

INTERCULTURAL EDUCATIONAL REPORTS IN SCHOOLS WITH GYPSY STUDENTS

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Abstract: *The intercultural education aims at developing an education for all in the spirit of recognizing the differences that exist within the same society. We can say that a large part of the gypsy population, so their children too, suffers from the process of marginalization and therefore requires a sustained intervention strategy, addressing both the marginalized and the majority, to form an intercultural society, by different but equal individuals, connected to the general values of humanity and respecting a common set of norms, but at the same time being in a permanent cultural and spiritual exchange. The education of gypsy children requires a special approach in which the initial data of this ethnic group can be a starting point for finding a solution to the issue of integration. In order to better understand the essence and the role of the intercultural education, we must accept that each of us is born in a particular culture, and in order to survive and grow in that culture, we must basically learn how to learn the basics, the norms, the values and the rules that make it possible to integrate into that culture.*

Key words: *intercultural education, gypsy ethnicity, intercultural commitment, intercultural curriculum*

1. The concept of intercultural education

The free movement of citizens, the widespread use of mass media and multimedia (mobile telephony, the Internet, e-mail, etc.) as well as the strong migratory phenomena (specific to the gypsies) in recent years have led to “mosaic” type societies in which elements of native culture combine (often unreviewable) with aspects of the culture of other groups (van der Velde, 2004: pp. 20-21).

In an even more concrete dimension, “and people themselves, somewhere in the more or less distant past of personal history, it is almost impossible that something or even someone of another religion, of another nationality or of another ethnicity should not have intervened” (*Teacher’s Guide*, 2001: 16).

We must be aware that, especially in the contemporary world, it is not known exactly who launched an idea, a fashion, a tradition, a proverb or even a

food dish. Around us, we all meet “intercultural communities that are ethnic, religious, cultural groups, etc., living in the same space, maintaining open relations of interaction, exchange and mutual recognition, respecting the values, traditions and modes of life of each of them” (Ciolan, 2000: 4).

We understand that the intercultural education is a process that takes place at the intersection of cultures and not an end in itself, and necessarily in the current educational system, the necessity of an educational, intercultural component, whose goals could be (*Ibidem* , p. 6):

- the formation of attitudes and behaviors based on the values of interculturality, both with regard to school principals and teachers in schools with gypsy population;
- methodological empowerment of teachers / teachers to design and carry out intercultural learning activities;
- providing and developing support materials containing elements of methodology and activities that teachers can use in the classroom;
- developing attitudes and behaviors, based on respect, understanding and communication;
- positive valorization of cultural differences through their acceptance, understanding and respect;
- developing the capacity to identify around us stereotypes and prejudices related to ethnicity, race, culture, religion, sex and awareness of their impact on each of us;
- providing a good visibility to minority groups and developing a positive image of themselves;
- stimulating communication and cooperation among members of different socio-cultural groups;

Starting from these general considerations, we appreciate that we can imagine gypsy school (or even a class that has many gypsy pupils) as a miniature community that we can say without being mistaken, that it is a “community that learns and forms through and for its cultural diversity” (*Ibidem*, p. 11).

These school communities are extremely diverse, both in terms of pupils’ learning styles and of the different socio-cultural groups from which these pupils come from:

“Each culture transfers to its members the system of core values, so children learn from adults how to understand and use the signs and symbols whose meanings can arbitrarily change from one culture to another. Without this process, the child will not be able to exist in a given culture” (*Educational package*, 1998: 21).

This process of transferring culture from adult generations to new generations is called socialization and is an interactive communication process that depends on several factors:

- family,
- school,
- media,
- interest groups (friends), colleagues of the same age etc.

The specificity of rural gypsy pupils is that in most cases they come from quite well-knit (even closed) communities, who usually live together in well-defined areas of rural settlements or even hamlets.

These children come to school in the first grade (often without attending the kindergarten), from a gypsy family, with many children, with specific and well-preserved traditional values and standards.

Here are some of these cultural landmarks specific to the gypsy family, such as: close relationships with relatives, respect for the elderly, traditional craftsmanship, marriage at a very young age (12-14 years), after some “bargaining” (negotiations between family members, the large number of children, the help given to parents in everyday life, the lack of a stable job, the dependence on social assistance, etc., and we called them only a few.

Once in school, these gypsy children face a culture whose value system is almost totally different from the one they have learned in the family, because school promotes competition, individualism, encourages personal success, makes the success of acquiring conditional and adherence to majority values, etc.

Thus a potential conflict arises between the traditional rules imposed by the gypsy family and the norms that school promotes, a conflict which, without being the only cause, can be a good explanation for school failure and school drop-out in a percentage among the gypsy children.

It is self-evident that as long as almost nothing in the culture in which they grew up during the first part of their lives and in their everyday life is not found in school, we must not regret that unrecognizing themselves in the school environment they came to, part of the gypsy children leave or fail because they fail to “reconcile” what they are told at home with what they are told at school.

Most often, the minority groups (in this case gypsy children) are forced to adhere to the rules of the majority, to the rules of dominant culture, which they must acquire and practice in order to succeed both in school and social plan.

This “accession” is, however, at the cost of giving up the elements of one’s own culture, a price that some minorities (students or their families) are not willing to pay.

The intercultural education supports (from a utopian point of view) that the gypsy population can integrate socially and in a “peaceful” way, without these students being forced or forced to give up the cultural values of this ethnicity, taking into account the character observation in general, that any

ethnic group can contribute to enriching the community to which it belongs by bringing new elements and by intercultural exchange and dialogue with members of the majority groups.

Equally, the intercultural education can be a viable response to some of the challenges of the contemporary world, the current social dynamics, because without strong promotion of the intercultural values we cannot speak of creating a positive attitude towards the gypsy community, in general, and to gypsy pupils in particular.

In literature (Cucos, 2000 ; Nedelcu, 2003: 48), there is no unanimous opinion on the scope of the intercultural education concept, but a summary of the main views indicates the following (Bennet, 1990: 102, apud Cucos):

- intercultural education is not a compensatory education for foreigners or minority groups, and not the children belonging to these groups are those who have problems, but the school institution has difficulties in adapting to the cultural diversity. The diversity of school performance should not be attributed to belonging to a different and sometimes disadvantaged socio-cultural environment (such as the rural gypsy community) but to be seen as an effect of the process of adaptation to a different context;
- intercultural education is not a new school discipline or an extension of programs for “teaching of cultures”, but it aims at forming positive and active attitudes towards other cultures;
- intercultural education is not confused with the classes of language and culture of origin, specific to the different minority groups, in the sense that it is sufficient to allow gypsy pupils to study their native language or other elements specific to the belonging culture;

Synthesizing, we can say that the intercultural education also means: interaction, exchange, communication, cooperation, penetration of cultural barriers, solidarity, trust and, last but not least, mutual respect, and if we should opt for a definition of intercultural education, we will chose the one of Christine Bennet.

“The intercultural education is an approach to the learning teaching process based on democratic values and beliefs that seek to promote cultural pluralism in the context of diverse societies and an interdependent world” (*Ibidem*, p.126).

2. Dimensions of intercultural education

From the definition of Christina Bennet it follows that the dimensions of intercultural education are the following (Cucos, 2000 :19):

- a. The intercultural movement
- b. The process of intercultural education

- c. The intercultural commitment
- d. The intercultural curriculum

a. The intercultural movement - focuses on ensuring equal educational opportunities and equity between different socio-cultural groups, in this case between the majority group and the minority group of gypsy pupils.

This dimension is aimed at transforming the school environment and especially attacking the “hidden curriculum” (eg. teacher’s attitudes and expectations, grouping pupils in the classroom, addressing forms used, ways to ensure discipline in school, relationships between school and community, teaching materials and strategies used in training), etc.

Many times, gypsy children have difficulties in adapting to the school environment when entering a school in which they are minor (in the first grade, the fifth grade, and sometimes in the 9th grade), as a rule at the beginning of the school cycle. In most cases, the major differences between the norms and values imposed by the school and those imposed by the traditional gypsy family place the gypsy pupil in a state of internal conflict that easily generates school failure (corrigenda or repetition) or even more seriously the school dropout.

b. The process of intercultural education

It focuses on developing competences to understand and at the same time to learn to appreciate the cultural diversity specific to the different ethnic groups, in this case the gypsy community.

An intercultural person has “an intellectual and emotional commitment to the fundamental unity of all human beings and, at the same time, accepts and appreciates the differences that arise among people of different cultures, being able to demonstrate the cultural empathy and to participate imaginatively at the world’s visions of others.”(Ciolan, 23)

The process of intercultural education itself is an interactive process that has as the ultimate goal of overcoming the prejudice that the culture of *others* is a threat to our culture and vice versa, but at the same time prejudice, perhaps as harmful, according to to which individuals belonging *to a minority ethnic group* must reject their own cultural values in order to function (and eventually succeed) in a different cultural environment. Intercultural education means identifying and understanding similarities and equally accepting and capitalizing on differences in a world where the relationship of cultural similarities / differences is extremely dynamic.

Teachers working in schools with a significant proportion of gypsy students must accept the challenge and make the children (whether they belong to the majority group or the minority group), become aware that what is different from a colleague is not necessarily dangerous, but also that what resembles you to someone can also distinguish you from someone else.

c. The intercultural commitment (Nedelcu, 2003:27)

It is that dimension of intercultural education which, in most cases, expresses an individual attitude, a unilateral manifestation of willpower directed towards combating racism or any other form of discrimination by forming values and attitudes appropriate to each educational sequence.

The intercultural engagement is at the same time a philosophical option, whereby the individual promotes according to his or her own attitudes and own level of education, attitudes, ideas and behaviors that ensure equal opportunities, combat discrimination and marginalization of socio-cultural groups, in this case the gypsy minority. This is an informed choice because the individual knows that official laws and regulations are not enough and consequently a conscious public commitment is needed that these laws, norms and regulations are beneficial and their values must be promoted and defended.

d. The intercultural curriculum

In order to have an intercultural school, it is not enough only the presence in the school of pupils from different ethnic groups in our case of gypsy pupils, but it is first and foremost needed the adaptation of the training contents to the actual state of school. This type of curriculum must be based on the real educational needs of the intercultural school community (school or class), so that all pupils (gypsy and non-gypsy who form that community) have equal opportunities to promote their own identity.

The intercultural curriculum proposes an integrated approach to the cultural diversity at local, national and even international level and given its role and importance, the organizational principles of this curriculum will be presented in the next subchapter of the paper.

3. Principles of organizing an intercultural curriculum

In an extended formula, the intercultural curriculum is interested both in content, in what is taught, but also in the way it is learned, by the concrete ways in which the specificity of minorities is considered and at the same time valued from a didactic point of view.

Specific realities in schools with a multi-ethnic school population and/ or teaching and administrative staff belonging to ethnic minorities have dimensions and connotations that give specificity to these school units.

In this context, the intercultural education - also promoted through intercultural curriculum - is in fact an intervention in order to determine institutions and policy-makers to be more attentive to the human condition,

individual cultural identity and cultural pluralism in society (National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, S.U.A.) (*Education through...*, 2004:1).

Starting from these realities, the National Social Education Council of the United States published in 1991 a Guide (*Intercultural Learning...*, 2003: 41), which contains in an integrated approach the principles of organizing a curriculum with intercultural openness:

- Cultural pluralism must be reflected in the entire educational environment (from library structure, classroom decorations, formal curriculum, to curriculum design, hidden curriculum);

- The intercultural curriculum must present the concepts and values of the different ethnic and cultural groups;

- Intercultural curriculum must help students develop self-confidence and a positive attitude towards their own identity;

- School policies and procedures need to reinforce positive interactions and understanding between students, teachers and the community;

- The staff of a school must reflect the ethnic diversity of society and systematic teacher training programs must be a permanent reality for a school's activity;

- Intercultural curriculum should make the most of the experimental learning and, in particular, the resources of the local community, and interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches should be used in the study of ethnic and cultural groups;

- Schools should initiate systematic, continuous assessments of the objectives, methods and teaching materials used to teach ethnic and cultural diversity.

In order to substantiate this approach, educators resort to various curriculum reshaping strategies, but unfortunately their efforts often stop by half, with the intercultural curriculum remaining only an added presence of a curriculum that remains essentially a mirror of the majority cultural fund.

The curriculum-multicultural relationship is described by J. Banks in "Education for Cultural Diversity" (London 1993) and is synthesized as hierarchical curricular restructuring models (Ibid., p. 18) as follows:

a. The model of cultural contributions

- in this case aspects of cultural, folklore and artistic traditions are dealt with, but there is no adequate interpretation of the meaning of these characteristics and habits among minority groups.

At the same time, however, the main curriculum remains in fact unchanged and generally ethnocentric.

b. The cumulative/additive model

- involves the addition of new content to the main curriculum, but without intending to modify the general goals or principles of this curriculum.

Concretely, teachers can “join” with the main curriculum, additional themes or materials, which leads to enriching the content through new experiences, concepts and ideas of different cultural groups, but unfortunately, their selection is based on “majority optics”.

c. The transformational model

- this model develops new perspectives of approach, meaning that the ideas and values of cultural groups are perceived and understood from the point of view of the groups to which they belong.

d. The decision-making and social action model

- this involves a more intense participation of students, who are asked to reflect, find solutions, act.

In this way, pupils become proactive, self-analyze and make social intervention decisions, engage and participate.

The practical transposition of intercultural restructuring models of the curriculum is not always easy, being influenced by a multitude of internal or external factors to the school space, which requires the following observations:

○ Intercultural reshaping of the curriculum can be performed at the core curriculum, curriculum at school decision, or extracurricular activities.

○ Intercultural education can be articulated in all school disciplines, because all and not only those “privileged” for such an approach can invite tolerance and respect for human rights. In fact, any curricular area offers opportunities for multicultural approaches.

○ Intercultural curriculum does not mean a collection of folklore data or an encyclopedia of the world’s culture, but rather a new perspective, a misunderstanding of the equality of cultures.

○ Interculturalism in school does not necessarily require additional financial or extra resources, additional extracurricular activities or additional optional activities. It is considered that pedagogical mastery can value for this purpose any intercultural space emerging in the current teaching.

○ Intercultural curriculum should be seen as a constant of school life and not just as a spot of color on a monotonous background, not just as an “event activity”, because the power of “small” but steady things must be valued at its fair value.

The Romanian national curriculum, even if it does not explicitly contain chapters or special indications designed to promote interculturality in school, supports or attains these perspectives through many of the principles or ideas that it promotes.

The new National Curriculum, unlike the previous ones, advocates a learning that reflects the dynamics of socio-cultural values specific to an open and democratic society that takes into account that “pupils learn in different styles and at different rhythms” (National Curriculum Council, 1998: 16).

These general principles, implicitly accepted by the New National Curriculum, are customized across different curricular areas, some of the framework objectives being established by reference to diversity, human rights, traditions, etc. and are reflected to a greater or lesser extent by supporting materials accompanying them (programs, manuals, teaching materials, etc.).

5. Resizing school curricula and textbooks from an intercultural perspective

We present briefly some intercultural references for the following school subjects from the perspective of the new national curriculum.

History (Manea, 2003: 136): - is a discipline with maximum intercultural potential and must lead students to know and understand both their own culture and others (including those of ethnic minorities).

For this, the teaching of history must be based on a multidimensional conception, the purpose of which is not merely the description of parallel histories, but rather the emphasis on the historical overlaps of cultures, the elements that different peoples owe to each other.

The internal logic of this discipline must go beyond the presentation of wars and confrontations, which often account for the losses, but never the accumulations resulting from cultural contacts between different communities forced or not to coexist. For this reason, historical events must be viewed objectively and in no way unilaterally, the approach of a particular historical situation or context requiring more perspectives, not only of the conqueror and of the conquered, not only of the majority but of the minority.

Geography (*Methodological Guide...*, 2003: 23) – is also a generous land for intercultural capitalizations by inevitably referring to spaces, areas and geographical communities.

The link between the study of geography and the multicultural curriculum is obvious and inevitable. Geography classes often refer to different parts of the world and place the perception of the environment, economy and social structure in a spatial context.

Geography must also focus on overcoming descriptive methods, often economically substantiated from a subjective perspective, of a wide range of stereotypes and prejudices associated with nationalities, races and ethnicities.

Mathematics (*Methodological Guide...*, 2003: 31)

With regard to disciplines in the mathematics and science curriculum, the intercultural approach is more difficult because these mathematical disciplines are not immediately associated with a cultural background and although mathematics is taught in all schools, more or less but it is not perceived in terms of the cultural contributions that fueled the formation of the domain, sometimes ignoring:

- The history of mathematical contents, meaning that there are no references to the origins of concepts, processes, and the contribution of different cultures to building mathematical content;
- The field's personalities, although some have significant multicultural contributions;
- The values assumed by the language of the field, meaning that there are no explanations of purpose or detailed technological specifications, and terms such as "precise", "exact", "about" are used without explanation or encouragement for analysis;

In everyday life, practical examples are not exploited on the role of different school disciplines in current activities. Such approaches, such as those listed in history, mathematics, or geography, ultimately lead to increased focus on content and the internal logic of building them. In this way, additional attention is paid to hidden curriculum in the sense of comparative and integrative approaches to content.

Naturally, there is a great cultural diversity in all the elements that make up the new national curriculum and the information they contain has a tremendous formative potential that can remain in the student's attention even without the corrective influence of the teacher.

It must be said, however, that some of them carry stereotypes, prejudices and labels, albeit unintentionally.

For example, textbooks, which are an important part of the curriculum, strengthen many stereotypes over groups perceived as outside the dominant group.

We often find that textbooks are deficient either by omission or ignoring minority views or by misrepresentations of various minority issues and, more importantly, the views are sometimes discriminative as far as they are concerned on minorities.

The successful models promoted in some of these textbooks are those of the majority, "their history and significant facts belong to them" (Ciolan, 27), while minorities are predominantly decorative for color.

As far as the illustrations in textbooks and teaching aids are concerned, they are predominantly mono-cultural or disadvantageous for minorities. Aware of the danger of such inappropriate prospects, a 6-point strategy has been proposed, which includes:

- a. invisibility / visibility - in the sense that certain cultures "do not see", do not exist or are poorly represented in textbooks;
- b. selectivity - some data are interpreted from a single perspective, usually the majority, so that minority groups do not find their own cultural contributions in the textbooks;

- c. the presence of stereotypes and prejudices, the choice of certain information that betrays the presence of inadequate filtering patterns of reality;
- d. unrealism - textbooks present unrealistic sequences and portraits of history, avoid controversies, and at the same time avoid a clarification approach;
- e. fragmentation and isolation - presenting data about the different as an appendix, in a separatist manner;
- f. language stereotypes - presenting information only by reference to one gender, etc.

Conclusions

Within the intercultural educational programs, the purpose of each such program is the school education of the child belonging to an ethnic minority, in this case coming from a gypsy family from a rural community.

As a rule, the partners of the schools in the implementation of these programs are: representative organizations of parents (parent committees, representative councils of parents) local authorities (mayors, local councils, police), sanitary authorities, church, non-governmental associations (NGOs, foundations, ethnic associations, etc.), economic agents.

The main dysfunctions in the intercultural education programs in relation to the partners involved are determined by: the very large number of partners, which, as a rule, they propose schools in the course of some projects, the wrong perception that the large number of partners determines either the increase of the chances that the project is eligible or that its aims are better achieved.

In fact, the overly large number of partners implicitly creates difficulties in identifying the needs of each participant in the child's education process, as SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) known and applied by schools' managers - which are usually the project / educational coordinators - are not compatible with the specifics of each partner.

Another dysfunction is created by the real difficulties of establishing links with these partners, difficulties that are proportionate to their number. Sometimes the partners only exist in paper/ electronic format and have a purely formal decorative role, the program coordinators appreciating that it is sufficient for the project to have as many signatures and stamps in the partnership section as possible.

Obviously, through an intercultural education program, such as "keeping local traditions", "editing the monograph of the locality", or "school recuperation in certain disciplines", it is absolutely necessary and natural for partners to be school, family, representatives of NGOs or ethnic associations,

but it is totally inappropriate to engage with police, health authorities or the County Agency for Employment.

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