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**THE PLACE OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN THE
OPINION OF MA STUDENTS**

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Abstract

At a time when trans-cultural human contacts have multiplied more than ever, when people move frequently from one place in the world to another, it has become increasingly important to understand and to accept multi- and interculturalism. Intercultural education contributes decisively to this. The study aimed to show the current role of intercultural education as perceived by MA students in Education Sciences from Petroleum Gas University of Ploiesti, Romania, the way they understand the importance of this type of education for inter-human relationships and to the evolution of one's own personality, as people and practitioners in education. The research has proven that MA students (in Education Sciences) attribute to this type of education a cognitive function rather than a communicative-interactive one, facilitating bridges between people (belonging to different cultural spaces) and - equally - discouraging possible conflicts between individuals or (large or small) groups of people. The research led to the idea that one way of forming intercultural attitudes is that of the cultural consistency of (formal) education. The mind shaped by systematic culture, cultivates in an environment of humanistic culture has the tendency towards openness and intercultural understanding.

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Keywords: Intercultural education; MA students; inter-human relationships; culture; personality.



1. Introduction

The problematic of contemporary world "are characterized by universality, globalism, complexity, emergent character that incorporate tendencies, phenomena and new aspects which occur simultaneously or in succession across all areas of the world" (Jinga, Istrate, coord., 2006, p. 18). The novelty of challenges or of (society's) issues leads to finding answers. In the sphere of human evolution they acquired the aspect of new forms of education. Their specificity resides in "the accentuated orientation towards a set of values from different areas of life" (Guțu, 2013, p. 145). Thus the tendency to consolidate "new types of objectives and contents" emerges (Cucos, 2006, p. 54) Among these there is also intercultural education. It is emerging more clearly and is a necessity given that trans-cultural human contacts have multiplied more than ever, when people move frequently from one place to another.

Intercultural openness and education involve *interactions based on mutual respect*, consolidation of cohesive communities, on the one side, and discouraging/ marginalizing relations of domination and rejection, under-appreciation and exclusion on the other. Differences (axiological in nature) will be understood as "sources in personal and community development" (Guțu, 2012, p. 154).

Intercultural education paves the way towards coexistence, understanding, closeness, patient and empathetic dialogue, tolerance (within the limits of good faith, respecting the dignity of every human being) (Georgiu, 2010).

2. Research Methodology

The purpose of this research was to reveal the significance given to intercultural education by MA students in Educational Management and European Integration and respectively School Counselling and Career Guidance from the Letters and Sciences Faculty of the Petroleum Gas University of Ploiesti; to uncover their vision related to the intercultural openness of contemporary education in the context of the intensification of economic globalization and cross-border mobility.

In March 2016 a questionnaire (with pre-coded answers) was administered to 53 subjects, among which some graduated from Pedagogy and The Pedagogy of Pre-School and Primary Education, and the rest from other specializations, as follows:

Table 1. The structure of the experimental sample according to the type of undergrad programs they attended

Type of undergrad programs	Number	Percentage
Education Sciences	36	68%
Other undergrad programs	17	32%
Total	53	100%

3. Data and Results

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

Table 2. The opinion of MA subjects relating to the purpose of intercultural education*

a.	b.	c.	d.	e.	f.	g.	Total
9,5%	2%	9,5%	19%	49%	-	11%	100%

* a. knowledge of the great cultures of humanity; b. knowledge of the history of universal culture; c. discouraging possible conflicts among different human groups; d. facilitating dialogue between people; e. knowledge of the customs, traditions and rituals of different cultures; f. erasing the cultural identity of human groups; g. developing a global culture.

Table 3. The opinion of MA subjects relating to the usefulness of intercultural education in inter-human relations *

a.	b.	c.	d.	Total
17%	28%	44%	11%	100%

*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 4. The vision of MA subjects relating to the importance of intercultural education in the development of one's own personality *

a.	b.	c.	d.	e.	f.	g.	Total
9,5%	4%	9,5%	43%	5,5%	23%	5,5%	100%

* a. makes us more curious as to the way of being of those from a different culture; b. determines us to be more prudent in relation to those from a different culture; c. motivates us to express ourselves as we know best; d. motivates us to open towards those from a different culture; e. gives us more trust in those belonging to a culture other than our own; f. determines us to be firmer in promoting and cultivating our own culture; g. determines us to be more prudent in promoting and cultivating our own culture.

4. Findings, Comments and Interpretations

1. Stepping on the 'territory' of this type of education required by our reality, we wanted to find out the point of view of the members of the experimental sample regarding *the purpose of intercultural education*. Concerning the options of the entire sample, we noticed that almost half of it (49%) considers that *the purpose of intercultural education is to help us know about the customs, traditions and rituals of various cultures* (of the people from all corners of the world, equally attractive and interesting). Only 19% considered that the ultimate goal of intercultural education is *facilitating dialogue among people*. As a result, the subjects attributed a cognitive function to this type of education rather than a communicative-interactive one, of facilitating the connections/ links between people belonging to different cultures around the world. 11% of the respondents considered the purpose of intercultural education to be *the development of a global culture*. They perceive it as an instrument to facilitate globalization and a globalizing culture.

There were other subjects who - in equal proportions (9,5%) - believe the purpose of this new education is *to get to know humanity's greatest cultures* (as a result, these subjects make the distinction

between great cultures and small cultures!), and others think this is *discouraging possible conflicts between various groups of people* (belonging to distinct cultural zones). Therefore, some believe there are great cultures that should be known systematically (in school) and not only superficially, in terms of tourism or propaganda, and others who believe there is the possibility that, by means of a special type of education (well designed, well prepared and well implemented) to discourage and/or restrict the number of possible (real and/ or potential) conflicts among different socio-cultural groups.

Table no. 2 indicates that only 2% of respondents consider the main/ ultimate purpose of intercultural education is *knowing the history of universal culture*. It is, of course, an insignificant percentage of those who believe that to edify a solid intercultural education we need (solid) knowledge of *the history of culture* of the entire humanity, as it has developed over the existence of mankind.

2. Regarding the *usefulness of intercultural education for human relations*, the options of the sample group of MAs (in Education Sciences) were the following:

44% have understood and considered intercultural education helps and will help us *identify what we have in common with others* (and the more so since we come from distinct cultural spaces). As a consequence, intercultural education facilitates ways to discover and accept common landmarks, meant to bring us closer and create the premises of mutual trust, overcoming estrangement and our fear of others.

Another 28% believe that, as far as interpersonal relations are concerned, intercultural education *helps us know others better*. It is a way of getting closer to the ones belonging to another culture, facilitating openness towards them and getting to know them better we end up knowing ourselves better. Besides, 17% of respondents opted explicitly for the statement that intercultural education helps and will help us *know ourselves better*; it contributes to a better self-knowledge. We are dealing with a self-awareness not only through ourselves (self-analysis) (Korney, 2014), but also through others, from a different culture than ours.

The fewest respondents - a mere 11% - thought intercultural education is one of the means helping us *identify what makes us different from the rest*. They see the function of this type of education as rather sensing the differences between people; further on, this might mean that in our interpersonal relations intercultural education helps uncover (cultural) differences. A more self-centered note emerges rather than one of closeness and revelation of what we share in common and might unite us.

3. Regarding the vision of MA students-subjects referring to the *importance of intercultural education in the evolution of our personality*, the collected data revealed that most of them (43%) believe this type of education *motivates us to become more open towards those coming from another culture*. As a consequence, we believe, they are aware they are challenged to become more open, to know and understand others (we might refer to it as *intercultural empathy*), to engage in relations that foster equality, respect, congeniality. By its specificity, intercultural education creates the premises for shifting the focus from our own values and traditions, for putting our self-sufficiency in brackets.

In the same context, 23% (almost a quarter of the investigated subjects) thought that *intercultural education determines us to be firmer in promoting and cultivating our own culture*. It seems that these subjects see in this type of development a tool to increase firmness connected to the promotion of own culture and less with enriching it with fertile and valuable contents from other cultures we may come into contact with, by means of those we encounter, work, coexist. In their case, it seems we are dealing if not with a distorted understanding then at least with an untrained, narrow and superficial one. It is therefore

important to understand (or make our MA students understand) that intercultural education does not prompt us to stiffness, exclusivity and over-evaluation (of self, of own culture), but urges to attention given to others, to a reasonable relativity of knowledge and own culture, equality in appreciating cultures, whether it is ours or not.

9,5% of the subjects believe intercultural education makes us *more curious as to the way of being of people from other cultures*, and another 9,5% think it *motivates us to express ourselves as best we can*. We might mention that this last category of respondents nears the 23% of those who believe *intercultural education determines us to be firmer in promoting and cultivating our own culture*. If we agree with this point of view, then we might say that $23\%+9,5\%=32,5\%$ of participants in our research have a yet unclear vision referring to the role of intercultural education in the evolution of their personality.

Table no. 4 also shows that only 5,5% of subjects believe the type of education we referred to in our research *gives them more trust in those belonging to a culture different from their own*, and 5,5% believe it makes us *be more prudent in promoting and cultivating our own culture*; also, 4% consider intercultural education *makes us become more prudent with the ones belonging to a different culture*. In short, very few think this type of education cultivates prudence and suspicion towards strangers.

5. Conclusions

We live in a world in which it is (increasingly) important to care for one another, as *human beings*, with the same purpose of a loving, fruitful and happy life. We exist in an ever wider world which we want spacious enough for everyone, irrespective of the culture to which - by birth or adoption - they belong. To this end, we need growth that generates openness between people, we need to cultivate sensitivity to the problems, fears, sufferings, searches and joys of our peers, no matter where in the world they may come from. Intercultural education is a welcome catalyst in a world that is always tense, in a hurry, full of pride and vanity, in which predominate (instrumental) power relations.

Our research (whose limits we acknowledge and accept), revealed that MA students (in Education Sciences) attribute to this type of education a cognitive function rather than a communicative-interactive one, facilitating bridges between people (belonging to different cultural spaces) and - equally - discouraging possible conflicts between individuals or (large or small) groups of people.

The research led to the idea that one way of forming intercultural attitudes is that of the cultural consistency of (formal) education, knowing that a well developed person culturally has the tendency to enhance an intercultural conception (about life, people, humanity) that is authentic, consistent and elegant. The mind shaped by systematic culture, cultivates in an environment of humanistic culture has the tendency towards openness and intercultural understanding.

Also, it emerges the fact that interculturalism helps us - to a great extent - to know ourselves better and not only others (foreign to the culture we belong to); indeed, precisely through them. As it happens, we tend to know better who we are, what defines us, what preferences and moral-behavioral profile we display, what customs organize and motivate our lives.

This does not mean intercultural education leads to self-sufficiency of the cultural-spiritual kind, but on the contrary, it *challenges our desire to learn*, assimilate and synthesize and it fosters cultural growth.

Intercultural education urges us to give special attention to others, to the reasonable relativization of our trust in the all encompassing and absolute character of our culture and, at the same time, to a greater availability towards new spiritual territories, new convictions, values and human ideals (without being forced to deny our own). It is useful and good for our MA students to pursue and deepen this self-clarification.

Intercultural education urges us, however, to be careful with ourselves and among us, it urges us to manifest more respect, acceptance and empathy. Of course, all this as long as there is no breach (from one party or by both) of the principles of respect and acceptance of any human being as a dignified being, valuable in itself.

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