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WORKING WITH MULTICULTURAL GROUPS: A CULTURE AND ETHNICITY CASE STUDY IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

The paper presents the main findings of a field research performed in different regions of Romania in the framework of the project *"Us & Them: dialog, tolerance, collaboration for good coexistence in a multicultural world!"*, a project financed by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union. The research has investigated the state-of-the-art regarding (1) the main features of existing cultures in Romania (principles, practices, ideas, values, patterns in human behaviour, thought and feelings, human activities, social standards) and (2) the misunderstandings, prejudices, stereotypes as potential sources of socio-cultural tensions. The research findings emphasize on the people's level of awareness about other cultures existing in their area and also on the level of interaction among these cultures. The existing categories of cultures and sub-cultures – from a sociological point of view - have been also analyzed through a Focus Group organized with representative participants. The research findings helped identifying the training needs of Adult Educators who work with multicultural groups and designing a training curriculum for them to promote dialog and collaboration among multicultural learners.

Keywords : Culture; Adult Education; multicultural groups; dialogue; collaboration.

1. Introduction

The paper presents results from a field research performed in Romania to identify the training needs of Adult Educators who work with multicultural groups, in the view of designing a training curriculum for them to promote dialog and collaboration among multicultural learners. The research was

performed within the Erasmus+ project *"Us&Them: dialog, tolerance, collaboration for good coexistence in a multicultural world!"*, ref. no. 2015-1-RO01-KA204-015131, financed by the European Commission.

The analysis we made showed that currently in Europe exist many ethnicities, each country hosting national and immigrant ethnic/cultural minorities. According to Nation Master (2016), Austria has 11.5% Croatians, Slovenes, Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, Roma, Turks, Bosnians, Serbians; Cyprus has 18% Turks; Spain is a composite of Mediterranean and Nordic types; Ireland has 12.6% white, Asian, black, mixed; Italy has clusters of German, French, Slovene, Albanian, Greek; Portugal is a Mediterranean stock with citizens of black African descent & East Europeans; Romania has 10.5% Hungarians, Roma, Ukrainians, Germans, Russians, Turks; Turkey has 20% Kurdish, Albanian, Bosnian, Arabs, Tatars, Armenians, Greeks; United Kingdom has 16.4% Scottish, Welsh, Irish, black, Indian, Pakistani, mixed. The European Union Census (2011) in these countries reported various religions: Muslims, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Hebrew, Hindu, Presbyterian, Anglican, Methodist, Reformed, Pentecostal, Orthodox, Sunni, Alevi or Sufi.

The social tensions and the anti-social deeds generated by multiple factors (such as different religious background, different cultural traditions, affiliation to different ethnicities or social clusters, etc.) can be defused and prevented through non-formal and informal education and training for tolerance, acceptance, opening, understanding and reciprocal knowledge, which is exactly what the "Us&Them" project tries to do, by aiming to train the adult educators to promote tolerance and the understanding of "the other" in multilateral communities. The target groups are (a) AE educators; (b) adult learners from cultural conglomerates.

2. Theoretical Foundation and Related Literature

Kymlicka (2012) analyses the myths about multiculturalism and brings viable arguments in favour of the thesis that *"Talk about the retreat from multiculturalism has obscured the fact that a form of multicultural integration remains a live option for Western democracies"* (p.5). Among the factors that can either facilitate or impede the successful implementation of multiculturalism, he points on desecuritization of ethnic relations, by stating that *"Multiculturalism works best if relations between the state and minorities are seen as an issue of social policy, not as an issue of state security"* (p. 6); it also emphasizes that *"Multiculturalism is first and foremost about developing new models of democratic citizenship, grounded in human-rights ideals"* (p. 12).

HarperCollins Dictionary (1991) states that multiculturalism protects cultural diversity, and defines it as the acknowledgement and promotion of pluralism as a feature of many societies. In multicultural societies, educators should incorporate in educational practices the adult learners' culture and *"[...] educational strategies must be developed to minimize the potential for further exclusion and marginalization of learners"* as emphasized by Kaya (2014).

Quite a controversial issue for nowadays Europe, multiculturalism has been analysed within the context of EU shared democratic values, from various culture-related angles and perspectives. In October 2010, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared *"This [multicultural] approach has failed, utterly failed"* at the meeting of the youth wing of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party, in Potsdam. In 2011, in an immigration-crime-employment related discussion, the French President Nicholas Sarkozy

stated on TF1 that multiculturalism *"doesn't work in France"*. These are only few of the signals that multiculturalism is not easy to be handled and that Europe needs to search for more viable solutions in its efforts to achieve real common European cultural identity.

In spite of studies emphasizing the fact that not the ethnic or religious identity are indicators of tensions within multicultural groups but rather some other socioeconomic factors like, for example, unemployment and poverty (Van Driel, Darmody & Kerzil, 2016), Sharpes & Schou (2014) stressed that ethnicity and cultural values does matter, especially in educational contexts in which educators have to observe the traditional democratic values on one hand, and in the same time to support and facilitate the integration of minorities into communities and schools.

In the multicultural Europe, social norms of tolerance should be commonly shared. In 2015, the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) officer Tania Berman, in charge with the EAEA project called "Awareness Raising for Adult Learning and Education" (ARALE), emphasized that *"Education is much needed"* and *"[…] learning can be a solution to religious and cultural hatred"*.

Adult Education can highly contribute with solutions to the multifaceted problems of nowadays multicultural societies. Educators within different cultural groups have an important role to play, especially in light of the refugee crisis. EAEA believes that Adult Education is one of the most effective tools to foster tolerance and counter stereotypes, and it should not only be looked at through the lens of growth and jobs (Halachev, 2015).

3. Methodology

The research has investigated the state-of-the-art regarding (1) the main features of existing cultures in Romania (principles, practices, ideas, values, patterns in human behaviour, thought and feelings, human activities, social standards) and (2) the misunderstandings, prejudices, stereotypes as potential sources of socio-cultural tensions. The final aim was to use the research findings to design a customized curriculum for adult educators of inter- and multicultural and groups.

We based our research on the following questions: *Is there any conflict/tension between different cultures? If so, which are the sources? What could be potential solutions? Which are the training needs of adult educators in the field of intercultural education?*

Our field research was achieved through questionnaire and Focus Group and was implemented between 10.12.2015 – 11.02.2016. The survey envisaged different regions of Romania (the Counties: Argeş – Southern part of Romania, Constanţa – South-Eastern part, Bistriţa-Năsăud – Central-Northern part and the capital Bucharest), with the purpose of having a holistic image on the existing cultures, ethnicities and religions, on people's perceptions about them and on typical or specific relations and behaviours of representatives from majority population and national minorities.

The questionnaire was delivered to 60 respondents, via email. We got 57 filled in questionnaires, of which 50 were complete and we kept them for analysis (36 from women, 14 from men). Respondents' average age: 40.57 years. The target audience was selected by snow balling with provision for maximum differentiation in terms of: a) ethnicity/religion/culture; b) geographic distribution; c) educational strand (academic, technical, other).

The Focus Group was achieved with 4 participants (3 males, 1 female). The respondents were adult educators, researchers, theologians, priests (each having one or two professional positions), more than half holding master and PhD diploma. Prior to the Focus Group, all participants have signed an Informed Consent. The duration was of two hours and a half. The Focus Group has been video recorded.

4. Results

4.1. Results from Questionnaires

92% of the respondents are aware of people from other cultures living in their area. The culture/religion/ethnicity/civilization that the respondents identified as living in their area were: Roma

(98%), Christians (58%), Eastern Europeans (46%), Jews and Turks (36% each), Chinese and Catholics (28% each), Russians (26%), Latin (24%), Filipino, Vietnamese & Latin-Americans (20% each) and other in less than 20% (i.e. Africans, Maghrebi, Indian, Buddhist, Armenians, Maronites, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Sri Lanka).

Although the scores obtained regarding their interaction with other cultures and religions existing in the area where they live are not the highest score possible, as shown in figure 1, people feel comfortable with living in multicultural societies (3.49) and interacting with "the others" (3.54). Probably an aspect requiring more attention and remedies from authorities refers to supporting more the traditions and languages of other cultures, as the score this issue got is relatively high (3.21).

Personal aspects (score from 5)

Aspect	Score
In my area, my society has improved with the increase of cultural diversity in the area	2.94
In my area, usually, people from other cultures / religions are problematic	2.41
In my area, public administration should support the traditions and languages of other cultures	3.21
In my area, cultures / religions could keep their traditions and language while they are living in my…	3.08
In my area, minorities do their best to integrate in society in my area	3.05
In my area, I have contacts with people from other cultures/religions	3.54
In my area, I feel comfortable living in an environment with different cultures/religions	3.49

Fig.1. Personal aspects of respondents' interaction and perception with the existing cultures and religions

Regarding the role of media in relation to the existing cultures in the area of the respondents, the answers show that media and media operators perform not so satisfactorily, as the obtained scores are only slightly above the average (1 = the least satisfying, 5 = the most satisfying) namely: *"Media always give a right image of different cultures living in my area"* scored 2.52, *"News about other cultures are*

mainly related with negative aspects: violence, extremism, etc." scored 2.64, *"Media informs under equal conditions about any culture in terms of activities, traditions, etc.*" scored 2.73.

The questionnaires provided extremely large scale of culture features and due to the diversity of the presented cultures/religions/ethnicities is not possible to present them in summarised format here. But we noticed that the major religions and ethnicities nominated by respondents are the same and have same common features as the ones identified during the Focus Group. All the characteristics collected through questionnaire can be the object of a further research.

To the question *"do culture and religion mean the same"*, the respondents offered a quite common vision, emphasizing that they are different concepts and correctly explaining what each notion mean to them.

The answers to the question *"Do you participate in any kind of initiatives/movements for the integration of different cultures in your area?"* revealed their low involvement, in general. However, this result is balanced in a way, by the desire, opening and availability of the respondents to get involved in near future to such activities.

The respondents declared that they do have contact with people from other cultures / religions *sometimes* or *rarely*, the reasons for interacting with these people being *family, friends* and *work place*.

Unfortunately we could not identify a dominant response to the question *"Do you think that the stereotypes linked to different cultures are true?"* as the answers where homogenously spread *("Many times are true", "If it is said so, then there would be a reason for that", "No, usually they are not true", "They are very rarely true").*

4.2. Results from Focus Group

The Focus Group revealed that in Piteşti, Argeş County and the Muntenia region there are currently living several ethnicities and religions: Christians, Neo-protestants (including Adventists), Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roma, Greeks, Armenians, Bulgarians, Jews/Hebrew, Chinese, Vietnamese and Indians. The participants could not estimate their exact size, in percentages, in the whole population, but the cultures/ethnicities we enumerated before are listed from the largest size to the smallest one. One participant (the priest) pointed out that he prefers to use 'denominations' instead of ethnicities.

Because the time during the Focus Group did not allow us approaching all ethnicities/religions, the participants selected and discussed only three of them. In tabel 2 below we included the description of the Roma population, but more information on the features of the other cultures/religions/ethnicities living in Romania can be obtained (by emailing to georgeta.chirlesan@upit.ro) from *"O1: National Report on the specific features of diverse European cultures and sub-cultures"* elaborated by the "Us&Them" project coordinator.

Tabel 2. Roma culture description by the participants in the Focus Group

NAME OF THE CULTURE/ETHNICITY/RELIGION: ROMA	
Principles and Values	Respect for traditions and for the clan. Obedience to their institutional leader "Bulibasa" (a kind of Gipsy king; he leads their form of clan-organization, an institution called "Satra", and the legislative forum "Stabor"). Own identity.
Practices	Singing, dancing, witchcraft, stealing, crafts (farriers, making brooms, blacksmiths, etc.)
Ideas	They do not accept abortion – respect for the human being.
Patterns in human behavior	Ostentatious display of goods (gold, cars, etc.) and wealth. Solidarity, "one for all and all for one" (they help each-other). They have a developed community spirit. Nomadism (yet a more limited one compared to old times) Thieves
Thoughts and feelings	They are sentimental, emotional, easy to be spiritually excited (but only among themselves, within the community). Hardly accept outsiders. If they accept you, they respect you. Otherwise no! Have their own sign language when they want to communicate only among themselves, not with others.
Human activities	Musicians (fiddlers) Pedlary Craftsmen They exchange currency on the black market (they are called "valutişti")
Social standards	Lack of respect for authority and the law (as shown, they have their own tribunal – the Stabor)

The participants in the Focus Group pointed out that there is potential for conflict only with the Roma population. The conflict sources refer to:

(a)   the failure in complying with social norms and law (organizing noisy and long lasting parties, trying to amaze the other by displaying wealth and assets, circumventing the law);

(b)   social statute of discriminated minority (this is how Roma perceive themselves);

(c)   low economic and educational level.

For the other two analysed minorities (Neo-protestant and Catholic) one cannot speak of conflicts and sources of conflict, it is not the case, because they are not conflicting with the majority population nor between each-other.

The opinions on the best ways to solve possible conflicts between cultures/religions/ethnicities/civilizations unfolded from educational to economical spectrum, showing that people think of a combination of ways to handle the situation and face problems, seeing that only a joint effort can be the solution for cultural tensions. Pessimistic existed among respondents as well: *"I do not think this kind of conflicts have a solution, because there will always be extremists in every culture / religion / ethnicity / civilization, as history has shown us so far"*. Some relevant positions given by participants on conflict solutions are presented below:

- Giving up in having prejudices, showing mutual respect and implementing programs / projects promoting multiculturalism and multiethnic and multi-religious tolerance.

- Integration of a minority in the social life of a community requires, in some cases, efforts from both sides. But as long as the opening occurs unilaterally, positive results won't appear.

- Obligation of minorities to justify their income to observe the financial obligations, to look for a job, to justify property.

- Communication in all its forms: verbal, non-verbal, informal, para-verbal, etc.

- Through getting support from the state, greater accountability standardized through fines and regulations that to be applied to them equally, by determining them to provide a quiet space and

to fit in everything that involves the state and the environment where they live (refering to Roma).

The Focus Group discussions concluded that the need for Adult Education training in intercultural issues is quite big and will increase in the future due to migration trend and globalization (which increase the mobility and free movement of persons). A suggestion was that the Adult Educators should be from the minority communities (some ethnicities, like Roma, accept more easily to be educated and interact during education and training sessions with their own representatives). Topics have been recommended for intercultural education: intercultural communication; knowing the communities (getting knowledge on the minorities); elements of history, culture and civilization of minorities; elements of acculturation; cultural awareness techniques; soft-skills; entrepreneurial knowledge and skills for social and economic initiatives (to be able to transfer them to the learners).

5. Discussions

The findings of our research reveal key-aspects regarding the existing ethnicities and religions in Romania and the perception of the majority population on them. The largest ethnicity is the Roma one (98%) followed by Easter Europeans (28%), while for the religions, the order is Christian (58%), Jewish (36%) and Catholic (28%). Although highly compatible with the official data on ethnicities and religions in Romania, we noticed a dissonance in the obtained results regarding Jewish and Catholic religions, as Catholic not Jewish was found in latest census to be the second largest religion in our country after Orthodox. This deviation could be explained by the fact that, when answering the questionnaire, our respondents have relied only on personal perception and not on statistical information.

Media role is seen as important, by there is room for improvement of its actions when it is about reflecting in a correct way the culture of co-existing minorities.

Our study sustained that Adult Education is important in multicultural communities due to its potential in bringing positive changes at social level. This is convergent with statements of Carlson, Rabo & Gök (2007) who shows that *"It is hoped that education can be an agent for causing social and cultural reforms and values to take root."*

Within the integration process of immigrants, besides housing and employment, education and social & cultural adaptation to the new society are crucial factors. For these to be achieved, a joint effort is required from immigrants, majority population and state with its institutions. As revealed by our findings, in Adult Education within multicultural groups the focus should be on respecting and correctly approaching and culture, ethnicity and religion. This is also supported by Brodnicki & Maliszewski (2013) who show that *"multicultural education should take into consideration and respect ethnic, racial and cultural differences [...]. Therefore it is a process of a dialogue of cultures, on the one hand protecting from standardization and cultural homogenization, on the other – from local egocentrism."*

6. Conclusions

In Romania, there are three major ethnicities and religions that live peacefully together with the majority population (Orthodox): Roma, Neo-protestant and Catholic. All of them have well defined identity and present distinct features. The majority population has a good knowledge on each of them and

has accepted them long ago. The co-existence among them and majority is a good one, there are no conflicts (except the conceptual ones). In the case of Roma-Romanian relationship, tension exists due to Roma's lack of respect for law, authority and work. The other two cultures - Neo-protestant and Catholic – are not conflictual with the majority population (Orthodox). On the other hand, the Roma people see themselves as being discriminated and are perceived as such by many from the majority population. Discrimination is only one potential source of conflicts with Roma, besides low education and economic level and a series of habits, traditions and customs they have (their music, their way of life, etc. which sometimes disturb the public order).

In spite of the existing differences, we may appreciate that the area is a peaceful one, with a high level of security, with low risk of future conflicts between the co-existing cultures.

The spiritual values of each culture together with their practices represent valuable assets that give uniqueness and shape the local colour of life and society here.

Acknowledgements

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