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## INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE – COMPONENT OF THE TEACHER` PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

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### *Abstract*

Globalization, interculturality and the whole range of changes generated by them are powerful imprint on the educational phenomenon. In a plural world, under the sign of inter - and multi -, education can't remain locked in the pattern of a mono - type logic. By appropriately valuing cultural diversity and being aware of the impact of the cultural context on the development of the child's personality, any educator must approach an inter-type logic, promoting the principles of intercultural education and designing educational practices aimed at all students and each student, in the same time. In this context, due to the acute need to adequately address the diversity of school space, the intercultural teacher training is a necessary step. Thus, fundamental changes are needed at the level of initial and continuous teacher training programs, in order to empower teachers with the competences necessary for a proper management of differences between students. Intercultural competence becomes a compulsory component of the teacher` professional identity. Teacher training programs should be organized around some fundamental acquisitions from the point of view of interculturality. Such an approach is extremely difficult and complex, because it involves changing the mentality of educators and overcoming their own vulnerabilities. In our study, we will focus on analyzing teachers' perception on the importance of forming and developing their intercultural competences. This approach is motivated by the fact that the cultural, religious or linguistic differences identified at students` class level are often ignored by the teachers, sometimes even when they become sources of conflict.

**Keywords:** globalization; interculturality; intercultural education; intercultural competence; dimensions of intercultural competence.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The whole world is reshaping under the impact of a phenomenon that imprint everything: globalization. Whether we report to culture, economics, politics or education, the effects of globalization are visible and can't be ignored.

The sociologist A. Giddens said that "globalization affects today the lives of people in all countries, rich and poor, modifying not only global systems, but also daily life" (Giddens, 2000, 76), and



the world is "an unique social system" (2000, p. 75), which "hosts" human beings who share "a common fate" (2000, p. 75).

In consensus with Giddens, Tomlinson shows that understanding *globalization* means realizing that "the world becomes, for the first time in history, an unique social and cultural framework" (2002, p. 21); *globalization* "makes the world become "one place"" (Tomlinson, 2002, p. 21). One place, we say, but characterized by a multitude of "nuances" of various cultures that, more than ever, begin to fuse, outlining a "picture" in which each one must learn to find himself/herself, identify their own "nuance", but manifesting an attitude of respect, understanding, appreciation to each element which composes the "painting".

Multiculturalism, interculturality represents, for the global world, a reality that requires the formation / development of new types of competences, of life skills. Globalization implies, therefore, a number of changes in the educational plan. Through an effective intercultural education approach, teachers should create a learning environment in which the differences between students, regardless of their nature - ethnic, religious, cultural, linguistic –have to be sources of personal and social development, each student reporting - to everyone else and to each other, with respect, consideration, understanding, accepting that values, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, etc. different from his/her own are not reasons for rejection, conflict, but opportunities for growth, enrichment, evolution. In order to organize such a learning environment, the teachers themselves have to integrate, at the level of their professional identity, the intercultural competence that resides "in a series of values, attitudes and behaviors activated in intercultural contexts, which enable effective communication and interaction with otherness and proper management of cultural diversity "(Drăghicescu, Stăncescu, 2011, p. 375).

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The professional identity of the teacher is not a finite acquisition of the initial and continuous training programs for the didactic profession, but a "construction" that crystallizes, improves and perfects throughout the didactic career. Referring to the construction of the professional identity of the teachers, the pedagogue E. Păun showed that it "swings between assuming an external professional model, developed by researchers, a largely canonical, standardized model, and a professional identity built on a daily basis as an ensemble of personal experiences and individual options before, during and after training for the teaching career "(Păun, 2017, p. 163).

The challenges that global society launches in the educational environment obligate teachers, today more than ever, to a profound reflection on their own beliefs, competences, on their own pedagogical conception, respectively on their own professional identity. The educational approach is grafted on a social background characterized by a multitude of cultures, values, patterns, which in no way should be perceived as competing, but, looking through the "magnifier" of cultural relativism, we can consider them equal. Teachers are called to form such an attitude, demonstrating that they act from the perspective of an inter-type logic and promoting, in the educational act, cultural interaction and didactic behavior based on the valorization of differences, their acceptance and appreciation.

The intercultural competence "refers to those skills, behaviors and practices that allow individuals to interact effectively with others coming from different backgrounds. IC includes, inter alia, respect for people, self-respect for who they are and appreciation of cultural differences between them" (Niculescu, Bazgan, 2017, p. 26).

By coordinating classrooms characterized primarily by diversity, the teachers which possess this competence will effectively manage the emerging conflicts/problem-situations and will be, above all, an attitudinal and behavioral model to which their students can report, because they will show respect for each student, will value the differences, will apply educational therapies that are likely to ensure equality of chances in education for all students, will constantly develop an attitude of acceptance of otherness, regardless the ethnicity, religion, cultural model of belonging, etc.

To train such teachers, however, it is necessary that the initial and continuous training programs to subsume a component focused on preparing teachers on the intercultural dimension of education. Unfortunately, as Niculescu and Bazgan showed, "the institutions for teachers' training (insufficient well stated as well defined structures everywhere in world) seem to be dominated by a reluctant or even

conservative attitude toward the issue of training for interculturality as an attitude. Too often this aspect is superficially approached and involved only to respond to a formal requirement” (2017, p. 25).

An authentic training in this area ”involves at least two interconnected dimensions: a dimension of knowledge - objective and involving different perspectives, and a dimension of experience - subjective and relational” (Rey, 1999, p. 180). At first sight, the first dimension is easy to achieve, while the second can generate more difficulties in the effective implementation of a program/module/course for future teachers/current teachers. And yet, solutions can be easily identified: there are many initiatives/programs launched at European level (an example being the Erasmus + Program), to which teachers and future teachers can participate, which can provide relevant opportunities for connecting with otherness, for intercultural communication, for training and practice, in multi/intercultural contexts, of the intercultural competence.

Referring to the same process of intercultural formation, Anca Nedelcu (2008, p. 32) considers that formation for interculturalism involves three main dimensions: *cognitive, instrumental-methodological and expressive*.

*The cognitive dimension* aims at: knowing human rights and relating international instruments; knowing main issues of our times and the issues relating to violation of human rights; knowing institutions, local, national, regional and international governmental and non-governmental organizations involved in fields of activity pertaining to the education of human rights from an intercultural perspective, from the support and expertise of which both educators and educational instances may benefit; knowing social, professional and informational networks at regional level; knowing disadvantaged communities, by regions, and their status and needs.

*The instrumental-methodological dimension* refers to providing teachers with methods fostering equality, collaboration, individual valorization in schools and intercultural restructuring as well as methodology used.

*The expressive (relational-behavioral) dimension* represents a side of the formation which is fundamental to create a suitable environment for learning and to use diversity as didactic resource. Therefore, formation for interculturalism consists in crystallization of some democratic mentalities which should enable educators to experiment efficient forms of communication, expression, accountability and to develop their critical spirit.

So, we can conclude that an intercultural teacher should be: (1) well trained from the scientific point of view (owning both: a functional level of development of general culture and of a specialty culture; (2) high level trained as methodologist both for teaching and for the assessment process; (3) a model, a mentor and a facilitator of human and intercultural relations (Niculescu, Bazgan, 2017, p. 24).

### 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The question that guided our micro-research is: *How important is, in the perception of teachers, intercultural competence as an integral part of their professional identity?*

### 4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The aim of our research was to identify teachers' opinions on the importance of forming and developing their intercultural competence, considering the three dimensions they involve: the cognitive dimension, the instrumental-methodological one and the expressive (relational-behavioral) one.

In subsidiary, we intend to demonstrate the need to complete / improve the initial training for the teaching career by introducing modules / disciplines centered on the formation / development of intercultural competence of future teachers.

### 5. RESEARCH METHODS

The method used was the questionnaire survey. The questionnaire was developed in relation to three dimensions specific to intercultural competence: *cognitive dimension, instrumental-methodological dimension and expressive (relational-behavioral) dimension*. Through the formulated items, teachers were asked to express their opinions on the importance of the various components of intercultural competence (knowledge, values, abilities, attitudes and behaviors).

The appreciation of these thematic areas was achieved on a five-step Likert scale, from 1 = *not important* to 5 = *extremely important*.

The research sample was made of 100 teachers in pre-university high school education, with years of experience in school from 2 to 30 years. 74% of them teach in high schools attended by Romanian and Romani students, whereas 26% work in high schools with Romanian, Romani and Bulgarian students. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and how the information obtained will be used / exploited.

## 6. FINDINGS

For the present study, we selected for analysis and interpretation four relevant items of the questionnaire: one subsumed to the cognitive dimension, one within the instrumental-methodological dimension and two subordinate to the expressive dimension.

The first item was *the identification and control of their own prejudices and of the various forms of discrimination generated by them*.

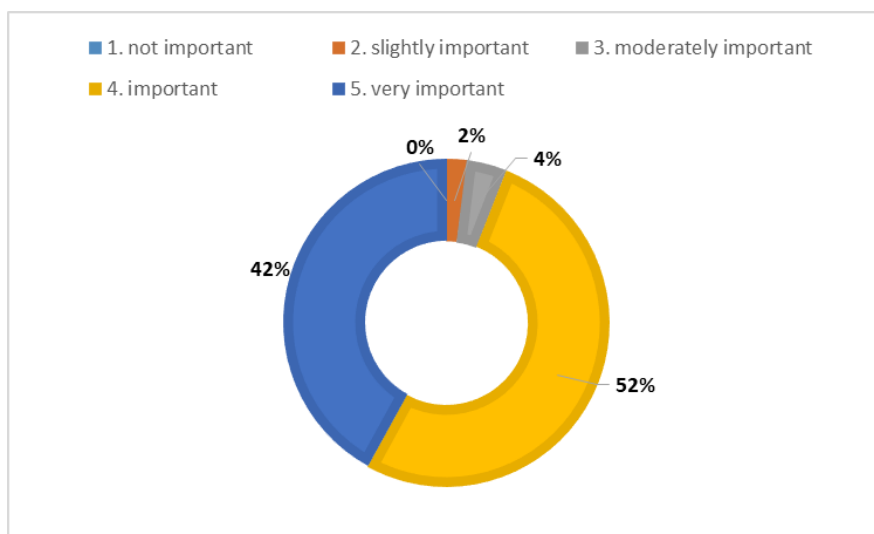


Figure 1. Teacher's opinion on the importance of identifying and controlling their own prejudices and the different forms of discrimination generated by them

In this item, which is focused on the cognitive dimension of intercultural competence, teachers have provided answers (graphically represented in the figure above) which demonstrate that identifying and controlling their own prejudices and different forms of discrimination are considered *very important* (42% of respondents) and *important* (52%) by them. Only a very small percentage of respondents consider these aspects to be *moderately important* (4%) or *slightly important* (2%).

Teaching in multicultural classrooms, where it can occur multiple situations that may need to be appropriately approached, before teachers can form intercultural competences to their students, teachers themselves need to make an exercise of awareness of their own prejudices. Only by awareness of our own prejudices, we can find appropriate ways of (self)control and eliminate some forms of discrimination that may manifest involuntarily.

The second selected item refers to an instrumental-methodological component of intercultural competence, namely *the valorization of methods that promote equality, collaboration, individual valorization in the school space, and restructuring, from the intercultural point of view, of the methodology used*.

According to the results registered on this item (Figure 2), all respondents consider this component of intercultural competence to be *very important* (60%) and *important* (40%). Teachers`

responses demonstrate that they understand how important it is that the didactic strategy used to be one that promotes relevant values for the intercultural formation of the student, such as equality, collaboration and respect for everyone, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, language or the cultural model to which he/she belongs.

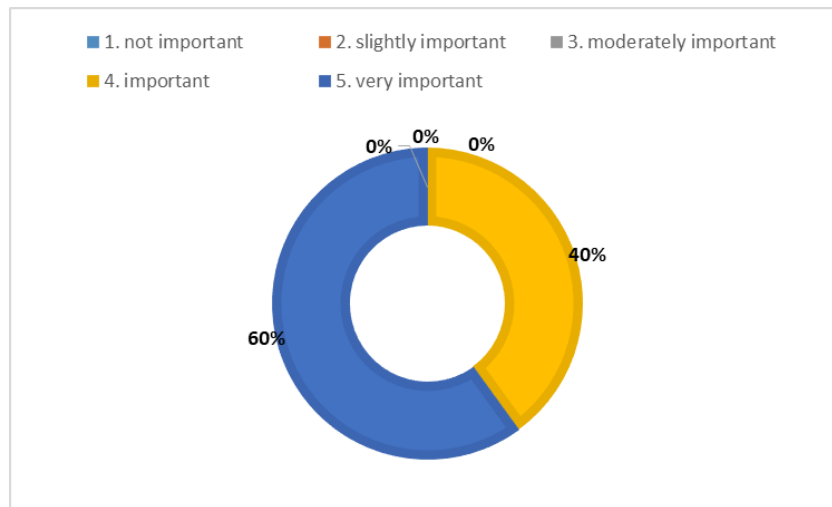


Figure 2. Teacher's opinion on the use of methods that promote equality, collaboration, individual valorization in school space, and restructuring, for the intercultural point of view, of the methodology used

The third item focused on teachers' opinion *on ensuring respecting the rights of all students and on equalizing opportunities in education*. This item is circumscribed to the expressive (relational-behavioral) dimension of intercultural competence and takes into account one of the fundamental principles of intercultural education.

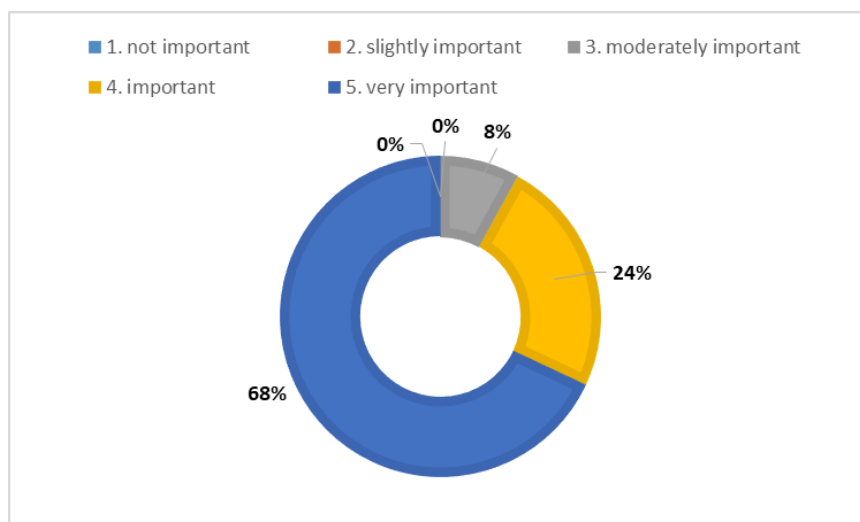


Figure 3. Teachers' opinion on ensuring respecting the rights of all students and the equalization of opportunities in education

The results registered in this case (Figure 3) are as follows: 68% of the questioned teachers consider this component of intercultural competence to be *very important* and 24% consider it *important*. This distribution of responses leads us to the conclusion that teachers are aware that it is extremely important, at the level of classroom, to respect the rights of all student, not just some, and to equalize the chances in education, valuing and creating optimum conditions for the development of the potential of each student.

The last of the examined items refers to a relevant attitude for the expressive dimension of intercultural competence, namely *the manifestation of adequate expectations for all students, accompanied by the belief that all can succeed*.

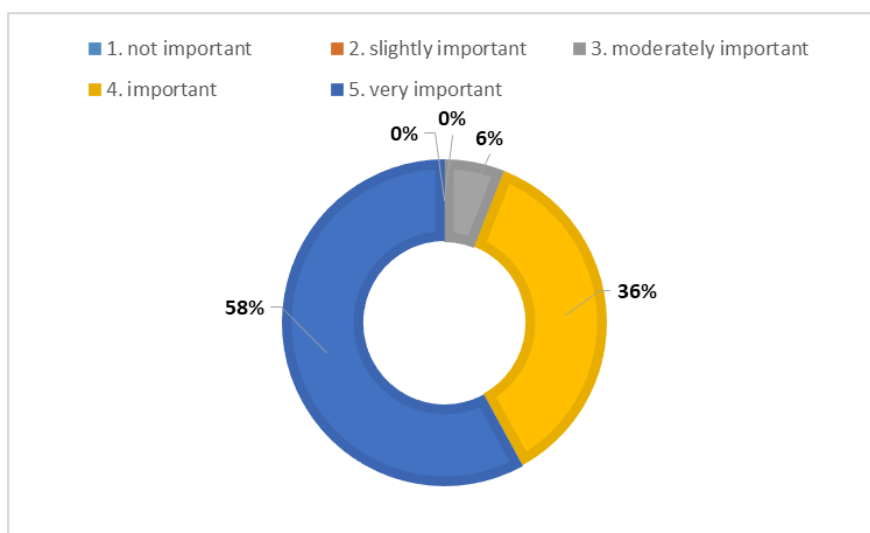


Figure 4. Teachers' opinion on the manifestation of adequate expectations for all students, accompanied by the belief that they can all succeed

In this situation, too, teachers' responses are placed on the upper levels of the Likert scale, as can be seen in Figure 4. Thus, 58% of respondents appreciate that this attitude is *very important*, 36% consider it *important*, and 6% perceived it having a *moderate importance*.

In order to develop harmonious educational relations between teachers and students and to stimulate the conscious and sustained involvement of all students in their own training process, it is very important for teachers to have adequate expectations for each student, which implies an authentic knowledge of personality of each student, his/her strong points, but also the most sensitive points. It is also very important for teachers to manifest confidence to all students, to the potential of each student, to encourage and support them so that they can achieve success and performance in line with the real possibilities of the students.

The analysis and the interpretation of the answers to the above mentioned items allow us to make the following inference: the pre-university education teachers are aware of the importance of intercultural competence as an integral part of their professional identity.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The results of the investigation undertaken allow the following inferences:

- reflection (directed through the items of the questionnaire) on their own beliefs, convictions, professional competences leads to awareness of the importance of the intercultural competence as part of the teachers' professional identity;
- generally, teachers value, in relative similar proportions, both cognitive components of intercultural competence (identification and control of their own prejudices and different

forms of discrimination generated by them), instrumental-methodological components (the use of methods that promote equality, collaboration, individual valorization in school space, and restructuring, for the intercultural point of view, of the methodology used) and expressive, relational-behavioral components (ensuring respecting the rights of all students and the equalization of opportunities in education and the manifestation of adequate expectations for all students, accompanied by the belief that they can all succeed);

- to ensure equal education opportunities and a quality educational approach, to form a solid and coherent professional identity, the development of the intercultural competence of teachers should be undertaken as a priority, should be incorporated and addressed, not only formally, as an important component of initial and continuous teachers' training programs.

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