

# CONSIDERATIONS ON THE NEW REFERENCE POINTS OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN SCHOOL

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**Abstract:** *In UNESCO's report on education in XXI century, the education is represented as resting on four elements, the four basic components of education: learning to know, to do, to live with others and learning to be.<sup>1</sup> These four complementary roles of education are inseparable from each other, and converge towards the emancipation of the individual is itself regarded as the ability to participate in a full citizenship in an open and democratic society.*

**Keywords:** *development, intercultural education, equality of opportunity, cultural plurality, spiritual specificity, cultural communication, intercultural relations.*

## 1. Intercultural Education: Objectives and Principles

Intercultural education is the third reference point of education: the familiarisation with living with the others. The International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century emphasizes this component of education as critical to the development of a harmonious society. This reference point concerns the familiarization with living with the others, *"through the development of the other's knowledge, of their history, traditions and spirituality"*.

Current European societies, which embrace ethnical and cultural plurality, as well as a plurality from the perspective of identities and interests, are the field of living together with increasingly more manifest and more vocal alterities. In such conditions, it is imperative that the generations that undergo socialisation should acquire basic skills which should allow a peaceful coexistence with groups that claim the difference, be it ethnical, of identity, cultural or of interests.

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<sup>1</sup> Delors, J., *L'education: un tresor est cache dedans. Rapport a l'UNESCO de la Commission Internationale pour l'education du vingt et unieme siecle* (extrase), Paris, Editions Odile Jacob, 1996, p. 18.

Cultural diversity is a reality to be developed in the school environment, because cultural plurality means more than pleading for differences; it also means cultural dialogue, which shows that everyone must contribute to the development of human experience and that each of them (of the differences) is an attempt to universalize a particular experience.

The general objective of intercultural education is to allow the acquisition of such coexistence skills in the plural society of our age.

More precisely, the objectives of intercultural education relate to several points of reference: the acquisition of knowledge in the field of general culture and of proper culture in particular, including with respect to its impact on the individuals' and groups' behaviours. Contemplation of one's own culture precedes contemplation of the culture of otherness.<sup>2</sup>

The second objective is the awareness of the causes and roots of one's own cultural determinations, of stereotypes, preconceptions, as well as the identification of the same in the others. Once such awareness is attained, the next step is to acquire the capacity to regard as relative the perspectives and the points of view, as well as to develop skills to communicate with the others.

The third objective is the formation of positive attitudes that should be applied in a plural society: the respect shown to diversity, to the identity of those who are perceived as different and, therefore, the rejection of intolerant and discriminating attitudes toward them.

The fourth objective of intercultural education concerns is the encouragement of an active participation, i.e. the application of pluralist principles and of the fight against racism, xenophobia and discrimination.

The objectives above are not listed in the order attached to the complexity of the skills needed in order to meet them. Thus, the first stages "involve cognitive related skills: reflection, identification of cultural aspects, awareness of some processes. The last two objectives mean, however, that the individual should undertake an active role: the respect in front of diversity and the rejection of discriminating attitudes are placed along the axis of action rather than on the axis of cognitive mirroring of the first objectives. And the last objective is *par excellence* one of concrete

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<sup>2</sup> The ideas in this paragraph are included in the document *Objectives and methodological framework of intercultural education*, drafted by the Timișoara Intercultural Institute in the project *Dromesqere Euroskola*. The documents corresponding to this project can be accessed at [www.dromesqere.net](http://www.dromesqere.net), retrieved in April 2010.

action, of active civic involvement in the fight against attitudes that oppose the principles of intercultural education. This transition from passive to active takes place along with the internalization of the principles of intercultural education by the individual exposed to the intervention in this field. In the absence of the internalization of the values identified for the first two objectives, the individual cannot attain the concrete action targeted by the last two objectives of intercultural education, and this means only a partial achievement of the objectives proposed. This is why the route must be complete, the progression must reach its end and the intervention should attain the level of depth at which values are internalized by the individual.

Thoroughness of intercultural education values and principles involves a set of basic principles. First of all, heterogeneity is deemed a norm (as term that generated the concept of “normality”), rather than a handicap that requires additional support.<sup>3</sup>

Such heterogeneity, as rejection of ethnical, cultural, identity and interest homogeneity is the negation of totalitarianism and a means to guarantee the values of an open and democratic society. At the same time, intercultural education is not a way of leveling or compensating inequalities, but a manner of acquiring equality.

Another principle of intercultural education is the idea that the individuals, therefore the groups in which they are included, are constantly subject to a crossbreeding process that generates continuous diversity.<sup>4</sup> We note here the convergence of this principle with the constructivist perceptions of the concept of culture, according to which any culture is in permanent change because of its permeability by external influences. When the idea of permanent dynamics of any culture is assumed, essentialist preconceptions and rigid stereotypes are more vulnerable and easier to take apart.

Furthermore, intercultural education promotes a certain type of cognitive dynamics of the student. We are talking about the acquisition of a movement from the center represented by one's own culture and norms toward the exterior, in order to be able to look at the values of the other, to

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<sup>3</sup> Meunier, O., *Approches interculturelles en éducation. Etude comparative internationale*, Institut National de Recherche Pédagogique, Lyon, 2007, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Meunier, O., *Approches interculturelles en éducation. Etude comparative internationale*, Institut National de Recherche Pédagogique, Lyon, 2007, p. 12.

the extent possible, from the other's point of view.<sup>5</sup> This principle may appear inapplicable, given that any individual is the product of his/her own culture. From this perspective, the possibility of a state of *tabula rasa* is non-existent; such a state would allow the individual to "shake off" completely the values internalized by education. But the aspect with which intercultural education contributes in this process of relativisation of one's own values is learning to open toward the alterity, in order to be able to understand from the point of view of its values.

This relativisation of one's own values must take place in an environment of continuous and reciprocal interaction. Value judgments are removed, difference is no longer stigmatized, on the contrary, emphasis is placed on the aspects shared by the individuals, on what allows them to use the same language, reciprocal understanding and valuation. Thus, intercultural education does not concern only the minority; it also concerns the members of the majority, who hold the same responsibility to relativise their own values, to fight against stigmatizing value judgments and to value the others. Intercultural education promotes constant dialogue, from equal positions.

One of the debates regarding intercultural education (actually "multicultural" is a better term, because the debate dates back to the 1980s in the UK) concerns the dichotomy perceived between multicultural education and anti-racist education.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, Fyfe demonstrates that debate is sterile and counterproductive, because, since the principles of education are those listed above, labelling the type of education promoted is secondary to the promotion purpose applied to the human rights principles via education. Thus anti-racist education and multicultural education complete and potentiate each other, being, in the end, mere currents of different political orientations that, nonetheless, share a similar purpose (with multicultural education perceived with liberal roots, while anti-racist education holds a radical and militant nature, a more violent and more direct, leftist one).<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Meunier, O., *Approches interculturelles en éducation. Etude comparative internationale*, Institut National de Recherche Pédagogique, Lyon, 2007, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Fyfe, A., "Multicultural or Anti-Racist Education: the Irrelevant Debate", in Fyfe, A., Figueroa, P., *Education for Cultural Diversity. The Challenge for a New Era*, Routledge, London, New York, 1993, p. 37-46.

<sup>7</sup> Robin Grinter, citat in Fyfe, A., "Multicultural or Anti-Racist Education: the Irrelevant Debate", in Fyfe, A., Figueroa, P., *Education for Cultural Diversity. The Challenge for a New Era*, Routledge, Londra, New York, p. 43.

We have deliberately chosen not to linger on the terminological debates of this type. It is possible to conceptualize a series of dichotomies between related concepts, such as intercultural education/ diversity education, intercultural education/anti-bias education etc.<sup>8</sup> Previously, we provided arguments for our preference for the term of “intercultural education” and the implications of this choice from a conceptual perspective.

Given that the principles and processes on which intercultural education is based are the ones important, rather than the labels applied to this type of education, we opted for an emphasis of the essential principles of intercultural education.

Once the general principles of intercultural education are exposed, we are going to go deeper into the concept, by the analysis of its dimensions, as well as of the factors and processes triggered with the implementation of intercultural education.

## **2. Intercultural Education: Dimensions, Factors, Processes**

Intercultural education is an “integrating concept”<sup>9</sup>, occupying several **dimensions**, and which enjoys the contribution of many **actors** via a number of **processes**. In what follows, we are going to make operational the concept, by drawing the elements needed by a profound understanding of intercultural education.

### **a. Dimensions of intercultural education**

As anticipated, numerous actors who became involved in the field of intercultural education conceptualized differently the system of processes driven by intercultural education in its application. For the purpose of analytic simplification, we chose, however, to deal first of all with two major dimensions of intercultural education. The application of its principles means, at the same time, a respect toward diversity and toward equity.<sup>10</sup> These two positions are the basis, in practice, of both the contents and the pedagogic processes typical to intercultural education.

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<sup>8</sup> A typology of such dichotomies and the explanation of the differences perceived between the terms is available in Nedelcu, A., *Intercultural learning in school. Guidelines for the teachers*, Humanitas Educational, Bucharest, 2004, p. 25-28.

<sup>9</sup> Nedelcu, A., *Bases of intercultural education*, Publishing House of Polirom, Iași, 2008, p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> Batelaan, P., *Le nouveau défi interculturel lance a l'éducation: la diversité religieuse et le dialogue en Europe*, (DGIV/EDU/DIAL (2003)), Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2003, p. 7.

The diversity dimension is the first axis on which the contents of intercultural education are placed. According to the previously enumerated principles, within intercultural education, the interest in the mirroring of diversity is visible in several directions. First of all, we are talking about the rendering of social reality as made of diverse (groups, individuals, interests...).

The student's sensitisation to this plural diversity is a sine-qua-non condition of the efficient approach of the concepts typical to intercultural education. Therefore, the pedagogic bases of the entire curriculum must reflect this plurality of points of view, by which diversity, and therefore alterity, will later become intelligible. From the perspective of intercultural education, reality must be rendered from various angles, which would allow the coexistence of versions that reflect the actual diversity of the points of view in the pluralist society.

On the same axis of diversity we find the pedagogic concern with providing the student with the possibility to communicate and cooperate with the others within heterogeneous groups.<sup>11</sup> These are meant to reflect the diversity of the points of view, to familiarize the student with the existence of perspectives different from his/hers.

The second dimension of intercultural education concerns equity. Closely related to the first dimension of diversity, the major aim of the equity axis is to understand that other points of view can be as valid and perhaps as "correct" as one's own perspective, once they are evaluated via the "other's" criteria. Thus, the pedagogic practice must focus on valuing "different" points of view, on the fact that they hold as much legitimacy as one's own perspective. In brief, we are talking about the implementation of the principles of cultural relativism, but at the micro-level of the individual's mindset.

This dimension of intercultural education also involves the approach of the concepts relating to the human rights (for all individuals are born *equal*), and the student's awareness of the practices of intolerance, discrimination and racism, which are opposed to the human rights principles.

In order for the students to apply such principles, it is essential, first of all that they should be complied with, including by the teachers, in the class and school environment. Thus, the equity of the access to educational

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<sup>11</sup> Batelaan, P., *Le nouveau défi interculturel lance à l'éducation: la diversité religieuse et le dialogue en Europe*, (DGIV/EDU/DIAL (2003)), Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2003, p. 7.

resources, of the participation in the educational act, as well as the equity from the point of view of the expectations concerning the children's results and competences, are conditions in the absence of which the student will not become easily aware of the necessity to observe, in his/her turn, the principle of equity.

We can see, from the framework drawn above, that the two dimensions chosen for the analysis of intercultural education are faithful to its analyzed principles.

However, in order to fathom the concept, it is also necessary to engage in a detailed analysis of the factors and processes by which intercultural education is implemented in the pedagogic practice.

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