Teenagers` Perception about Discrimination

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Abstract: Adolescence is the age of impetuous transformations, but also the age of crises accompanied by anxiety, insecurity, depression. When discrimination - a phenomenon that has certainly affected the lives of each of us - is added to them, the "route" of teenagers to the crystallization of self-identity becomes even more difficult. Awareness of discrimination and taking on the mission to prevent / combat it, by cultivating values and attitudes such as respect for diversity, equity, tolerance, solidarity, cooperation become, in this way, objectives of the school, achievable in the context of social education. Going in this direction, the RAINBOW project aims to promote social inclusion and positive EU values through capitalizing of non-formal education and its specific methods into the school education. Within this project, a research was carried out with a target group consisted of 1487 students and 254 secondary school teachers from six European countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Italy, Romania and Spain. From Romania, a group of 37 teachers and 267 students was part of this approach. The research method used was the survey based on questionnaire, and regarding the target group of teenagers students, the objectives included identifying their perception of discrimination, awareness of negative effects of social media, but also the importance of civic competences development. Referring to the need for a proper understanding of the phenomenon of discrimination, in this study we integrated some of the results of research conducted within the Rainbow Project, presenting some important data on teenagers' perceptions and experience on discrimination.

Keywords: *adolescence; discrimination; students` perceptions; social education; RAIN.BOW Project.*

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1. Introduction

The discourse about adolescence, about the defining notes and particularities of this age, integrates various perspectives, contradictory elements, accents placed either on “evolution/progress”, or on aspects specific to a period of crisis.

Transition stage between childhood and adulthood (Erikson, 1968), the last and the most complex of the great stages of development (Debesse, 1970), adolescence is the period when, for the first time, physical development, cognitive abilities and social expectations are concordant and ensure the systematization/synthesis of "acquisitions" subsumed to self-identity (their childhood identifications), made at earlier ages, thus advancing to maturity (Marcia, 1980).

Adolescence is either the age of qualitative transformations in cognitive, emotional, moral, social area, the "age of second birth" (Rousseau), "age of great impulses", "age of social integration", "golden age", or “ungrateful age”, the age of crises, of anxiety, of insecurity and restlessness, of contestation and conflict, of violation of law, norm, order (Stanley Hall), "age of dramas", age of "unfulfilled" dreams, "impossible" loves, of “disastrous” relationships, of taking risks (Barbu & Niculae, 2018) etc.

Because the major question of teenagers is "*Who am I?*", one of the relevant concepts for this stage of human development is identity.

Marcia (1980, p. 181) argues that this is an useful concept from an educational point of view, and people generally act better and feel better, in relation to themselves and others, when they are able to define their own identity.

Engaged in the process of defining/crystallizing of a coherent, articulated, healthy self-identity, teenagers live a so-called experience of *identity diffusion, which implies a strong sense of insecurity* (Erikson, 1968).

Many specialists appreciate that teenagers go through a stage of identity crisis, because their own identity construction is not well defined and neither the "dream of perspective", the project of a *future self* doesn't have a clear outline.

Beyond this crisis, defining for adolescence, and other age-specific "turbulences", we must relate objectively to everything that composes the "psycho-behavioral picture" of teenagers, precisely because our interventions, the interventions of the significant adults in their lives - parents and teachers alike, have to give them exactly the support they need,

guiding them through a world that they often perceive as a “parallel universe” in which they cannot find their place.

Adolescence is thus an age whose potential increases as young people engage in deeper and more various interactions with the world around them. Teenagers go through a period of intense changes in terms of physical development, have an increased "appetite" for new activities, their critical thinking becomes more "visible", and the relationships they initiate are complex and various (US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Adolescent Health, 2018).

In this context, it is not to be neglected that most teenagers also face the phenomenon of discrimination, which make difficult the "route" to themselves and accentuates the identity crisis.

2. Problem statement

The phenomenon of discrimination is today in the attention of all states that want to promote a democratic culture, cultivating/forming values, principles, attitudes, behaviors that support the effort to build a healthy society, a society that ensures equal opportunities for formation, development, evolution and fulfillment to all its members. Moreover, the assurance of equal opportunities is a fundamental principle in any society that wants to be a democratic one, thus guaranteeing the respect of civil rights and freedoms and its functioning as a sanogenous environment, as an environment in which every person feels respected, accepted, valued for what he/she is, regardless of belonging to a certain race, ethnicity, religion, gender, socio-professional category, etc..

Violation of this principle generates an act of discrimination. Discrimination may be direct – if the treatment of a person or group of persons disadvantages them in comparison with other peers in similar situations, or may be indirect - when a number of provisions, requirements, criteria or practices disadvantage certain persons or groups of persons, except in contexts in which they are motivated by a legitimate aim (Iordache, 2015, p. 3).

Discrimination means a (pre)judgment, which can generate negative effects, sometimes irreversible, in terms of interpersonal relationships (teenagers end up rejecting those who discriminated them, whether they are adults who should have been models of attitude, behavior, relationship, etc., whether they are congeners), but also at the level of the construct called self-identity.

In order to understand once again the devastating (sometimes) effects of discrimination, we bring to the fore two dimensions of otherness, representative for the way teenagers relate to those around them. Thus, otherness can be approached as: a) a constructive process of self-development and social knowledge, together with others; b) a process of clear delimitation between “us” and “them”, which can also circumscribe the stigmatization of other groups and individuals (Howarth, 2006).

Placing “definitive labels” on an entire generation, stating, for example, that “teenagers are lazy, without the motivation to learn, etc.,” determines a certain type of attitudes and behaviors that adults develop in their relationships with teenagers. Thus, interacting from the perspective of this representation, significant adults from the lives of teenagers, whether parents or teachers, will no longer be able to properly value and stimulate the potential for intelligence and creativity that the young generation has. At the same time, they will be the ones who will “introduce” the delimitation between “us” - adults, the omniscient, with a well-defined axiological frame of reference, etc., and “them” - teenagers, without landmarks, without the desire to give “a meaning of life”, thus placing a stigma that can permanently compromise the relationship with them, so implicitly the educational action or influence.

Focusing on the school area, respectively on the discrimination as attitude and behavior manifested by teachers, we find with concern that certain prejudices, stereotypes, especially those related to ethnic minorities, are so well fixed in the minds of teachers that they still produce „differences” in teacher-student interactions, with obvious effects at the level of relationships developed between students, but also in terms of school performance, of attitude towards learning, towards school, in general, of minorities. Given the fact that the ethnic minority frequently encountered in Romanian schools is represented by Roma children, we find confirmation of the opinion previously expressed in a recent report conducted under the auspices of the European Roma Rights Center, entitled *Blighted Lives: Romani Children in State Care* (2021). Thus, a manager of a General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection stated that discrimination against institutionalized Roma children takes place only inside the school: “Teachers used a strange vocabulary towards the children, and this affected them”) (Rorke, 2021, p. 66).

As for the discrimination that we can observe at the level of peer groups, it is influenced by the set of representations that teenagers often construct and, primarily, as a result of the influences exerted by parents (e.g.: in case of discrimination based on ethnic criteria), but also of the

influences/pressures manifested within the groups of the elderly. In adolescence, exposure to values, attitudes, behaviors of a certain type have the potential to change minds (Hjerm et al., 2018).

Excessively concerned with their physical appearance, many teenagers associate discrimination with this aspect. In a study of discrimination / stigma in peer groups, by body weight, the data show that this form of discrimination is associated not only with dissatisfaction with one's own body, but also with social anxiety and loneliness (Juvonen et al., 2017), as well as with low self-esteem (APA, 2002).

Any form of discrimination can leave "traces", lasting sometimes, and with dramatic effects, materialized in low self-esteem; an acute feeling of loneliness, inadequacy in relation to a certain environment / group - family, school or peer group; exclusion, marginalization, isolation; a parasitic lifestyle with low social involvement; poor interpersonal relationships; low or no motivation for everything that school life represent etc ..

The family (Cetean Voiculescu, 2019), but also the school can play a decisive role in preventing and combating discrimination.

Moreover, beyond functioning as agents of change for the direct beneficiaries of the educational services provided - students, schools can also be agents of change at the level of society as a whole (Howarth & Andreouli, 2015).

In the school environment from Romania, the disciplines circumscribed to the field of Social Education - *Logic, argumentation and communication, Psychology, Sociology, Philosophy, Social studies*, etc., through the promoted values and attitudes, can contribute to the formation of prosocial behaviors and of an authentic moral profile.

In Romania, the general competences, common to all disciplines subsumed to Social Education in high school are:

1. Using the specific concepts to the social sciences for organizing the approaches of knowledge and explanation of some facts, events, processes in real life;
2. Applying knowledge specific to the social sciences in solving problem situations, as well as in analyzing personal development possibilities;
3. Cooperation with others in solving theoretical and practical problems, within different groups;
4. Manifestation of an active and responsible social behaviour, appropriate to a changing world;
5. Participating in decision making and solving community problems.

All these competences circumscribe a series of values, attitudes, such as: self-confidence and confidence in others; awareness of personal identity and positive appreciation of differences; acceptance of diversity and tolerance; positive relationship with others; availability and interest in communication, in general, and for intercultural communication, in particular; critical spirit, solidarity and taking responsibility for personal actions; peaceful resolution of conflicts; collaboration; critical and flexible thinking; freedom of expression; freedom of opinion; freedom of conscience, personal balance, etc.

Once they internalize this set of values and attitudes and they objectify them in appropriate behavioral manifestations, namely they have social and civic competences, teenagers will know how to avoid / combat discriminatory practices, react when discrimination occurs around them or they themselves become "targets" of this phenomenon.

Moreover, teenagers acutely feel the need to belong, to integrate, to be loved, appreciated and validated in the group of congeners. This need for belonging / affiliation has an impact on the attitudes and behaviors manifested by them, on the decisions to engage in various activities, on self-esteem and self concept, etc.

The group, through its values, through the promoted behavioral practices and common activities, can represent the optimal framework for understanding, mutual support in the crystallization of a healthy, coherent, sustainable identity, or, on the contrary, in the case of a harmful "composition" and a pressure that it exerts on all its members, can generate a series of undesirable behaviors of the teenager, urging even to acts of discrimination.

Moreover, it is necessary that significant adults in the lives of teenagers - parents and teachers - to monitor their activities, relationships with other peers, to communicate constantly and provide axiological models, emotional support, but acting in a balanced way, - in such a way as to support the need for autonomy, independence of teenagers, as well as the need to join the peer group.

Another need strongly felt at this age, less explored by human development specialists, is the need to contribute (Fuligni, 2019), to have a contribution to the achievement of common goals, to be useful, providing support to others - individuals or groups, to invest personal resources to facilitate the well-being of others, especially as teenagers are now more attentive to the needs of others, showing an obvious concern for what is the rights of others, equity, justice, welfare, etc. .

Correlating this need with the other needs and central concepts of this stage of development - identity, autonomy, belonging, we will obtain the necessary foundation to build, through disciplines subsumed to Social Education, those prosocial behaviors that will ensure harmonious coexistence in a predominantly conflictive world.

Cultivating values and attitudes, such as: respect for otherness / diversity, equity, solidarity, freedom, tolerance, cooperation, availability for dialogue, etc. and by creating appropriate contexts for objectifying them in behaviors, we build "safety nets" not only for today's teenagers, but for tomorrow's world. We build a sanogenous, safe social environment in which every teenager can find the emotional, moral, instrumental support needed to solve problems, overcome critical situations, or provide some form of support, thus practicing and preparing. specifically, for adult life.

3. Research purpose

The RAIN.BOW (Raise Against Intolerance. New Bridges On the Web) project will generate a contribution in field of media literacy, to increase teachers' and students' civic awareness and to aware them on hate speeches.

#RainBow Erasmus Plus promotes social inclusion and positive values by introducing non-formal education methods in school education; aims to combat populism, xenophobia and radicalism, cultivating peace, tolerance and common values and "inviting" to a critical thinking approach "applied" to social values and false news. The project will create a heterogeneous community that will be trained to conduct the European Values campaign and to promote empathy and understanding, implicitly contributing to reduction / eradication of discrimination.

4. Aims of the research

The research approach focused on the following objectives, but only the first of them is targeted by this study:

- To identify students' perception about discrimination;
- To measure the level of awareness of the negative effects of social media;
- To analyze the importance of civic competences' development in the perception of teenagers.

5. Research methodology

In order to achieve the mentioned objectives, we choose the method of the questionnaire-based survey.

The questionnaire applied to the students from the target group contains 24 items, distributed over 4 sections:

1. Students' experience in situations of discrimination;
2. False news and violent content in social media;
3. Raising awareness of civic competences;
4. Data related to age, gender, place of residence.

Relevant for the analysis proposed in this paper are the data recorded for sections 1 and 4.

Regarding the investigated population, it was represented by 1487 students and 254 teachers from six European countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Italy, Romania and Spain. In Romania, the research sample included a group of 37 teachers and 267 students. The target group of students includes teenagers of different ages.

Figure no. 1. Age of students from target-group

Source: Authors' own conception

Regarding the places where the students live, we must mention that the survey have been sent to teachers and students from schools in Dambovită county, which means that probably all or most of the students live in Dambovită.

Analysing the students answers we notice that almost half (51%) of the students live in rural areas and the other half in urban areas (49%).

In Romania, the access to different facilities may differ a lot from rural to urban areas.

Figure no. 2. Number of inhabitants in students' city/locality
Source: Authors' own conception

We present, in the following, the results obtained from the application of the questionnaire addressed to students from Romania (section on discrimination), associating the quantitative analysis with the qualitative one.

6. Results and discussions

The first analyzed item is the one related to *how often students have been discriminated*. The collected data about if/how often the respondents (students) are or have been discriminated shows that a big percentage (85%) have experienced discrimination often or sometimes.

Figure no. 3. How often students have been discriminated
Source: Authors' own conception

Therefore, a very high percentage of the surveyed students state that they have been discriminated *sometimes* or *often*, which leads us to the conclusion that discrimination is a phenomenon present in their lives, which they face either in the school environment, in peer groups or even in their own families.

The percentage of 85% of teenagers who state that they have been discriminated is more worrying, as adolescence is the age at which negative dispositions are more common than in adulthood; an age marked by insecurity and anxiety, with a complex "picture" of negative emotional states and feelings - from dissatisfaction, sadness, to despair and suffering, anxiety and depression. As a teenager, being the "target" of discrimination means living at an even higher intensity the whole range of negative emotions mentioned above.

Another item asked students to mention *the aspects which are related to discrimination*. According to the students' answers, the first reason they have been discriminated is related to their *physical appearance* (42% of the students) and the second reason is related to their *morals - moral values and principles* (32%).

Figure no 4. The aspects which are related with discrimination
Source: Authors' own conception

The following situations in which they have been discriminated, mentioned by the students are (at a great distance from the first two positions): *the place where they live, their age, their political opinions* and *their surname*.

At the age of adolescence, *the physical appearance* and *the morals - moral values and principles* - are very important for their relationships with those around them (adults or colleagues/friends) and are elements that define their identity.

Teenagers are more attentive to everything that means values, attitudes and moral behaviors, developing a positive feeling about their compliance and manifestation, but also an increased concern for the rights of others, for equity and well-being. Any action of discrimination in relation to the values they have internalized or to their behaviors in certain situations affects the concept of self, self-esteem, making it difficult, of course, the crystallization of a healthy and lasting identity, as the main goal of this age.

The next item asked surveyed students to mention if *they were ever been witnessed discrimination` situations* related to a number of aspects.

Most of the students witnessed discrimination situation. Most of these discrimination situations were related to *physical appearance* of the person who was discriminated (48%), his/her *economic situation* (31%), followed by his/her *family situation* (24%), *skin colour* (22%), his/her *morals – moral values and principles* (21%).

Figure no. 5. How often students have been witnessed discrimination` situations

Source: Authors' own conception

Regarding the situations in which students are witnesses to discrimination, the answers have points in common with those recorded in the previous item, but we can also observe some differences:

- The common point is that in the first place is, in both situations, the physical appearance;
- The differences appear in the hierarchy of the following places: in this item, on the second place is mentioned *the economic situation*, followed by the *family situation* and the *skin color*, while in the previous item, on these positions we record their moral values and moral principles, the place where they live and their age, in second place is mentioned the *economic situation*, followed by the *family situation* and *skin color*.

The registered differences in the answers to these questions may raise suspicions about the sincerity of the respondents, but we also add to this question the percentage of 15% of students who said they were not discriminated against but witnessed or perhaps even initiators of an act of discrimination.

The last item was related to *the reasons some people discriminate others*.

The main reason identified by the respondents is the *rigid mentality* (75,28%). *Misunderstanding* (31,46%) and *ignorance* (23,59%) are also two reasons selected by many students. To these are added *envy*, *entourage* and *frustration*.

Such a consistent percentage of those who appreciate that the rigid mentality is the main factor that explains / generates discrimination can be interpreted as follows: teenagers reffer mainly to their discrimination by adults, which they often consider and label as having an outdated, conservative mentality, diametrically opposed to their mentality.

Also, we cannot but associate this mentioned reason (*rigid mentality*) with the school space. This perception of students can be considered an "alarm signal" to the school, which must train students as future citizens, "instrumenting" them with a series of values, attitudes and prosocial behaviors, through a specific approach to social education. Or, it is obvious that this is a vulnerable point of the Romanian school.

7. Conclusions

The main conclusive ideas resulted from the analysis and interpretation of the results obtained in our research are the following:

- Discrimination is a phenomenon present in the lives of most teenagers;
- Given the fact that adolescence is a delicate age, with noticeable changes on all levels, with a major task to fulfill, that of forming a healthy, coherent and lasting identity, the effects of discrimination can amplify teenagers' negative emotional states and feelings. and may permanently compromise the achievement of the above objective;
- The physical aspect, an important structural element for the construction of the teenager's identity, represents (according to the undertaken study) the first aspect mentioned when it comes to situations of discrimination that students have experienced or witnessed.
- Regarding the reasons for discrimination, the highest percentage was registered by the *rigid mentality*, which can be an alarm signal for teachers, for the school in general, highlighting the need to integrate, in the initial and continuous teacher training programs, relevant topics for what represents inclusive education, intercultural education, non-discriminatory educational practices, etc., but also the need for more responsibility in terms of achieving specific goals / objectives of social education.

Correlating these data with those resulting from a *National Opinion Survey on the level of discrimination in Romania and current perceptions of hate crimes* (NCCD, 2018), we find that the phenomenon of discrimination is still present and

sufficiently consistent. Fear of a different person, intolerance to the differences generated by sexual orientation, health, the practice of a certain religion or belonging to a certain religious denomination, language differences, etc. there are aspects that describe a reality that we live in and that only emphasizes the availability to receive or produce a hate speech.

Beyond the measures adopted by the national authorities, the one from which it is expected to get involved and to “change” fundamentally the attitude and behavior towards otherness, to “lay” the basis of the functioning of a society that we want truly democratic, values such as respect for otherness, tolerance, equity, solidarity, etc., is the school. Through social education and, in particular, one of its components better outlined in the Romanian educational landscape, namely civic education, the school can make a decisive contribution on building a society in which discrimination and hate speech become, at some point given, only marginal phenomena.

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The authors of this paper stipulate, on their own responsibility, that the subjects who participated in the research have been informed related to the voluntary nature of their participation, the understanding of the received information and the fact that the withdrawal from the research process can be done at any time without any negative consequences on participants. The whole research respected the actual ethical standards, and the participants expressed their consent to participate in the undertaken research.

The contribution of the authors to this paper is equal.

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