Empowering Teachers to Deal with Classroom Diversity

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Abstract: In the age of globalization, teachers need to have special skills to deal with classroom diversity represented by the different cultural, socio-economic backgrounds of students in a class. Studies have shown the need to train teachers with respect to several dimensions related to dealing with diversity in class: respect for cultural differences and diversity, confidence in interactions with students from different cultural backgrounds, manifesting interest in interactive contexts.

This paper briefly presents an educational intervention program focused on empowering teachers to deal with classroom diversity and results obtained following its implementation at undergraduate students preparing for a teaching career, attending the Pedagogy of primary and preschool education BA study programme at Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacău, Romania. Our findings show that the educational intervention program enhanced the trainees' knowledge, skills and attitudes in terms of their ability to successfully approach classroom diversity and risks of conflicts based on discrimination and differences in the class of students.

Keywords: *Classroom diversity; intercultural competence; conflict management; positive exploitation; differences.*

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1. Introduction

In the 21st century, classroom diversity is represented by the different cultural, socio-economic backgrounds of the students in a class. The 21st-century teacher should be an interculturally competent person who knows how to address and exploit differences among students in a class in a positive manner, as well as manage conflicts and conflict risks successfully. To become an interculturally competent teacher, it is essential to participate in training programs, workshops focused on promoting a teacher's profile as a true cultural mediator and agent of change and providing trainees with content and materials on good practices in class. Today's teacher must be competent in the content of the subject he/she teaches and in performing other *roles* he/she must successfully fulfil: classroom management, consideration of all factors inside and outside the classroom and school that may impact the educational act, and directly or indirectly influencing education. Today's teacher is required to be a good psycho-pedagogue and subject specialist, a dedicated social worker, cultural facilitator, social actor and active citizen (Council of Europe, 2012). This does not mean that teachers should necessarily be psychologists, sociologists or cultural anthropologists, but that intercultural education is based on the ability to associate and/or correlate different cultural symbols and stakes belonging to different cultural formations.

2. Problem statement

Every training program has a moral obligation to prepare teachers to: be aware of the diverse cultural and ethnic background of the society in which they live; be able to recognize their own prejudices and recognize the various forms of discrimination; become agents of change in education, within a pluralistic society, in accordance to European recommendations that stipulate the fact that quality education is, first and foremost, education for equality and education equally provided to all (Neuner, 2012). Studies have shown the need to train teachers with respect to several dimensions related to dealing with diversity in class (Boghian, 2016, 2017, 2018; Neculau, 2011; Salgur, 2013; Savu, 2014; Tuomaala, 2013; Țurcan, 2015; Voinea, 2012).

3. Research purpose

The purpose of our research was to have prospective teachers attend a training module focused on building their intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes that would manifest as enhanced tolerance towards students

from different cultural backgrounds. The *research hypothesis* was: attending a teacher training course focused on building intercultural competence enhances trainees' tolerant attitude towards students from different cultural backgrounds and empowers trainees to deal with classroom diversity.

4. Research methodology

a. Research design and participants

The *research design* of the experimental psycho-pedagogical study was mixed and involved two groups of students, all of Romanian ethnicity, attending the Pedagogy of Primary and Pre-school Education study program at the Faculty of Letters of Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacau. The first group (experimental) included 54 students in the third year. They have covered the educational intervention program aimed at increasing intercultural sensitivity, openness and tolerance of future teachers (teachers for pre-school and primary education) who will work with a variety of pre-school and lower-school children. The second (control) group included 51 students in the second year. The control group did not participate in the educational intervention program. It has served as a basis for comparison to better highlight the acquisitions we have expected from the experimental group of students as a result of the formative intervention. In both groups of students, two measurements were made using the *Scale for Assessing Teacher Tolerance towards Roma Ethnic Students* (SATR). The scale is a measurement instrument that we have developed by adapting items from existing scales related to accepting and respecting difference in others (*Intercultural Sensitivity Scale*, by Chen and Starosta (2000)). The *dependent variables* were the scores obtained by students in the two groups on the SATR instrument subscales (desire for constructive interactions, respect for cultural differences and diversity, trust in interactions with Roma students, the desire and pleasure to interact, the attention paid to interactions, avoiding labels, stereotypes and prejudices) to which the total score was added. So, the design included repeated measurements in two different groups of students.

The age of participants in the experimental group was 20 to 44 years old ($M = 27.66$, median = 25, $SD = 7.76$). Approximately 54% of those were aged ≤ 25 years. The distribution according to the last studies they graduated was presented as follows: 30 - high school (theoretical, vocational, technical or pedagogical), 7 - post-high school/college, 9 - basic university studies and 8 - master's degree. Ten of the students who participated in the experimental group worked as pre-school teachers in the national education system, 7 worked as primary school teachers, 3 as middle-school teachers,

and the rest did not work in the field of education. Twenty-five of the students who participated in the educational intervention program were friends or work colleagues Roma people.

The mean age of the control group students was 25.23 years (median = 21, SD = 7.47, variation range = 19-44). Approximately 63% were aged ≤ 21 years old. The distribution of students according to the last studies they graduated was presented as follows: 34 - high school, 7 - post-secondary school / college, 6 - master and 4 master studies. Regarding the distribution according to occupational status in the field of education, the distribution was as follows: 5 – pre-school teachers, 6 – primary teachers, 2 - teachers in middle school, 38 - did not work in education. Twenty-four of the students in the control group were friends or work colleagues with people belonging to the Roma ethnic group.

The two groups of students did not show statistically significant differences in the distributions according to the last graduated studies ($\chi^2 = 2.09$; $p = 0.552$), the occupational status in the educational system ($\chi^2 = 2.08$; $p = 0.556$), the presence/absence of interpersonal contacts with representatives of the Roma ethnic group ($\chi^2 = 0.006$, $p = 0.938$), respectively age ($t = 1.63$, $p = 0.105$).

b. The educational intervention program

Our model of educational intervention program (EIP) aimed to provide teachers with training at the level of all the three dimensions of competence. Forming an intercultural competent teacher able to deal with classroom diversity successfully and meaningfully involves building teachers' intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes.

In terms of intercultural *knowledge*, the content that was made available to teachers participating in the EIP on how to be an intercultural competent teacher able to deal with classroom diversity comprises information units focused on:

- knowledge in socio-human sciences: stereotypes, prejudices, minorities;
- different teaching strategies based on student cultural capital;
- cultural identity and intergroup attitudes;
- strategies of knowledge and inter-knowledge;
- positive communication and resolution of conflicts.

The content units of the training program fell under the following main themes: the culture of respect; discrimination legislation; identity and stereotypes; the effects of stereotypes; prejudices and discrimination; equity and inequality; approaches to diversity in education; adapting intercultural

and anti-discrimination education to the Romanian context; assertion of identity; celebrating diversity; development of strategies for preventing and combating prejudices and racism in class; reflection and evaluation.

Forming the profile of the intercultural competent teacher involves building such professional *skills* as: self-reflection, the ability to create an appropriate climate; opting for specific training and leadership strategies; performing explicit multicultural activities; the ability to build certain types of relationships with parents (Nedelcu, 2008: 155).

A competent intercultural teacher is largely defined by an *active tolerant attitude*. The higher levels of educational goals are made up of attitudes and values. The formation of affective behaviour involves engaging students in the multi-level landscape of knowledge and culture. To activate values through one's behaviour, one must have experienced and filtered a vast amount of knowledge and ideas (Hutmacher, Cochrane, & Bottani, 2001). Behavioural value or attitude does not emerge on its own, but relies on a huge ideological and cultural ferment.

The *values and attitudes* on which the educational intervention program focused to build at interculturally competent teachers are:

- positive valorisation of cultural differences between students in the classroom and beyond;
- positive attitude towards people and groups belonging to different cultures;
- respect for one's own cultural identity and for the cultural identity of others;
- respect for dignity and human rights; tolerance and mutual understanding;
- peaceful resolution of conflicts;
- cultural empathy; civic spirit;
- availability for intercultural dialogue and cooperation.

The methods we have used during the training are methods often proposed as highly suitable for building intercultural competence, namely: exposition, dialogue, heuristic conversation, exercises, critical thinking methods and techniques, and active-participatory methods (6 Thinking Hats, Frisco, the Fishbowl technique, Cubing, the Pyramid, Starburst), problem solving, demonstration, case study, debate, role play (Bernat, 2006; Bunăiașu, 2015; Turcan, 2015).

The EIP comprised 28 hours of classes (2 hours/week) designed as interactive lectures and seminars, conducted by the author during the 1st semester of the 2018-2019 academic year, at Vasile Alecsandri University of Bacău. The focus was on empowering teachers to deal with classroom

diversity in the Romanian educational context characterised by ethnic diversity, with vulnerable Roma children as the main issue.

5. Findings

Raw data processing was performed with SPSS for Windows 16.00 (IBM SPSS, Chicago, IL). For both the experimental and the control group, the mean scores of the SATR instrument subscales were calculated, as well as the average total score that the students obtained in the two measurements. In the experimental group, two measurements were made - one before the educational intervention program and the second after it was completed. At the same time, two measurements were made in the control group, but without the students covering the educational intervention program. For both groups of students, comparisons of the meanings obtained from the two measurements were performed using the *t-Student* test for repeated measurements (Labăr, 2008). The critical threshold value for statistical significance was fixed at $\alpha = 0.05$ (two-tailed). For significant differences, the effect size was estimated by calculating the value of the coefficient *d*. The formula used was:

$$d = \sqrt{\frac{t^2}{N-1}}$$

where *t* was the calculated value for the paired-samples *t*-test and *N* was the sample size. The qualitative benchmarks for the effect size interpretation were as follows: 0.20 – low effect size, 0.50 – moderate effect size, 0.80 – high effect size.

To present our results, we have summarized the means and standard deviations of the dependent variables that have been the focus of our attention in Table 1 below. Values are listed for both measurement waves and student groups who participated in the study. After completion of the educational intervention, the students in the experimental group showed statistically significant increases in the scores averages for *respecting cultural differences and diversity* ($t = -3.06$; $p < 0.01$), *confidence in interactions with Roma pupils* ($t = -3.34$; $p < 0.01$), *pleasure in interactive contexts* ($t = -2.88$; $p < 0.01$), respectively the SATR global score ($t = 3.74$; $p < 0.001$). For these significant differences, the magnitudes of the effects were moderate (0.42, 0.45, 0.39, and 0.51, respectively). The educational intervention aimed at modifying the intercultural sensitivity and the openness towards Roma pupils among students from the Pedagogy of Pre-school and Primary Education study

program also led to increases in the average scores for the other two dimensions (the *desire for constructive interactions* with the Roma students, respectively *avoidance of labelling, stereotypes and prejudices*), but the differences between the measurements made before and after the completion of the action were not significant.

For the control group, no significant difference was observed between the averages of the scores obtained from the two measurements: the desire for constructive interactions – $t = 0.0001$ and $p = 0.998$, respect for cultural differences and diversity – $t = 0.38$ and $p = 0.705$, confidence in interactions with Roma students – $t = -1.03$ and $p = 0.307$, the pleasure of interactions – $t = 0.80$ and $p = 0.424$, the attention paid to interactions – $t = -0.22$ and $p = 0.830$, avoidance of labels, stereotypes and prejudices – $t = 0.71$ and $p = 0.478$, the global score for SATR – $t = 0.21$ and $p = 0.834$.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations by measurements and participants' group

Dependent variables	Experimental group		Control group	
	PRE	POST	1st measurement	2nd measurement
Desire for constructive interaction	3.48 (0.46)	3.58 (0.47)	3.70 (0.51)	3.70 (0.52)
Respect for cultural differences and diversity	3.57 (0.46)	3.77 (0.46)	3.75 (0.42)	3.74 (0.45)
Confidence in interacting with Roma students	3.51 (0.52)	3.75 (0.60)	3.88 (0.54)	3.91 (0.52)
Pleasure generated by interactions	3.64 (0.65)	3.82 (0.58)	4.00 (0.58)	3.96 (0.60)
Attention paid to interactions	3.28 (0.46)	3.38 (0.52)	3.22 (0.54)	3.22 (0.52)
Avoiding labelling, stereotyping, prejudices	3.62 (0.51)	3.76 (0.49)	3.83 (0.56)	3.81 (0.55)
SATR – overall score	3.53 (0.37)	3.70 (0.36)	3.76 (0.39)	3.76 (0.39)

Note: PRE - Measurement made before the educational intervention; POST - the measurement achieved after the educational intervention. Between parentheses, there are listed the values of standard deviations. Values set in bold type indicate mean differences that were statistically significant.

6. Discussions and conclusions

The research hypothesis – attending a teacher training course focused on building intercultural competence enhances trainees' tolerant attitude towards students from different cultural backgrounds and empowers trainees to deal with classroom diversity – was confirmed.

For these reasons, we believe that the EIP has reached its aim to a large extent: respect for cultural differences and diversity, confidence in interactions with culturally different students, experiencing pleasure while interacting with culturally different students are the pre-requisites for promoting a non-discriminative attitude in class, as well as for the desire to identify and apply the best teaching practices and techniques that diminish risks of conflicts in class and exploit differences in a positive way.

However, further actions need to be taken at two levels: we believe that such an educational program aimed at ways of approaching diversity in the class of students should be compulsory for all pre- and in-service teachers; the impact of the educational program may be enhanced, first of all, by increasing the number of hours allotted to it, by doubling it (56 hours); also, the EIP may be extended to also include informal and non-formal learning.

A first conclusion is that an educational intervention program focused on empowering teachers to deal with classroom diversity is timely; teachers need to be prepared to deal with all types of differences in class. Whether these differences are related to financial status, ethnicity, religion, race etc., teachers need to know how to approach diversity in class and all the associated issues. We believe that an open mind and attitude of active tolerance is an essential dimension of teacher intercultural competence. Besides the dimensions of a tolerant, open attitude translated as engagement in interaction, respect for cultural differences and diversity, self-confidence while interacting with people from different cultures, the pleasure of interacting, attention to interactions with students from different cultural backgrounds, we have found that it is useful to provide teachers with methods and tools suitable for an intercultural approach in class.

It was confirmed that among the best methods to be used, on the one hand to train teachers to deal with classroom diversity and, on the other hand, by teachers themselves to reduce conflicts and risks of conflicts in classes characterised by diversity, are those based on interaction, active participation, analysis, critical thinking, cooperation and collaboration, communication, team work that build, first and foremost, empathy, solidarity and mutual help: heuristic conversation, reflection exercises, 6

Thinking Hats, Frisco, the Fishbowl technique, Cubing, the Pyramid, Starburst, problem solving, demonstration, case study, debate, role play.

The first thing of which teachers and prospective teachers need to become aware is their role as models: therefore, the best method ever to reduce conflicts based on discrimination in class is setting an example. An interculturally competent teacher will have interculturally competent students. Further research is needed to see the impact of an interculturally competent teacher on a class of students characterised by cultural differences and diversity.

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