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LET'S INCREASE ADULT EDUCATORS' INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES

Case
Study

Keywords

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Abstract

The article is a study on enhancing adult educators' intercultural communication competencies as achieved through the INCREASE European project (2019-1-RO01-KA204-063872); the project is being implemented by a partnership of institutions and organisations from six countries, coordinated by the University of Medicine and Pharmacy Iasi, Romania. The project aims to strengthen the intercultural communication competencies of adult educators who work in various formal and non-formal educational settings in order to help them to overcome the challenges arising from their everyday work with multicultural and multilingual learners. The paper presents the project's objectives and activities and gives insights into the research findings on multiculturalism in adult education in Romania.

INTRODUCTION

Economic, political, social and cultural challenges have impacted our society, leading to unparalleled growth in its complex interconnections among people from different cultures, nationalities and ethnic and religious groups. Our environment has become more and more diverse, bringing together people that come from different linguistic and socio-cultural contexts. It is therefore imperative that this contact relies on mutual respect and that is where the notion of interculturality comes into play. Interculturality has generally been defined as the set of relationships and interactions that take place intentionally between different cultures in order to promote dialogue, mutual respect and the awareness of the necessity to preserve the cultural identity of each individual (Bekemans, 2016).

Interculturalism can be summed up as the relations that exist between culturally diverse human groups in a given society and offers fruitful ways for different ethnic groups to co-exist in an atmosphere that encourages understanding and civility (Dietz, 2018). Interculturalism is enriching as it provides one with new perspectives, concepts, visions and ideas; it is "the recognition of common human needs across cultures" (Kolapo, 2008). Interculturality focuses on understanding similarities and differences between cultures; it helps one understand and open up to new cultural forms and perceptions of reality without losing one's own identity. In fact, it offers a unique opportunity to reflect on one's own culture and the world. In addition, it enables one to adapt to a new complex context.

Education should respond to the challenges of diversity, mobility and complexity of any specific socio-cultural contexts and prepare students for dialogue and intercultural exchanges (Bekemans, 2016). The main objective of intercultural education lies in preparing people to perceive, accept, respect, and experience alterity. Interculturality has emerged in the last decades as an educational response to the challenges that complex human interconnections pose and to the need to find efficient communication channels and train adequate skills. Educators play a key role in responding to these challenges. However, the current situation points out the existing lack of adult educators' intercultural communication competencies (ICC).

The INCREASE project

The INCREASE project aims to strengthen the ICC of adult educators working in various formal and non-formal educational settings in order to help them to overcome the challenges arising from their everyday work with multicultural and multilingual

learners. The project is being implemented within a partnership made up of seven organizations (universities and educational centres) from Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Romania and Spain. The project partners have produced the following outputs: an interactive map presenting the current situation of multiculturalism in adult education, an e-test/questionnaire tool to set up the profile of multicultural learners' needs, a guideline for adult educators and an e-book, "Enhancing Intercultural Communicative Competencies" - a self-learning resource for adult educators of inter-cultural communication competencies.

THE INTERACTIVE MAP ON MULTICULTURALISM IN ADULT EDUCATION IN EUROPE

The first intellectual output is an interactive map presenting the current situation of multiculturalism in adult education in the EU. The map is based on solid research on literature review, internet articles, policies & strategies, best practices, projects or initiatives on the topic of multiculturalism in adult education. The research is also accompanied by interviews and a collection of audio, video or written testimonials from adult educators. The map describes five main cultural groups, the ICC adult education resources available and provides tips on the knowledge, skills and attitudes that interculturally competent adult educators need.

The project creates a supporting tool for adult educators who work with multicultural and multilingual learners. The project proposes the creation of an e-test/questionnaire tool to set up the profile of multicultural learners' needs. The tool is focused on socio-demographic characteristics, educational motivation, and geo-cultural comfortability, multilingual and multi-religious classes, the process of adaptation of freshman international learners, and immigrants; it identifies the factors triggering acculturation and also deals with the stress of acculturation experienced by international learners. The profiles highlight which factors influence the adaptation to the new culture and the problems or needs multicultural and multilingual learners are faced with.

Romania is in line with the European policy on this issue. The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, signed and ratified by Romania in 1995, refers extensively to the role of intercultural dialogue in ensuring the rights of national minorities (European centre for minority, 2000). Article 5 of the same document expresses the need to address cultural diversity as a source of enrichment of society rather than of its division. Article 6 stipulates that the signatories of this Convention will promote tolerance and intercultural dialogue "by eliminating barriers

between persons belonging to ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious groups, encouraging organizations and intercultural movements that seek to promote mutual respect and understanding and to integrate these people into society, while preserving their identity." The role of education in intercultural dialogue is clear from Article 12 of the Convention, which states that the signatories are committed to promoting the knowledge of the culture, history, language and religion of minority and majority groups (European centre for minority, 2000).

Given the richness of references to the role of intercultural education in promoting a democratic society based on the values of human rights and equal opportunities, it is clear that the concern of European political actors for implementing the principles of intercultural education in Romania must have a positive effect on reality.

As far as the field of formal education is concerned, the current context is one in which a monocultural approach to and a unilateral perspective over most history and culture prevail, and the references to cultural, ethnic, and religious minorities are rare.

Monoculturality seems to characterize the Romanian society in general. The lack of openness to the landmarks and the values of alterity, the lack of genuine intercultural dialogue, the limitation of intercultural exchanges to folkloric parades of ethnic and minority cultural groups (most frequently, promoting interculturality comes down to "multicultural folklore performances"), all lead to a context that makes it difficult to put into practice the principles of intercultural education. As mentioned above, because of a mentality characterized by the closure to otherness, students' learning the principles of intercultural education and teachers' and adult educators' initial (or continuous) training in this field is not easy to achieve.

Intercultural communication is not studied systematically at university: there are no specific training courses in ICC. There are no compulsory courses on intercultural education in the initial teacher education curriculum. Optional courses in this field are offered only by a few universities. This means that only motivated students interested in cultural diversity attend these courses. In some universities, the qualifications of teachers in the field of intercultural education have a more technical aspect correlated with the academic specialization. Beyond scientific training, by acquiring specific knowledge, even psycho-pedagogical training is not studied enough. Essential issues such as urbanization, the globalization of information, cultural plurality, subcultures of young people are left in the background, leading to the formation of a narrow, often didactic, unaccomplished and rather illusory professionalism.

The research shows that Romania needs to accept and develop the values that multiculturalism brings. According to the 2011 Romania national census, minorities represent around 11% of the population. The regions with the highest ethnic diversity in Romania are Transylvania, Banat, Bucovina, and Dobrogea, whereas the areas with the lowest ethnic diversity are Oltenia and Moldova. Experts and historians often hold that Romania has not been a strong facilitator and mediator in its multicultural regions although it has not hindered different cultural developments. However, its most important priority has been to maximize cohesion at the national level.

Romania is in line with the European policy on this issue. Although progress has been made there is still much to be done concerning one ethnic group. The revised Strategy for the Inclusion of the Roma Minority – 2012-2020, adopted in 2015, sets targets in the key areas of education, employment, health and housing and addresses the promotion and protection of Roma culture and their participation in the public and political life. Regrettably, the strategy neither identifies sources of funding nor contains mechanisms to ensure its implementation.

Romania also celebrates the Day of Minorities on December 18, which was officially recognized by a Government Decision of 1998. Moreover, it is a holiday all over the world, because the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Declaration on the rights of people belonging to national, ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities on December 18, 1992.

The social inclusion of the Romanian citizens belonging to different minorities implies an integrated approach, a planned process and conjugate actions, followed by the adoption and implementation of specific strategies, public policies, programs, and projects. One of Romania's main strategic goals for 2030 is promoting and strengthening the values of multiculturalism by including the perspective and contribution of minorities in Romanian history and culture, preserving traditions that add cultural richness and combating any form of discrimination, racism, and anti-Semitism.

Across the entire EU as well as in Romania, the education system is confronted with a number of challenges. Several countries already face or are about to face shortages of teachers, either in particular subject areas (especially science, technology, engineering, and maths) or in particular geographical areas.

The Romanian authorities have made efforts to promote minority cultures and education, and particular steps which have been taken to facilitate the representation of national minorities in parliament are widely recognized and appreciated. The Law of Education remains the main legislative

basis for teaching in and of national minority languages.

One of the most representative educational centres for multiculturalism in Romania is the Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj. About this university Professor Andrei Marga stated that it is “the university with the most developed multicultural organization, providing complete studies in Romanian, Hungarian, German, as well as specializations in Hebrew, along with a wide range of programmes in modern languages (English, French, Italian, Spanish, etc.)”. The university promotes and relies on the extraordinary richness of the Transylvanian cultural space (Marga, 2004). Nowadays, in this technology-driven world, teachers need new skills more than ever, including the competencies to deal with cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom, to teach professionally in a technology-rich environment and to adopt collaborative teaching practices. While 92% of teachers report regular participation in professional development courses, only 21% of them claim a further need for training on teaching special needs students; 16% ask for training on the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in their classes; about 13% feel the need for training on teaching in multilingual and multicultural environments (European Commission, 2019).

Romania has recently developed programmes aiming at attracting young Roma students to teacher training and encouraged them to become teachers, in order to serve as positive role models. For instance, the University of Bucharest runs a distance learning programme and special places are reserved for Roma students at all universities. The Centre “Education 2000+” also supported Roma students on condition that they worked within their communities for some time after they graduated.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS OF THE PROJECT

Based on the e-tests and the profiles created, project partners will develop a guideline for adult educators. The tool will enable teachers to measure the acculturative stress experienced by immigrants or international students. Acculturative stress refers to the psychological adjustment that occurs when culturally distinct groups and individuals come into contact. The tool will help educators working in adult educational centers, centers providing cultural information courses to international learners/immigrants or organisations which support the acclimatization of newcomers to a new environment.

The partnership will also produce and deliver a training programme consisting of two modules – a theoretical and a practical one. The theoretical

module will cover knowledge, skills and attitudes towards multicultural environments such as comprehension, communication, openness, curiosity and desire to learn from each other. The practical module will be composed of exercises on the application of various methods such as questionnaires, feedback, analysis of critical incidents, culture assimilation, real-life simulations, etc. to improve inter-cultural interactions relevant to education and training. The main strategies will be reflection, learning from the other, collaboration and sharing.

A self-learning resource for adult educators will be prepared and take the shape of an e-book. It will consist of self-study professional materials as well as examples of the most relevant case studies and good practices, practical training activities, examples, exercises, tests, etc. It will be freely accessible from the project website as pdf and/or flipbook and it will be suitable for both self-study and trainer-facilitated face-to-face sessions.

CONCLUSIONS

The project promotes inclusion, diversity and equality in adult education - in particular through innovative integrated approaches. It aims at fostering the development of intercultural communicative competencies in adult educators as core competencies necessary for teaching culturally diverse learners and for dealing with diversity issues in their context. By developing these competencies, adult educators will get prepared to work more effectively with learners varying in culture, language, abilities and most importantly will learn how to create an educational culture where all learners regardless of their cultural or linguistic background are welcomed, supported and provided with the best opportunity to learn. Thus the partnership promotes ownership of shared values, equality, non-discrimination and social inclusion through adult education and will help to tackle discrimination, segregation, racism, bullying and violence. At the same time, the project results contribute to the enhanced access, participation and learning performance of disadvantaged learners, reducing disparities in learning outcomes.

Education about opening up to multiple values is a fully justified approach as it aims at a better insertion of the individual into a polymorphic and dynamic spiritual world. This approach meets both formative and individual aspirations by valuing some particular unique trait that deserves to be recognized and enhanced, ensuring a degree of coherence, solidarity and functionality. Community solidarity is enhanced by the way it manages the reproduction of the great symbols within that cultural space, but also by the way it adjusts openness to other socio-cultural formations. There

is a specific dynamic between closure and openness, a pulsating relationship that generates cultural growth. All the project partners have experience in a number of the sub-topics this project deals with (general and professional language training & evaluation of competences, adult education training, fighting radicalization, supporting adult immigrants to integrate into host cultures, helping work mobility) or in using adult education principles and methodologies that benefit adult learners if applied knowledgeably by skilled adult trainers: the principle of constructivism, the collaborative approach that leads to the co-creation of knowledge among people who learn and share their experience in a learning community of practice, the benefits of a technology-enriched education.

The project addresses a big lack in the overall education of specialists working in adult education: the intercultural communication competence (ICC), which has become more and more relevant for a trainer working with multicultural adult groups of students. Experience is placing these competencies currently among the core competencies in the fields of BMA (in all partner countries), alongside with language teaching (in all partner countries), psychology, education sciences, social pedagogy (in Romania, Lithuania); nevertheless, the formal approach to training educators as adult trainers does not include building intercultural knowledge among its learning objectives nor any practice to exercise and consolidate this competence in any of the curricula identified in the partner countries while writing this application. This is somewhat surprising as education should respond quickly to the social dynamics of our societies; despite much talk about this necessity, this competence has not been included in the teacher education either, not because it is not considered important, but because there is a strong attitude of inertia in the educational systems everywhere in the EU that prevents a better level of adaptation of education to social realities.

The project also innovates by developing new resources and instruments which are very much in need. Adult educators from both formal and non-formal education institutions working with multicultural learners find it difficult to elaborate resources, which are neither piloted nor validated prior to being used. The proposed Interactive Map of Multicultural and Multilingual adult educators/learners in the EU, with its focus on knowledge, skills and attitudes, is an innovation in terms of educational resources and a necessary guidance tool for both educators and multicultural learners.

This project is innovative because it goes beyond a simple scale to offer a guide to acculturation and acculturative stress with useful information for lecturers to help their international learners meet

the new challenges in the country where they live, be it for study, work or immigration purposes.

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