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INTERCULTURAL DIMENSION OF EDUCATIONAL DIALOGUE IN UNDERSTANDING RELIGION

Perspective,
opinion and
commentary

Keywords

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Abstract

Working with children of different nationalities and cultures is a challenge for the Romanian teachers. It requires both new research in the methodology field and a reconsideration of the importance of some of the subjects taught in schools. In this regard, the article shows the role of religious education in the context of the global challenges and quick changes, which require a new approach of child education based on transversal competencies. Considering the primary Finnish School of Sibiu model, the authors' view is that the class of religious education can contribute through tools and methods of non-formal education to the holistic project of educating man, namely body-mind and soul. They consider that it trains the child to be a responsible citizen with a strong identity, able to face the new challenges and to understand the civic and ethical dimension of life. Moreover, it contributes to developing child's spiritual intelligence, preparing him to live responsibly in the religious pluralism and offering the chance to assimilate and apply the common values, namely love, respect, communion and spirit of justice.

A GLOBAL CHANGING CONTEXT

While the need of intercultural dialogue as a path towards intercultural society became clear within Europe after the Second World War, when reconciliation and peacebuilding were at the heart of international youth activities, in Romania the process was delayed because of the communist period. Even after the abolishment of the communist regime, the communist mentalities and the weak economic growth did not promote too much intercultural exchanges. However, as a country of the EU since 2007, Romania is facing today the consequences of globalization, although not on the same scale as the western European countries. Communications and information technologies, tourism, migration, interconnected communities, linguistic, cultural and ideological convergence, and world systems of signs and images (Marginson, 1999, p. 1) remodel the traditional familiar patterns. Sibiu, the small town with about 160 thousand inhabitants and European capital of culture 2007 has lately experienced the phenomenon of welcoming new residents. In 2018, over 3,700 foreigners have requested a stay permit or residence in Sibiu in one year. While 2,552 were citizens of the European Union / EEA / CH, coming from Germany, Italy, France, Switzerland, Scotland, Austria and Spain, the other 1,172 came from Republic of Moldova, Turkey, China, Egypt (Dogaru, 2019).

In this globally changing context, self-awareness and alterity have become basic elements of a fulfilled interdependent living. Beyond trade, globalization encompasses flows of information and people, their beliefs, worldviews and ways of worshipping God and celebrating their faiths. Therefore, the contemporary world is a network of tensions of knowledge. Unfortunately, the Romanian society is facing the lack of information about the huge reservoirs of knowledge, for it often acts unwelcoming towards the others. The "Christianophobia" (Guitton, 2010), as well as all types of religion related phobias, reveal a kind of cultural blindness, a dysfunction of the intercultural dialogue, the lack of both the freedom of thought and the communitarian consciousness, bearing a false humanism of knowledge.

The global context has effects on school communities, which frequently become multilingual, multicultural and multi-faith. In this respect, the authors want to underline the importance of training Romanian educators as ones of the most important catalysts of changing mentalities in society. Romanian teachers should be empowered with some new key-competencies, such as intercultural competence and creativity to stimulate the intercultural dialogue and facilitate the application of diversity as a tool in the

classroom. Moreover, the authors state that the schools should assume the role of connectors to foster the moral transformation of the social existence and to cultivate active citizenship on the base of moral common values. As micro 'labs' that find and select values, by offering a space in people's process of education, they should become agents of change, through intercultural learning, trying to understand the other's religion and culture as markers of his/her identity.

The Christian Church may contribute to the civil society education with both its theological thinking, offering a philosophical base of the intercultural vision and its millennial experience through the religious education class, making space for inter-faith and intercultural exchanges to find the common values, such as family, spiritual life, soul's existence, and spirit of justice. The authors will often refer to the experience of education model promoted by the primary Finnish School in Sibiu (FSSB), which is a product of Finnish education transferred in the Romanian field. FSSB tries to offer a space of intercultural and interreligious experience, including children with different cultural and religious backgrounds, encouraging meaningful interpersonal relationships, freedom, self-awareness, and the development of those skills necessary for lifelong learning.

THEOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE INTERCULTURAL VISION IN EDUCATION

Concepts as culture, religion and education are, in essence, intertwined (UNESCO, 2006, p. 12). Firstly, from the Christian point of view, the lesson of Pentecost can serve as the philosophical base of the intercultural education model. Pentecost is not only the origin of the Christian Church but also it is the model of its existence. The event is considered as the definitive reversal of Babel. If at Babel, tongues were confused, at Pentecost they were understood. Therefore, the contribution of Christianity to the contemporary intercultural educational context is related to the Pentecost lesson, namely the assumption of diversity without denying the cultural differences, but transforming them into dynamic sources of thought (Chemo, 2019, p. 7-18). The respect for the Unique God, who interferes in history to save the whole human nature, is not a simple aspect of theological discourse, but the essence of the consciously embraced faith. It is the first principle of the culture of the ecumenical thinking in relation with the social pedagogy, as a specific reflection of the 'social' in schools and in other institutions that shape and foster education.

Secondly, another theological principal to be considered is that the world is God's gift to people.

Everyone is called through the knowledge of the world to a progressive dialogue and communion with God and with his/her neighbour. It is a universal sacrament and thus, man's activity becomes a sacramental communion with the Divinity (Ioja, 2008, p. 143-144) and with the others. Adam's mission given him by God in Heaven to cultivate and maintain the orchard (Genesis 2.15) is very relevant today. It means to both cultivate and maintain the harmony in the world and to intelligently cultivate the world according to its purpose, as a divine gift, not as an idol or worse to abuse it. From that mission point of view, Religion educator is not only the person who teaches Religion, as a discipline of study, but also every educator, who helps the child to know the world. The educator discerns together with the child the laws and the immutable patterns of the universality, identifying the constants through which God addresses to the world. Therefore, sharing the religious culture, customs or informal culture become extremely important (Necula, 2019, p. 530).

Thirdly, considering the ecumenical and interfaith relationships, Churches' experiences should be taken into consideration in respect of the efforts toward an intercultural society. In this regard, the Romanian Orthodox Church as a member of World Council of Churches and participant in the ecumenical and interfaith movement since 1961, along with the Church sisters and religious communities could be viable partners, offering help and inspiration to the civil society. Regarding the catechetical and religious education, it should be noted the Romanian theologians' efforts to open the Romanian theological research to the universal Christian research, to take into consideration the Roman-Catholic and Protestant findings in the field. Going beyond the stereotypical and prejudicial narrow confessional views, they tried to understand the social and the intercultural experiences that the Western Christian Churches have already done in their environments.

LEARNING YOUR RELIGION AND CULTURE, A CONDITION OF INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

In the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), it states that: "the education of the child shall be directed to ... the development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own" (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989).

In respect of how important is to learn firstly the own cultural identity, Luigi Giussani identifies two

requirements that can influence the young generation's life vision and attitudes. Firstly, to educate means to propose the past, the tradition as a hypothesis of work. If it is missing, the young people will invent it or will become a sceptic. If the tradition is properly known, it offers a coherent vision of reality, a hypothesis of significance, a vision of destiny. On the other hand, the past should be proposed to the young people within a present experience, which can reveal the relation with the final heart requirements, namely with truth, beauty and goodness. The confrontation of the tradition with these heart's final requirements within a present experience fosters the critical thinking (Giussani, 2005, p. 5-6).

Giussani also underlines the distinction between critical thinking and doubtfulness. While doubtfulness is the end of the research, questioning is the beginning of the knowledge of the truth (Giussani, 2005, p. 7).

Doubtfulness is symptomatic for the contemporary Romanian society, revealing both the dysfunctions in the educational approach of the past, as well as a deficiency of the social cordiality with some issues of religious thinking. Often the past is considered to be connected with the idyllic village, folk traditions, morality, or a mixture of all these. Therefore, it may be very difficult for a young inhabitant of a city to accept the past as a hypothesis of work. The negative effects are obvious in the Romanian context that seems to uncritically assimilate modern morals, which have enormously changed. After 30 years since the Romanian Revolution, the Romanians are experiencing a minimal peaceful cohabitation. Many young people deny the religious need and banish any religious belonging but embrace a culture of idolization of a pseudo-religion and a pseudo-religious culture. These attitudes mostly determine syncretic activism and the lack of respect for other religious cultures.

SCHOOLS, RESPONSIBLE ACTORS FOR INTERCULTURAL COMMUNITIES

Concepts like multicultural society and intercultural society are sometimes confused. Even if they seem to be similar, they are not synonyms. While a multicultural society means different cultures, national, ethnic, religious groups all living within the same territory but not necessarily coming into contact with each other, intercultural society supposes interaction and open relations, exchanges and mutual recognition of the groups' values, traditions, norms and ways of life (Huber, 2012, p. 23-24).

Schools are the most appropriate institutions to prepare and change mentalities. They can foster the transition from a multicultural society to an

intercultural society. Therefore, they should assume also the role of connectors, by bringing together teachers, parents and the social and political environment and trying to create mediation groups based on the common values such as *family, spiritual life, soul's existence, the spirit of justice* that can be valued in the daily life. Knowing each other and establishing some common values, people can act together and build a "safety ring" in the communities, where they live. One of the beneficent results may be the moral reformation of the social existence by harmonizing the religiosity of the social constructions (individuals-families-communities) to reduce the disputes (e.g. the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina where after the last war the enmity among the block neighbours or the schoolmates makes the national reconciliation impossible).

FSSB makes efforts to achieve this goal by encouraging a vivid and natural relationship among school, families and the social environment to nurture a communitarian spirit. One of the FSSB's objective is work in close partnership with parents, supporting them in the education of their children, for one of the school's values is 'family', and considering school as the second home. Reading marathon, science fair, breakfast prepared by parents for teachers, pyjamas party, time and space for creative workshops held by the parents who want to share their experience with the children in the school, and all celebration events are some of the activities, which encourage the partnership between school and families. Moreover, they are meant to spread the educational values in the community. Since the FSSB parents' community is made up of both Romanians and foreigners, these activities encourage the intercultural dialogue, by connecting people of different cultures.

NEW KEY-COMPETENCIES FOR LIFE IN SOCIETY

The Romanian School should also become conscious that it should transmit knowledge and develop competencies, skills and attitudes, which empower learners for life in the contemporary and future society. Even if the values and interpersonal skills that should be acquired through family education cannot be replaced by school education outcomes, teachers have the great opportunity to daily influence and model the youth way of thinking. Moreover, their role has increased lately, for they spent much more time with the children than their parents or tutors, often becoming mediators between the child and his/her family. Therefore, the teachers should be the first trained and empowered with new key-competencies, necessary to foster empathy, solidarity and respect for differences. *Intercultural competence* and

creativity are the competencies needed to cultivate teachers' intercultural communication and to help them to apply diversity management in the classroom.

Deardorff describes *intercultural competence* as the "ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 247). The model describes the development as a process based on particular attitudes (e.g. tolerance and openness), the acquisition of knowledge about foreign cultures, and the development of cultural self-awareness as well as of certain skills (e.g. to listen carefully, to analyze situations).

European ministers of education recommend that the training of the intercultural competence should take into account intercultural sensitivity, communication skills and cultural awareness. Moreover, teachers should be taught how to provide a democratic learning environment for students. They should acquire skills in developing teaching materials, which foster culturally responsive education and be equipped across different subject areas with methods and resources that support empathy, critical thinking, teamwork, conflict management and multiperspectivity (Huber, 2012, p. 45).

Creativity is inherent to every human being. It can be developed as a skill, but it is nonetheless a natural ability of our minds. It creates and strengthens connections between people and within society and helps the individual to connect to the world because it is the sign of the divine sparkle and freedom put inside of every human being. In the Bible, Adam is presented as co-creator, for God gave him the empowerment to name the animals on the planet. If everybody should be a co-creator, then the goal of education is to empower individuals to be much more involved and innovative. Therefore, it is a double processual-organic aspect regarding the educational actors: the child can become a teacher for his/her teacher. Considering this point of view, teachers should encourage and foster proactive learners, divergent ideas and non-conformism. They should be equipped with all necessary methods and well-trained to face the mental resistance, as an important source of transcendental learning (Illeris, 2014, p. 37).

The contemporary educational theories consider creativity as a key competence that helps peoples to adapt and "respond with smart ideas to the modern world" (Zimmermann & Leondieva, 2017, p. 13-15).

When modeling the creative competence for educational purposes, it should be taken into account four dimensions, according to specialists: the factual, methodological, social and personal dimension. Factual dimension refers to the ability

to identify adequate solutions for tasks and problems based on the knowledge of a particular field. Moreover, it means to apply knowledge and practices from different domains. Methodological dimension concerns the ability to choose methodologies and to evaluate outcomes as well as structuring complex topics and seeing them from multiple perspectives, through experimenting innovative approach. The social dimension implies team and conflict management skills, and assertive communication. The personal dimension means acting autonomously and in a self-organized and reflective way (Zimmermann & Leondieva, 2017, p. 16).

Teachers should be trained to be able to work in interdisciplinary teams to bring lessons closer to the real world. Moreover, they should be able to share examples of good practice and understand that they are not in competition, but all together, they are builders of cultural bridges in communities.

RETHINKING THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Despite the western European tendency to underplay the role of religion in the public sphere since the Enlightenment, in the contemporary global world its role has significantly increased, even from the political point of view. The religious education is considered to contribute to children's active citizenship (Hession, 2015), promoting values like assertive communication, freedom of expression, the spirit of justice and communion. Religious education trains and fosters skills for interreligious dialogue, mutual respect, love for other human beings and natural environment care. Moreover, it is the main subject that develops spiritual intelligence, which plays an important role in both individual and community life.

The expansion of migration as well as the private and professional mobility have brought different faiths, worldviews and ways of celebrating faith in front of the Europeans' doors. As a result, classrooms have become multicultural and multi-faith. Romania is about to experience this phenomenon, too. In this context, first, the importance of religious education in Romanian schools should be reconsidered. Assured through legislation both in state and private schooling system, 'Religion' is part of the common "trunk" and taught in Romanian schools for all eighteen recognized cults (Ministry of Education and Scientific Research, 2015). In spite of the solidarity manifested among Churches and different religious groups with the occasion of the sharp debate of 2015, when more than two million parents or tutors enrolled their children in the religion class, the religion teachers are frequently accused to

indoctrinate children. Moreover, the religion class is often unfavourably placed in the children schedule. Media promote the stereotypical and prejudicial view that is also maintained by the religious illiteracy of the adult generation and by some religion teachers' misunderstanding of their mission. It could be another factor, namely that the religion is often associated with the past and connected with the idyllic village, folk traditions, morality or all these together, as it was mentioned above. To avoid the superposition of the dynamic contents of the real faith and soul's needs and the folk tradition, the religious topics should be rationally approached, by taking into consideration their capacity of promoting the authentic human values, the enlightenment and improvement of the human being. Moreover, morality should be taught not as a simple fulfilment of good works, but a tension toward a new reality that pushes people to get out of themselves, of their comfort zone and to tend towards likeness to God.

Secondly, a series of questions arise concerning the children who belong to different Churches and religious groups. One of them is whether they should be separated or should learn together, sharing their experiences and trying to understand the main important religious values as well as the differences as signs of personal identities. Another question is whether plans for interfaith approaches should be prepared to bridge different spiritualities. Which is the most appropriate model of religious education to be adopted in the global context to fulfil the needs of the child: learning religion, learning about religion or learning from religion (Schreiner, 2013, p. 7-12)? Whether it is chosen one or the other of the models or a mixture of them, it is important to highlight the necessity of developing the interreligious anthropology based on dialogue, tolerance and exchange of values (Natoli, 2019). The religion teacher should be a facilitator, who helps children to find their way and benefit of holistic education, by the use of practical, participatory and contextualized teaching methods and facilitating the application of diversity as a tool in the classroom (UNESCO, 2006, p. 34). They should be conscious that an intercultural community cannot be built without the effort of being aware of the other person's culture and way of thinking, for walking in other's shoes foster the real knowledge. FSSB has already made this experience. Now, the fourth grade children learn about the Ancient Egypt, an important era of human culture and history of religion. The idea of the course came after the teacher's experiential travel in Egypt, which inspired the topics for an entire year of study. The children have enthusiastically received the course and now they want to make the real experience of knowledge by visiting Egypt and deepen what they have already learned. Therefore, it is necessary to underline the

importance of studying the cultural archaeology of various ages and exploring attentively the world's history of religion and its phenomena of social mysticism, to discover the common knowledge, a requirement of intercultural communication.

CONCLUSIONS

In the global changing context, the Romanian teachers should be prepared to handle multicultural and multilinguistic classrooms. As one of the most important catalysts of changing mentalities, they should be well trained and empowered with new key-competencies to cultivate the intercultural dialogue and facilitate the application of diversity as a tool in the classroom. The Romanian schools should take seriously their role of connecting people involved in education to create mediation groups based on the common values such as family, spiritual life, soul's existence, and the spirit of justice and to promote the moral reformation of the social existence.

Church theological thinking offers a spiritual-philosophical base of the intercultural community through the Pentecost lesson as the definitive reversal of Babel. It underlines the assumption of diversity without denying the cultural differences but transforming them into dynamic sources of thought. Starting from the image of Adam as co-creator with God, Christian theology stresses the importance of the double aspect of the process of education, which thus becomes a great source of creativity and flexibility. Moreover, the Christian Church is able to contribute to the common effort of educating people towards an intercultural society, sharing its millennial experience also through the religious education class, together with the other churches and religious groups in Romania, and promoting the authentic human values. The new global context may make us think of alternative approaches of the Religion class, namely religious education or interfaith education that should cultivate mutual respect, active citizenship, empathy and solidarity among different religious groups and should strengthen the intercultural dialogue. Therefore, the religious education class can contribute to forming a cultural "hardware", on which the "software" of an exchange of cultural competencies can be built.

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