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INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF PLANNED TEACHING ACTIVITIES IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MACEDONIA

Introduction

Intercultural education is a long-term priority of Macedonian society, as confirmed in several strategic documents in the field of education: *Concept for Intercultural Education*[1], *Strategy for Education 2018-2025*[2], *National Strategy for Development of the Concept of One Society and Interculturalism 2020-2022.*[3] One of the essential priorities in all documents is strengthening of the intercultural education, which will enable "contents, methods and activities implemented in schools to promote tolerance and respect for differences as values, as well as to enable the acquisition of knowledge and skills for recognizing and respecting the others."[4] A crucial factor in implementation of this priority is the competence of teachers to incorporate intercultural elements and activities in teaching, and thus provide upbringing and educational environment that will advocate the cultural diversity and encourage students' interest in mutual socialization and cooperation. Since 2012, the Training Centre for Intercultural Education within the Nansen Dialogue Centre in Skopje, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science and in accordance with the Implementation Plan of the Concept for Intercultural Education, carries out ongoing training for teachers, professional associates and principals in primary and secondary schools in Macedonia. The programme is aimed at developing intercultural competencies, i.e. improving their personal, interpersonal and cross-curricular competencies and cognitive and creative skills.

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[1]Krsteska-Papić, B., Bilal, S., Emin, O., Miovska-Spaseva, S., Ačkovska-Leškovska, E., Stojkovski, S., *Concept for Intercultural Education*, Ministry of Education and Science of RM, 2015 (Крстеска-Папиќ, Б., Билал, С., Емин, О., Миовска-Спасева, С., Ачковска-Лешковска, Е., Стојковски, С., *Концепција за интеркултурно образование,* МОН на РМ, 2015.)

[2]*Strategy for Education 2018-2025 with Action Plan*, Ministry of Education and Science of RM, 2017 (*Стратегија за образованието 2018-2025 со акциски план*, МОН на РМ, 2017.)

[3]*National Strategy for Developing the Concept of One Society and Interculturalism 2020-2022* (version 3), Government of RNM, 2019 (*Национална стратегија за развој на концептот за едно општество и интеркултурализмот 2020-2022 година* (верзија 3), Влада на РСМ, 2019.)

[4]Ibid., p. 14.

Purpose and method of the research

A qualitative analysis of planned teaching activities in primary and secondary schools in Macedonia was carried out in order to inquire whether the teachers who take part in the intercultural education trainings organized by the Training Centre are sensitized to identify the possibilities for incorporating intercultural elements in the existing teaching contents and whether they are capable and skilled to design and independently organize intercultural teaching activities in accordance with the curricula for various subjects in primary and secondary education. The research covers 20 methodological preparations prepared by 14 primary and 3 secondary school teachers and 2 workshops prepared by professional associates (psychologist and pedagogue) in primary and secondary school. One of the methodological preparations is designed by a special educator who works with children with disabilities in a special school for primary education, while the other planned activities are designed to be implemented in regular classes with regular student structure.

All teachers were provided with standardized forms for methodological preparation of the class, which enabled comparison and drawing summary conclusions for each aspect of the planned activities. Usual elements of class planning in forms were upgraded with questions that emphasize the intercultural dimension, as well as questions about the supposed challenges that teachers would face in the realization of the class.

Teachers/professional associates who took part in the research work in schools in urban, suburban and rural areas, with different number of students (from 5 to 30) and mixed gender composition. Regarding the ethnic composition of students in the class, four teachers work with students of the same ethnicity (only Macedonians, only Roma, only Albanians) in their native language. Eight teachers work with students of two ethnicities (Macedonians and Turk/Turks, Macedonians and Albanian/Albanians, Roma and Macedonians, Roma and Bosniak). Six teachers work with students of three or four different ethnicities (Macedonians, Roma, Albanians and Serbs; Roma, Turks, Macedonians and Bosniaks; Macedonians, Turks and Bosniaks; Macedonians, Turk, Roma, Bosniak and Syrian; Macedonians, Roma and Turk; Macedonians, Bosniaks and Albanian), while two teachers did not indicate the ethnic origin of students.

All teachers have implemented the planned eight program areas of the training organized by the Training Centre for Intercultural Education within the Nansen Dialogue Centre in Skopje: Challenges of intercultural education, Building an intercultural school environment, Overcoming stereotypes and prejudices in multicultural school environments, Unbiased approach to education, Approaches to successful intercultural activities, Positive education, Communication and bilingualism, and International good practices.

Analysis of methodological preparations

The analysis of provided methodological preparations is based on several key aspects of the teaching activity in primary and secondary schools: 1) teaching contents, 2) teaching forms, methods and techniques, 3) textbooks, materials and other teaching aids used in classes, 4) correlation between subject contents and other subjects and extracurricular activities, and 5) connection of the teaching activities with the wider environment. The individual analysis of all listed components was used as a starting point for assessing the competence of the 20 teachers/professional associates to plan and implement intercultural activities in their upbringing and educational work.

1. **Teaching contents and their relation to the upbringing and educational goals and tasks**

The planned teaching activities fall within a range of the following **subjects**: art education (4), social science (3), Macedonian language (and literature) (3), English language (2), civic education (2), Roma language and culture, geography, biology and clothing design. The analysis shows dominance of subjects in the field of languages, social sciences and arts, which means that teachers in these subjects have identified greater opportunities for incorporating intercultural elements in teaching.

The subject **topics** chosen by the teachers are suitable for organizing intercultural activities and learning about the *others* (Interculturalism in civil society, Culture and customs, Culture and cultural identity, Holidays in my homeland, Trademark and logo (my flag), Characteristics of folk costumes, We are different, Neighbouring countries of our homeland, Finding your roots). Still, the emphasis in some of the planned activities is put on one's own cultural identity and not on learning about the *others,* (Roma students learn about the origins of the Roma people). Even when planning contents that are not explicitly intercultural (for example, Printing with rhythmic repetition "Scarf Pattern", Blood types) teachers show skills in incorporating activities that arouse interest in distinctive characteristics of the *others*.

For most of the provided teaching activities, the selected **teaching contents are appropriate to the defined upbringing and educational goals**. Intercultural aspects are most often emphasized in the upbringing goals (*"respecting the differences"; developing respect and mutual collaborative relations between students"; "accepting differences, respecting the others and their needs", "learning about cultural values of different nations and respecting them"; "recognizing that we are different, yet we are all the same", "respecting the cultural diversity in Macedonia", "promoting tolerance, mutual trust, respect and non-discrimination towards the neighbouring countries", "equality and non-discrimination in multicultural environments and communities", "recognizing gender prejudices and building a positive attitude towards gender equality", "developing awareness of existing gender prejudices and finding ways to overcome them", "overcoming stereotypes"*). Four written preparations lack goals that indicate an intercultural dimension, although they do include intercultural activities.

In relation to the selected contents and the upbringing and educational goals that refer to the intercultural dimension of the class/workshop is the perception of teachers/professional associates on which program area of the NDC training helped them the most in preparing the planned activities. The area is explicitly stated in half of the methodological preparations, while in the others, there is no reply to that question or one of the goals of the class is paraphrased. It can be stated that the program area *Overcoming stereotypes and prejudices* is indicated in most cases (70%), while a lesser percentage was observed for *Challenges of intercultural education, Positive education,* and *Communication and bilingualism.*

2. Teaching forms, methods and techniques

Regarding the planned **teaching forms**, most of the teachers in their methodical preparations prefer combination of group, individual and frontal work, while only few of them prefer working in pair. Considering that one of the goals of the trainings at the Training Centre is to promote the individual approach and to enable participants for proper and efficient application of tandem and teamwork, provided planned activities suggest that most teachers recognize the importance of group and individual class activities. "*All selected teaching forms, except the frontal instructions are aimed at encouraging creativity and help students to express their opinions and attitudes*," said one primary school teacher. Another teacher emphasized the importance of individual approach: "*Individual approach helps students to get to know themselves and their own culture and identity, but also to get familiar with their classmates through active listening.*"

Prevailing **teaching methods** in methodological preparations of teachers are the methods of conversation, demonstration, game, illustration, practical work, text method and oral presentation (direct instructions) which teachers mostly use in the main part of the class for presenting content. Teachers point out that selected forms and methods contribute to the promotion of interculturalism, as they enable students of different ethnicities to "*socialize in an easy and spontaneous way*", "*cooperate and make friends regardless of gender, religion or beliefs*", "*respect each other and different points of view*"; "*develop closeness*", "*increase motivation*" and "*encouragement to learn*", "*develop critical thinking and positive emotional climate, and overcome stereotypes and prejudices through two-way communication and exchange of ideas.*" One professional associate also indicated the importance of setting rules of conduct in the group "*in order to provide a safe environment in which everyone is free to express themselves without being ridiculed, insulted or interrupted by others, an environment in which everyone's opinion is valued.*" It is also pointed out that the application of interactive learning methods enables "*teachers to accomplish their goals in a spontaneous and entertaining way.*"

The most used **teaching techniques** are the Cluster, the Venn diagram and the Storm of ideas, but also other techniques for encouraging critical thinking, such as KWL (I know-I Want

to Know-I Learned) and the STOP technique, which enables "*students to think actively, ask questions and bring up ideas.*"

Some teachers point out that the successful application of planned methods and techniques requires appropriate spatial conditions ("*larger available space for game activities and prepared space for group work*"), appropriate timing ("*it may take longer to process this content, more than one school class*") and fostering of positive climate and motivation in the class ("*positive atmosphere and good mood among students*".)

3. Textbooks, materials and other teaching aids

Following the preference of teaching methods and techniques that encourage the active teaching, teachers in their preparations indicate an abundance of materials and aids that help students to activate the cognitive and motivational processes. Half of the teachers planned to use digital technology, while many preferred flip charts or standard blackboards, LCD projectors, worksheets, coloured sheets, magic markers, brushes and paints, images, textbooks or other books. Many teachers emphasize the advantages of information and communications technology in organizing intercultural activities ("*Videos of students from another city/country that would have completely different information in the identity wheel, compared to my students, would help me*"; "*Instructions in the school media library would be helpful, since it would allow me to play short films to students that symbolize examples of intercultural schools, communities and societies*"), but also the need for its availability in schools (operable technical devices, fast and stable internet connection, available projector and printer). Some teachers, indicate the information skills of students as desirable preconditions for effective classes, and emphasize the importance of available photographs, literature and other materials in accomplishing the planned activities.

When asked, "*Does the content of the textbook offer intercultural elements or did you upgrade it by including them in the activity?*" half of the teachers indicated that the textbook contents somewhat included intercultural elements, but they were upgraded with additional activities prepared by the teacher, for example, student presentations and game or research activities. In this context, one teacher says, "*The content already includes some intercultural elements, for example, customs, culture, language, but it is additionally upgraded by the students being involved in exploring the characters' clothes in the play, as well as the songs and dances.*" Only two English language teachers were affirmative regarding the textbooks ("*Yes, English language textbooks always include an intercultural content.*") On the other hand, four teachers (in biology and Roma language and culture in subject teaching, art education and society in class teaching) point out that the textbook contents do not refer to the intercultural dimension ("*There are no intercultural elements in the textbook contents, I have upgraded it*"). Three teachers indicate absence of textbooks in their subjects (clothing design in secondary school, society and art education in class teaching) and therefore "*using the skills gained during the training", "at*

their own discretion", they include intercultural elements "*in the teaching contents (sheets)*" that they prepare and use.

4. **Correlation between the planned contents and other subjects and extracurricular activities**

Few teachers find possibilities for connecting the selected teaching content with other subjects ("*This teaching content can be implemented in correlation with the subjects: society, music education and art education.*"; "*This unit can be upgraded in correlation with other subjects (Macedonian language, art, music)*" and one teacher believes that the class topic can encourage additional research activities of students ("*A broader research on "World Cultural Identities" can be performed at a school club or during an extracurricular activity. That would allow students to research and present cultures from different continents.*")

Some teachers emphasize the need for sensitization of students on interculturalism and multiculturalism during all classes in all subjects. However, their opinions differ, since some believe that, "*it is already becoming a practice because of their previous experience in this type of activity; over years, a lot of classes within the regular curriculum and many extracurricular activities were implemented in this manner*". Still, two teachers show doubts about the specific competencies or prior skills of students, especially regarding the "*culture, customs, language and folklore of all ethnicities living in our country*" for successful activities ("*Students may not understand the concepts of multicultural and intercultural elements, i.e. they do not distinguish between these two terms. Thus, I believe that additional classes with incorporated intercultural elements from other contents will enable students to easily recognize and understand the class requirements.*") Two teachers believe that the cooperation between teachers and students of different ethnicities is crucial for successful implementation of intercultural activities.

5. **Linking the planned activities with the wider environment**

None of the methodological preparations provides linking of the planned curricular activities with the local or wider environment. Only a few teachers believe that visits to institutions that are related to the topic would help the realization of activities (e.g. visits to gallery, ethnological museum, etc.)

Finally, teachers were asked to assess what would help them to carry out the class as they planned it and what challenges they might face when implementing the activities. Most teachers emphasize that the schools are sufficiently provided with information and communications technology devices, visual aids and working materials as a prerequisite for successful accomplishment of planned activities. Almost none of the teachers assume encountering difficulties in the implementation, and two teachers even exclude this possibility, because they have already implemented this type of activities with students.

Concluding remarks

The analysis of planned teaching activities based on the five aspects of upbringing and educational work lead to following conclusions regarding the intercultural competencies of the 20 teachers/professional associates:

- All teachers are sensitized to identify ways for incorporating intercultural elements in the subject contents in language, social sciences and arts classes in accordance with the curricula. Professional associates also demonstrate skills in planning workshops for primary and secondary school students that encourage them to build intercultural competencies in a spontaneous and entertaining way.

- Almost all teachers are capable to select topics and design intercultural teaching activities. Almost half of the teachers upgrade the contents of existing textbooks with intercultural elements or, in the absence of textbooks, independently organize upbringing and educational activities that encourage socialization and interaction between the students of different origin.

- Teachers are sensitized to respect differences in the school environment and demonstrate efforts to nurture the friendship, cooperation and trust between the students they work with, as well as to encourage their interest in learning about the culture of the *others*.

- The majority of teachers have processed topics and contents from different subjects that enabled them to educate students on how to recognize, understand and overcome negative prejudices and stereotypes of different types (cultural, ethnic, gender, social). Such high preference can be interpreted from various aspects, starting from the identified need to intervene exactly in this segment (since it is widespread and resistant to changes), to the greater flexibility of the contents in the curricula and textbooks to emphasize this particular intercultural aspect.

- Teachers identify the importance of applying methods and techniques that encourage active learning and interaction between students during classes and most of them show skills for proper and successful methodological organization of planned activities.

- Cross-curricular competencies of teachers are not significant, because only few teachers indicate possibilities for connecting the planned activities with other subject contents and extracurricular activities.

- All teachers design activities that are implemented only in the classroom, while only few of them point out the benefits of their connection with the local or wider environment.