

THE ROLE OF THE PEDAGOGUE IN THE INTERCULTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT:

Interculturalism as a global tendency opens a platform for diverse pedagogical approaches aimed at incorporating diverse intercultural elements into the educational process. A series of modern perceptions of intercultural education highlight the need to promote a cross-curricular approach as a reflection of the holistic promotion of a system of values, such as: respect, understanding, tolerance, solidarity, empathy, helping, promoting all kinds of otherness. Intercultural initiatives in schools should contribute to strengthening natural, spontaneous, frequent interaction between cultural, social, linguistic, religious, ethnic differences, which will result in multidirectional networking of the same. In conditions when multicultural school contexts are predominantly encountered, the question arises about the role of pedagogues as visionaries and leaders of intercultural transformation. Through qualitative research, the steps and activities of this complex process led by school pedagogues in three school contexts, i.e. two primary municipal schools in urban areas (Skopje, Tetovo) and one rural primary school (Konche municipality) were followed. The school pedagogues in the three educational institutions have been involved in implementing a range of activities to support intercultural values for more than five academic years. Through analysis of rich pedagogical documentation, participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, the following aspects were followed:

- categories of support and activities implemented by pedagogues during planning, implementation and evaluation of intercultural initiatives,
- the influence of pedagogues on the teaching staff in the process of personal and professional transformation, as a prerequisite for intercultural education and education,
- dynamics of intercultural transformation and overcoming barriers in the school environments.

The results unequivocally emphasize and highlight the crucial role of pedagogues in maintaining a long-term, systematic and planned orientation towards intercultural efforts. The transformation of program goals into the components of the school's mission and vision, i.e., into the ethos of the school, is recognized as the ultimate benefit.

Keywords: *intercultural transformation, school pedagogues, obstacles, intercultural ethos, otherness*

Introduction

Starting from a clear terminological distinction between two concepts: multiculturalism, versus interculturalism, it is necessary to objectively perceive the positions of the Macedonian educational system through the prism of this complex aspect. Taking into account the characteristics

of multiculturalism, as an idea for promoting respect, tolerance, understanding between several cultural groups present in a common territory, but it is extremely important to emphasize that the absence of interaction, connection, spontaneous exchange of cultural values, this concept exposes to critical reflections on its shortcomings. (Barrett, 2013) The same are absolved with the support of intercultural steps, which are based on multi-directional communication, exchange, influences between diverse cultural, social, ethnic, linguistic groups and sub-groups, concentrated in a common space.

Bearing in mind the above-mentioned specifics of the two (social, but also educational) concepts, and in an attempt to outline the contours of the current circumstances in our educational system, it is observed that the ideas for multicultural education are predominantly recognized in primary schools, with rare examples of good, long-term and sustainable intercultural practices. In such an educational environment, a key step is to initiate a process of transformation from multicultural to intercultural school approaches. School pedagogues play a leading role in this complex and sensitive step, taking into account their role as visionaries, strategists, planners, motivators, evaluators of educational practices. With their planned, systematic and long-term engagement in this sphere, the transformation of multicultural elements into intercultural components in school environments can be successfully designed and traced.

Review of the legal framework

The intercultural dimension in the Macedonian educational context is highlighted and emphasized as a paradigm, especially in the past decade, as a response to the current domestic circumstances in a multicultural, multilingual and multi-confessional social community and context. A series of official documents reflect this commitment, starting from the current legal framework, where in the Law on Primary Education the same is emphasized through several formal provisions. Thus, interculturalism is embedded as one of the principles (Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, Article 4, No. 161/19, 229/20, 3/25) oriented towards the promotion of similarities and the acceptance of differences, which can be correlated with the foreseen anti-discrimination policies defined in the postulates of primary education. They are built in the direction of prohibiting any direct or indirect discrimination, based on gender, race, skin color, national or ethnic origin, disability, citizenship, social origin, education, religion or religious belief, political belief, other types of beliefs, age, family or marital status, property status, health status and social status or any other basis (Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, Article 5, No. 161/19, 229/20 and 3/25).

The Conception for Primary Education (2021) also emphasizes the importance of promoting inclusion, gender equality and interculturalism, as a prerequisite for social cohesion and the development of intercultural competencies among students. In this direction, the recommendations of the Concept for extracurricular activities in primary education (2020) were created pointing out the need for multi-directional student interaction, as a prerequisite for supporting intercultural

values in educational contexts. Document: Indicators for the quality of work of schools (2019) is in synergy with the stated projections, emphasizing the need for continuous monitoring of students' intercultural competencies, as drivers and indicators in several areas (curricula and programs; student achievements; learning and teaching; student support; school climate; resources; management, leadership and policy making).

All these formal preliminary steps were the basis for synthesizing intercultural initiatives into a detailed presentation through Standards for Intercultural Education (2021), as a cross-section of standards that should be implemented across multiple areas during primary education, i.e.: cultural identity; multiculturalism; interculturalism; social justice and equality; stereotypes and prejudices; peace and peaceful conflict resolution; globalization. It is inevitable to mention the National Strategy for the development of the concept of one society and interculturalism (2019), which includes seven clusters: legal framework, education, culture, media, local self-government, youth, social cohesion and integration. The planned activities in the action plan for the education cluster are closely related and reflect the fragments of all the above-mentioned official and current conceptual sources, which creates space and a platform for dynamic action and increased support for initiatives with an intercultural connotation, especially in primary education.

Intercultural competencies of pedagogues

The development of an intercultural image of primary schools implies a set of competencies that the school pedagogue, as a professional associate, should possess and practice. Modern pedagogical sources emphasize the need for the development and nurturing of competencies in the intercultural domain, and are most often classified into three categories (Huber, 2014): *attitudes* (openness and respect for differences; curiosity to explore cultural specificities; willingness to cooperate, etc.); *knowledge and understanding* (awareness and understanding of sources of stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination against certain categories of people; understanding the specifics of verbal and non-verbal communication in different cultural-social contexts; knowledge of cultural diversity in local conditions, but also at the global level, etc.) and *skills* (empathy; cognitive flexibility; multi-perspectivity; bilingualism, multilingualism; critical assessment, etc.).

The document created in our educational context: Basic professional competencies and standards for professional associates (2016), organized in the following areas: work with students; work with teachers; work with parents; cooperation with the community; professional development and professional cooperation; analytical-research work and school structure, organization and climate, opens space for incorporating intercultural reflections and ennobling them with aspects that refer to the promotion and respect of diversity, otherness. At the same time, another important observation must be emphasized, that is, the intercultural transformation of the school, under the professional guidance of the pedagogues, should unite the program activities that will reflect all the above-mentioned areas, because only with a holistic approach will all stakeholders, factors and pedagogical processes be involved in dealing with multifaceted challenge.

Basics of a research framework

A series of project initiatives and activities in the field of multiculturalism, interethnic integration, bilingual integrated education, intercultural upbringing and education, etc., have been intensively implemented in the past two decades. Some of them have been implemented with observed and clearly established dynamics, while our educational process has also witnessed the organization of short-term, occasional steps in the field of multicultural and intercultural action.

Our research interest was focused on monitoring and precisely detecting and outlining the role of pedagogues in the intercultural transformation of schools. This is where the need arose for clearly defined indicators according to which it would be followed. Modern pedagogical intercultural strategies (UNESCO guidelines on intercultural education, 2015) unambiguously point out the following aspects as indicators of the desired transformation, namely:

- openness of the curriculum for intercultural interventions,
- didactic-methodical articulation,
- didactic resources, sources,
- language/s of instruction,
- school climate,
- support and training of teachers,
- links between the school and the community (parents, local municipal authorities, line ministries, etc.).

Given the complexity and sensitivity of the topic, the research conducted is of a micro qualitative nature. It covered three primary schools, whose intercultural transformation began as part of the Nansen Model for Intercultural Education project, implemented in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science, in the period from 2017 to 2022, whose primary goal was to support the design and nurturing of an intercultural ethos in school environments. Two primary schools were from urban areas, namely the city of Skopje and the municipality of Tetovo (western part of the country), while the third school was located in a rural area, the municipality of Konche (eastern part of the country).

The “Bratstvo” primary school from the municipality of Karposh organizes an educational process in Macedonian and Albanian, just like the “Lirija” school from Tetovo, while in the “Goce Delchev” school, municipality of Konche, the teaching process is carried out in Macedonian and Turkish. All three educational institutions are characterized by a heterogeneous ethnic composition of students and teachers, while the difference could only be seen in the number of enrolled students (PS “Lirija”, Tetovo - over 1100 students, PS “Bratstvo”, Karposh - over 700 students and PS “Goce Delchev”, Konche - over 300 students). Women are employed as pedagogues in the three schools, two of them Macedonians, one Albanian. Their work experience, in that period, was of different duration, i.e. the pedagogue from the Tetovo primary school had up to 5 years of experience, the pedagogue from the municipality of Konche had up to 20 years of experience, while the pedagogue from the Skopje school had the longest experience, up to 30 years. All three

were initiators for the inclusion of their home schools in the above-mentioned project activity, in the public call, published in cooperation with the line ministry in 2017. Also, their engagement in supporting the project's intercultural efforts lasted in continuity through the five academic years, which gave them the opportunity for a rich cross-section of the transformative developmental phases in school environments.

The goals of the research were:

- defining the types of activities undertaken by pedagogues in order to managing the intercultural design of the educational environment,
- illuminating the influence of pedagogues on the teaching staff in the process of personal and professional transformation, as a prerequisite for intercultural education,
- identifying sources of barriers to intercultural action in the school,
- perceiving the dynamics of intercultural transformation in a five-year period.

The hypotheses that guided the research are as follows:

- pedagogues continuously undertake a series of diverse activities that reflect different program areas,
- pedagogues have a leading role in motivating, supporting, advising teachers on various aspects of intercultural education,
- the most common barriers arise as a result of political negative influences, such as at the local as well as at the national level,
- an intercultural ethos in schools can be recognized after three years of permanent and planned action.

The qualitative research was conducted through analysis of the intercultural dimension in rich and diverse pedagogical documentation (annual work programs of schools, daily lesson plans of teachers for teaching and extracurricular activities, programs for cooperation with parents, programs for training teachers and professional staff, reports from integral evaluations, international evaluations, etc.), participatory observation (of part of the teaching and extracurricular activities, design of the school space in order to determine the representation of intercultural components, etc.), semi- structured interviews (with school pedagogues throughout the academic years 2017/18-2021/22, as a review of the dynamics with which intercultural transformation is initiated; on barriers, challenges in this process; on the impact they have on the professional and personal change, upgrading of teachers, as drivers of the process).

Research findings

The research made it possible to arrive at a clear picture of the entire range of activities that school pedagogues plan, initiate, implement, monitor and evaluate in order to support intercultural initiatives. In all three schools, the pedagogues confirmed that in their annual work programs they find enough space to incorporate intercultural elements in all defined areas of activity, i.e.:

- work with students (with a range of activities such as: organizing students into groups for extracurricular activities with a bilingual approach; planning and implementing workshops, events, open days to support universal human values, anti-discriminatory school practices, as well as overcoming stereotypes and prejudices; enabling students to peacefully resolve conflict situations; involving students in designing and preparing intercultural design of the school space);
- work with teachers (with a series of activities such as: supporting teachers to monitor pedagogical innovations and modern didactic-methodical approaches enriched with intercultural elements; organizing counseling, workshops, support for professional activities, etc. for cross-curricular planning and operationalization of intercultural educational initiatives; support in cooperation with parents, as partners in intercultural education; sensitizing teachers to sources of stereotypes and prejudices in ethnically heterogeneous school environments, as well as for applicable pedagogical solutions to overcome them; promoting bilingual component in teaching and extracurricular activities; supporting teachers in developing a positive and safe socio-emotional climate in classrooms and the school, etc.);
- work with parents (a set of activities, such as: presentations, open days, workshops, individual counseling for inclusion, motivating parents for positive perception and proactive attitude towards intercultural initiatives in the school, as well as for supporting an impartial attitude towards the diversity present as in the immediate environment, as well as more broadly);
- cooperation with the community (activities to promote cooperation with representatives of the local business community as promoters and supporters of intercultural steps in the school; cooperation with civil sector organizations in the field of interculturalism; deepening cooperation and relations with cultural, scientific institutions, such as museums, archives, libraries, etc. that can contribute to long-term promotion of intercultural education);
- professional development and professional cooperation (activities that emphasize the importance of continuous personal professional development through participation in relevant trainings, counseling, webinars, forums, professional associations and groups that are profiled in the domain of intercultural education; dissemination of the same among teachers, in order to motivate them, encourage them to do the same);
- analytical-research work (activities dedicated to regular writing and analyzing planned and realized cross-curricular, extracurricular content with intercultural significance; analysis of the socio-emotional climate in the classrooms and groups participating in extracurricular activities; monitoring interpersonal relations and relationships in the collective; analysis and research of sources of stereotypes and prejudices in the school; monitoring categories of diversity present in the school context, etc.);

- school structure, organization and climate (activities that support universal humane values, gender sensitivity, prevention of discrimination, solidarity, etc.).

All these detailed findings obtained through the analysis of pedagogical documentation, as well as through a semi-structured interview, lead to the conclusion that the first hypothesis is fully confirmed, which emphasizes the continuity and diversity of activities undertaken by pedagogues in order to support school intercultural initiatives, as a basis for further transformation of the school from a multicultural to an intercultural micro-community.

In support of this conclusion, it can be emphasized that the pedagogues in all three of the above-mentioned schools had a key, leading, dominant and continuous role in guiding, advising, supporting, organizing the teaching staff in their personal and professional transformation for many sensitive aspects of intercultural education. In the mentioned schools, the pedagogues contributed to the teaching staff being permanently covered for several years with months-long training on intercultural approaches, where a systematic approach was observed through gradual inclusion, first, of class teachers, and then subject teachers. The school pedagogues were the main initiators for the introduction on bilingual extracurricular activities as a form of integration into the home schools, helping with the management of the necessary space, materials, schedule, but above all, with the formation, support, motivation of bilingual teaching teams. With this, the second hypothesis is also confirmed.

Unlike the previous two hypotheses, the third is partially confirmed, that is, through a semi-structured interview with the pedagogues and through participatory observation, insight was gained into other factors that negatively affect intercultural initiatives (in addition to political influences at the local and national level, especially in conditions of pre-election periods, changes in municipal structures, etc.). The pedagogues unequivocally emphasized that negative reflections are also created by media content (especially information that is massively available through social networks used by students), and they also pointed out the influence of stereotypes and prejudices that fluctuate at the level of their local communities, as a kind of transgenerational heritage. In this corpus of causes and challenges for the intercultural transformation of the school, they also highlighted the fact of changes in the structure of the teaching staff, as the bearer and driver of interculturalism in school contexts, as well as a greater number of subjects in subject teaching classes, which organizationally further complicates the steps towards intercultural transformation.

The fourth hypothesis, which emphasized the three-year period as optimal for expecting intercultural changes in the ethos of the school, can also only be partially accepted, because the statements of the pedagogues indicated their caution and awareness that in three years initial efforts can be made to animate the teaching staff, groups of parents and students for initial attempts and establishment of initial dynamics for intercultural educational activities. These efforts, although initial, according to the pedagogues, are key to raising awareness of the importance and need for them, while their continuous promotion and implementation would create more favorable conditions for further deeper transformation. Through a semi-structured interview, the pedagogues

shared their dilemmas regarding the time frame, so the reflections gravitated around a potentially minimum of seven years of practicing this pedagogical approach, in order to obtain the necessary mass and coverage of the majority of students and teachers from classroom teaching and at least half of the total number of teachers and students in subject teaching. The pedagogues also emphasized that they can locate the easiest and fastest change in relation to the intercultural design of the school space, as one of the components of the school ethos, which as a transformation is both easily visible, but also temporally and content-wise amenable to efficient management by the pedagogues who in all three schools, almost independently, led the process (with support from the school administrations).

Concluding observations

Intercultural transformation of schools is an extremely complex and long-term process, which should be an imperative for all school environments, regardless of the ethnic structure of students and teaching staff. The same stems from modern perceptions of intercultural upbringing and education, which emphasize the need for intercultural sensitization of all categories of students, bearing in mind that intercultural education must not be limited only to racial and ethnic issues, but opens a platform for support of all kinds of diversity and otherness, understood as a challenge, and not as a barrier to cultural cooperation, interaction, exchange. All this implies a strategic design of the algorithm for intercultural transformation of the school, which can be one of the pillars in the professional work of pedagogues, as a prepared and called profile for managing a long-term and systematic process of transition of schools from multicultural positions to intercultural ethos.

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