

## FROM INFORMAL TO FORMAL USAGE OF TECHNOLOGY FOR DEVELOPING ROMANIAN CHILDREN INTERCULTURAL AND DIGITAL COMPETENCES

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**Abstract:** *Taking into consideration the actual social changes that emerged due to unprecedented digital technology development and the increased usage of internet by more than 59% of global population, this article will focus on children and adolescents, estimated as being one in three internet users around the world (UNICEF report, 2017). Most of the researches over the habits and patterns of children and youth internet usage show that they are using it a lot, mainly for entertainment, being exposed to many risks, but also gaining lots of advantages. The gap between the rapidly development of technology and its integration within educational systems position the internet as an informal learning, less integrated in the formal school educational activities. This raise lots of concerns and schools need to adapt and include in the curriculum new subjects and transform the older ones in order to develop children competences needed for life in a digitalized future. The European Union established since 2006 a new educational reference framework in this direction, strengthening on eight key competences that should be developed through education. In the actual globalized inter-connected technologized world the digital and intercultural competences are on the forefront. In this direction, this paper will conceptualize on the bi-directional relationship between children digital communication and intercultural competences development, through the lens of informal learning brought by internet usage and formal education provided by school system.*

**Keywords:** *intercultural competences; digital competences; digital communication; formal and informal education;*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The children and adolescents are living today in a multi-digitalized environment, being surrounded by devices connected to internet and adults on an “always online” status. Technology changed the way people live and work, having the power to re-shape the functioning of the main social institutions, as family and school alike. In January 2020, 59% of the world population is online and on the social network platforms are almost 50% of the world population - Facebook - 2.50 billion monthly active subscribers, You Tube - 2 billions, and WhatsApp 1.60 billion active users on the first places (Clement, 2020). The time spent online by an average user is 6 hours and 43 minutes daily, meaning we spent more than 40% of our waking lives using the internet (Kemp S., 2020). Other important aspects revealed by the same report are: 92% of the world’s internet users are connecting through mobile devices, even the other available technologies are not far behind, meaning that most people are using a variety of devices to go online; the usage of mobile apps is

extended to all aspects of our lives, only 9% of the mobile time being spent browsing web, the rest being used mainly for social communications, entertainment and games apps. (Kemp, 2020).

All these means that the distances, places, languages and cultural borders are almost vanished and the inter-connection between virtual and real world is emphasized. Under these circumstances the importance of having intercultural and digital competences become tremendous for all of us, being the key to adapt to the future and minimize the main discrimination of today: to be, or not to be online.

The focus of this paper is on children and teenagers - as heavily users of internet and related technologies - and the way are developed their digital and intercultural competences. The most recent research report from EU Kids network (2020) reveal comparative findings for 19 European countries: 80% of the children 9 – 16 years old are using daily a smartphone, with an average time spent online of 167 minutes / day, and with the 14 – 16 years old teens spending almost twice as much time online than 9 – 10 years old children. Their preferred activities are

watching videos and listening to the music, followed by communication, social network and online games. Using the internet for homework, browsing things to buy and news are on the last positions. (Smahel, 2020).

In Romania things are not so different, the same EU Kids Online research data for our country show that the internet is used by 84% children and teens 9 – 16 years old, mainly for entertainment and communication, 74% are users of social networks and their digital competences measured are comparable with the others European children. (Velicu *et al*, 2019). Being part of “Z Generation” and because internet is ubiquitous in their lives, they are taken the technology for granted, learning how to use it from the first year of life, in their own way, from their parents, relatives, friends and by themselves, long before the school curriculum includes informatics classes – now from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, so around 11 years old.

It is obvious and dangerous the gap between the way children are using the internet and the way schools are integrated it within curriculum and its educational objectives. Having access to technology from the very small age, using social media and apps and online games the children are intensively participating to the popular digital culture that is mediated, produced and reproduced through globally networked communication technologies. They became prosumers - producing and consuming popular culture (Scolari, 2018) – being empowered in the virtual world, having agency as the adults, and the freedom to move, to find, to create, to share, to connect, to speak and make their voices heard. They need to become digital and intercultural literate and they are doing it through informal education. Additionally, being informal and circumstantial digital learning is not complete and as researches reveal, children are exposed to lots of internet risks: cyberbullying, sexting and grooming, access to improper violent and sexualized content, fake news, AdSense and influencers, addiction and physical and neuro-psychical diseases. Gaining digital literacy and developing digital competences are the main solutions to prevent and overcome all these, doubled by communication, personal development and intercultural competences.

On the other part, the Romanian education system tries to fulfil this gap through new formal specialized curriculum, starting from 2017, introducing informatics (TIC) classes from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade and transforming and adapting to the new social requirements all the gymnasium subjects, according to the European Union recommendations for each member state.

In order to analyse if the Romanian curriculum offer adapted formal education for developing children’s digital and intercultural competences a content analyse of the manuals will be realized searching for indicators of the digital and intercultural competences development in order to find if the Romanian children are also exposed to formal education regarding internet usage and intercultural understanding.

The starting premise of this paper is the relationship between informal & formal learning regarding digital and intercultural competences, conceptualizing on the bi-directional influences between them. Through the content analyse of the new gymnasium manuals related to these subjects, it will be revealed if formal education integrates and offers effective solutions for guiding and completing the informal education gained by the children through personal & individual usage of internet.

## 2. CONCEPT EXPLANATION & DEFINITIONS

In order to advance with the analyses of the above mentioned issues is tremendous to define and operationalise the concepts we are working with: intercultural & digital competences, formal & informal education, digital communication and virtual communities.

Intercultural competences: related with the globalization of the contemporary society, the concept of “intercultural competences” was in the debate centre for many scholars, the communication sciences being the most appropriate science for the definition we are looking for. Being related with a person capacity to interact and communicate with different others, we will conceptualize accordingly with the definition given by Spitzberg and Chagnon (2009) who define it as “the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive and behavioural orientations to the world” (Spitzberg & Chagnon, 2009:7). Applied to the actual context and to the enhanced interactions between people from different cultures due to internet mediated extensive communication, the concept of “intercultural competences” is used interchangeably with “intercultural communication”, the two attributes “appropriateness” – linked to personal abilities as flexibility, empathy, open-minded, adaptability, language skills or cultural knowledge – and “effectiveness” – being related with the relevant contextual variables as shared goals, incentives, equality or agency. (Arasaratnam, 2016). These are in

line with the previous definition of intercultural competence given by Deardorff in 2006, as “the ability to develop targeted knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to visible behaviour and communication that are both effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions”. (Deardorf, 2006). On this direction, the operationalization of “intercultural competence” should be understood as containing three dimensions:

- Knowledge: cultural self-awareness and specific knowledge about its own and other cultures, socio-linguistic skills, understanding globalization and its implications on local communities;

- Skills: listening, observing and evaluating using patience and perseverance, empathy and critical thinking

- Attitudes: respect to others, value cultural diversity without prejudices and stereotypes, openness, curiosity and see difference as a learning opportunity and discovery, as tolerance for ambiguity. (McKinnon S., 2018)

Researches proves that all these cannot be acquired in a short term, they are not naturally occurring phenomenon but a lifelong learning process (McKinnon S., 2018), meaning that children should be exposed gradually and constant to such information, in order to achieve intercultural competences.

Digital competences: on 18<sup>th</sup> of December 2006 European Parliament and Council established the general educational framework to be implemented within each member country educational systems, in order “to establish a common reference point that encourages and facilitates national reforms and further cooperation between Member States” (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council, 2006). There were established eight key competences, with equal value, to be offered through initial education and training to all the young people in Europe as the basis for equipping them for living and working in the future: (1) communication in mother tongue and (2) in foreign languages, (3) mathematical, science and technology competences, (4) learning to learn, (5) digital and (6) social-civic competences, (7) sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, (8) cultural awareness and expression.

In May 2018, the competences were revised and new recommendations for Member States were given, according to what was achieved and what should be done more, for better adapting to the new technologized life and build

a space where all young people should receive the best education and training, regardless of their background (European Commission, 2019).

There were reinforced the eight key competences, emphasizing their meaning as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes” (European Commission, 2019). It is explained that the

digital competence involves the confident, critical and responsible use of, and engagement with, digital technologies for learning, working, and for participation in society. It includes information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, media literacy, digital content creation (including programming), safety (including digital well-being and competences related to cybersecurity), intellectual property related questions, problem solving and critical thinking. (European Commission, 2019).

The operationalisation of the competence uses the same dimensions: knowledge, skills and attitudes:

- Knowledge: understanding of risks and opportunities offered by technology, of their functioning principles and develop a critical approach to the information and data made available by digital means;

- Skills – to be able to use the digital technologies for communication, access, filter, share, evaluate or create digital content;

- Attitudes – open-minded, curious, forward-looking for evolution in a reflective and critical way (European Commission, 2019).

As the intercultural competences, the digital ones should be developed continuously, starting from childhood as the children grows, accordingly to their needs and the technological evolution.

Formal & informal education: as the educational theories convey and in accord with OECD explanations of these concepts:

- formal education regards the systematic approach of learning in schools and universities, an intentional process based on a national curriculum, with established learning objectives, delivered by professional trained teachers;

- informal education regards all the life existence experiences which constantly expose the individual to learning situations, being un-organised, un-intentioned, without objectives and never intentional; it is often referred as learning by experience, or just as experience.

Starting from these it is understandable that a great majority of the activities and experiences

mediated through internet are accessed by individuals through informal learning, especially children interactions with technology is first copied from parents, modelling being one of the main mediation strategies that occurred within family environment (Hefner *et al.*, 2018)

Digital communication: in accordance with communication theories, in this paper we will adopt an exhaustive meaning of digital communication as all the types of interactive communications based on transmitting messages through internet connected devices, such smart phones, tablets, PC's and also on the virtual spaces that world wide web make available, from platforms, to socializing networks applications, blogs, or online games. The messages and devices capabilities are multimodal, meaning that text, pictures, movies or audio files can be communicated through words, images or audio files in various dynamic ways.

Virtual communities: the digital communications made possible the transfer of the traditional communities circumscribed geographically in to the virtual world, without place-related borders.

Virtual communities resemble real life communities in the sense that they both provide support, information, friendship and acceptance between strangers (Wellman, 1999)

having a variety of social and professional interests in common. There are lots of discussions regarding virtual communities, from different types of networks and purposes to their advantages and disadvantages, but for our interest, the most important is their existence and the fact they offer mainly informal learning for children and teenagers, who can access whatever community they consider, being exposed to advantages but also to lots of risks.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The starting premises of this article regards the informal character of the internet mediated communication and learning for children and teenagers, with uncertain and often negative results – as the researches point lots of risks for them due to the freedom and agency they acquire on virtual world. Parents are generally considered the main responsible for the digital mediation of their children, in order to enhance the positive side and advantages of internet for them, but the research results show that they are feeling insecure about

what to teach them, how to use it responsible and most of the parents find difficult to help children because they seem to know more regarding internet and it's difficult to control and restrict access or negotiate rules with teenagers. Parents believe that school should have a more important role in developing children digital competences. (Bartau Rojas *et al.*, 2018).

In the nowadays technologized world intercultural communication became the normality due to the extended access to virtual communities, so the relationship between digital and intercultural competences is implicit and bidirectional and educational systems worldwide should adapt their curriculum in order to equip children and teenagers with the competences needed for adult life in a society where maybe the “metaverse” will be the reality – an universe expanded through virtual-reality sustained by internet and augmented reality technologies (Wikipedia). Under these circumstances, the focus for developing digital and intercultural competences is moving on the educational system due to its main aim of offering equal opportunities for all the children.

**3.1 Research question.** Based on the above mentioned premises, our research question regards the way Romanian educational system succeed to adapt and make changes within this direction, after almost 30 years of continuously transformations.

Does the new educational curriculum starting from 2017 on gymnasium classes address the digital and intercultural competences in a formal way? What are the main directions used for adopting a future-oriented digital technological view in Romanian education?

In order to find answers to these questions will be used the content analyses research method, very useful for a deep and objective approach to the educational curriculum.

**3.2 Research methodology.** The research method of the content analyses was used in a quantitative manner for identifying the content related with intercultural and digital competences within the new Romanian gymnasium manuals in order to find how many references to these concepts exist and how they are presented.

The first step was the operationalization of the concepts, accordingly to the above mentioned explained concepts and the construction of the analyse grid based on the three dimensions of each concept: knowledge, skills and attitude. Taking into consideration the specific of the Romanian curriculum, tailored on curricular areas and study

discipline, and the limited resources for this analyse, were chosen three study disciplines: “Social Education” – for searching intercultural competences; “Informatics” for digital competences and “Counselling and Orientation” – for both type of competences. Because the new curriculum it was applied starting with the school year 2017-2018, these manuals were elaborated until now for the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade in printed and digital versions, the digital being similar with the printed but having multimedia activities attached, available only if studied in digital format. There were analysed 9 digital manuals, one / subject / year of study. There were established two types of analyse units: the “lesson title” and the “multimedia activities”. Occasional subjects related with intercultural and digital competences could be also found in other manuals, from literature to languages, history or geography, but there are tangential to the subject, rare and it was decided to not be included in this primary analyse.

**3.2 Research results.** The content analyse was realised taking into consideration for each manual the number of units regarding development of intercultural and digital competences accordingly to the three dimensions established for each of them (knowledge, skills, attitudes) in order to measure and compare quantitatively the information offered on each year of study and also the degree of digitalization included.

Regarding the intercultural competence, the analyse shows that the associated skills are the most present, followed by knowledge and at a distance, by attitudes, proving that the new educational paradigm centred on competences and experiential learning is applied. The “Social Education” manuals content is centred on humans and children rights and the development of critical thinking in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and on intercultural education in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, so all the lessons are related with developing children intercultural competences, theory and practice exercise building the attitudes. On the 7<sup>th</sup> grade the manual content is centred on offering justice and political general functioning, relating with human rights and constitutional principle to be followed, so the relationship is also direct with the intercultural competence. The digital versions of the manuals include three additional types of digital content to be accessed if the classroom is equipped with technological devices: low interactivity materials – the pictures can be increased and some important docs – as the Constitution, the Human Rights Declaration, etc.; limited interactivity materials – additional quizzes

to be solved by clicking the answer and receiving instant evaluation; high interactivity materials – short movies to be played and discussed, increasing the interest, the understanding and memorability. As the analyse shows most of the materials are low interactivity, but the high interactivity ones are also well represented, all these contributing to the enhanced comprehension of the thematic, and also to the integration of technology in to the formal education.

Table 1. Intercultural competences analyse grid(Bratu *et al*, 2017, 2018, 2019 – Educație Socială – Manuale clasa a V-a, a VI-a, a VII-a, (Social Education – classes V, VI, VII); Radu *et al*, 2017, 2019; Popa E., 2018 – Consiliere și Dezvoltare Personală - Manuale clasa a V-a, a VI-a, a VII-a, (Counselling and Personal Development Classes V, VI, VII)

	Intercultural competences			Multimedia activities		
	Knowledge	Skills	Attitudes	Low interactivity	Limited interactivity	High interactivity
Social Ed. 5 <sup>th</sup>	15	17	14	64	45	38
Counselling 5 <sup>th</sup>	12	10	5	12	8	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>48</b>
Social Ed. 6 <sup>th</sup>	10	7	10	24	1	50
Counselling 6 <sup>th</sup>	9	16	12	43	24	39
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>89</b>
Social Ed. 7 <sup>th</sup>	11	11	11	63	26	22
Counselling 7 <sup>th</sup>	18	17	15	21	5	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>227</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>174</b>

Regarding the development of digital competences, the “Informatics” manual, build also on the principle of modern educational paradigm offer exhaustive knowledge and references related to the usage and understanding of how programs, applications and internet function, advantages and risks, potentiating in a positive way the children desire to use and know more. The digital manuals also contain low, limited and high interactive digital materials, but the number of movies is higher, offering additional interesting content to increase pupils desire to find more. It can be observed that here the accent is on knowledge, a little more than developing skills, finally the school reality and access to resources being the key, the teachers can easily contra balance these numbers if they have all the necessaire technology. Generally speaking, all the Romanian school should have at least one dedicated classroom for informatics

hours, and not only, but the technology they have and the discrepancy between number of pupils and number of pc's in some cases are barriers in accomplishing the educational objectives.

Tabel 2. Digital competences analyse grid (Ciocarú *et al*, 2017, 2019, Popa, 2018 – Informatică și TIC - Manuale clasa a V-a, a VI-a, a VII-a, (Informatics Classes V, VI, VII); Radu *et al*, 2017, 2019; Popa, 2018 – Consiliere și Dezvoltare Personală - Manuale clasa a V-a, a VI-a, a VII-a, (Counselling and Personal Development Classes V, VI, VII)

	Digital competences			Multimedia activities		
	Knowledge	Skills	Attitudes	Low interactivity	Limited interactivity	High interactivity
TIC 5 <sup>th</sup>	20	13	4	22	14	28
Counselling 5 <sup>th</sup>	3	8	2	7	4	5
Total	23	23	6	29	18	33
TIC 6 <sup>th</sup>	14	13	7	69	19	48
Counselling 6 <sup>th</sup>	4	3	2	6	7	12
Total	18	16	9	75	25	60
TIC 7 <sup>th</sup>	20	20	14	16	28	26
Counselling 7 <sup>th</sup>	6	5	6	4	4	7
Total	26	25	20	20	32	33
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>126</b>

The “Counselling and Personal Development” manuals, dedicated for one hour/week with the class head teacher or school counsellor are following the objectives of holistic developing of children, the content being structured on four directions, accordingly with children age: self-knowledge and well-being, social and emotional development, learning management and career management. All these are strongly related with developing both the intercultural and digital competences, as the content analyse shows. Even the intercultural competence is much more sustained and represented through the content related with children personal development, also the digital competence is strongly developed through information related with advantages and risks of internet, but especially through the openness to continuous learning and search of knowledge, raising children interest to adapt to the technological world we are living in.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The content analyses proved to be a prolific search method fruitful for understanding the way formal education is adapting and integrate technology

and content related to development of intercultural and digital competences within classes, proving the efforts made by Romanian educational system for transform into practice the recommendations of European Union in this direction.

This research prove that intercultural competences are developed continuously starting from 5<sup>th</sup> classes, and even before, taking into consideration that subjects like “personal development” and “Civic education” are into the Romanian curriculum from the 1<sup>st</sup> classes. It is important it’s transversal approach, taking into consideration that the “Counselling and personal development” curriculum is focused on the same subjects and values, improving the intercultural related knowledge, skills and attitudes, but in a more personal and affective way. Even this study does not reveal the effects of all these actions, it proves the attention and interest given in this matter within the general, formal education. Also, the interweaving with digital competences is of great help for assuring the both competences development and an extra proof that Romanian educational system makes efforts to adapt to the new technologized society. The digital competences have become a constant within the curriculum, taking into consideration not only the informatics classes, but also the digital format and improvement of the manuals.

It should be considering also the limitations of this study, because these data should be related with the reality of the schools, to find how they are implemented by the teachers and how are received by the children, in order to have a real picture of the phenomenon and to measure if the change is really effective. There are still many obstacles in the educational system, especially regarding the development of digital competences at gymnasium, due to the uneven distribution of technological resources within the school network and to the lack of specialized teachers on this subject, taking into consideration that until 2017 this type if informatics classes were studied only in high schools.

Another improvement that could be made by future researches regards the in deep study of the quality of the digital resources attached to the manuals. They are useful and very easy to be used by any teacher, their existence is of great help and a way of digitalize education, but it should be verified their relevance for children, taking into consideration their digital development level and the digital communication and virtual communities they are using already.

## 5. DISCUSSIONS AND FINAL CONCLUSIONS

During these times of acute and rapid changes in the world and education alike, the importance of empowering children with intercultural and digital competences is vital, because it offers them the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to perform in the technologized future, to enhance and use their potential for reaching success in a globalized world. This small research proves that the Romanian educational system makes steps towards this direction, introducing within its formal curriculum dedicated content for developing these competences.

Starting from the reality of children and teenagers, already users of internet and digital communication, members of vary virtual communities and exercising intercultural and digital competences in an informal way, this article is a starting point for researches on the way schools' attempts to formalize their digital behaviour and interactions, in order to increase the opportunities and minimize the risks of internet for them.

Through a content analyse on the manuals of the main disciplines related with intercultural and digital competences development it was proved that big changes were made and both the curriculum and the way is presented to children are adapted to the actual needs: the manuals content do not emphasize only the knowledge, but also the required skills and attitudes, and the print versions are doubled by the digital version of the manuals with supplementary digital interactive materials.

Future research may be focused on enlarging the research field on the entire set of new manuals, to measure if all these facilities are really used within classrooms, and if their effects are positive and the Romanian children are exposed to relevant formal education regarding internet usage and intercultural understanding, and the unbalanced relationship between informal & formal learning offered through internet is levelled through the changed curriculum.

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