

# THE INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES: A CENTRAL ROLE FOR DEMOCRACY. THE PESTALOZZI PROGRAMME EXPERIMENTATION

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***Abstract:** The Council of Europe has been actively involved in intercultural matters from back in the 70ies, mutual understanding being a preconditions for living together in a Europe without dividing lines and for the promotion of democracy and the respect for human rights and dignity. The current work of the Council of Europe on "developing intercultural competence through education" intends to support this change. The focus of Pestalozzi Programme experimentation is training activities for education professionals from 50 countries and it promotes and builds capacity around the transversal competences for democracy and an appropriate pedagogy.*

***Keywords:** intercultural education, politics, empirical research, democracy, intercultural competences, European citizenship.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Council of Europe has been actively involved in intercultural matters from the 70, mutual understanding being a precondition for living together in a Europe without dividing lines and for the promotion of democracy and the respect for human rights and dignity. The Council of Europe considers the following seven points as programmatic: the link between the vision of society and the reality of educational provisions; multiple purposes of education; the key role of intercultural competences for democracy; the Pestalozzi Programme, its focus and pedagogy; intercultural education and resistances and the implementation of the process; the charter for the diffusion of the Pestalozzi Programme Community of Practice. Over the past thirty – forty years, in educational discourse has reflected a rather technocratic stance, where the main topics regarded efficiency and not the effectiveness of our education system. We need to address, once again, the question of whether our education practice actually prepares individuals, learners, citizens for the

vision of society, which we advocate. A change of mind-set becomes necessary. Education serves multiple purposes. The Council of Europe has identified four major purposes: a) preparation for life as a democratic citizen, b) development of competencies and skills to enter the labour market; Personal development/ development of the personality, maintenance and advancement of a broad knowledge base. Out of these four goals it appears that only two are at the core of the current concerns of the education policy: the alignment of competencies to the labour market needs and, to a certain extent, the maintenance and advancement of the knowledge base. Preparation for life as a democratic citizen has been advocated for many years by the Council of Europe as a fundamental element, but it has not reached sufficient consideration yet; as for the fourth dimension, personal development, is more or less left to the fringes of educational practice. Indeed it is however this fourth dimension, the development of personality, of attitudes, values, behaviour, key to a society where democracy, mutual understanding and

respect are main features. In nowadays education we deal to a very large extent with the development and acquisition of subject-specific competences: mathematics, geography, history, physics, literature, etc. They are of course important and we need people to have a good amount of these competences. However, without the development of “transversal competences”, the subject-specific competences lead into a cul-de-sac. Most education laws do name and enumerate some of these transversal concerns, usually in the preamble. The purpose of education is to educate free, independent, critical citizens imbued with the values on which we found our democratic societies. The problem is, that in actual fact, in terms of education practice, curriculum time, progress over the years, these transversal concerns are more or less ignored. The following list names but the most central ones: the citizen, observes critically and from different perspectives, bases actions on human rights, is able to act democratically and to cooperate, is able to understand and live in diversity, is able to understand the past and the present and project into the future, is able to communicate successfully across all kinds of borders, uses media environment, critically, profitably and responsibly, continues the learning throughout her/ his life. The purpose of education is to educate free, independent, critical citizens imbued with the values on which we found our democratic societies. The problem is, that in actual fact, in term of education practice, curriculum time, progress over the years, these transversal concerns are more or less ignored (the citizen; observes critically and from different perspectives; bases action on human rights; is able to act democratically and to cooperate; is able to understand and live in diversity; is able to communicate successfully across all kinds of borders; uses media environment critically, profitably and responsibly; continues the learning throughout her/his life.

## **2. THE PESTALOZZI PROGRAMME**

The focus of Pestalozzi Programme experimentation is training activities for

education professionals (from 50 countries) and it promotes and builds capacity around the transversal competences for democracy and an appropriate pedagogy. You cannot develop critical thinking in a learning space, which doesn't allow it; you cannot develop the willingness and ability to act democratically and to cooperate in a context of frontal teaching and isolated working processes and achievements. Learner-centeredness, learning-by-doing, collaborative, cooperative learning are the centre of its approach to training. The art of teaching (Didactica, Comenius) needs to be complemented by the art of learning (Matetica, S. Papert). In the Pestalozzi experimentation the training activities are always an intercultural experience since they gather participants from so many countries and mutual understanding beyond all borders (also those in the minds) is the aim of each training course. Apart from that, specific training for intercultural and diversity education, diverse worldviews and world knowledge, prevention of discrimination, and similar themes are a regular part of the programme's offer. Education practitioners could be seen as key actors for societal change. It is they who by their daily action make change happen, or not happen. As much by what they do and how they do it as by whom they are. Teachers and other education professionals are the profession with whom every individual spends more time than with any other. When training courses are over, participants usually feel motivated and stimulated, and the they return to their daily professional lives and slowly this motivating experiences of exchange and collaborative work with their peers fades into background and even disappears. The Pestalozzi Programme uses a social networking platform to offer a continuation of the experience, of the possibility to continue exchanging, discussing and supporting each other in a growing Community of Practice.

## **3. EXPECTED RESULTS FROM THIS STUDY**

The expected results of this study are: increased knowledge on theory behind the concept of transversal competences; ability to

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map transversal teaching, learning areas and skills to implement them into teaching and learning process; ability to identify aspects connected with transversal competences; ability to identify and describe observable behaviours related to the above mentioned aspects of transversal competences; participants are familiar with tool for the evaluation of transversal competences; participants have tested elements of evaluation tools; participants have developed ideas as how to implement the approach towards the evaluation of the tasks in their educational practice. The project is based on an understanding of evaluation as an action to support learning, and will focus on a participatory, cooperative evaluation and self-evaluation approaches. Building on the P-Core components, the ways of understanding, describing and supporting learners' development will be tested and developed. A special focus will be directed towards learners' observable behaviours indicating changes and development potential as well as evaluation activities appropriate to reflect these changes in different learning contexts. The current work of the Council of Europe on "developing intercultural competence through education" intends to support this change. It shall propose a coherent picture of what intercultural competence is why it is crucial to develop its elements through education and offer guidelines and support for how to go about it. In the meantime, it proposes to all those concerned to use respectful and constructive communication across all borders to follow the example of the Pestalozzi Programme Community of Practice. Questions and research areas raised by this study that are recommended for further study include how do specific internationalization strategies affect the development and preparation of global citizens who are intercultural competent. How is intercultural competence developed through internationalization efforts? How does the developmental stage of an individual affect the assessment of that individual's intercultural competence? More research is needed on the intersection of an individual's development stages and the acquisition and

development of intercultural competence. How does the development of intercultural competence affect global workforce development? How do other current and future studies on the definition and delineation of intercultural competence correspond with the findings of this study? An important aspect that we should investigate are the advantages of the Pestalozzi Programme in terms of effectiveness in comparison with other education theories and methodologies. First of all, in the Pestalozzi's education programme, education is considered as a possibility of self-comprehension, self-education and self-development. Life is a permanent construction and reconstruction, programming and reprogramming. Deconstruction is a method of vision and interpretation of the world, as well as a way of living. It always implies a certain reconstruction with the two meanings of this concept: the recreation of constructions based on reality and the application of these constructions to the recycling of reality, based on the principles of reality. One of the simplest and most important out of these postulates there is the above-mentioned free possession of the self. It emphasises civic and intercultural education understood as an education programme that develops human universality, independent thinking, openness to change and freedom. In this educational approach, knowledge, understanding and ability are inseparable. Knowledge allows the possibility of evaluating processes, that is, to raise questions, and look for meaning, and once the person has found it, he/she can form his/her own opinions and attitudes, gain skills, and make a rational use of his/her abilities. A civic education process has to stress critical and independent thinking possibilities, analysing social problems, drawbacks, possible variants, and looking for positive means and methods to solve them. The self-learning teacher should know how to teach himself and, apart from the professional competencies, he needs very general competences – competences of critical thinking. A very important aspect in the civic education process is the possibility to raise questions and doubts, and not the necessity to

find and provide univocal answers. In the process of comparative analysis of social entities, in the process of social research and communication, meaning is found on one's own, it takes a subjective form, a form of personal approval of social principles and norms. In order to provide a value-engaged civism, it is necessary to apply didactic methods that enable us to reason, interpret, and evaluate social-life facts autonomously and authentically; and also methods that encourage us to weigh and choose from different alternative and independent ways of performing social and personal activities. This possibility can be realised through a meta-relationship – one's own relationship with oneself and with others. It is necessary to declare that a person is precisely the one who possesses himself, he/she is the subject (will, intellect and soul) who sets his/her own goals, chooses the means, decides, rules, and commands. And at the same time, he/she is also the object (body, thing, person) whom he/she rules, directs, encourages, and the one he/she can possess with absolute autonomy. There is a need for a competence for lifelong learning. The self-teaching actor should be ready to learn from experience, should be ready to learn all the time and assume that learning is a never-ending process. Therefore, he/she is the one who educates and changes and perfects himself/herself, as well as the one whom he/she can change, perfect and educate. Evidently, these assumptions presuppose permanent, inevitable reflection and a meta-relationship with oneself. When reflecting, the individual observes himself/ herself as the object under analysis and then he/she determines what he/she could and would like to do with himself/herself and by himself/herself. In the classical situation of education, where there is one educator and others are learners, there is a prevailing passive attitude of observance. One can easily imagine a certain state of expectancy, as the learner passively lets himself/herself "be taught, educated". He/she transfers all the competences of the subject to the "real" educator, a kind of demiurge, organiser or planner. This passive state does not require any subjectivity, responsibility or initiative.

One can simply vegetate with no reflection. In the classical conception of the education process, the responsibility is simply passed on to the one who takes it in order to get an expected social product out of the learner. In the classical conception of education there seems to be no question about the personalisation of the education process: in the objective process of objective knowledge transference, knowledge is considered a thing to be transmitted from a material collection of knowledge pieces into the no less material head of the learner who is ready to receive it. The Pestalozzi Programme designs and develops a concept of a subject who is autonomous, dynamic, active and responsible. Civic and intercultural education should be such that it seriously promotes human universality, independent thinking, openness to change and freedom. And in this respect so much of the civic and intercultural education emphasised in the Pestalozzi Programme presents what is most important for the individual: his/ her liberation and commitment to possess himself/herself and cultivate his/her own ability to create, educate and change himself/herself for his own good and the good of society. Civic and intercultural education should mean an education that encourages the idea of free and independent thinking together with responsible self-possession. One of the most important competences is the competence for independent thinking. Self-correction and self-education presuppose an ability to decide independently, the ability to test one's own theories and verify assumptions, challenge one's own attitudes and ideas. In contact with culture, the individual constantly finds himself/herself in situations of uncertainty, where rationality may not help, because in the cultural context most processes cannot be simply foreseen, planned and rationalised. No one may be prepared for future problems by knowledge alone, simply because it is impossible to know future knowledge. The unpredictable nature of the future – together with the unpredictability of the past – calls upon the competence for tolerance for unpredictability. This tolerance for unpredictability is the ability to act and to fit in when presented with unexpected

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circumstances and unforeseen coincidences. It would be simply impossible to count on a participant in the education process who is aware of his/her role, who forms himself/herself and sets his/her own goals, if there were no theory of self-observation and self-reflection to support it. Going one step further, the learner has to be well equipped with a theory that allows him/her to observe, interpret and reinterpret his/her own education process and to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies chosen for his/her teaching and learning. In an intersubjective and interactive relationship, adjustments of tactics and strategies are a natural and constant part of the process.

### 4. CONCLUSION

In order to acquire civic competence it is important to stick to social ideals and to the principle of the inherence of social activity. From the point of view of didactics, this means that it is impossible to count only on the traditional methods of passive transmission, reception and reproduction of knowledge. The formation of an active relationship with social matters, an active civic position requires a factor of action, active participation in social processes. Education foreseen as an interactive and interrelated process needs the competence for effective communication. Reflection and distance then become not only inevitable concepts, but principles of self-help as well. Furthermore, reflection and distance – in other words, a meta-relationship – become unavoidable conditions for social life. Social phenomena cannot function without the consequent engagement in a relationship, a certain reflection in the person's consciousness. Man made social laws, models, rules and theories very soon lose their connection with the individual and start to live lives of their own; they run their own course, as it were. However, objective, essential and universal rules come into force only when they take a human form, as they have to become subjective intentions, attitudes, theories; in other words, they gain personal, subjective approval and a certain persuasive nature in the

individual's mind. The learner should develop the competence for openness and flexibility. He/she should have an ability to accept new ideas, criticise, count and test alternatives. If knowledge were narrow of scope, mechanical, dogmatic and one-sided, it would not provide sufficient foundation for an explanation of social reality. Social life is possible only when it gets personal approval, personal understanding and a certain persuasive form; it needs to be well grounded, clarified and legitimatised, because such legitimisation then engenders internal principles of behaviour, which will in turn justify and create a proper "social reality space", appropriate for the life of individuals. In social reality, social phenomena exist inasmuch as each person understands, in one way or another, the necessity and meaning of these phenomena. If a person fails to make sense of moral principles, political standards or economic laws, such a person is unpredictable and his reactions are unforeseeable. It then becomes clear that the most real argument for understanding social reality is not mechanical consolidation, which in fact is not possible due to the dynamic and uncertain variation of social reality. In the Pestalozzi Programme the emphasised civic and intercultural education encourages the need for flexibility and openness and forces one to reinterpret theoretical and cultural constants.

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