Teachers’ Intercultural Competence: Effects of Intercultural Training and Experience

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Abstract: - The present study focuses on teachers’ intercultural competence, and potential effects of intercultural training and experience. The sample included eighty-seven Romanian elementary and secondary school teachers, divided in four subgroups according to studied variables. Intercultural competence has been investigated using a questionnaire for intercultural competence development, previously constructed and analyzed. Results reveal main effects of specific training on some dimensions of intercultural competence (minimization, acceptance-behavioral adaptation, and encapsulated marginality), but no main effects of intercultural experience, or interaction effects of the two variables have been computed. Results are discussed against available research data, and further research ideas are suggested.

Key-Words: intercultural competence, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural training, intercultural experience

1 Introduction

Contemporary education faces the challenge of diversity, and tremendous increase in cultural heterogeneity of educational settings. Within this context, teacher readiness to apply intercultural education principles seems to be strongly linked to their intercultural competence. The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of some factors, as intercultural pre-service or in-service training and experience in real-life contacts with representatives of different cultures on teachers’ intercultural competence.

The literature review highlights main trends in defining intercultural competence and summarizes findings of similar studies. It also points potential research gaps that may lead to further investigations in the field. The empirical research reports outcomes of a quantitative study on Romanian teachers’ intercultural competence and emphasizes potential effects of intercultural training and experience.

2 Theoretical backgrounds

2.1 Intercultural competence: “competing” definitions

Although the term “intercultural competence” is increasingly used today, there is no consensus about its definition and scope. Moreover, its meanings partially or totally overlap with other similar concepts as cross-cultural competence, intercultural communication competence or cultural competence.

Intercultural competence was defined as people’s adaptation capacity in an open, flexible, creative manner [1], or as ability to negotiate cultural meanings, and to execute appropriately effective communication behavior that recognizes the interactants’ multiple identities in a specific environment [2].

Intercultural competence is related to relational and situational contexts and can be observed in relational, communication behavior; intercultural competent behavior needs psychological resources and it must be simultaneously appropriate (respecting the cultural norms of the interaction context) and effective (leading to reaching the established goals) [3].

Theoretical models of intercultural competence focused either on their psychological resources [4, 3, 5, and 2] or on their developmental process phases [6, 7].

Structural approaches on intercultural competence [3, 5, 2, and 8] emphasize the internal resources of intercultural competence, grouped in three categories: cognitive, affective, and related to action resources [9].

Cognitive resources / intercultural conscience, include cultural information on people’s own
culture and the other’s culture [8], and self conscience (self-awareness, self-monitoring) [2], expectations, knowledge of more than one perspective, knowledge of alternative interpretations, knowledge of similarities and differences [5].


Action related resources – the behavioral dimension [2] of intercultural competence (also known as intercultural skills or knowing-how factors) [5, 8] include abilities such as to empathize, to tolerate ambiguity, to adapt communication, to use many language codes, to accommodate behavior, to gather appropriate information [5], adequate self presentation, behavior flexibility, interaction management and social abilities [2].

Approaching the resources of intercultural competence, J. Stier [8] makes a distinction between intrapersonal (cognitive skills – perspective alteration, self-reflection, role-taking, problem-solving etc.) and interpersonal competencies (interactive skills, as interpersonal sensitivity, communication competence and situational sensitivity).

Intercultural competence research needs an operationally defined concept, and appropriate measurement. Based on Ruben’s model [4] of behavioral dimensions of intercultural competence, Koester and Olebe [3] constructed BASIC (Behavioral Assessment Scale for Intercultural Competence). This instrument assesses eight behaviors considered important in intercultural relations: (1) display of respect (express positive regards to other person), (2) interaction posture (respond to other in nonjudgmental ways), (3) orientation to knowledge (the terms people use to explain themselves and their world), (4) empathy (behavior as the person understand the world as others do), (5) task role behavior (behavior involved in group problem solving activities), (6) relational behavior (behaviors associated with interpersonal harmony and mediation), (7) interaction management (skills in regulating conversations), (8) tolerance for ambiguity (responding to new and ambiguous situation with little visible discomfort).

The developmental models of intercultural competence outline the phases of the change process through which the individual passes, in order to reach efficacy and adequacy in intercultural relations, and how individual identity adapts in this process. Banks [6] describes a six-phases trajectory of global identity development, for different ethnic or racial groups: (1) ethnic psychological captivity (assimilation of negative stereotypes and beliefs of others about the own group), (2) ethnic encapsulation (closure of marginalized groups within their cultural borders), (3) clarification of ethnic identity (knowing positive and negative traits of own group, self-acceptation, psychological security), (4) bi-ethnicity (adequately acting in two cultural ways, economic mobility), (5) multi-ethnicity and reflective nationalism (going beyond factual cultural expressions, appreciation of others’ values, symbols, institutions), (6) globalism and global competence (local, national, global identities are contextually employed).

Banks [6] states that not all individuals or groups go through first and second stages of the process – this is the situation of marginalized, disadvantaged groups; also, the stages are to be interpreted in a larger view than a simple, linear succession.

M. Bennett [7] has been inspired by Banks’ model, and outlined the way individuals pass from ethnocentric to ethnorelative stages in the process of developing intercultural sensitivity. The ethnocentric stages are: (1) denial – lacking of diversity knowledge, (2) defense – maintaining the own cultural assumptions, considering own culture as superior, (3) minimization – acting within own cultural paradigms, thinking the own beliefs and behaviors are shared by the others, and viewing cultural differences as insignificant. The ethnorelative stages are (4) acceptance – recognizing other’s beliefs and world representations and displaying respect to these; (5) adaptation – knowing the other’s culture and behaving when needed based on the other’s cultural norms; and (6) integration (encapsulated marginality) – having a multicultural identity by integrating cultural differences, and transgressing the cultural borders.

Bennett [7] asserted that efficacy in intercultural relations is reached only in adaptation and integration stages. Attaining the last stage is a difficult task; it requires a wide experience and a long time interaction within cultural diverse environments.

Both structural and developmental models are useful for professionals dealing with intercultural relations and education. Thus, structural models guide the selection of activities’ themes for intercultural training programs, while developmental models serve as theoretical framework for monitoring the development of intercultural competence.
2.2 Intercultural competence in teachers: determinants

Paige [10] proposed a theoretical model of intercultural trainer competence, organized into four categories: (1) knowledge (on intercultural phenomena and learning; intercultural training), (2) skills (assessing organization’s and trainees’ needs, designing training aims, objectives, matters and strategies, implementing and assessing training program), (3) personal qualities (tolerance of uncertainty, cognitive and behavioral flexibility, patience, enthusiasm and commitment, interpersonal skills, openness to new persons and situations, empathy, respect, humor) and (4) ethics (knowing ethical principles of intercultural training, maintaining quality professional standards, facilitating trainees’ well-being, awareness of pressing to which intercultural training may expose trainees).

The author [10] asserted that the basic foundations of intercultural trainer competence are education (which provides knowledge) and experience (which translates knowledge into actual training skills).

For the last decades, national and international institutions have encouraged and financially supported teachers’ mobility, in order to become efficient intercultural trainers. Exchange of good practices and intercultural communication has been the focus of mobility programs, but there is a lack of research data illustrating their effects on intercultural competence. However, recent studies employ both quantitative and qualitative approaches in searching the linkages between immersion in a different educational system or in educational environments with culturally diverse population, and intercultural competence development.

A longitudinal study conducted by Anderson et al. [11] measured the impact of study abroad programs on American students’ intercultural sensitivity, using the Intercultural Development Inventory [12]. The instrument was administered before the students traveled abroad and then four weeks later when they returned in their home-country. Results suggested that short-term programs can have a positive impact on the overall development of intercultural sensitivity.

Pence and Macgillivray [13] reported results form a study based on pre-service teachers’ personal journals analysis, focus groups with supervisors, observation notes, reflection papers, course evaluations, and a questionnaire completed one year after the experience abroad. They tried to assess immediate impact of short-term international experience and any lasting impact the trip may have had on participants as future teachers. Participants indicated few negative experiences, and results prove that overall the benefits included both professional and personal changes. Pre-service teachers mentioned as important benefits increased confidence, a better appreciation and respect for others and other cultures, and an awareness of the importance that feedback and reflection play in professional and personal growth.

In a qualitative study investigating the effectiveness of planned international experiences in promoting cultural awareness, understanding and appreciation among American educators, Kambutu and Nganga [14] conducted pre- and post-visit surveys on educators who experienced working and living in foreign cultures during three different summers, for two-three weeks. Participants reported positive outcomes, as broader awareness, understanding and appreciation of host cultures.

Wiggins, Follo, and Eberly [15] searched the effects on pre-service teachers of on-site coursework and a long-term field placement in a culturally diverse urban elementary school. Results suggested that the program improved pre-service teachers’ attitudes, making them more aware about culturally-responsive strategies in culturally diverse classrooms. Authors emphasize that it was also the case of those participants with little or no prior experience in culturally diverse communities.

Although the interest in studying potential effects of experiences abroad on intercultural processes increased recently, more research data are needed in the field. Additionally, more influential variables should be considered, and this is the case of intercultural training or preparation programs for both pre-service and in-service teachers. Reviewing the literature on this particular issue, DeJaeghere and Zhang [16] argued that numerous studies have shown educational programs effects on teachers’ beliefs and attitudes about culture and race, but fewer studies have assessed the effects these programs on teachers’ classroom behaviors or pedagogy. Emphasizing the lack of attention for influential models on intercultural competence, such as the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) elaborated by M.J. Bennett [17, 7], same authors conducted a study using the correspondent measure - Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), which assesses the level of intercultural sensitivity. Findings indicate that professional development programs directly related to DMIS are stronger than other training forms, in explaining teachers’ perceived intercultural competence scores. Authors assume that these
results are due to the fact that this type of focused training helps teachers to understand that intercultural competence is developmental, and few workshops are not sufficient to achieve a high-level competence. Additionally, the program helps teachers to relate knowledge, skills and attitudes with adequate developmental level.

Competent trainers are reflective peoples, who relate each training experience to literature, to the past experiences and learn from it [10]. Reflecting on own experiences, trainers refine their theories, improve their training design, and develop their training skills.

A similar research aim has been embraced by Kidd, Sanchez and Thorp [18], but the methodology was mainly qualitative: participants wrote a narrative of ten pages on guiding principles in working with children and families from diverse cultures, after a semester of field experiences in culturally diverse communities. The study examined pre-service teachers’ perceptions of which program experiences contributed to shifts in their culturally responsive dispositions and teaching practices during a specific teacher preparation program. The results suggest that five types of experiences were considered relevant in effecting changes in dispositions and teaching practices: material resources, diverse internship experiences, interactions with diverse families, critical reflection, and discussion and dialogue. Authors concluded that well-designed assignments and experiences can contribute to shifts in pre-service teachers’ awareness and understanding of cultures different from their own and increase their professional skills for working in diverse communities.

Although a number of studies have investigated the issue of teachers and student teachers’ intercultural competence, additional research data and more diverse approaches are needed for clarifying effects of professional mobility and specific training.

3 Method

3.1 Participants

The sample included eighty-seven Romanian elementary and secondary school teachers. Thirty-nine participants have benefited of intercultural training in their pre-service or in-service preparation for the teaching career, while forty-eight have not been exposed to similar training experiences. Twenty for teachers have been involved in developing international educational projects, or traveled abroad for short-time professional exchanges, while sixty-three did not experience interpersonal contacts within international environments.

3.2 Instruments

Intercultural Competence Development Questionnaire (ICDQ), a self-administered measure, is based on developmental model of intercultural sensitivity [17, 7] and has been extensively described in a previous research study [19]. The initial version of the measure included forty-two Lickert-type items, organized in six subscales: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation and encapsulated marginality. The items have been formulated in accordance with available descriptions of intercultural developmental stages. An exploratory factor analysis has been conducted for studying questionnaire’s construct validity; a five factors solution, covering thirty items, and explaining 40.10% of total scores’ variance has been used in further statistical analysis. Reliability coefficients (alpha for internal consistency) have acceptable values: 0.69 for the overall measure, 0.67 for denial-defense subscale (nine items); 0.57 for minimization subscale (four items); 0.83 for acceptance-behavioral adaptation subscale (nine items; 0.78 for cognitive adaptation subscale (five items); and 0.65 for encapsulated marginality subscale (three items).

3.3 Procedure

All participants completed the instruments in one application session, and scores have been computed for each ICDQ subscale. An overall score has been computed for ethnocentrism (the sum of denial/defense and minimization scores) and ethnorelativism (the sum of acceptance-behavioral adaptation, cognitive adaptation and encapsulated marginality scores).

4 Results and discussion

Generally, scores for ICDQ subscales vary in line with teachers’ intercultural experience. Thus, mean scores (presented with respective standard deviation value) obtained by teachers with self-reported experience in dealing with diversity are the following: for denial-defense scale M= 49.58, SD= 7.25; for minimization subscale M= 10.87, SD= 4.16; for acceptance-behavioral adaptation subscale M= 47.25, SD= 12.14; for cognitive adaptation
For exploring effects of self-reported intercultural experience and training on participants’ intercultural competence we conducted a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA). No main or interaction effects have been obtained when the overall ethnocentrism score has been used as dependent variable. A main effect of intercultural training on ethnorelativism overall score has been computed \( F(1; 86) = 5.73; p < 0.05 \), while professional mobility and the interaction between the two independent variables showed no significant effects. Similar statistical analysis revealed no main effects or interaction effects of intercultural training and experience on denial-defense scores and cognitive adaptation scores. However, main effects of intercultural training has been computed for scores on minimization subscale \( F(1; 86) = 5.73; p < 0.05 \), acceptance-behavioral adaptation subscale \( F(1; 86) = 6.56; p < 0.05 \), and encapsulated marginality \( F(1; 86) = 4.20; p < 0.05 \).

Independent samples T tests have been computed for the three subscales’ scores, in order to identify the source of previously discussed main effects. Teachers with intercultural training obtained significantly lower mean scores than teachers who did not benefit of relevant preparation on minimization scores – \( t(84.28) = -2.68, p < 0.05 \) (Levene’s test for equality of variances has a significant value – \( F = 6.60; p < 0.05 \)). Teachers with intercultural training obtained significantly higher scores than members of the other group for acceptance-behavioral adaptation subscale – \( t(78.05) = 2.45, p < 0.05 \) (Levene’s test for equality of variances has a significant value – \( F = 5.73; p < 0.05 \)), and for encapsulated marginality subscale – \( t(85) = 2.02, p < 0.05 \).

These results are similar to findings reported in previous studies, excepting the non-significant effect of professional mobility programs on teachers’ intercultural competence.

5 Conclusions

Although our research findings revealed mixed effects – generally, professional mobility does not have significant effects in decreasing ethnocentrism scores and increasing ethnorelativism scores, while intercultural training has an expected positive effect on teachers’ intercultural competence – we may conclude that inter-groups differences support the main lines, emphasized in relevant previous studies. Intercultural training may be considered critical in the efforts to improve teachers’ specific
competence, and mobility programs do have certain effects, which are still to be studied.

However, these results may need deeper investigation, involving a larger sample of teachers, and also more complex research designs (for example, quasi-experimental designs, measuring teachers’ intercultural competence before and after a mobility program, or before and after a specific training program). Further research data are still needed to support these findings, and correlative topics should become more visible in future studies. New instruments - more teacher/teaching specific, should be created and tested, and effects’ consistency should be studied within longitudinal designs.

References:
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