

Intercultural Competence in the Professional Training and Qualification of Education Specialists in Bulgaria

Nikolay Sashkov Tsankov & Yana Velichkova Rangelova¹

South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Faculty of Pedagogy, Blagoevgrad

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Abstract

Modern development of educational practices and policies brings more requirements to the professional profile of education specialists and requires searching for better options for the improvement of their professional training and qualification. On the other hand, the multicultural context and the need of creating a tolerant environment in education focuses on the importance of developing educational specialists' intercultural competence as a crucial professional prerequisite. This paper focuses on the university training practices in Bulgaria and attempts to define the problem fields of intercultural competence, its content and its representation in the curriculum and syllabi used for the training of the educational specialists. The research covers two aspects. The first aspect refers to the theory and offers a critical analysis of the current educational standards in the context of intercultural competence. The second aspect refers to practice and describes the real opportunities for the education specialists to gain intercultural competence throughout their training and qualification.

Keywords: Education specialists' qualification and training, intercultural competence, professional competence.

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that education specialists at all levels of the education system need a wide range of skills and competencies to address the new challenges. Their professional training and qualification as an integral characteristic of their professional profile generally refers to the acquisition of specific knowledge and abilities for effective education practice in strong relation with the skills and strategies for creating and maintaining a positive and motivating working environment. Nowadays, in nearly every European country multiculturalism is a common experience in education institutions. For teachers, this multicultural dimension is a big challenge. Intercultural competence becomes an intrinsic part of their professional training and qualification. It is seen as a developmental process of formal and informal learning and in the context of education specialists' professional development can be summarized as the capacity to see and analyze the world from different perspectives, to learn to listen and negotiate in diverse and complex environments, and to connect to the worlds of the others in order to challenge and expand their boundaries (Jokikokko, 2010: 28).

¹ PhD student.

After the introduction of National Standards determining the professional development of education specialists in the Bulgarian educational system, some crucial features and functions of their professional qualification have been outlined in terms of intercultural competence: (1) theoretical knowledge and practical skills conducive to good practices in the field of intercultural education; (2) strategies for understanding and identifying children's need to express their cultural identity; (3) organizational skills which enable one to create an appropriate environment facilitating and fostering children's socialization; (4) strategies for recognizing and counteracting cultural stereotypes and their effect on student's perceptions; (5) appropriate methods and teaching techniques in a multicultural environment that promote appreciation of cultural diversity; and (6) positive attitudes towards different cultural groups in the school community and skills for working in a multicultural environment.

All these aspects require a special approach to the curriculum design and professional training of education specialists in the context of different opportunities for intercultural competence development and improvement at all different levels of their qualification, including university training and post-university professional qualification and lifelong learning programmes.

2. Method

In order to ascertain to what extent the existing syllabi and curricula comply with the new requirements regarding the intercultural competence level of education specialists in Bulgaria, a content analysis method has been applied as a reliable tool. It provides an objective analysis of the content of education specialists' university training curriculum and syllabi, their qualification descriptions and other supporting documentation specifying different aspects of the educational process, and of education specialists' professional training, qualification and requalification. The obtained data, grounded on the documentation framework, highlights both quantitative and qualitative aspects, and reveals some important facts and trends in education specialists' intercultural training. The analysis covers different BA and MA university training programmes for education specialists in the field of pedagogy, pre-school and primary school education in the seven biggest Bulgarian universities with a tradition of providing training and qualification to education specialists: Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", South-West University "Neofit Rilski" – Blagoevgrad, Shumen University, The University of Veliko Turnovo, Trakia University – Stara Zagora, Plovdiv university "Paisii Hilendarski", and "Angel Kanchev" University of Ruse.

In order to determine to what extent education specialists recognize the intercultural competence as an important aspect of their professional qualification, a survey has been conducted with 50 specialists in the field of education and 50 university graduates with degrees in Pedagogy, Pre-School Education, and Elementary Education. They were asked to rank six fundamental components of their professional profile according to the importance they attach to each of them (1 = the least important, 6 = the most important). The components were related to knowledge and proficiency in the teaching subject, interpretation skills of subject theories and instructional practices, integration of standards into curriculum and instruction, intercultural understanding and negotiation, assessment skills and strategies, further engagement in professional development and improvement. Afterwards the components were presented to them on two separate lists of knowledge and skills respectively, and the same teachers and students were asked to state to what extent they were important and necessary. There are not any significant differences between the opinions of the two groups, therefore they will not be discussed separately for the purposes of our analysis.

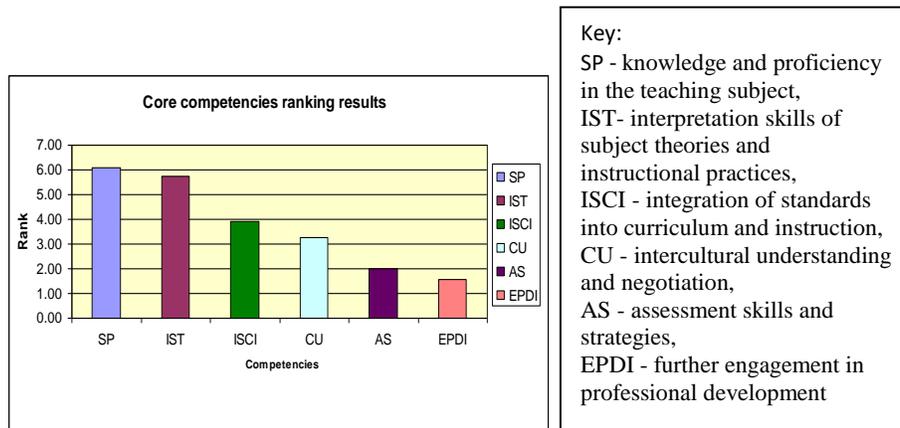
3. Results

The results of the content analysis of the existing documents regulating the professional training and qualification of education specialists in Bulgaria reveals two different approaches in terms of development and improvement of the intercultural competence as an aspect of education specialists' professional profile. In only two universities curricula provide a systematic and effective strategy for development and improvement of intercultural competence through a variety of core subjects and elective courses on intercultural matters. A small number of programmes offer some elective courses on intercultural education. The majority of BA programmes do not include any courses exploring intercultural issues. Only from the description of some other courses it becomes clear that different topics require development of separate skills for working in a multicultural environment, but the approach to achieving this goal is fragmentary and vague. Wherever subjects dealing with intercultural competence exist in the university programmes, they belong largely to the realm of elective courses, and cover problems related to: (1) early intercultural education; (2) European intercultural dialogue through education; (3) educational interaction in multicultural environment; (4) developing children's intercultural competence; (5) Bulgarian language teaching and learning in multicultural environment; and (6) intercultural communication. In only 3 out of 32 BA and MA curricula included in the research there is a subject or a course on intercultural education in the list of the core disciplines.

Furthermore, the results of the survey show that both groups of respondents give precedence to practical skills and competencies over theoretical knowledge. They agree that besides being professional and motivating, education specialists should be creative, patient, conscientious, approachable, fair, authoritative, humorous, and understanding, should show enthusiasm for their work, but they do not recognize intercultural competence as an important prerequisite for their professional development.

The majority of respondents show a limited understanding of intercultural competence, regarding it only as an awareness of different ethnic groups, which creates more stereotypes rather than breaking them.

Another tendency emerging in our analysis is that intercultural competence is mostly represented by a number of additional training programmes and courses for professional qualification, but this additional professional qualification is ranked as least important.



4. Discussion

The analysis of the current situation in Bulgarian universities shows that the wide range of knowledge, skills and attitudes relevant to the issue of intercultural competence is hardly taken into consideration in the curriculum design of university programmes, but it is nonetheless declared to be one of the main goals of qualification requirements and standards. The BA programmes hardly offer any opportunities for development and improvement of intercultural competence as a compulsory component of the professional qualification of education specialists, which would enable them to create an appropriate working and educational environment both tolerant of cultural diversity and respectful of individuality.

The negative tendency of neglecting intercultural competence in the training of education specialists affects the curriculum design of MA programmes, too. Only three of the MA programmes included in our study involve intercultural education and aim at developing intercultural competence.

A number of post university requalification courses and programmes appear to compensate for the gap between the university training and the standards specified in the normative acts. An information register for the requalification programmes of the educational specialists has been created and maintained according to the Education Act of Republic of Bulgaria. As of May 2018 this register includes a variety of programmes geared towards the development and improvement of education specialists' intercultural competence focusing on: (1) ethnic and religious tolerance and reflection in an intercultural educational environment; (2) developing adequate knowledge, skills and competencies for teaching and interacting in a multicultural environment; (3) developing practical skills and teaching techniques and strategies for working effectively with children from minority groups or refugees; (4) intercultural models of different types of interaction in a pre-school and school educational environments, or between the school and the family; (5) general approaches, methods and strategies for teaching in a multicultural environment; and (6) introduction of good intercultural teaching and learning policies and practices.

In most cases, education specialists' understanding of intercultural competence narrowly focusses on two goals: (1) successfully integrating children from minority ethnic groups into the mainstream classroom; and (2) providing opportunities for these children to gain proficiency in their mother tongue.

Despite the fact that intercultural competence is often considered to depend on communication skills in a foreign language, which can facilitate understanding between people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, foreign language acquisition is not among the priorities of education specialists' training and qualification. We certainly cannot expect them to be proficient in all the languages or dialects spoken in a given community. However, developing a certain level of linguistic competence will facilitate effective intercultural communication for educational purposes and in an educational environment.

The detailed analysis of the current situation of the basic professional training and qualification of education specialists shows that university programmes must be further developed in some of the following directions: (1) providing opportunities for observation and analysis of integration processes in an educational environment, considering the specific interpersonal and intrapersonal specifics within various ethnic and cultural groups that affect and facilitate different aspects of intercultural understanding and meaningful communication; (2) developing strategies for dealing with conflicts based on cultural misunderstanding and differences in the educational environment, so that both sides of the conflict may be equally and fairly treated with respect to their cultural and ethnic values, and the conflict may be resolved; and (3) developing strategies to

overcome communication barriers due to cultural differences, stereotypes, discrimination or prejudice. Developing intercultural competence is a particularly challenging task, for a well-developed intercultural competence is always multifaceted, and comprises many heterogeneous components. This inevitably creates contradictions, but this is not a reason to underestimate its value for the education specialists' university training and qualification. Intercultural competence should not remain something marginal or exceptional in university studies. The existing additional forms of post-university qualification through various training programmes are also important, but they cannot fully compensate for the current deficiencies.

5. Conclusion

Although intercultural education deals with applied aspects of the educational process, and its organization, appropriate conditions and efficiency, intercultural concepts are better presented in theory rather than in the education practice and formal professional training and qualification of education specialists. To achieve optimal professional development in terms of intercultural competence, education specialists need: (1) knowledge, skills and a positive attitude in order to work effectively and appropriately in an intercultural environment; and (2) a reflective awareness of different cultures and specific cultural values and behaviour. The formal university training of education specialists should include a wide range of intercultural situations and practical solutions. The post-university programmes have the capacity to enhance intercultural competence, but they fall short of achieving this goal.

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