

Early and preschool teachers intercultural competence: study program analysis in Croatia

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ABSTRACT

Interculturalism in education represents the foundation for a multicultural society. It tends to develop new, more tolerant behaviors in everyday life which includes changes and awareness in people's attitudes. Intercultural competence is a very important part of education but specifically for children in early and preschool age. Systematic implementation of intercultural education in early and preschool education would help formalize interculturalism in the whole education system. Early and preschool teachers have an important role in this subject. The role of experts is in the right choice of materials, challenges and incentive of it. Early and preschool teachers' competencies are prerequisites for development and interculturalism implementation in kindergartens. Therefore, education for early and preschool teachers has to answer practice incentives. For these reasons early and preschool teacher study program analysis was conducted. The aim was to analyze two aspects of those programs: name and content of courses that can be related to interculturalism and intercultural competence. Qualitative analysis was conducted based on programs available online. Four University study programs in Croatia were analyzed. Based on the research data it can be concluded that interculturalism is not represented in many courses on given aspects. The term multiculturalism is used in course content, but there are no course headlines connected to term of interculturalism. It is important to include intercultural content in study programs, and maybe as a course for itself.

Keywords: competences, courses, early and preschool education, interculturalism, undergraduate study program

1. Introduction

In this century we have to look at interculturalism as a challenge in the educational system. First, we will define basic terms and their meanings in this concept. The educational system includes all vertical formal institutions, beginning with early and preschool education - kindergartens, primary schools, high schools and universities. These institutions are the basic foundation of education, but also a place of intercultural education.

The term of interculturalism is used daily and in various contexts. It can be frequently used in the context of multiculturalism and pluralism. Piršl (2002) connects the term with the problem that occurs in relations between actors in different cultures, their acceptance and respect. Interculturalism encourages thinking about differences, prejudices and possibilities. It learns how to accept others as different but also similar, whereat differences are taken as advantages and not as disadvantages (Previšić, 1996). Piršl (2002) points on actual opportunities that interculturalism enables facing problems, communication, knowing each other and evaluation, sharing values, life model and society and ethic appreciation.

Intercultural education and competencies are being looked at as a development process, changing people into human and social beings (Jagić, 2002). Hrvatić and Piršl (2007) define intercultural education, meaning intercultural learning, as much more than just differences awareness. Therefore, we have to talk about intercultural competence that is based on openness, acceptance and respect. Intercultural competence needs to answer „new“ social challenges that are very much transcultural.

Interculturalism deployment in the educational system represents answers on cultural complexity in society, different lifestyles and non-dominating social groups' identity affirmation (Spajić – Vrkaš et al., 2004). Spajić – Vrkaš (1993) states that the main task of interculturalism in education is to make youth aware of their national originality and tolerant to differences which is achievable by developing a sense of belonging to their community. The author states that interculturalism in education tends to develop new, more tolerant behaviors in everyday life which includes changes in people's awareness and attitudes. It is



expected that it contributes to democratic development, protecting human rights and freedoms, better understanding and collaboration, security, peace and world disarming. It is also expected to contribute to national awareness, religious, language and cultural identity of every individual.

No program will learn an individual to talk successfully, connect and work in different situations with people that are different. It is what it needs to be systematically adopted, raise individual and social awareness. Krutky (ASHE, 2012a) states that 21st-century education needs to prepare students for the world which is connected, interdependent and different. This should be an intercultural education goal. It should never be just an appendix to the curriculum. It should be part of the learning environment and in every dimension of the educational process. Therefore, the UNESCO guidance of intercultural education highlights school life dimensions, including decision making, teacher education, curriculum, language learning, work methodology, student interactions and study materials. All the above represents the essence of intercultural education and intercultural competence acquisition.

1.1. Intercultural competence – frame and necessity in early and preschool education

Defining interculturalism many authors ponder about intercultural competence. There are differences in acquiring competence, but, the impact is on the process. Deardorff (ASHE, 2012b) states circular and longitudinal processes of intercultural development through his model of intercultural competence. As it is a longlasting process, in Croatia, it is included in the National curriculum for early and preschool education and in the National curriculum for primary and high school education. Why is it important to talk about interculturalism form early and preschool age? Because talking to a child as a social person and citizen we are talking to a person who is developing its own identity in the early years. Ponciano and Shabazian (2012) state that children at preschool age accept differentiation between themselves and others regarding similarities and differences. Holmes (1995) states an assumption of no prejudice among preschoolers but research show opposite results.

If a child is in homogenous groups (ethnic, religion, socio-economic, etc.) there are several variations and differences among the member of each group.

Changing approach and developing Educational Strategy of the Republic of Croatia interculturalism was introduced as a curriculum principle in government document *The National framework curriculum for preschool, elementary and high school education*. Stating that the importance of all participants in the education process is highlighted through intercultural education (Nacionalni okvirni kurikulum za rani i predškolski odgoj, osnovnoškolsko i srednjoškolsko obrazovanje, 2010).

The National curriculum for early and preschool education, a document delivered in 2014 in Croatia, doesn't contain word intercultural competence, but developing eight core competencies implies the need for intercultural competence development for every person. The document states that it is important to encourage and empower the development of eight core competencies for a life long learning (Nacionalni kurikulum za rani i predškolski odgoj i obrazovanje, 2014). Mentioned competencies are communication on native language, communication on foreign languages, mathematic competence and competence in natural sciences, digital competence, learn how to learn, social and civic competence, initiative and entrepreneurship and cultural awareness and expressing. As stated earlier, intercultural competence is acquired through the process of systematic learning, doing, knowledge and acceptance. It is based on interculturalism definition and acceptance of multiculturalism in the society that we are living in. Here, we can highlight the UNESCO definition of learning: „learning by doing“, learning to live together“ and „learning to be“ (UNESCO, 2006). National document mentions „child as a social subject with specific needs, rights and culture“ (Nacionalni kurikulum za rani i predškolski odgoj i obrazovanje, 2014, 35) and „child as an active member of the community“ (Nacionalni kurikulum za rani i predškolski odgoj i obrazovanje, 2014, 37). As stated above in the national document as a frame of early and preschool education intercultural competence needs to be lived in every kindergarten curriculum and kindergarten itself. The goal is to raise children for respect and respect for diversity, promoting equality and answering to challenge of discrimination.

Intercultural competence as an ability means an understanding of relations between different cultures (Peko et al., 2009). It supposes understanding of different social groups in the society with all their specialties towards the dominant culture. Developing competence includes



certain skills to achieve constructive action and answering questions between different cultures in one society. The development of intercultural competence implies a global perspective and analyzation of the impact of other cultures in society. It also implies skills development that will provide a successful function in the big global community (Hrvatić & Piršl, 2007).

Lately, we can witness the necessity of life-long learning and professional improvement. Changes made by the National curriculum caused the need for professional development in the field of interculturalism. It is important to train those who need to educate children with terms of interculturalism (Peko et al., 2009). Can we expect the educational system to be the one to intensify the whole system and professional development in the field of intercultural competence? To answer this question, scientists in Croatia have been working on this subject several years now, theoretically and practically. But the key is in the educational institutions that will have their impact on the longitudinal process of intercultural education.

As we mentioned before, interculturalism and intercultural competence in the context of early and preschool education imply the question of the development of intercultural competence for early and preschool teachers. It is necessary to asses the intercultural context in their formal education.

2. Method

To make an insight into the current state of early and preschool teachers' intercultural competence this qualitative analysis has been done. Early and preschool teachers' study program documentation on four Universities in Croatia were analyzed. The aim was to gain insight and analyze two aspects of the programs: names and content of courses that can be connected to interculturalism and intercultural competence.

We used documentation that was available online for the period of academic year 2017/2018 (through the University web page). Universities who conduct Early and preschool education undergraduate programs were analyzed. Although there are graduate programs available at some Universities, those have not been a part of this analysis. By the current qualification

frame, a graduate degree is not necessary for early and preschool teacher employment. In the forthcoming analysis, we will only mention undergraduate programs.

For the purpose of this paper study programs available on web pages of these Universities were analyzed: Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Split; University of Zadar; Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Rijeka and Faculty of Education, University of Osijek. Although, in Croatia, there is a Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb that conducts the undergraduate program for Early and preschool teachers, analysis of their program was not included in this paper due to the insufficient information on the University web page. Based on the University's web pages we conducted data on programs, their implementation, structure and course performance, course organization, teachers, content and course names.

3. Results and Discussion

Based on data retrieved from analyzed programs compulsory and elective courses were divided and therefore analyzed separately for every program. Elective courses are not mandatory and therefore student chooses which course from that list will they enroll. In the following analysis, two categories are presented: course content and course name in the context of interculturalism and intercultural competence. The results review is shown in table

Table 1. Analysis – course content and course names in the context of interculturalism and intercultural competence

University, Faculty	Course content		Course name	
	Compulsory courses	Elective courses	Compulsory courses	Elective courses
University of Osijek, Faculty of Education	1 2	5	0	0
University of Split,	1	8	0	0

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	5			
University of Zadar	1 0	9	0	0
University of Rijeka, Faculty of Teacher Education	1 0	10	0	0

Faculty in Osijek has a program named Undergraduate university study program of Early and preschool education (<https://www.foozos.hr/studiji/studijski-programi>), after which a participant gets a degree as a University Bachelor of Early and Preschool Education. Analyzing the study program we can extract twelve compulsory subjects that can be related to interculturalism by its content. In the eight of those, we can find content related to the theme but in four we can see in learning outcomes stated intercultural competence. Those four are *English language I* and *English language II*, *German language I* and *German language II*.

Analyzing elective courses in the same program we came up with five of them that their content can be related to interculturalism and intercultural education. In two of those, *Parenting* and *Pedagogic communication*, term multiculturalism is used. But analyzing names of the courses none has term interculturalism in it. So, we can conclude that four courses in this study program have learning outcomes in terms of intercultural competence.

Examining the Undergraduate study program of Early and Preschool education on the Faculty in Rijeka (http://www.ufri.uniri.hr/files/studiji/010915_Rp.pdf) we have come across information about course holders, general and specific competences of future early and preschool teachers. The study program is organized throughout five modules: pedagogy – psychology module, integrative – methodic module, practical competencies module, elective courses module and introduction to study program module. Analyzing this program we found ten courses on the compulsory course list that have a connection with intercultural competence, and in two of them, we found the term multiculturalism.

From the elective courses list, it is possible to extract ten courses in which content can be related to intercultural competence. One of those mentioned multiculturalism. So, it can be

concluded that this program doesn't mention intercultural competence in its content or it has interculturalism in any course headlines.

The study program at the University of Zadar (<http://www.unizd.hr/ucitelji-odgojitelji/studijski-programi-za-ucitelje-i-odgojitelje>), Primary and Early and Preschool teacher education department, consists of modules: general courses module, pedagogy – psychology module, integrative methodical module, practical competencies module and elective courses module. Concluding those module students achieve a degree as a University Bachelor of Early and Preschool Education.

Analyzing the content of the compulsory courses throughout modules, it is possible to highlight ten courses in which content can be related to interculturalism and intercultural competence. The elective courses module has nine courses stated and only in two the term multiculturalism is used. Here, like in the analysis before we can conclude that there are no courses in this program that has interculturalism in their headlines.

Study program on Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split (http://www.ffst.unist.hr/download/repository/ELABORAT_Rani_i_predskolski_odgoj_prediplomski_SB_2017_web.pdf) is named Undergraduate university study od Early and

Preschool education. Analyzing the content of the compulsory courses it is possible to relate with interculturalism and intercultural competence in 15 courses. In one of those, term multiculturalism is used. Analyzing elective courses it is possible to relate with intercultural content in eight courses. But, there are no courses in this program that has interculturalism in their headlines.

Comparing these results it is possible to conclude that interculturalism as a course doesn't exist, but intercultural competence is a part of some compulsory and elective courses. It is mentioned in four compulsory courses on the Faculty in Osijek.

Presenting results and conclusions made on this analysis can't be complete if we don't state the important information about elective courses. It is important to highlight the possibility and options for choosing elective courses. Some Faculties, due to organizational problems, sometimes don't offer all elective courses stated in study programs. Also, some have enrolment rules (study year, number of students, finishing certain compulsory courses as a



prerequisite for enrollment). Therefore stated courses in programs are not always available for everyone and since they are elective some students will not enroll in some courses. We can conclude that not all students will be on the elective courses that are in some way connected by its content with interculturalism.

We can conclude that term multiculturalism is used in course content, but it is not a part of any course headline. Term intercultural competence is stated in four courses as a learning outcome. So, it is necessary to ask is interculturalism important enough as a subject to be in study programs? Is the integrative approach stated in courses content enough to put interculturalism into context? Unfortunately, this documentation analysis is not enough to make a conclusion on this question.

4. Conclusion

The importance of intercultural competence in preschool education and in every kindergarten is a key to intercultural development in society. Intercultural education needs to be started in the early years, through appropriate content and activities. Choosing those contents is a part of experts' intercultural competence. Without this understandings, it is impossible to talk about intercultural education in the context of early and preschool institutions. The future of society is in developing core competencies. Intercultural competence is a sort of complex of many skills and knowledge that we want to ensure to each individual through education.

The importance of future experts education and developing intercultural competence is a society needs. It is important to think about every study program and school curriculum to contribute with its content to intercultural competence development. It is a longitudinal process, from early and preschool education to faculty level and later through lifelong learning and training. It is important to include intercultural content in study programs, and maybe as a course for itself.

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