

“Like flying birds”: raising candidate teachers’ intercultural competence of refugee identity

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ABSTRACT

The education of candidate teachers in the acquisition of intercultural competence has been underlined by researchers for many decades. Many candidate and in-service teacher training programmes have been enriched with courses and seminars focusing on the development of intercultural competence. This article describes the contribution of a university course to the development of intercultural competence of candidate teachers. The communication and cultural exchange between student teachers and young refugees which took place during the course, seem to lead to the transformation of students' negative stereotypical perceptions on refugee identity.

KEYWORDS

Intercultural competence, refugee identity, university course, candidate teachers, experiential learning

RÉSUMÉ

La formation d'enseignants-candidats à l'acquisition d'une compétence interculturelle, a été soulignée par les chercheurs pendant de nombreuses décennies. De nombreux programmes de formation de candidats et d'enseignants en poste ont été enrichis de cours et de séminaires axés sur le développement de la compétence interculturelle. Cet article décrit la contribution d'un cours universitaire de développement de la compétence interculturelle de candidats-enseignants. La communication et l'échange culturel entre les étudiants-enseignants et les jeunes réfugiés, qui ont eu lieu pendant la formation, semblent avoir transformé les perceptions négatives et stéréotypées des étudiants, concernant l'identité de réfugié.

MOTS-CLÉS

Compétence interculturelle, identité de réfugié, cours universitaire, candidats-enseignants, apprentissage expérientiel

TEACHER EDUCATION FOR INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: INTRODUCTION

The education of candidate teachers in the acquisition of intercultural competence has been underlined by researchers for many decades (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Banks & McGee Banks, 2004; Gay, 2010). As pointed out in relevant research, while teachers are usually proficient in their academic subjects, they are often lacking where issues of diversity management in the

classroom are concerned. They may often discriminate against students of different ethnocultural background, may display the desire for the 'other' to assimilate to the dominant group and may hold views in line with the theory of cultural deficit (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Nieto, 2004). As a result of these findings, candidate and in-service teacher training programmes have been enriched, with courses and seminars focusing on the development of intercultural competence.

Intercultural competence, which is the ability to manage diversity on the basis of the principles of the intercultural approach, is one of the most important skills that students should acquire, as early as possible. Bender-Szymanski (2000) argues that it cannot be acquired automatically, simply through coexistence with the 'other' but can be developed through systematic and in-depth educational processes. Spalding et al. (2010) point to the insufficiency of good intentions in the functional management of diversity. Instead, what trainee teachers need, are relevant theories and ideologies that they can approach in their education, combined with participation in actions and practices related to processes of creating conditions of social justice.

PARTICIPATION IN INTERCULTURAL ACTIONS AS A MEANS OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

The need to combine the theoretical training of teachers in the field of intercultural education with their participation in actions of intercultural and anti-racist content is repeatedly highlighted in the relevant literature (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Hylland & Noffke, 2005). Prospective teachers should participate in community actions, both in practical training and in general. Thus, they will acquire experiences of intercultural exchange and communication with different social groups and individuals. Such experiential processes are capable of mobilizing the reflection of the participants. This in turn will lead to the change of previous dysfunctional mental assumptions which are usually influenced by social stereotypes and prejudices. According to Miller Dyce & Owusu-Ansah (2016), prospective teachers who attended classroom management lessons and also took part in actions in a multicultural school with a large number of refugees and migrant pupils, had a significant shift in their intercultural competence. According to the researchers, their findings highlight that "when teacher educators create diversity courses critically and intentionally, students increase not only in their diversity knowledge but become actual advocates for social justice, equity, and social change for students and families" (Miller Dyce & Owusu-Ansah, 2016, p. 351).

Similarly, Farnsworth (2010) studied transformations in prospective teachers' perceptions on social justice issues, as a result of their participation in community based service-learning. In his conclusions, he points out that the participation of the prospective teachers helped to redefine their own identity and to transform their wider views on social justice issues. Tinkler et al. (2014) studied changes in the perceptions of candidate teachers who participated in service learning in a context of cooperation with members of vulnerable groups and minorities. According to their findings, candidate teachers who participated in social justice service learning, due to critical reflection, had more significant transformations than those who took part in traditional charity service learning. In the latter, in some cases, not only was there no development in these students' views on the intercultural management of diversity, but reproduction of stereotypical views against the 'other' was also observed.

In their review of the articles published in scientific journals over the last decade on teacher education in social justice issues, Mills and Ballantynes (2016) note the significant number of university courses on the above subject. However, they also underline the need for

more systematic research in order to ascertain the stability of the transformations that appear in the perceptions of the candidate teachers after attending respective courses.

In the conclusions of their study on the education of candidate teachers in social justice issues, Ritchie et al. (2013) highlight the importance of co-operation between teachers of different academic subjects. They studied changes in the views of students who attended four different courses (language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies) in which teachers had agreed to emphasize the intercultural dimension and social justice. Researchers point out that the multidisciplinary approach, as developed in combination with the different subjects, had very positive effects on the perceptions of the students.

Likewise, the Mills (2013) survey evaluated transformations in the perceptions of candidate teachers in their internships. They concluded that the duration and timing of internships in culturally sensitive environments are decisive factors in the development of student reflection and intercultural sensitization. Thus, short-term practical exercises, which usually take place at the end of their studies, do not have the same significant effect as those that last longer and are spread throughout the duration of the candidate teachers' studies.

Hylland & Noffke (2005) also endorsed the same view, but highlighted the difficulties of organizing a long-term internship and suggested enriching the trainee teacher curriculum with more frequent, flexible forms of cooperation with the multicultural community. They suggest that action research in places where vulnerable and socially excluded groups live and are educated, is an appropriate methodology to raise competence among candidate teachers on issues of social exclusion and inequality. Their focus is on the development of reflection and critical thinking, which is cultivated in the context of action research through the process of performing an action, observing and reflecting on it. Acquaintance and cultural exchange with ethno-cultural 'others' but also in general, with members of minorities and vulnerable groups can mobilize the reflection of candidate teachers. It can trigger reflection on the cultural differences that they will encounter in their future classrooms, as well as on issues of equal opportunities and social justice.

Given the significant number of refugee students attending school classes, the cooperation of candidate teachers with refugee communities can contribute to their wider intercultural competence and, in particular, to reflection on refugee identity management in the classroom. Although a number of social researches in reception centres and other refugee accommodation exist in the international literature, the number of investigations concerning the training of candidate teachers in refugee identity management is extremely limited. Therefore, the description and discussion of intercultural actions that take place in the context of basic teacher education, acquire a particular value in studying the transformations that may occur in students' perceptions, as a result of their involvement in such actions.

LIKE FLYING BIRDS: AN INTERCULTURAL ACTION INVOLVING STUDENTS AND REFUGEES

During the course "Planning, Organizing and Evaluating Intercultural Actions" in the Department of Early Childhood Education at the University of Thessaly, xenophobic views against refugees were expressed by a small group of students. Because of this, an intercultural action was designed and implemented in the academic year 2016-17. This course is taught in the form of a workshop and exploits the principles of experiential learning. Its purpose is to sensitize students to issues of the acceptance of otherness, reflection on the function of stereotypes and prejudices, and to develop empathy towards diversity.

The above aim is realized each academic year through the design and implementation of experiential actions, which aim to introduce students to the 'other' and through this, to the

development of acquaintance, communication and intercultural exchange. The model of participatory action research is followed. Students have the dual role of participant in the actions and researcher and the lecturer has the role of facilitator of the action research. There was also the presence of a critical friend; assistant professor Maria Tsouvala has taught with considerable knowledge and experience, both in the field of action research and refugee education.

Two methodological tools were used in the context of this action research. The first was the research journal, which is also the classic tool of the researcher in the methodology of action research. A research journal was held separately by each student, showing both the evolution of the actions in which they participated and their observations and thoughts on them. Diary entries were systematically read by students as part of the meetings with the teacher. This formed a critical approach to completed activities and a guide for the design of the next round of action. A research journal was held both by the lecturer-facilitator of the action research and the tutor-critical friend.

Regular meetings were held between facilitator and critical friend, with their diary records as a basic feedback material, as well as an evaluation of the whole process. Finally, apart from the research journal, the technique of focus group interviews, both at the beginning and at the end of the action research, was also used as a second research tool. The technique of focus group interviews is particularly effective for two important reasons. The first concerns the small number of participants in each group, which gives everyone the opportunity to express their point of view. The second focuses on the fact that in focus groups it is easier than in the plenary, to create that climate of security and trust that helps the participants present their 'hidden' views, those that may conflict with the dominant ones. They are also able to express their deeper feelings in relation to the actions in which they participate. This action research is a case study, so although its findings cannot be considered as generalizable, they highlight dimensions that can be used in the design of intercultural curriculums for active and candidate teachers.

At the start of the course, initial interviews with focus groups were held in order to decide on the content of intercultural action that students would plan and organize under the supervision of their teacher. During this activity, some students expressed negative views towards refugees. The predominant element of these views was arguments that focused on the large increase in the number of refugees relative to the number of indigenous peoples: *"Greece is a small country, not all of Syria, Afghanistan and half of Africa can live here"*.

Fear was expressed about the true identity of some of the refugees: *"Who knows who the real refugees are and who the ISIS warriors are?"*. Students also expressed their fear that refugees might develop illegal behaviors: *"If they're hungry, they're gonna rob and steal"*.

Views were expressed, often by the same people that showed signs of compassion towards the refugees: *"If we had war, we would also leave" as well as suggestions of charitable support: "gathering clothes, money, games to help them"*. The teacher noted in his research journal: *"Students' attitudes are often characterized by ambivalence and embarrassment over the management of the refugee issue, while they are clearly influenced by dominant perceptions of the negative image of the refugee and their stay in Greece"*.

Students answered negatively to the question of whether they had met refugees and whether they had personally contacted them. With this in mind, the teacher proposed they meet a group of refugees and try to organize an action together. The proposal was accepted by all the students and a first meeting was organized between the students and a group of young asylum seekers hosted in a centre in Magnesia. This particular centre was chosen on the basis of the similar age between the young refugees and students and because a previous collaboration meant practical obstacles and difficulties were more easily overcome.

The first three-hour meeting between a group of 15 young asylum seekers and 32 students took place at the University of Thessaly. Students and refugees were divided into mixed groups and getting to know you, icebreaker activities were carried out. Each group then made a brief presentation using techniques of creative movement and physical expression. These techniques are particularly effective in creating familiarity among the members of a group but also in overcoming language barriers where members of the groups do not share a common language. The meeting was ended with a discussion in which a number of questions were raised by students about refugee identity and answered. Here are some indicative excerpts from students' diaries, as recorded by them after the first meeting. *"I've seen these kids often in [the name of a well-known café in the city] and I could never have imagined the stories behind them", "I could not believe what he told us about his trip from Afghanistan to Greece. I don't think many people would be able to withstand all that K has been through", "Whenever I heard the word "refugee" my mind usually went to something negative. I was deeply afraid. Getting to know these kids will help me overcome my fear"*.

It is clear that using the principles of the experiential approach, through personal acquaintance and direct cultural exchange, was particularly effective in developing reflection on refugee identity. Students no longer talked about the *'faceless refugee'* who's usually portrayed through the dominant media; they now knew the personal stories of asylum seekers of their own age. These stories seem to have functioned as a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 2000) for some students, transforming their initial, largely stereotypical perceptions of refugees.

What seemed to be particularly effective was the similar age of the students and young refugees. Both groups discovered that, despite their very different pasts, they shared similar dreams and desires for the future. They also had many things in common, such as leisure time activities, favorite music, digital pages and games. Some refugees, who had had no opportunity up until that point, expressed a strong desire to study. This sparked intense debate on equal opportunities amongst a group of students. It also highlighted some students' indifference to their student status. The mapping of similarities and differences, both in everyday life and in a more general cultural context, served as a challenge for both students and young refugees. Finally, both groups responded positively to meeting again, as part of the course, in order to plan and organize a cross-cultural action together.

As an intercultural action, it was decided to organize an open intercultural event entitled: *"Like flying birds"*. One of the young refugees had formulated this phrase in Arabic, wanting to highlight the desire to be able to move freely between countries. Noteworthy is the fact that most of the young refugees said they did not want to settle in Greece, but were trapped because of bureaucratic obstacles to asylum or travel documents. For symbolic purposes, March 21st was chosen as it coincided with World Day against Racism and the central square was chosen as the venue. The event included musical and visual activities, participation in which did not require knowledge of the dominant language. In contrast, they planned to use some indicative words and phrases during the event. These were *'open borders for refugees'*, *'solidarity'* and the title of the event which was to be given in the mother tongue of all the participants. This was a symbolic move in order to underline the multiculturalism and multilingualism that characterizes both the local community and Greek society as a whole. The event was open to the public, but school classes, migrant support groups, as well as groups whose identity was linked in one way or another with dimensions of diversity, were to be invited and involved.

In preparation for the event, there were a number of meetings that took place both in lesson time and in their free time. During this process, cooperation between students and young refugees progressively grew. The following extracts from students' diaries and the teacher's research diary illustrate this. *"After the rehearsals at the university, we all go out*

together. It is a surprise for me to join the refugees”, “A and X (young refugees) are very good. They move like dancers. They are very shy and avoid touching us because in Afghanistan only married couples can touch. It is very interesting to talk with them”, “Many of the students and young refugees seem to have become a group. They stay for many hours at the university and then continue to be together afterwards. The initial embarrassment of the first meetings no longer exists. [...] Some of the refugees are asking if they can attend the university courses”.

The intimacy created between students and refugees, was repeatedly highlighted by the critical friend in her diary. She did not attend all the meetings and her notes illustrate the situation just a few days before the event: *“Only by gender and language can you distinguish the students from the refugees. In the rehearsal I watched today, it was impressive how synchronized they have become in such a short time. They used eye contact to communicate and I noted some who seem to have talent; they could have been professional dancers”.*

The event was successful, with the number of outside participants higher than the students and young refugees. It was also given very positive coverage in the local media, which was a great pleasure for the participants. The message of open borders for the movement of refugees was passed on to the general public who attended the event, while the title *“like birds flying”* was the headline of a local newspaper.

In the focus group interviews with students after the event, transformations were made in the views originally expressed about refugees, as well as a development of empathy elements. Typical extracts from the interviews follow. *“What I understood from the discussions with the kids is that no one leaves their country for a joke. You do so for very serious reasons. Like if staying there means your life is in danger. This was something I, unfortunately, had not thought of”, “These guys are our age and their experiences are like my grandparents. What the children said about war and refuge I heard from my grandparents’ stories”, “I have never been hungry. These kids have gone hungry for days and have walked hundreds of kilometers on foot. If I had not met them, I would not have believed what I heard”.*

Students and refugees agreed to continue their meetings within the setting of the university, but also to get involved in activities at the refugee reception centre where the young people lived. At the next meetings, on the courses taught by both the facilitator and the critical friend, small groups of young refugees participated alongside the students, not as observers but as equal participants. In the work that students had to do on the course, the young refugees’ narratives were used as research material that the students recorded and commented on. At the same time, the students repeatedly visited the refugees’ home, and celebrated the end of Ramadan with them.

CONCLUSIONS

Acquaintance, communication and cultural exchange between students and young refugees seem to lead to the transformation of students’ original negative stereotypical perceptions of the ‘other.’ From faceless strangers, the young refugees became familiar faces with stories and experiences to tell. Their dreams and desires were similar to the students’ in many ways. The relationship created between the members of the two groups led to the questioning of stereotypes about refugee identity, as these are mainly transferred through the media of the dominant group. The narratives of the young refugees functioned as a mirror and a window for the students. It was a window because through meeting them, they were able to study their lives and the dangers of their journeys. It acted as a mirror because it gave them the

opportunity to reflect on the timelessness of the refugee identity; to look for similar elements in their own family stories, but also to identify the dynamic dimension of identity.

At the same time, the participation of students and refugees in the organization of a shared intercultural event and the respective responsibility for the success of the event helped both groups to establish strong ties of cooperation and solidarity, which continued after the event had finished. Creating a climate of trust where all participants felt safe and could express their opinions freely, contributed to the consolidation of acquaintance and the development of intimacy and cultural exchange. Finally, the use of a university course and space as a meeting place between students and refugees gave another dimension to the functioning of the university. It contributed to the creation of communication between the academic world and the multicultural local community and promoted a different process approach of knowledge, based on experiential learning and social participation.

Such an approach to the teaching and learning process supports the cognitive development of the students. Also, social competence is raised through the cultivation of important skills such as the development of respect for diversity and empathy. At the same time, the arrival of young refugees on the university campus and their participation in university courses motivated their desire to complete a formal education and the probable progression to university studies. Assad, who, shortly after the event, decided to attend classes at the city's night school said: *"I want to complete my school education and then come to the university. I've been working since I was eight. Everything I learned about life, I learned on the road. Now I want to learn other things"*.

Although participation in the event showed significant changes in the way candidate teachers dealt with refugee identity, it would be interesting to explore their views over time. What could be examined is whether this experiential encounter between students and refugees was strong enough to act as a counterbalance to the influence of the dominant culture, where they are exposed to a rhetoric of non-support for refugees.

Also, it would be interesting to see if the intercultural perceptions they have formed during their encounter with these same age refugees, will also influence their pedagogical practices in multicultural kindergartens where they will work in the future. A positive sign was the fact that some of the students expressed willingness to volunteer in refugee accommodation centres. As one of them wrote on the final course assessment sheet: *"If I had not taken the course, for me, the refugees would still be just an image on the television. I did not know where I could meet them in the city I live in. Now that I know, I want to help"*.

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