

Introduction

Intercultural dialogue through education

This handbook was produced in the framework of the pilot project “Intercultural and interfaith dialogue through education”, part of the Council of Europe–European Commission joint programme “Fostering a culture of human rights in South Caucasus and Ukraine”.

The project was implemented by the Council of Europe in co-operation with the educational authorities of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine in the period 2006-2009. It aimed to promote awareness of intercultural education and support drawing-up educational policy guidelines addressing cultural and religious diversity at all levels of education. It also aimed to help improve practice in this field by developing educational materials and by disseminating and translating existing Council of Europe materials into the languages of the participating countries.

The activities included country assessments to identify main issues, needs, existing resources, opportunities and the key stakeholders to be involved. Meetings were organised at regional level, as well as awareness-raising conferences and workshops in each country, involving teachers, teacher trainers and education specialists. The development of co-operation and exchanges at regional level was also envisaged and, for this purpose, a virtual collaboration space has been made available.

A key feature of the project was to ensure a balance between the dissemination in the targeted region of information on the intercultural perspective – representing over three decades of Council of Europe work – and the active involvement of local practitioners and key stakeholders, in order to ensure an effective adaptation to the real needs, constraints and opportunities of the education systems in their countries.

For an intercultural perspective in education

The Council of Europe is strongly committed to the promotion of an intercultural perspective in education and has played a major role, not only in development and promotion of a coherent theoretical reference framework in this field, but also in the development of methodological

guidelines and in the production of educational resources that can be used in teaching and training in both formal and non-formal education.

Although the term “intercultural” emphasises in itself the importance of interdependency and interaction, there are two dimensions that should be considered. The intercultural perspective first requires us to recognise that reality is plural, complex, dynamic and changing, and that interactions are an integral part of all lives and cultures. It seeks to understand how these interactions work, and to record them objectively. Secondly it asks us to ensure that these interactions foster mutual respect and the enrichment of mutually supporting communities and individuals, rather than strengthening of relationships based on domination and rejection. Both these dimensions call for us to question – reciprocally – our egocentric visions of the world, to search for truth through dialogue and to work towards mutual understanding.

Two words are commonly used in discussions about diversity. Clarifying their meaning is essential for avoiding misunderstandings and confusions: “multicultural” (as in a multicultural society) and “intercultural” (as in intercultural relations, intercultural education).

Multi means “many” in Latin. Therefore, we can understand “multicultural” as meaning that we recognise the presence of many cultures, and that society is plural. It has people coming from various backgrounds and sharing several kinds of diversities.

Inter expresses a relation. From that, “intercultural” means that there are interdependences, interrelations, exchanges, reciprocal borrowings, changes, mixtures among cultures and people. That is an unavoidable reality. However, we can move beyond this reality and see “intercultural” as a project: building positive interrelations, exchanges and reciprocity, which can lead to co-operation and peace rather than to conflicts and war.

Moreover, our wish is to go from statements to action: the prefix “inter” reminds us that our aim is not only the recognition of plurality, but positive interaction and solidarity.

Intercultural dialogue is an essential element of democratic societies. It should be seen as one of the pillars of social cohesion in our multicultural societies as well as a condition sine qua non for successful co-operation between individuals, groups, a whole range of institutions, or countries. However, it is not “natural” behaviour. It is a process which demands our support and our readiness to do all in our power to build a Europe and a world enriched by diversity, in which we can live together in peace,

harmony and respect for human rights. Or in the way the Czech novelist Milan Kundera describes the European project: “Maximum diversity on minimum space”.¹

In education, as specified in the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue,² the intercultural dimension should straddle all subjects. History, language education, civic education and the teaching of religions and convictions are perhaps among the most relevant. Multiperspectivity should be an essential approach, particularly in teaching history. Education as to religions and convictions in an intercultural context should make available knowledge about the various world religions and beliefs and their history, and should enable individuals to understand religions and beliefs and avoid prejudice. The close connection of intercultural education with the education for democratic citizenship has been underlined on many occasions by Council of Europe documents. Education for democratic citizenship is “a factor for social cohesion, mutual understanding, intercultural and inter-religious dialogue”.³

As part of an education for democratic citizenship, intercultural education is paying particular attention to the acquisition of the attitudes necessary for life in multicultural societies. To that end, educational approaches and teaching methods should focus on learning to live together in a democratic society, and on combating ethnocentrism, racism and intolerance and eliminate violence and extremist thinking and behaviour. This can only be reached if, besides knowledge acquisition, education focuses on developing intercultural competences, together with key competences of democratic citizenship, including the ability to:

- settle conflicts in a non-violent manner;
- argue in defence of one’s viewpoint;
- listen to, understand and interpret other people’s arguments;
- recognise and accept differences;
- make choices, consider alternatives and subject them to ethical analysis;
- shoulder shared responsibilities;
- establish constructive, non-aggressive relations with others;

1. M. Kundera, *Die Weltliteratur*, in *The New Yorker*, 8 January 2007, pp. 28-35.

2. Council of Europe White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue “Living Together As Equals in Dignity”, June 2008.

3. Committee of Ministers Recommendation 2002/12, on education for democratic citizenship. See also the vision behind the EU funded REDCo-project: R. Jackson, S. Miedema, W. Weisse, J.-P. Willaime (eds), *Religion and Education in Europe. Developments, Contexts and Debates* (Religious Diversity and Education 3), Münster/New York/München/Berlin, 2007.

- develop a critical approach to information, thought patterns and philosophical, religious, social, political and cultural concepts, at the same time remaining committed to fundamental values and principles of the Council of Europe.⁴

In this perspective, ministries of education of all member states of the Council of Europe expressed an explicit commitment to introduce the intercultural dimension in their education policies⁵ and asked the Council of Europe to capitalise on its unique expertise in this field to support this process. However, the support of the Council of Europe is not limited to policy recommendations and clarification of fundamental concepts and principles. Many practice-focused resources, with suggestions for educational activities, have been produced for intercultural education, education for democratic citizenship and human rights education.

Delving deeper

The policy paper “Discussion pointers for intercultural education policy, training and education”, drawn up by Dr Micheline Rey for this project, can be found in Appendix 1. It reviews the key ideas and fields of activity, as well as the recommendations adopted by the Council of Europe and its activities related to intercultural education. It has been discussed in each of the participant countries as a basis for further national policy measures. Teachers and all users of the handbook may refer to it to get a deeper understanding of the meaning of intercultural education as well as suggestions on how to implement it.

This policy paper also offers a list of the most useful Council of Europe documents on intercultural education and related fields, such as human rights and democratic citizenship, migrants and minorities, multilingualism, multiperspectivity in history and cultural heritage, the diversity of religions and non-religious convictions and so forth.

What does the handbook offer?

The handbook is based on the assumption that intercultural education cannot be effective if it relies on “ready-made recipes”. Teachers need to have a clear understanding of the key concepts and methodological principles as well as the ability to adapt existing approaches to their local context.

4. Committee of Ministers Recommendation 2002/12.

5. Declaration by the European Ministers of Education on intercultural education in the new European context. Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education 21st session – “Intercultural education: managing diversity, strengthening democracy” (Athens, Greece, 10-12 November 2003).

Moreover, they need to use their creativity to develop innovative practices inspired by their social environment and by the key issues related to cultural and religious diversity that confront their societies. It is, however, useful to have a variety of sources of inspiration for this process and, if the examples are closer to the challenges encountered at local level, the chances that teachers will improve their practice will be higher.

Special attention has been given to the specific contexts in the countries involved in the project. Thus, the content of the handbook is based on the proposals for educational activities developed by the participants in the workshops that were organised in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine. Nothing is more difficult than elaborating practical activities. Therefore, the handbook should be seen both as a step in the training process of the teachers and teacher trainers involved, and as an output, containing ideas and experiences shared with other colleagues.

The activities presented here cover a range of topics associated with intercultural education that correspond to some of the key elements and competences that the Council of Europe is considering as fundamental for intercultural education. They have been divided into six clusters. The first topic presents activities related to the management of cultural and religious diversity in the classroom and the inclusion of these issues in various types of educational activities. The second one focuses on a key issue for an effective intercultural communication and understanding – stereotypes and prejudices – with three activities, two of them combining cultural and gender equality issues. Six activities, one of which is a training programme for teachers, school directors and other staff, have been grouped under the heading “equality, inclusion, human rights education”. The fourth section addresses a core topic of intercultural education: tolerance and mutual respect, while the activities in the following one address the way multiperspectivity can be applied to history issues in Ukraine and Azerbaijan. Finally, the activities in the last section concern conflict resolution.

As is common in attempts to categorise complex educational activities in this field, many activities have connections with topics in other sections. This overlapping is evidence of the fact that some activities may be used in relation to different fields. Thus, these categories are just one element to help the orientation of the users of the handbook.

The suggested exercises have two purposes: they propose methodological approaches which encourage students to be more active and creative, and to reflect critically. They also illustrate ways to implement intercultural, human rights and civic education in order to promote a peaceful way of living together.

Each activity is presented on a simple common structure, similar to the one used in many other publications of this kind, including some well-known publications produced by the Council of Europe. Besides the element related to the content of the activity (objectives, procedure, extension and complementary information), for each activity some practical elements are also indicated: the key issues addressed, the target group, the resources needed for its implementation, the estimated duration and the type of activity (a lesson, a cross-curricular activity, an extracurricular activity, etc.).

In some cases, activities can be transposed in practice without much adaptation, if the context of implementation is similar to the one for which they have been designed or piloted. In most cases however, a more extensive adaptation will be needed. Some variations are already suggested in the "extension" section or in the "complementary information". Other adaptations might be needed in order to take into account the age of the students, the curriculum context or the specific social and cultural environment.

Each activity has been conceived in order to comply with the requirements of the education system in one of the countries involved and the socio-cultural issues addressed are connected with the realities of the specific country, and sometimes with a specific region or city. However, it is not only possible but even recommended that they are adapted and used in other contexts, in the same country but also in another country. This handbook can become thus a regional resource and a step towards more effective regional cross-border co-operation for the promotion of an intercultural approach in education.

How to use the handbook

The handbook has been conceived of as a tool for teachers of different subjects who want to integrate an intercultural dimension in their practice. It can also represent a useful resource for teacher trainers in this field. The activities presented in this handbook offer many useful suggestions. However, they should not be seen as "good practices" which have to be followed blindly or adapted without critical thinking.

The way they are presented in the handbook, the exercises contain neither all the documentation needed on each subject nor an elaborated reflection on the concepts used (as intercultural education, human rights, democratic citizenship, etc.). It is preferable that teachers using these activities attend training sessions on intercultural education, as well as training focused on the use of interactive pedagogical methods. Before using these activities, teachers should become familiar with the key concepts and main methodological background of intercultural education, by referring, for

example, to Appendix 1 and to various Council of Europe publications translated into their language or available in a language that they understand.

From the curricular standpoint, intercultural education may be organised in different ways, depending on the level of education and organisation of the curriculum in the country concerned. It may be offered as a separate stand-alone compulsory or optional subject, or integrated into one or more subjects, such as languages, history, social sciences, geography, arts, ethics or religion. A further possibility is to offer it as a cross-curricular educational theme, so that the principles of intercultural education might be present in all subjects of the curriculum. These different approaches are not mutually exclusive. The activities included in the handbook can be adapted from this point of view to the concrete situation found at school level or in a specific education system.

Some recommendations that John Keast⁶ made in relation to the current practices in the field of religious diversity and intercultural education are also useful here:

Teachers are invited to reflect critically upon the practice of others and apply their thinking to their own practice. They should ask themselves questions such as:

- How effective is this example of practice?
- Does it actually fulfil what it sets out to do? If not, why not?
- How could I improve this example?
- What would I have to do to make it possible for me to use it?

To enable such critical reflection, it is important to refer to concepts and methodologies which provide the source and criteria for such reflection. Teachers might like to ask themselves to what extent the examples given:

- run the risk of stereotyping;
- confuse concepts that really need to be clearer;
- assume certain understandings of culture, ethnicity, religion or diversity.

Particularly important for intercultural education is the question: To what extent does this example promote tolerance, reciprocity, civic responsibility, reflection and moderation in the expression of personal convictions – for the well-being of the other and for the sake of the dialogue?

6. J. Keast (ed.), *Religious diversity and intercultural education: a reference book for schools* (Strasbourg, Council of Europe Publishing, 2007, pp. 126-127).

Reflection on the process and perspectives for advancing intercultural education

If the handbook is used with such a reflexive and responsible attitude, it can represent a valuable resource for teachers and teacher trainers in the countries involved. However, through their innovative character, both in terms of content and of methods, largely due to the creativity of the participants that suggested them, the activities can also be useful beyond the region where they have been elaborated, in other European countries. In this way the handbook can be considered not only as a tool stimulating regional exchanges, but also as a contribution of teachers and teacher trainers from Ukraine and the South Caucasus, in co-operation with the group of Council of Europe experts involved in the project, to the advancement of intercultural education and dialogue in general.

The process that led to the development of this handbook and all the project activities represented an intercultural learning experience for the participants, the organisers and the team of Council of Europe experts. "Learning in the presence of the other" and active listening, with attention to each other's concepts and convictions, experiences and backgrounds, were the keywords that span across all project activities, from regional preparatory meetings to local workshops and editing the handbook.⁷

Working together in the complexity of cultural and religious diversity implied a readiness to learn about the other, but most of all to learn from the other. Many experiences could be made communicable because globalisation is confronting people in different parts of the world with similar challenges and questions. But on the local level the life experiences and the ways to deal with its complexity often seemed to be divergent. People did not always feel they were using the same tools to interpret the situation and they were not always using the same words and concepts to understand the topics at stake. But it is precisely this challenging context that stimulated the commitment to listen attentively to the viewpoints of the dialogue partners.

Intercultural education helps young people to define their own identity in this complex and changing world, where both knowledge and intercultural communication skills are essential for managing encounters with people from different cultural backgrounds and everyday life in a diverse society. Therefore, teachers and teacher trainers should have opportunities, such as the ones offered by our project, to experience diversity and to

7. For the concept "learning in the presence of the other", see B. Roebben, *Seeking Sense in the City. European Perspectives on Religious Education*, Münster, 2009, pp. 127-149.

reflect on issues that are difficult and challenging, although currently often overlooked or ignored, and to define together new approaches that can be relevant for their pedagogical practice.