

# Developing Interethnic and Intercultural Competencies

## Aims and Syllabus in the Context of Elementary Education Students in Republic of Macedonia

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### Abstract

The main goal of our theoretical research was to show how much the syllabus allow development of awareness about the diversities and development of life values in multiethnic and multicultural environments. In that context, we established the goal to analyze the objectives and the content of the syllabus of the most relevant subjects regarding multicultural and intercultural education: *Introduction to society and Society* for grades I – V. Having in mind that in Macedonia there are different cultures, religions, traditions and languages, it is necessary to develop competencies to show respect for the diversities and to develop the multicultural awareness of the students at the earliest age. On the other hand, globalization, as a characteristic of the modern age, increasingly imposes the need to develop the intercultural awareness and competencies of the students as well. The interethnic (multicultural) as well as intercultural competencies are especially important from several aspects: firstly, as a result of the need to overcome stereotypes and prejudices still present in our society, and secondly, to develop values in children, and especially empathy in students.

**Keywords:** syllabus; competencies; interethnic and intercultural; students

### Introduction

Multicultural education reflects the reciprocity of the cultures within a single social community, and the intercultural – the reciprocity of different cultures, which is more and more expressed in the world of globalization and mobility. It is interesting that both multicultural education and intercultural education are based on respecting diversity. (Cavdarova-Kostova:2010). Therefore, in the last few years, the use of the term diversity education is used more and more frequently, which in Macedonian language means education about the diversities.

Taking into account what we mentioned previously, the goal of our qualitative research was to see how much the curricula for the subject society allow not only formal, but also essential development of awareness about the diversities and development of life values in multiethnic and multicultural environments. Just as a reminder, the syllabi in the Republic of Macedonia are prepared by the Bureau for the Development

of Education, which is an institution that operates under the Ministry of Education and Science. The work of the Bureau for the Development of Education includes components which determine the objectives and content of the educational work in the area of preschool, primary school, and secondary schools as well.

In the context of our goal, we need to mention that the realization of the project for interethnic integration supported by USAID started 2010 in all primary schools and high-schools in the Republic of Macedonia. The only goal of the project is to use education to improve the interethnic integration of the students, who learn in different instructional languages. We consider all these elements as very important competencies for the development of coexistence and mutual respect both in ethnic and global frames. The fundamental question of our paper is to what degree, the school, can influence the development of the awareness and attitude of the students in the spirit of interethnic and intercultural competencies through the syllabus. It is certain that apart from the syllabus, the teachers are the most important factor. They are the ones who realize the syllabus.

### **Analysis of the Syllabus for the Subject Introduction to Society for First Grade**

The following objectives need to be attained with the subject Introduction to society in first grade:

- The student discovers the relations and dependence among people, objects and events;
  - Encouragement of mutual understanding, helping the others and cooperation with them,
  - Development of respect for one's own culture and the cultures of the others;
- (same, p. 4)

In order to attain the objectives mentioned above, the syllabus indicates the topic *Me and the others and My school*.

The following objectives need to be attained with this topic:

- The students see the differences between them and the others;
- They respect and help the ones who are younger and different from them;
- They are trained to resolve elementary conflicts with the help of the adults.

These objectives should help to develop the feeling of friendship starting from the youngest school age, since the term friendship is indicated as a basic term within the material of the topic *Me and the others*. The objectives should be attained through activities and methods such as: simulations, dramatization, role-play, as well as social games, of which we should emphasize the games for tolerance and trust. Apart from this, the child is trained to lead a conversation with the friends, as well as to distinguish

similarities and differences in the physical appearance, the wishes, favorite toys, etc. (Syllabus, p. 5).

The topic *My school* has the objective to teach the student to overcome the stereotypes and prejudices about the others. The following aspects are listed as activities: Participation in establishing the rules and behaviors in the classroom, drawing messages for proper behavior... and the methods include conversation about what would happen if the rules are broken, as well as conversation about what is just and unjust in the games and activities, and why people should not be unjust. In our analysis we did not come across a specific activity and methods for the attainment of the objective regarding the stereotypes and prejudices, which allows us to conclude that the objective has not been attained, only established.

The topic *My home*, establishes the following objective related to multicultural education: introduction and respect of the family holidays of the children from one's surrounding, by learning the term Holiday and celebrations, all within the lesson *My family*. The methods require writing descriptions of birthday celebrations, religious holidays, weddings, etc., and the way they are celebrated. Although the established objective is introduction to the others, the activities which are planned do not correspond to the established objective. We did not come across a single activity which leads towards multiculturalism.

The topic *The place where I live* establishes the objective to introduce the students to the cultural diversity of the place where they live. This objective should be attained through discussion about the places where the children live, such as their building, municipality or city (the spoken languages, the celebrated holidays). It is believed that in this way the children will get introduced to the other ethnic communities in the place where they live, and the mentioned holidays, should introduce them to the multicultural way of life.

### **Analysis of the Syllabus for the Subject Introduction to Society for Second Grade**

In second grade the objectives of the syllabus are expanded in comparison to the objectives in first grade. Regarding the subject of our research, we came across the following global objectives:

- To understand the need for helping, cooperation, etc., to develop friendship, tolerance, humanity and responsibility;
- To learn about the customs and holidays of their own culture and the cultures of the other communities in the Republic of Macedonia

In the topic *Me and the others*, an objective is established to recognize the differences and similarities among people, and the methods include training the children to

identify that they are similar and different from the other children in given regards. In our opinion, this objective refers more to the differences and similarities of the characteristics we inherit genetically, such as: eyes, hair color, etc. We believe that this objective has to be expanded to the specific objective to show the children how to overcome the stereotypes and prejudices and build positive attitudes towards people from other ethnic communities.

The topic *Life and work in the school* establishes the following specific objective:

- The school develops a sense of mutual respect, help and cooperation, by organizing workshops for responsibility, justness and privacy, by using the method of role-play.
- To get introduced to the religious and national holidays. This objective is to be realized through conversation about the following holidays:

Christmas, Easter, Eid al-Fitr. Here, for the first time we come across specific names of some religious holidays, celebrated by the members of different religions. However, the syllabus does not mention other holidays, such as the Roma holiday St. George, the Serbian holiday St. Sava, etc., and at the same time, no distinction is made between the holidays Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. We can see that the objective is to develop understanding about the cultural differences through celebrating the religious holidays of the members of the different ethnic communities who live in the Republic of Macedonia. However, in our opinion, instead of theorizing (as is the case with the human relations between the genders), where the teacher is instructed to start a conversation about the holidays, a home should be visited of a family that celebrates Eid al-Fitr, Easter or Christmas. Stereotypes and prejudices can be overcome, and at the same time sensibility can be developed towards the "other", if the children have the possibility to get introduced to each other, i.e. share common activities, both within regular education and especially in the extracurricular activities.

### **Analysis of the Syllabus for the Subject Society for Third Grade**

In the general objectives of the syllabus for the subject Introduction to society for third grade, we found an objective which stimulates the *student to develop a positive attitude towards multiculturalism*. (Syllabus for third grade, p. 3)

The specific objectives of the topic *Me and the others and the others and me*, and specifically the lesson "*I and they, we and you*" sets the following objective "the student learns that the people who live and work together have certain common relations (love, respect, care, trust, friendship, cooperation, fairness). Within this objective, the student has to learn the terms cooperation, friendship, respect, and regarding the planned activities and methods, the teacher is recommended to organize workshops

on the topic: I and you, We and you, I help the others. Also, other interactive methods are recommended, such as: role-playing, situation games, dramatization, etc.

This lesson also establishes the following objectives: “the student is encouraged to respect the differences (gender, ethnicity, social background, external appearance), as well as to gain the respect and trust of the other people”. However, there are no specific lessons for these objectives, i.e. the objectives have to be accomplished through the lesson “*My rights and responsibilities*”, which makes us conclude that there are no specific objectives and specific lessons which would develop the multicultural and intercultural capacities of the students at a young age. In fact, formal objectives are established, without the possibility to accomplish them, especially regarding the area of interethnic integration.

The same conclusion refers to the lesson *Family relations* which establishes a range of objectives which could be part of the multicultural education in our education system in a wider sense, such as:

“to introduce the student with the different types of cohabitation;

to learn about the different types of families,

to overcome gender stereotypes related to professions” (Syllabus, p. 6)

No activities are planned which would help develop the children’s sensitivity for cultural diversity, and there are no activities and methods which would develop the children’s attitudes and values regarding the families from the other ethnic communities (Albanian, Turkish, Roma, etc.) and promote better understanding.

The final objective in our analysis is the one established in the topic *My homeland*, and more specifically the lesson: *My homeland has a past and a tradition and The beauties of my homeland*, which refer to the obligation of the students to respect the tradition and cultural heritage of their own community and the other communities in their homeland (Syllabus for third grade, p. 8)”. This objective is to be attained through conversation about photographs and postcards from the homeland (local crafts, national costumes, food, plants...) (Syllabus: 8).

It would be nice to accomplish the established objective not only through photographs, but also through actual visits of temples of different religions. In this specific case, it would be best if the students visited a church and a mosque. This is the way to understand and respect each other from the youngest age. In this way, the stereotypes and prejudices of the children can be overcome.

## Analysis of the Syllabus for the Subject Society for Fourth Grade

The subject Society in fourth grade is covered by 2 classes per week, and is an interdisciplinary subject, i.e. it includes objectives and content from several areas, such as: sociology, history, geography, ethnology, ethics, etc. From the aspect of our research (once again, we remind you that our research refers to the question of how much the syllabus helps develop the interethnic, i.e. multicultural and intercultural competencies of the children, which help develop important attitudes and opinions in the future), this subject establishes the following general objectives:

Development of abilities for: communication, research and collaboration with the others, which implies understanding the others, taking the role of the others, responsibility, participation in group work, understanding the others, accepting and respecting the others, respect of the tradition and culture, care about the others, etc. (Syllabus, 131). Although the subject offers many possibilities to attain the objectives of the intercultural education, we did not come across a specific objective in this aspect, especially in the context of the multicultural and intercultural education, which is a great shortcoming.

We may highlight the following objectives within the *specific (concrete) objectives* of the syllabus for fourth grade:

- “to learn about and respect the cultural and religious differences of the people in a wider context (the municipality);
- to know examples from the Macedonian cultural tradition, as well as the cultural traditions of the other communities in the Republic of Macedonia;
- to understand the ways people collaborate with each other and support each other, as opposed to conflicts, as well as conflict resolution”. (Syllabus, 132)

This content is concentrated in three topics: The first topic is: *Family, Household and Society*, the second: *Housing and Settlements*, the third: *Municipality*.

When analyzing the planned topics, we were surprised by the great amount of material that needs to be realized, as well as the many planned objectives, although there are only three topics. From the aspect of our research, only the topic “Municipality” includes an objective that is interesting to us: “the student accepts and respects the differences among the people” (Syllabus, 136). It is interesting that there is no specific material for the attainment of this objective, and the methods include conversation with the students about the differences among the people in the local community. Regarding this material, it is our opinion that there are too many terms that need to be learned by a 9 year old, which refer to the local community, such as: Local Community, Local Self-Government, Municipality, Mayor, Citizen, Municipal Council. In fact, the children cannot understand many of the terms, and according to us, they are not even necessary.

Our remarks refer to the need to establish objective and content, and to include adequate activities and methods to realize certain aspects of the multicultural and intercultural education. Namely, a lot of the content of the subject Society is suitable for conversation with the students about the stereotypes and prejudices, as well as the need of interethnic integration through the development of empathy and mechanisms for group life and work. There is a need of workshops, simulations, case studies, etc., where the children will be placed in specific situations in order to develop ethical values about the others and see diversity as a benefit. It is not enough only to mention the respect of diversities, but also to offer situations which will enable the children to think, act and express their opinions and create values for interacting with the other ethnic communities and the surrounding.

### **Analysis of the Syllabus for the Subject Society for Fifth Grade**

The subject Society in fifth grade is covered by 2 classes per week. It covers the following topics: *Our homeland the Republic of Macedonia, The Individual in the group and in the society, and The Republic of Macedonia in the world.*

From the *general objectives*, we found the same objectives, as in fourth grade, to be relevant for the subject of our research. The objectives are so to speak repeated, although the content and the specific objectives are completely different. We were surprised by the fact that the expected results do not include an aspect which refers to the multicultural or intercultural education, although, at this age, and regarding this subject, it should have taken the primary position. Also, the topics, mentioned above, establish numerous objectives, which could hardly be attained in reality. Namely, for example, within the three topics: *Our homeland the Republic of Macedonia, The Individual in the group and in the society, and The Republic of Macedonia in the world* there are a total of 45 specific objectives. This means that the objectives are visibly dispersed without any need.

Apart from this, we noticed that the objectives do not correspond to the material. For an example, the following objective is established: the students will be introduced to the most important trade branches in the Republic of Macedonia, and the following topics are offered: Tourism in the Republic of Macedonia, The cultural life and the cultural institutions in the Republic of Macedonia, Religious institutions in the Republic of Macedonia. This is another indicator of the low quality of this syllabus, which has potentials for developing collaborative approaches in the area of interethnic integration and interculture as well.

We came across the following recommended activity from the activities and methods planned in the program, for realization of the last lesson: The greatest religious holidays of the believers in my country. We ask whether the use of the term “believers”

is adequate. The religious holidays are part of the tradition of a given country, is it necessary for the holidays to be limited only to the believers?

The second recommended activity is a task of the following type: *How does my family celebrate the great religious holidays?* We ask the following question: Is there a need for an activity of this type, characteristic of younger children, for example first, second, third or fourth grade, when the children in fifth grade are 10 years old? It is our opinion that the students in fifth grade should be placed in situations which require them to form opinions about unity, integration, better understanding of each other, as well as overcoming the prejudices they have against each other in terms of religion.

In our analysis of the syllabi for the subject Society for fourth grade and especially fifth grade, we came across material, which in our opinion is not essential for the children of this age. For an example, the syllabus is burdened with material which could be learned in the upper grades. This is the case with the third topic, which refers to the Republic of Macedonia in the world, and covers material about the European integration, emigration, the global world, energy, etc. Within this topic, we came across the term multicultural, as a term which needs to be learned by the students. However, there are no specific objectives, and the material refers to the cultural heritage of the Republic of Macedonia. This material includes field work and a written composition, as correlation to the subject mother tongue. Examples like these give us the right to believe that the teachers are left to their own devices to teach some terms, although they are exceptionally important.

Our general conclusion is that the subject Society in fifth grade covers a lot of unnecessary material, which should be replaced with material that treats problems from the area of social justice, gender equality, the possibility for overcoming the gender and especially the interethnic stereotypes and prejudices, which are still very strong in the Macedonian society, and of course interculture. In fact, the nature of this subject allows the students to develop social, (civic) competencies which are essentially characterized by multicultural and intercultural, problem resolution, solidarity, developing empathy, and other values. Unfortunately, the great number of objectives, terms and extensive material render the syllabus overwhelming and inefficient, and consequently, with lesser quality regarding the development of the competencies mentioned previously.



## Conclusion

Our analysis of the syllabi for the subjects Introduction to Society and Society showed us that the objectives, which refer to the multicultural and intercultural capacities of the youngest primary school students, i.e. first to fifth grade, are established and attained only formally and declaratively. We came to the conclusion that in many cases, there are objectives, which should promote the creation and development of cultural, ethnic, and other sensitivity, but there is a lack of activities which could lead to realization of the objectives in reality. Many of these activities should be dynamic, and not just a passive interpretation of the objectives, as is the case with the following formulation: “developing respect in the children for the others”, without specifically emphasizing how to do it. It is our assumption that a lot of things are left to the creativity of the teachers, without systematic action in the function of creating and developing the multicultural and intercultural capacities of the youngest children. This requires a lot of work, establishing realistic objectives, which will be actually attained through a variety of activities, which among other things, will contribute to overcome the interethnic barriers in education. Also, there are a lot of barriers, since our children learn separately, not only in separate school shifts, but very often, they also learn in separate buildings. As a result of this, they do not know each other and do not share common activities. It is our conclusion that the teachers need to be encouraged to organize debates and discussions with the students, so the students could create and develop interethnic and intercultural competencies. Also, it is necessary to create workshops for the subject society, which will encourage collaborative approaches in the area of the intercultural and interethnic collaboration. In fact, the syllabi should train the students to develop critical thinking, to encourage them to ask questions, and most importantly, to think and not to just reproduce knowledge. On the other hand, we must emphasize the issue related to the assessment (evaluation) criteria (standards) of the multicultural and intercultural competencies of the students. These are the so called descriptors, which show the profile of the interculturality or multiculturally competent student. We hope that the new syllabi for the subject society will include these descriptors. This has to be seen as an inseparable part of the instructional work within the school.

Our final conclusion is that the presence of the multicultural aspects in the syllabi for the subjects Introduction to society and Society is not sufficient. We recommend revision of the syllabi, and establishment of real and attainable objectives instead of formal ones, which would be actually attained and will reflect our multicultural reality, and parallel to this, the need of interethnic integration.

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