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Urban/Rural Workplace – A Relevant Factor in Manifesting Intercultural Sensitivity

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Abstract: Our paper presents the results of a questionnaire-based inquiry aimed to investigate the level of intercultural sensitivity concerning respondents' workplace background, namely urban versus rural. The main purpose of our research is to highlight possible differences in intercultural sensitivity levels at teachers working in urban and rural schools, which constitutes our contribution to the research existing in the field. The general hypotheses of our research are: the workplace background (urban/rural) impacts the level of manifesting intercultural sensitivity; the urban workplace of respondents is connected to a higher level of manifesting intercultural sensitivity. This investigation is part of wider research that aims to identify teacher training practices that may raise pre- and in-service teachers' levels of intercultural sensitivity and better prepare them to work with groups of students characterized by diversity, as well as solutions to educational issues in the Romanian context by considering the two different contexts in which education takes place, namely urban and rural. Our findings have revealed higher levels of intercultural sensitivity at teachers working in urban schools, compared to those working in rural schools and the results obtained for each specific hypothesis and objective reveal the particularities involved for each scale dimension.

Keywords: *Intercultural sensitivity; diversity; multicultural classroom; urban residence; rural residence.*

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1. Introduction

Many authors have highlighted the desideratum to provide teachers with professional training that may enable them to successfully tackle the challenges occurring from the different cultural, socio-economic backgrounds of students in a class (Neculau, 2011; Voinea, 2012; Tuomaala, 2013; Salgur, 2013; Savu, 2014; Ţurcan, 2015). Based on our previous research (Albu & Cojocariu, 2015; Boghian, 2016; Boghian, 2017; Boghian, 2018; Boghian, 2019; Cojocariu & Boghian 2019a, 2019b; Guţu & Boghian, 2019) and in accordance with the results of other studies on the same topic (Afdal, 2006; Hopkins, 2004; Loewen, 2013; Reardon, 2004; Toes, 2013), we strongly believe that today's teachers, at all educational levels, should be, among other things, *interculturally sensitive people* able to positively exploit differences among students in a class, as well as successfully mediate conflicts and control conflict risks.

Intercultural sensitivity is the ability to manifest a positive emotion that translates as the desire to understand and appreciate cultural differences; this positive emotion is the basis for manifesting an appropriate and effective behavior within intercultural communication. Intercultural sensitivity is a complex, versatile concept: interculturally sensitive individuals undertake self-motivation in their attempt to understand, appreciate, and accept cultural differences and generate positive outcomes from intercultural interactions. Intercultural sensitivity requires that the person has: an inquisitive mind, interested in other cultures; a curious and intelligent approach to interpersonal relationships that supports the discovery of cultural differences; a desire to self-regulate behavior to show respect for people of other cultures (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). A meaningful distinction should be drawn between two related concepts: 'intercultural sensitivity' is the ability to distinguish and experience relevant cultural differences; 'intercultural competence' is the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways. Greater intercultural sensitivity is associated with higher levels of intercultural competence (Bennett, 1991).

2. Problem statement

One of the main issues of modern society is related to approaching differences in all life contexts: building trust and respect between representatives of different cultures; living and working together as culturally different persons; valorizing cultures and cultural differences while living, working and learning together.

In the context of the modern globalized world, there emerges the need for people to build and develop skills necessary for effective communication with individuals of different socio-cultural backgrounds. More so as the globalized world widens the opportunities for intercultural exchange and contacts.

One category of professionals that need to meet today's increased demand for higher-level intercultural communication skills is that of teachers at all levels of the educational process. Also, intercultural sensitivity, as defined in the introductory section above, is a professional requirement for approaching the teaching career in a way that is compatible with international and national recommendations on ensuring the right to education to all children, irrespective of their socio-economic-cultural background: *The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child* (UNO, 1989); *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, adopted by the member states of the United Nations Organization in September 2015 (UNO, 2015); *Preparing a post-2020 initiative on Roma equality and inclusion* (European Commission, 2019b); *The National Strategy for Romania's Sustainable Development 2030* (Guvernul României, 2017); *Law of National Education* No. 1/2011 of Romania (Guvernul României, 2011, updated 18.07.2019).

Teachers should be trained to identify and define the cultural and ethnic background of their students, become aware of their prejudices and forms of discrimination and act as agents of change in education, in accordance to European recommendations that stipulate the fact that quality education is, first and foremost, education for equality and education equally provided to all (European Commission, 2012; Neuner, 2012).

3. Research purpose

This study is part of wider research that aims to identify teacher training practices that may raise pre- and in-service teachers' levels of intercultural sensitivity and better prepare them to work with groups of students characterized by diversity.

In 2020, the percentages of Romanians with urban (56.42%) and rural (43.57%) (National Institute of Statistics, 2020) residence have been recorded as being quite close. Hence, we believe that all studies concerning educational problems and solutions to educational issues in the Romanian context should approach the research problem by considering the two different contexts in which education takes place, namely urban and rural.

Given the socio-economic-cultural differences particular to urban and rural residents that highlight lower economic status and fewer

educational opportunities for rural residents (Guvernul României, 2017; European Commission, 2019a), we have formulated the general and specific hypotheses of our research and the objectives for each of them.

4. Hypotheses (H) and objectives (O)

The general hypothesis (GH): the workplace environment (urban/rural) impacts the level of manifesting intercultural sensitivity.

Specific hypotheses:

SH1: The desire to interact constructively displays higher levels at urban background respondents:

O1: identification and quantification of answers that illustrate the desire to interact constructively;

O2: a comparative analysis of the answers in relation to the background of the teaching activity.

SH2: Respect for cultural differences and diversity displays higher levels at urban background respondents:

O1: identification and quantification of answers that illustrate respect for cultural differences and diversity;

O2: a comparative analysis of the answers in relation to the background of the teaching activity.

SH3: Confidence in interactions with people from other cultures displays higher levels at urban background respondents:

O1: identification and quantification of answers that illustrate confidence in interactions with people from other cultures;

O2: a comparative analysis of the answers in relation to the background of the teaching activity.

SH4: Pleasure produced by interactions displays higher levels at rural background respondents:

O1: identification and quantification of answers that illustrate pleasure produced by interactions;

O2: a comparative analysis of the answers in relation to the background of the teaching activity.

SH5: Attention paid to interactions displays higher levels at rural background respondents:

O1: identification and quantification of answers that illustrate attention paid to interactions;

O2: a comparative analysis of the answers in relation to the background of the teaching activity.

SH6: Avoidance of labels, stereotypes, and prejudices displays higher levels at rural background respondents:

O1: identification and quantification of answers that illustrate avoidance of labels, stereotypes, and prejudices;

O2: a comparative analysis of the answers in relation to the background of the teaching activity.

5. Research methodology

5.1. Research design

The questionnaire was applied online over the 1st semester of the 2019-2020 academic year (October 2019 - February 2020) through Google Drive forms. This research is the continuation of our previous studies (Albu & Cojocariu, 2015; Boghian, 2016; Boghian, 2017; Boghian, 2018; Boghian, 2019; Cojocariu & Boghian 2019a, 2019b; Guțu & Boghian, 2019) and draws on similar research approaching the same topic (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Turcan, 2015; Čuhlová, 2019; Mekheimer, 2019; Khuhlaev et al., 2020).

In this study, we have explored possible associations between the respondents' level of intercultural sensitivity and their work background, namely urban versus rural.

The present research is of an observative type; the research methodology involved the use of methods such as the survey, the questionnaire, statistical and mathematical methods.

5.2 Research sample

The sample consisted of 206 undergraduates and graduates of different specializations at the "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, Romania, equally distributed into two groups, with similar work experience. The respondents are all attending the teacher training program and are working as teachers at various educational levels in school units from urban and rural areas. There were 103 respondents with rural working background and 103 respondents with urban working background.

By filling in the questionnaire, the respondents expressed their consent to participate in the research. The ethical principles of the research were respected, the data collected based on the questionnaire was treated with confidentiality, respecting the dignity of the participants. The study was observative and involved neither invasive interventions and elements that would affect the integrity of the participants nor conflicts of interests.

5.3. Research tools and procedure

The questionnaire we have applied for our research purpose is an adapted, Romanian version of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (Chen & Starosta, 1996; Fritz et al., 2000), namely the *Intercultural Sensitivity Scale* (ISS). It is a 24-item Likert scale with 5 answer options. Each of the 5 answer options is associated with a score, as follows: totally disagree – 1 point; disagree – 2 points; neither agree, nor disagree – 3 points; agree – 4 points; totally agree – 5 points. For some items, the scores had to be reversed in the scoring phase, because they contained statements opposite to the desire and confidence to interact constructively, the pleasure derived from interacting with people from different cultures, respect for cultural differences, avoidance of labeling and stereotyping. The dependent variables represent the scores obtained by the respondents on the ISS instrument subscales:

A) The desire to interact constructively (4 items);

B) Respect for cultural differences and diversity (6 items);

C) Confidence in interactions with people from other cultures (5 items);

D) Pleasure produced by interactions (4 items);

E) Attention paid to interactions (3 items);

F) Avoidance of labels, stereotypes, and prejudices (2 items)

Regarding data interpretation, both the quantitative and qualitative approaches were used to establish and compare answer frequency. The respondents gave their consent on participating in this research and respondent anonymity was ensured.

6. Results and discussions

To verify *the general hypothesis* the workplace environment (urban/rural) impacts the level of manifesting intercultural sensitivity, we proceeded by verifying the specific hypotheses SH1 – SH6.

To verify *SH1: The desire to interact constructively displays higher levels at urban background respondents*, we proceeded to achieve objectives O1 and O2. To highlight the achievement of *O1: identification and quantification of answers that illustrate the desire to interact constructively* we present the data in Table 1.

Table 1. Average scores for *the desire to interact in a constructive manner*

Items	Urban	Rural	Difference
I am open to people from different cultures.	**4.15**	4.00	+ 0.15
I often give positive	3.38	**3.44**	- 0.06

answers while talking to a person from another culture.			
I avoid those situations where I have to interact with people from different cultures.	**3.84**	3.79	+ 0.05
When I interact with a person from another culture, I often show them that I understand them through verbal and nonverbal cues.	**3.83**	3.82	+ 0.01
Total	**15.20**	15.05	+ 0.15

To highlight the achievement of O2: a comparative analysis of the answers in relation to the background of the teaching activity, we proceeded to interpret the final data in Table 1.

The data reveal a higher score of 15.20 obtained by respondents with urban working background compared to the 15.05 obtained by those with rural backgrounds, the difference is 0.15. Out of the total of 4 items, there is only one in which respondents with rural background achieved a higher score (3.44) compared to those with an urban background (3.38) (I often give positive answers while talking to a person from another culture), the difference being 0.06, however without affecting the overall score for SH1. In conclusion, we can appreciate that SH 1 has been validated.

To verify SH2: Respect for cultural differences and diversity displays higher levels at urban background respondents, we proceeded to highlight the achievement of O1 identification and quantification of answers that illustrate respect for cultural differences and diversity; the results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Average scores for *respect for cultural differences and diversity*

Items	Urban	Rural	Difference
I don't like to interact with people from different cultures.	4.10	4.10	-
I respect the values of people from other cultures.	**4.35**	4.30	+ 0.05
I respect the way people from other cultures behave.	**3.99**	3.96	+ 0.03

I disagree with the opinions of people from other cultures.	**3.83**	3.82	+ 0.01
I believe that my culture is better than other cultures.	3.60	**3.61**	- 0.01
The differences between me and a person from another culture that I interact with give me a sense of joy.	3.20	**3.23**	- 0.03
Total	**23.07**	23.02	+ 0.05

To highlight the achievement of O2 comparative analysis of the answers in relation to the background of the teaching activity, we proceeded to interpret the final data in Table 2.

The data reveal a higher score of 23.07 obtained by respondents with an urban working background compared to the score of 23.02 obtained by respondents with a rural working background, the difference is 0.05. Of the 6 items, for one of them (I don't like to interact with people from different cultures) the 2 categories of respondents obtained the same score (4.10). There are two items where respondents with rural working background got a higher score than those with an urban background (I believe that my culture is better than other cultures, +0.01, respectively, The differences between me and a person from another culture that I interact with give me a sense of joy, +0.03). However, based on the results obtained in the other 3 items, we can appreciate that SH2 has been validated.

Regarding SH3, to highlight the achievement of O1 identification and quantification of answers that illustrate confidence in interactions with people from other cultures, we present the data in Table 3.

Table 3. Average scores for *confidence in interactions with people from other cultures*

Items	Urban	Rural	Difference
I'm pretty confident when I interact with people from other cultures.	3.65	**3.73**	- 0.08
It is very difficult for me to speak in front of people from other cultures.	**3.59**	3.55	+ 0.04
I always know what to say when interacting with	3.35	**3.48**	- 0.13

people from other cultures.			
I can be very sociable when I interact with people from different cultures.	3.74	**3.77**	- 0.03
I feel confident when I interact with people from different cultures.	**3.66**	3.61	+ 0.05
Total	17.99	**18.14**	- 0.15

To highlight the achievement of O2 *comparative analysis of the answers in relation to the background of the teaching activity*, we proceeded to interpret the final data in Table 3.

The data reveal a higher score - 18.14 - obtained by respondents with rural background compared to the score achieved by those with urban background - 17.99, the difference being +0.15. On the one hand, of the 5 items, the respondents with urban working background achieved higher scores than those with rural background only at 2 items (It is very difficult for me to speak in front of people from other cultures, +0.04, respectively I feel confident when I interact with people from different cultures, +0.05). On the other hand, the higher scores obtained by the respondents with a rural working background to the other 3 items cumulate +0.24. It results that SH 3 has been invalidated.

To verify *SH4*, we highlight the achievement of O1 *identification and quantification of answers that illustrate pleasure produced by interactions* by presenting the data in Table 4.

Table 4. Average scores for *pleasure produced by interactions*

Items	Urban	Rural	Difference
I like to interact with people from different cultures.	**4.26**	4.10	- 0.16
I get easily upset when iinteracting with people from different cultures.	**4.23**	4.18	- 0.05
I often feel discouraged when interacting with people from other cultures.	**3.94**	3.92	- 0.02
I often feel useless when interacting with people from other cultures.	**4.02**	3.92	- 0.10
Total	**16.45**	16.12	- 0.33

To achieve O2, *comparative analysis of the answers in relation to the background of the teaching activity* we interpreted the data in Table 4.

The data reveal a higher score of 16.45 obtained by respondents with urban working background compared to the score of 16.12 obtained by those with a rural background, the difference being +0.33. The respondents with rural working background did not achieve for any of the 4 items a higher score than the respondents with an urban background. It results that SH4 has been invalidated.

To verify *SH5*, we highlight the achievement of *O1 identification and quantification of answers that illustrate attention paid to interactions* by presenting the data in Table 5.

Table 5. Average scores for the *attention paid to interactions*

Items	Urban	Rural	Difference
I am very careful when interacting with people from different cultures.	**3.57**	3.37	- 0.20
I try to get as much information as possible when interacting with people from different cultures.	4.00	**4.03**	+ 0.03
When I interact with someone from another culture, I am sensitive to their subtle remarks.	**2.76**	2.66	- 0.10
Total	**10.33**	10.06	- 0.27

Regarding O2, comparative analysis of the answers in relation to the background of the teaching activity, we proceeded to interpret the final data in Table 5.

The data shows a higher score of 10.33 achieved by respondents with urban working background compared to the score of 10.06 obtained by rural working background respondents, the difference being +0.27. Of the 3 items, the rural background respondents achieve a higher score to those from the urban background for only 1 item (I try to get as much information as possible when I interact with people from different cultures, +0.03). For the other 2 items (I am very careful when interacting with people from different cultures, +0.20, respectively, When I interact with someone from another culture, I am sensitive to their subtle remarks, +0.10) the

respondents with urban working background achieved higher scores, summing up 0.30. It results that SH 5 has been invalidated.

To achieve *SH6*, we highlight the achievement of O1, *identification and quantification of answers that illustrate avoidance of labels, stereotypes, and prejudices*, by presenting the data in Table 6.

Table 6. Average scores for the *avoidance of labels, stereotypes, and prejudices*

Items	Urban	Rural	Difference
I think people from different cultures have a more limited horizon.	3.91	**3.95**	+ 0.04
I usually take my time to form an impression of people who are culturally different from me.	3.69	**3.70**	+ 0.01
Total	7.60	**7.65**	+ 0.05

To highlight the achievement of O2, *comparative analysis of the answers in relation to the background of the teaching activity*, we proceeded to interpret the final data in Table 6.

The data reveal a higher score of 7.65 achieved by the rural working background respondents, compared to the score obtained by the respondents with an urban working background, namely 7.60, the difference being +0.05 for both items associated with this questionnaire dimension. It results that SH 6 has been validated.

Regarding *the general hypothesis: the workplace environment (urban/rural) impacts the level of manifesting intercultural sensitivity*, the data presented in the table below shows the average scores obtained by each group of respondents (those with urban working background and those with rural working background) for each dimension of the questionnaire (Table 7).

Table 7. Scores obtained by respondents with urban vs. rural working background for each of the questionnaire dimensions

Questionnaire dimensions	Urban working background	Rural working background	Difference
1. The desire to interact constructively	**15.20**	15.05	+ 0.15
2. Respect for cultural differences and diversity	**23.07**	23.02	+ 0.05

Questionnaire dimensions	Urban working background	Rural working background	Difference
3. Confidence in interactions with people from other cultures	17.99	**18.14**	**- 0.15**
4. Pleasure produced by interactions	**16.45**	16.12	- 0.33
5. Attention paid to interactions	**10.33**	10.06	- 0.27
6. Avoidance of labels, stereotypes and prejudices	7.60	**7.65**	+ 0.05
			+ 0.25
			- 0.75
Total	**90.64**	**90.04**	**- 0.60**

It is worth noting that for the 3rd questionnaire dimension – *Confidence in interactions with people from other cultures* – there were higher scores recorded for the respondents with a rural working background (18.14), unlike for the other five scale dimensions where the respondents with urban working background achieved the highest scores.

For the second questionnaire dimension - *Respect for cultural differences and diversity* - there were higher scores recorded for the respondents with an urban working background (23.07).

Also, for the first questionnaire dimension – *The desire to interact constructively* – there were higher scores recorded for the respondents with urban working background for most items, except for the item *I often give positive answers while talking to a person from another culture*, where the respondents with rural working background achieved the highest scores.

The data analysis and interpretation support the validation of the specific hypotheses SH1, SH2, SH6 (+0.25), whereas SH3, SH4, SH5 have been invalidated (-0.75); although the differences between the answers to the questionnaire provided by the respondents from the two groups recorded at the level of each questionnaire dimension are quite small, they nevertheless reveal that the workplace environment (urban/rural) *impacts* the level of manifesting intercultural sensitivity.

The results of our research reveal that the general hypothesis of our research – the workplace environment (urban/rural) impacts the level of manifesting intercultural sensitivity – has been validated.

7. Conclusions

The results of our research represent an argument for prospective, similar research to include larger sample groups; although small, the differences indicate that the working background impacts intercultural sensitivity levels at teachers, which is a relevant contribution to the international and national research on the same topic or related themes.

Studies concerning educational matters and solutions to educational issues in the Romanian context should approach the research problem by considering the two different contexts in which education takes place, namely urban and rural.

We have noticed the interest shown by the respondents for participating in the study which demonstrates that the targeted issue is topical, responding to a professional need for continuous teacher training. We consider that there are at least two macro-systemic trends that generate and maintain this need:

1. *increasing labor mobility in Europe and in the world* (Romanian families go to work abroad, where Romanian teachers are not available in all schools; Romanian families return from abroad with children raised and educated to some extent in other educational systems, bearers of relatively common, relatively different values, inculcated in different ways; Romanian teachers, regardless of the environment in which they work, have classes of students belonging to both cultures integrated into the Romanian space as well as immigrant students from extremely different cultures (Asia, Africa, Turkey). Under these circumstances, teachers must display cultural sensitivity to students and their families alike.

2. *enhancing professional contexts in which teachers interact more broadly with members of other cultures* (Erasmus programs, conferences, exchanges of good practice, international camps). In these circumstances, teachers must show cultural sensitivity, both to their fellow teachers and to students involved in training activities.

At the same time, it is interesting to note that based on the same data we can make some observations on how the cultural sensitivity of the respondents is related to the environment in which they operate. *Teachers with an urban working background* have better scores on the following dimensions: 1. *The desire to interact constructively* (0.15); 2. *Respect for cultural differences and diversity* (23.07); 4. *Pleasure produced by interactions* (16.45); 5. *Attention paid to interactions* (10.33); these add up to a score of 50.00. *Teachers with a rural working background* have better scores on the following dimensions: 3. *Confidence in*

interactions with people from other cultures (18.14) and 6. *Avoidance of labels, stereotypes, and prejudices* (7.65), totaling 25.79. Comparatively, the data show that the urban workplace of respondents is connected to a higher level of manifesting intercultural sensitivity (24.21 higher, approximately a double level of intercultural sensitivity for teachers with urban working background).

Our results reveal the stringent need for educational measures and policies aimed at eliminating the gaps between rural and urban educational working backgrounds in terms of teacher training, as well as teaching and learning opportunities.

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