

INTERCULTURAL ADJUSTMENT – THE PREMISE OF THE SUCCESS OF YOUTH EXCHANGE PROGRAMS

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***Abstract** The current study brings to light several dimensions of the success of youth exchange programs. The endeavor comprises the analysis of the situation of several young Romanian students who have left in exchange programs in different countries, of their families and of the young people from elsewhere who came in Romania through the same exchange program. The analysis observes the stages of the multileveled intervention for the success of the program, as well as a healthy readaptation to the return in the home country. The study's objectives are to identify the exchange student's motivation to take part in this endeavor and to make their adaptation process more efficient through short-term interventions*

Keywords: intercultural adjustment, the young, family.

1. INTRODUCTION

The long-term youth exchange programs are created for a duration of a year and have, as a final goal raising the participants' relational and even professional insertion and it stimulates the young people's mobility in the world. Besides these challenges, there lays the problem of structuring the entire process so that it is a success. The main goals of these kinds of programs are:

- Developing the concept of an international culture and the differences that exist between the countries [art of this exchange
- The encouragement of students to acquire a vast personal experience, and also to develop their own flexibility and their own adjustment abilities
- The students' motivation for educational mobilities
- The students' support in gaining and sharing multicultural knowledge and experience
- Developing the tolerance towards other cultures
- The possibility to reflect upon values and upon the importance of the culture they come from, and the discovery of the cultural influence upon the young person's general formation
- The opportunity to share the experience accumulated throughout the exchange with their peers

Buber sustains that: “If a person walks along the road and meets another person who comes from the opposite direction, she or he only knows her or his own side of the road not the other one's side.

That knowledge can be achieved in the meeting with that person. Communicators can create a space between them if both parties want to share and learn from each other.” [1]

When the young students go from a country to another, they come in contact with other people who have different customs and have different ways of acting and living.

Presently, migration towards a stable life, a better workplace brings along more intercultural contacts than before, all the while they realize much faster than ever before.

This thing shows a constant change in the world we live in, and thus a greater and faster need of acclimatization.

One of the causes of this change is represented by the short or long-term exchange programs of which have been defined and described several models of intercultural adjustment.

One of the most recent models sustains that they have to deal with contradictions between their internal identity and this external world around them.

It is also noted that communication lies at the heart of the adaptation process. In intercultural communication situations all communicators affect each other and in most cases people have to adapt to some extent.

Without a good motivation to adapt, this process brings with it several difficult moments and the possibility of missing the learning opportunities, and implicitly the exchange period.

The theory of social constructionist emphasizes the interaction and mutual meaning making process. The process of learning new cultural patterns is not a passive adaptation of other people's cultural concepts but a gradual meaning making process. Another approach of acclimatization draws the attention towards relational and stress-related aspects.

The interactions that begin in the social environment imply, with necessity, the admission of the social influence phenomenon as an adjustment to external conditions mechanism. This can appear as follows: conformism, compliance, obedience. Even though in exchange programs, all the above-mentioned mechanisms appear, we are mostly interested in the conformism problematic. This represents adjusting one's behavior or thought process to coincide with a group standard. Conformism is often the results of the group pressure. Usually, the person adopts the new type of behavior or attitude, making it its own. The first studies on conformism were realized by Sherif in 1936, and one of the conclusions is that the person who wishes to adapt will adopt the group's evaluations as references and that, in ambiguous situations there are social norms that intervene.[2] Later one, Deutsch and Gerard have identified two different types of influence which have convinced the participants to the experiment to conform:

- The informational influence – the other people in the group ensure a source of information in case of ambiguity or uncertainty
- Normative influence – in the situation in which ambiguity is reduced, the group norms and a strong social pressure will convince people to conform.

When people are explicitly identified with the members of the group, the normative influence contributes to the emphasis of conformism and this things gets us to the *autocategorizing* concept.

Being a member of a group is very important for and what we do must be in accordance with the quality of being a member of the group. This autocategorization theory gives us an explanation of the question why some people are anticonformists, trying desperately to be different than the others.

It might be that part of the self image which makes the individual be different than the others. The factors that influence the conformism degree are the following: the size of the group, group decision, unanimity, the inter individual differences in conformism. It is uncomfortable to be the "exception" in a group, which is why people conform to the group to be able to become an incorporated part of it. This thing is mostly applied to exchange students – they are suddenly immersed in a different country, in a different group, between people who speak a different language, have different values and thus it becomes necessary to adapt to be part of the group. In the case of exchange students, they do not know what the adequate behavior is for different circumstances. In these situations, the individual will look to copy other people's behavior, a behavior that offers information about what is actually right in the given situations. In terms of gender differences, in this interaction of adjustment of exchange students, females conform much faster than males. The cause would be that they are socialized in this sense. In general it is considered that a bigger importance play the situational factors, as opposed to the individual ones. Before the selection process of the people leaving in an exchange program, a good knowledge of the intercultural adjustment process is needed. In this process, adjustment motivation plays a crucial role. A few aspects of the selection pertain to the following dimensions:

- The adequate perception of reality – it has to be as realistic as possible in the establishment of their reactions and capacities and in the interpretation of what is happening around them
- The aptitude to exercise a voluntary control of the behavior
- The existence of auto-respect and the acceptance of your own self. The well adapted persons have an approximate idea of their own value and feel accepted by those around them. They feel well in the company of others and are capable to react spontaneously in social situations. At the same time, they do not feel compelled to submit their opinions completely to the group
- The aptitude to create relationships full of affection – to be capable to create strong and satisfactory relations with other people.
- The existence of productivity – the well adapted persons are capable to channel their qualities in productive activities.

The exchange program includes:

- Meetings with the students and his or her family prior to the departure
- The careful selection of the host families, the supervision of the host family and of the student throughout the duration of the program
- Free accommodation and food for the student offered by the host family
- Offering detailed informative materials for the student prior to the departure
- The student's airport pick-up by the host family and/or by the local program coordinator
- Informative sessions at the arrival in the host country, in the middle of the year and at the end of the program, sessions which take place in the community the student will live in
- Free assistance and counselling offered by the personnel of the organizing institution responsible for this exchange program

In order to ensure an adequate exchange program, the birth family of the exchange student is prepared. A few of the conditions which the family will go through are:

- Accepting the departure for almost a year
- Accepting and understanding the 'daughterly' connections that develop abroad
- facilitating the child's adaptation and constituting it into a real support
- Encouraging their own child to: be positive, to relativize the events, to communicate with the host family, to integrate well in the life and in the scholar activity, to respect the rules of the organizing institution

Starting from these premises, the place and role of the psychologist is to counsel the exchange students and their families before the departure, while on exchange and after the child's arrival in the country of origin, but also to offer counselling to the host families.

The adjustment process to the exchange program is thus multifaceted - adapting to a new country, with all its implications, but also at the end of the program, readapting to the country of origin, the adjustment of the family to the break from their own child and the adjustment of the very same family to hosting an exchange student from another country.

The student will be hosted for the duration of a school year by two or up to three families, so that, besides adapting to a new country and culture, the student will have to face the differences brought by the host families, and the student's family will have to adapt to one, or maximum two exchange students.

Throughout the year in which the exchange student is away, he or she will take part in classes so that on the duration of that year he or she would graduate the class in which he or she was in the country of origin, while upon their return they will be able to equate their studies and not lose the school year. However, this is a condition that is not compulsory during the exchange year. In the situation in which a participant on the program, does not conform the participation rules or is considered unfit for the responsibilities the organizing institution aims to develop through the programs it organizes, the latter reserves the right to break off the staying in the host country and to send the exchange student back to their country of origin before due term.

Starting from these the study desires to answer a few questions:

- What motivates students to leave in exchange programs and do these factors motivate the success?
- What does cultural adjustment mean? What does the process entail?
- observing the sense of adjustment and of avoiding the exchange students' transformation in "outsiders" (persons who understand the sense of change and adjustment to a new culture, but cannot realize it or even persons who can't understand the sense of change and adaptation)

Objectives:

1. Emphasizing the motivational factors implied in the intercultural adaptation process which take to the sociocultural learning
2. Observing the differences in terms of the adaptation level for the Romanian exchange students and those from abroad

The hypotheses of the study:

1. The students' selection constitutes a premise to create a successful exchange program
2. The student's way of relation with the family modifies after the intervention of the counselor or psychologist

For the realization of the hypotheses suggested above the endeavor was initiated over the duration of a schooling year – specifically 2011-2012.

Sample description:

This study was comprised of 5 exchange students - three departed from Arad to Canada and Mexico, and two who arrived in Arad from Brazil and Mexico.

Tools used:

The tools used in this study are provocative working tools used in personal development and a questionnaire which targets the motivation to adapt to the exchange year.

The endeavor to understand the intercultural adjustment comprises following the phases of the process, stages which refer to the processing and the return from the cultural shock and the adjustment to this stressor.

Anderson sustains that there are four categories of models which describe the process of adjustment to a new culture – the recovery of the models, learning the models, the journey of the models and the balance of the models.

The first category “the recovery of the models” refers to the impressions the newcomer amasses at the beginning and the emotions he or she senses – at the beginning everything seems new and wonderful and then he or she starts feeling alone, sad, unaccepted or even rejected by the others, lost, strained, confused, anxious, angry and unhappy.

It is the moment in which he or she starts to look for solutions to get out of this crisis and to discover about his own self what exactly makes him or her feel good in the new situation, this will lead towards the adjustment to the new culture. The same process happens at the return to the country of origins and it is called reverse cultural shock.

The second category – “learning the models” consists in the fact that people have to learn “the parameters of the new sociocultural system and acquire the sociocultural skills necessary for participating in it”. A first step towards this is learning the new language – without communication, the students do not have access to differences, they cannot understand what exactly happens, the frustration and anger levels simply grow and there is no possibility to adjust to stress factors.

The third stage – “the journey of the models” – is a step by step process, a psychological journey from ignorance to the understanding of the new culture, of all the differences.

The fourth stage - “the balance of the models” - represents the stage in which new construct of intercultural adjustment is finalized. In this stage, stress is diminished, solutions are found, there is a perceptual frame to reference the new culture, behavior and surrounding environment.

In grand terms, the stages towards which the adjustment refers to are – being immersed in the new environment, the student’s bias towards adaptation, acceptance, data on communication – both personal and social and the intercultural transformation.

The personal communication refers to way in which the person sees, hears, understands and answers to the surrounding environment.

The social communication refers to each other’s capacity to communicate in one’s own environment, but also in new and different environments.

Results and Discussions

For the success of the exchange program it is necessary for the students to understand the utility of social relationships built in a new environment as fast as possible. The number of students who arrived in Romania in 2011-2012 was 7 and most were hosted in two families throughout the year. In Arad, there have been two people hosted – a student from Mexico and one from Brazil. For the student in Mexico, the situation was easier as he already knew English on a conversational level at his arrival in the new country. For him it was easier to make the passage to a new language as there was already a language to liaise with, English and this facilitated the access to relations and communication. Even though the two students were at the same school, they did not form a support web and , throughout the year they did not have common activities other than the compulsory ones imposed by the organization. The student from Mexico managed to speak the language at a conversational level after approximately three months from his arrival, however the Brazilian student did not speak the language even after 6 months of immersion. The adaptation difficulties were in connection with the school insertion – their presence was requested, however, because they were not speaking the language, they could not participate to the classes, thus leading to long hours of boredom. After learning the language this step was overcome by both and, by the end they have managed to graduate the class they were in. The difficulties connected to the adjustment to the new family were in liaison with the dynamics of the host family – the participation to family schedules, sharing the responsibilities, the manner in which the relationships were built in the new family. Their difficulty was to choose to be functional in the new family and in the new conditions. If for the student from Mexico these difficulties were overcome after 6-7 months of immersion, for the Brazilian student, most of the difficulties remained until the end of the exchange. In the relationship with the organizing institution there were not adjustment difficulties.

In the regards of the exchange students who have departed the city of Arad, two went to Canada and one to Mexico. From the three students, only two have managed to adjust to the exchange program, the two who have gone in Canada, the third one has returned after approximately two months from the departure.

In the student's selection, an important step was understanding the reasons they wanted to leave on this experience. At the departure, the declared reasons were:

- **E1** the desire to learn a foreign language, the preference for French has made me desire to leave in French Canada, the desire for independence, to demonstrate that I can, the curiosity for another culture, I want to see the aurora borealis, the positive attitude towards Canada and the exchange program

- **E2** - the desire to learn a foreign language, curiosity, the positive attitude towards Canada and the exchange program

- **E3** - the desire to travel, curiosity, the preoccupation with their celebration of death, the positive attitude towards Mexico and the exchange program

Legend:

E1 = student from Arad, departed for Canada

E2 = student from Arad, departed for Canada

E3 = student from Arad, departed for Mexico

The conditions for the selection also target aspects liaised to the school conduct, the level of school grades, data about the balance of the origin family. For the two students who arrived in Arad, the reasoning situation was:

- **E4** - the desire to travel, curiosity towards Romanian customs, desire for independence, demonstrating that I am capable, the positive attitude towards Romania and the exchange program

- **E5** - the desire to travel, curiosity, the positive attitude towards Mexico and the exchange program

Legend:

E4= = student from Mexico, arrived in Arad

E5= student from Brazil, arrived in Arad

From following the reasons exposed by the students we can deduct that no all of them had personal reasons and that their reasons were structured mostly on generalities (e.g. curiosity – without it being necessarily oriented towards something specific – floklor, climate, cultural differences, etc.)

The strongest motivation to adjust is conneced to the understanding of one's own choice of going on an exchange, the desire to learn and do new things, the desire to see and understand a new culture, the desire to find one's place in the new conditions.

These young people have their primal needs insured by the organizing institution – food, shelter, safety, but they need to be able to satisfy all their other needs in the new conditions, and this is not an easy task. For this, it is necessary to have their eyes and mind open to understand the differences and to be able to adapt to them.

Throughout this whole process the person who is on exchange will change affectively, cognitively and behaviorally transcending the distance from the ethnocentric stage (denial, defence, minimization) to the etnorelative stage (acceptance, adaptation, integration).

In order to be able to transcend these stages easily, the organizing institution realizes, throughout the exchange year several activities for the students – the presentation of their country, of their country's values, of their family values, for them to understand the new country and its values.

Besides these activities, it is important for watch host family to understand their role in facilitating the student's adjustment – thus, in the host families, the one who initiated several socializing activities and who was more preoccupied in the inclusion of the student in family activities had the best success rate. The adjustment dynamics makes the exchange student at the acknowledgement of these differences feel lonely or look for isolation and this thing can be avoided with a constant support from the host family.

The second step is the implication in activities with people of the same age – and here, the host family has the role to create the right environment for this. Across these steps it is assumed that the student will learn the language and the pursuit of the results from the host family. The intervention at this level targets the family's efficient understanding of this necessary effort which they need to make in order to make it easier for themselves, as the good adjustment of the student will be positively felt in the family, whicle the student's bad adaptation will be a source of stress for the family. „Through communication with the others, the students manages to distance oneself from the concrete reality and the experience enriches step by step, as the reports with reality become more and more numerous, [...]” [3].

A smaller role, but just as important was played by the weather – the meteorological conditions being highly different compared to the country of origin.

For those in Canada the low temperatures were a challenge at the beginning because of the many months of winter and the outdoors activities being mainly oriented towards winter sports.

For those who came from Mexico, and Brazil respectively – the existence of winter was a pleasant surprise, however difficult to surpass – adapting to different low temperatures being a challenge.

At the end of the exchange program the situation of these stages for the students from Arad was as follows:

Ethnocentric Stage(A)

Denial(1) The person denies the existence of cultural differences

Defense(2) The person attempts to protect their own worldview to counter the perceived threat of cultural difference

Minimization(3) The person attempts to protect the core of their own world view by concealing differences in the shadow of cultural similarities

Etnorelative Stage(B)

Acceptance(4) The person begins to accept the existence of behavioral differences and underlying cultural differences

Adaptation(5) The person becomes empathetic toward cultural differences and become bicultural or multicultural

Integration(6) The person applies ethnocentrism to their own identity and can experience difference as an essential and joyful aspect of all life

		E 1	E 2	E3	E 4	E 5
A	1	x	x	x	x	x
	2	x	x	x	x	x
	3	x	x	x	x	x
	4	x	x		x	x
B	5	x			x	
	6	x				

Legend

E1 = Elev 1 (From Romania to Canada)

E2 = Elev 2 (From Romania to Canada)

E3 = Elev 3 (From Romania to Mexico)

E4 = Elev 4 (From Mexico to Romania)

E5 = Elev 5 (From Brazil to Romania)

We can observe, from following the indicators from the tables the different levels of the young people’s adaptation. Throughout the course of the stay in Romania they have received psychological assistance at request, both the students and the host family. The assistance was offered on the following themes – the differences to rapport to the situations, the different crisis situations, the adaptation upon return for the student who came home early, realationing difficulties.

Following the psychological intervention, the students have overcome the difficult situations and these were also overcome by the host families. The psychological intervention was realized in Arad for the two exchange students who came from abroad, but also for the student who discontinued her year. The interventions have allowed the exchange students to explore the space of their own image, of their own culture, of their personal identity, of their personal resources and also of the role each of them has in the host family’s home. At the family’s level, the interventions targeted the support patterns with which they can participate to streamline the adaptation, the connection to the personal resources in order to overcome the difficulties that intervene and finding the balance in these conditions.

Limits of the study

The study started from the premise that the team formed of the exchange student and the host family has a better efficiency if the families and the exchange students fathom the motivational factors to make such an effort. A first limit would be that of fathoming the motivational factors only for the exchange students and not for the host family. Another limit is set by the small number of subjects. Another limit is set by the fact that the specialists in the area are not invited to be part of the team with the organizing institution, or this leads to the loss from sight of several aspects that are necessary to adaptation. The continuous existence of psychological counselling would make the exchange programs more efficient, however, this is not presently done this way, the psychologist being contacted only in need and not always by the organizing institution, but mostly by the families who cannot overcome a temporary situation.

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