

## Romanian children and parents in German school-Extracurricular activities rolls in shifting cultural identity

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**Abstract:** Defining cultural identity is a challenge of the present time. It swings between *assuming* the given cultural heritage (Geertz, 1963) and *becoming* under the influence of context and opportunities that awake the desire for change. History shows us that the existence of German school in the region of Transylvania and the desire of Romanian ethnics to join this school path is not new. This study aims to capture possible changes in cultural identity components of Romanian children and parents attached to the German school. The school is not seen only as educational establishment, but as a chance for identity transformation, with future benefits foreseen under the influence of positive perception over the German ethnicity in connection with career opportunities. The study is part of a larger research regarding the cultural identity of Romanian children enrolled in German preschool department. The entire research was concretized in a doctoral thesis. In this section we start from the assumption that changes happen in the pattern of cultural identity components of the observed children, changes which they don't comprehend, but transpose into fluctuating emotional states. With respect to parents, we move on the supposition that deviations in the pattern of cultural identity unit are acknowledge, even if not assumed. Participative observation and in-depth interviews were used to check the made assumptions. The study describes extracurricular activities that challenge Romanian parents and children in their struggle of being "different". Our interest in this research is to describe the process of cultural identity transformation through this activities. Various extracurricular activities are described in detail, respectively parent meeting, the feast of Saint Martin, Advent, Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day, Carnival, and swimming activity. Of these activities, we extract observations that could impact the cultural identity construction process of children. Finally, we present six conclusions. The study, descriptive and non-experimental, complies with rules of ethics in research with minors.

**Keywords:** cultural identity, extracurricular activities, Romanian parents and children, German school

### 1. Introduction

In Sibiu, public education, but also the private one, offers, regardless of ethnicity, the possibility of enrolling children in the German department. Starting with the pre-school level, there is the option to enroll children in kindergarten classes in which the language used in the educational process (later considered the mother tongue language in the

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baccalaureate exam) is German. Although most of them are Romanian and have no knowledge of German, an increasing number of parents choose this option, amplifying competition every year.

The language of study is certainly the most obvious difference between the German department and the Romanian one. But there is more than this. Through the acquisition of the foreign language, children and parents receive an infusion of cultural elements, different of the membership culture ones. Parents seem to manage more pragmatically the process of affiliation to the German school, considered "a door to another world", "different", "more disciplinary", and "full of opportunities". On the other side, their children are much more vulnerable to the transformation they pass through. Even though they finally manage it and lately even enjoy the school purchases turned into competitive advantages in the labor market and the positive perception in the eyes of others, the beginning of the transformation is at least interesting, if not, sometimes, alarming.

The study describes extracurricular activities that challenge Romanian parents and children in their struggle of being "different". Our interest in this research is to describe the process of cultural identity transformation through this activities.

## 2. Methodology

The objective of the study is to expose the changes in cultural identity components of Romanian children and parents after taking part in various extracurricular activities.

### *Specific study hypothesis*

The pattern of children's cultural identity components suffers alterations that they don't realize, but transpose into fluctuating emotional states.

### *Working assumptions*

Although children have knowledge about the differences between the Romanian and German cultural items, they don't comprehend those differences, nor put them in connection;

Children are able to label, but labelling is taken, not made aware.

*Tools:* In-depth interview guide and observation grids.

*Type of study:* descriptive, non-experimental.

*Target population:* a group of children from a public kindergarten in Sibiu. The group is mixed, 15 girls and 12 boys, level I and II (children aged between 3 and 6); children's parents and two teachers.

## 3. Research ethics

Prior to the research, all involved parents or legal protectors of children signed an informed consent. Then we obtained the agreement of the kindergarten management and the County School Inspectorate approval for performing the study.

In the case of children, we point out that filming and records have been done only with their endorsement. If they have expressed verbal or nonverbal refusal, if the devices created them discomfort, children weren't approach. The names of children and teachers used in the study are not real. The age of children, placed in brackets, is real. We consider important the association of children's age with their behavior.

We insist on the statement that the information provided here does not claim representability and relates strictly to the group of children, teachers and parents involved in this study.

#### 4. Findings

In the following section, we will detail few extracurricular activities carried out during the school year. Finally, we will extract significant observations and check the specific hypothesis enounced.

##### *Parent meeting*

The first meeting with parents takes place in September. Date and time of the meeting have been set by the two teachers and were communicated orally and through an announcement posted on the classroom door. Informational messages posted here are short, colored, and underlined.

At the start of the meeting, most parents are present. Each child is represented by at least one parent. Adults sit on chairs arranged in a square, with teachers in the middle.

Mother of Valeriu (5 years), the one about whom we soon noted she is an exception to the low German language level of parents, enters the meeting and places herself in the middle of the square. She speaks to the teachers in German<sup>40</sup>, talks loudly, laughs, and does not communicate with any other parent.

Parents who speak Romanian address each other in quiet voice.

The meeting starts with good wishes for the new school year. Teachers speak Romanian. The two educators are relaxed, smiling and watching the clock. A table of presence is completed. Teachers, watching a list, present the points that will be discussed. New parents that have entered the group this school year are requested to fill in a form with child's identification data (ID, date of birth, address) and a description of the family (father, mother, occupation, address, telephone number).

The researcher is presented at the beginning of the meeting. Parents are requested to decide whether or not to accept the proposal for participation in the study. Adults carefully listen and ask questions about the research. Mother of Michael (4 years) seems most interested in the study and has a moment of reflection, wondering about the study findings. In another occasion, she recommences the reflection and explains the decision of her child's enrollment in the German department, saying: "I didn't chose to come here, I gave in front of my husband's decision" (Dorina, personal communication).

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<sup>40</sup>Point out discrepancy strategy through communication (Giles, Coupland and Coupland, 1991).

Parents are informed of specific issues, such as the fact that, in addition to the individual required kindergarten bag, children need toothpaste and toothbrush. Also, they are reminded about the specific educational vision in the German department, stressing out the children independence. Parents are encouraged to come in support of teacher's vision, following the same principles, namely to let children make themselves as many things as possible.

#### *Saint Martin*

The feast of Saint Martin is a specific one for the German department. The feast is prepared in three stages. First, children receive information about the legend of Saint Martin. All activities ensure the transmission of knowledge regarding the topic. Then parents are engaged in a separate activity to make flashlights. Finally, on 11<sup>th</sup> of November, the feast takes place.

#### Preparing for Saint Martin

Kindergarten activities regarding the transmission of knowledge about Saint Martin are diverse and subscribe in all experiential domains: language and communication, science, aesthetic and creative, man and society, and psychometric. We note the constant enthusiasm of children in this period of time. In truly integrated activities, teachers transmit knowledge, appealing to all senses. The learning experience is complex. The legend of Saint Martin is more than just told, is experienced.

#### Flashlights making

For making flashlight, parents are invited to kindergarten, in the evening before the feast. The date and time are determined by the kindergarten teachers. Parents are notified verbally and by posting, as usual, an announcement on the classroom door. In this activity only parents are allowed. The presence of children is prohibited.

The activity takes place at the kindergarten, on the ground floor, in the eating room, starting at 16, in a working day. The space is prepared in advance by the teachers.

Tables are arranged in five groups. In the middle of each table group materials are placed: paperboard of varying colors, colored paper, scissors, glue, stapler, templates and a flashlight model.

The teacher prepares tea and snacks. Majority of parents reaches the set time. Punctuality is a well-known requirement and the ones who arrive later are visibly ashamed. Most of parents have participated in at least one activity like this, in the past years. This year's activity was attended by mothers, with one exception, the father of Ovidiu (3 years). After choosing materials, parents start to work. Every parent makes a flashlight for his child. Adults listen to German music while working.

Mother of Valeriu (5 years), comes late, and, after entering the dining room, she chooses the only table placed in the middle. We note her superior attitude and a slightly rejection of other mothers. She and Julia's mother (4 years) are the only ones who speak German with the teacher, but not between them. In fact, the two mentioned mothers don't speak with anyone else outside the teacher. The other mothers carry on small talk, both with each other and the teacher. We note a slightly competition in mothers' conversation about their children, regarding their activities and their achievements (especially about private German classes).

The atmosphere is pleasant, but not relaxed. Mothers hurried to finish the lamps. When they leave, they say good-bye, but avoid eye contact with those in the middle of the room.

The feast

After completing the usual preschool program, children, the two teachers and some parents go visit anasylum in the city center. On the road, children carry flashlights, made by their parents, and play specific German songs. In this time of year, in Sibiu, numerous groups of children can be seen on the streets with lamps in their hands, singing in German.

For most parents and children, the activity is not new and its on-going scenario is known. While preschoolers depart at the asylum to share symbolic gifts to elders (apples, oranges, sweets), parents remaining in the kindergarten wait for their return and prepare a sweet hot desert. For their nice gesture for the lonely elderly, children are expected back in a festive manner.

Two mothers prepare the desert. With ingredients bought in advance, they prepare muffins. Other mothers prepared hot tea that will be brought out into the courtyard of the kindergarten. Here, three fathers make the fire. Parents gather around the fire, listen to music, drink tea and chat. The atmosphere is pleasant, relaxed, despite the cool weather.

Children come back to the kindergarten, two in a row, with lamps in their hands, singing about Saint Martin. At the entrance in the courtyard of the kindergarten there are surprised by the atmosphere and the fireworks. Children get warm drinking hot tea and tell parents about the experience of giving gifts. Teachers ask the little ones gather in a circle. In the applause of parents, children dance after a choreography made by the teachers. They remain out for a few minutes, then they enter the kindergarten dining hall, where they are served with muffins.

The scene at the table is a normal one. Discipline and order associated with the space itself, makes everything appear fluid. They place at the table, where they expect a warm cup of milk and a muffin. Teachers insist all children come to the table. In activities with parents, children tend to stay into the arms of mothers or fathers. Knowing this, teachers insist that all the little ones settle in and serve what was prepared for them. Insisting on *obedience*, and refusing negotiation even though some of them are tired, one of the teachers takes a child from the arms of a mother and puts him at the table. Teacher's authority is not discussed. What Ramona and Carmen Tante say is what needs to be done. We note the discipline of children and parents.

Before serving sweet snacks at the table, children pray in German. After eating, children clean the tables. Although it is a holiday, there is no compromising of this rule.

Parents, throughout the evening, are enthusiastic, relaxed, they enjoy the atmosphere, and do not seem to hurry to go home, although the temperature is low. Most of the parents do not speak German, but those who do, speak in a higher tone. Mother of Victoria (6 years) speaks loudly and is proud that her daughter responds in German.

Parents speak Romanian to each other. Once in a while you can hear a "Guten appetit!" or greetings on behalf of parents that don't speak German. They utter the words in a mixture of pride and shame.

At the end, everyone puts things in place and cleans the space.

*Christmas, Advent, Easter and Mother's Day*

Children don't collect, as teachers say, religious imprints celebrating Saint Martin feast and don't appreciate differences in the different rituals of Christmas or Easter, which are celebrated differently in kindergarten.

If children are not aware of the cultural information transmitted. Regarding parents, teachers believe that adults understand the differences and "they're educated" (Carmen) into another culture.

Mother's day is not celebrated on 8 March, but in the first week of May. Usually there is a celebration where mothers and grandmothers are invited and served with something sweet, engaged in funny contests, games of movement, or just invited to a walk in nature.

"Because children grow up in a Romanian environment, for me it's no longer important to celebrate let's say ... 1<sup>st</sup> of December", added Carmen, regarding the Romanian National Day.

During the school year, the group visits the Evangelical Church, but not in the service time.

All holidays described above are seen as activities supporting the effort of learning German. Teachers are aware of the formal revealed curriculum, but also of the hidden one, and all the cultural information transmitted to children and parents. German language support teachers can teach without participating in the activities described.

"They adopt some cultural knowledge, traditions, etc.", says one of the teachers.

*Swimming*

The first session of swimming demonstrates, once more, the discipline of the group. When departing, every child has the baggage ready for this activity. In the dressing room, the little ones, are helped to get ready by the teachers and few parents, who are requesting to be present of only for the swimming lesson, and then are asked to no longer participate.

Although the group is large (26 children), the instructors appreciate and express his admiration for the discipline demonstrated by children. He states that it is the only group so numerous and diverse (age, sex) with whom he works.

In the locker room, a problem occurs. Raul (6 years) is embarrassed and refuses to take his clothes off. The situation is somewhat overlooked. Teachers do not give importance to the boy's shame. Finally, Raul is changing and going to the pool.

*Carnival*

The carnival is held at the end of January, in the classroom, after the end of the regular program. The carpet is removed so everybody can enter with shoe on. The activity starts with a call of presence. Teachers ask parents to shut down the phones. Children are waiting for costumes to be put on them. Parents place on the edge of the classroom.

Children enter the classroom singing. Preschoolers are agitated, but confident in knowing the program. Victoria (6 years) begins loud and expressive. Her parents are proud and smile. Mihai (4 years) goes to his mother and tells her the costume produces him discomfort. The teacher calls the boy to return in the circle.

Children's program consists of a series of songs with movement and poetry. At one point, children make a mistake in the routine. Victoria realizes the mistake of screams out to her colleagues to stop.

Mother of Valeriu (5 years) does not shut down the phone, and at one point it sounds loud, pausing the scene. The woman has no problem to answer her phone.

At the end of the program, children dance. The teacher takes out of the circle all the children that have missed the dance preparation. We noted the desire of the preschoolers removed outside the circle to dance alongside their colleagues. On the sidelines, children are doing part of the choreographed dance.

The script ends with a song in the Romanian language, which the little ones played much louder than before, nearly screaming.

After the routine program, the games start. Teachers have a list of games scheduled in an agenda. The whole program is well organized. For each game a separate bag with materials was prepared. Children are called to enter in games three or four at once.

Teachers talk to children in German, but translate from time to time.

Winning is encouraged both by parents and teachers. Parents applaud and encourage children. Children seem to be under pressure. They don't feel comfortable, are over excited and make efforts to win the games. They don't seem to have fun.

For every game there is a reward. The one who wins receives something more special.

The mother of Stephen (5 years old), calls the boy on the sidelines and whispers him "You have to win!" After half hour of games, the atmosphere in the room is hot, although the windows are open. Children are becoming increasingly restive, and the pressure of the competition tires them.

After they ensure that all children have entered one game as they had planned, teachers ask them to go in another room, where they are served with something sweet by the caregiver.

The final game involving only parents is not relaxing, but the competition leaves the atmosphere.

At the end of the activity the atmosphere seems much more relaxed and children settle down. After helping to rearrange the room, one by one, parents and children are leaving.

## 5. Research limitation

One of the general limits of participant observation is the singularity of perspective. The observation has been made only by one researcher. Another limit is the limited quality of the audio and video recordings, due to the lack of technical knowledge of the researcher.

Although not knowing German seems to be a limit, for this study we consider it rather an advantage as it allows to focus on the aspects observed. Without the interest of German language knowledge, we concentrated on the effect produced by the cultural elements infusion in the attitude and behavior of children and parents.

## 6. Conclusion and discussion

We extract the following conclusions:

Romanian parents have a positive perception over the German emic. This conclusion is sustained even through the decision of enrolling their children in the German school. The same attitude emerges in the relationships between adults. Parents are divided in German-speakers and the ones that don't know German. On one hand, we note the appreciation of non-speakers in various occasions, their low voice and their marginal place in the actual space, and, on the other hand, we observed the speakers' need to expose in an obvious manner their German knowledge level. Those who do not know German, speak in a quiet voice, as if they don't want to disturb or wouldn't want to deconspire that they are not supposed to be there. In meetings, German speakers and non-speakers place themselves in different places: speakers in the middle, to make themselves seen and heard, and non-speakers on the fringe, in silence, making room for the first mentioned ones.

The idea of discipline has a specific German touch: we note the punctuality, the insistence upon compliance with meeting time, the shame of those who delay, the power of rules and routines in children program (children from this class are the only ones from kindergarten that wash their teeth during the program).

We note the desire of parents to attach to German holidays (Advent, Christmas, Easter, and Mother's Day) and the involvement of adults in following different rites of those practiced in the culture of confession (Orthodox).

We emphasize the idea of competition. The competition is actually a characteristic of parents, but is transferred rapidly into the education of children (see "You have to win!", the discussion of how many activities do children participate in, the taboo of private German lessons). From this point we extract and verify the specific hypothesis. The competition between the parents induces stress to children. Preschoolers get out early from their comfort zone. The foreign language barrier that they are pressured to learn in order to achieve their parents' ambitions, leads to a mix of alternative positive and negative moods.

Also, although children have knowledge about the differences between the Romanian and German cultural items, they don't comprehend those differences, nor put them in connection. Children are able to label, but labelling is taken, not made aware. But, by taking part of all German holidays, they come to approach different cultural elements. In a related study, we surprised the wish of children finishing German school to change their confession (Dan, 2009).

We notice the respect for Romanian parents' for the German education vision and for the physical space of school. Teachers' authority, even though in certain circumstances comes over the word of parents, is not negotiated. Adults don't come into the dining room when children are celebrating Saint Martin and pray in German. More than respecting the physical space, parents respect the attitude and the vision of teachers, trying to obey with the German education style. In the doctoral thesis, which gives more context to the discussion, we concluded that Romanian parents fail to adopt the German style of education, and only get to compromise the unity and integrity of their own vision, damaging children's emotional state.

We observe the desire to be "different", to receive confirmation of affiliation to another, better group, through both the specifics of the extracurricular activities described (Advent, Christmas, Easter, and Mother's Day, swimming), but also through the specifics of routines (washing teeth). Over-all, a different attitude rises on top of those who want to be different.

We conclude with the idea that the authentic affiliation of parents with the German emic and their actual capability to reach this desire generates a high ambitious in the children's emotional state.

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