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## PROBLEM-SOLVING EDUCATIONAL PURSUITS TO INCREASE PARENTS SOCIOCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN SCHOOL COMMUNITIES INTEGRATING MIGRANT CHILDREN

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***Abstract:** The article examines methodology and methods to implement andragogic problem-solving educational pursuits for parents of pupils in school communities integrating migrant children. For andragogic training are proposed two scenarios in dialog groups aiming to increase the parent's sociocultural competences by placing them in imaginary crisis situations and seeking adequate solutions from them. The proposed andragogic pursuit's main purpose is to provoke empathy and understanding in the host community through awareness for the challenges faced by migrants, respectively - migrant children, in the process of migration, adaptation and resocialization in their host countries and communities.*

***Key words:** children, migrants, school, parents, inclusion, problem-solving educational pursuits, andragogy.*

### INTRODUCTION

A well-known fact is that migration is part of human nature since time immemorial. However, it is still considered an unusual, uncomfortable and difficult to perceive phenomenon in our country, itself viewed for years by its own and alien alike, as a country generating, rather than welcoming, migration.

There is hardly anyone in Bulgarian society who does not know a compatriot (be it a relative, friend, acquaintance) living abroad. The Bulgarians attitude to Bulgarian migrants around the world, however, cannot be considered as being identical to migrants arriving in our country.

Studies over the last decade indicate that fears caused by the migrant flow passing through our country are not decreasing, but rather changing. For example, a research survey of ‘public attitudes towards refugees and people seeking protection in the country,’ ‘commissioned by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Bulgaria,’ indicates ‘that it still cannot be insisted that Bulgarian society nurtures a positive attitude towards those seeking and receiving protection in the country,’ as well as that the ‘main concerns’ of Bulgarians ‘are that refugees may be responsible of crimes (60%), spread their cultural customs and religious beliefs (48%) and spread diseases (39%).’ If ‘concerns regarding personal security, job loss and disease infection were most prevalent in 2013, at the beginning of the increased migrant flow,’ then ‘in 2017 the leading ones are security concerns, differences in culture and religion’ [UNHCR, 2018], persistently established to date. There are even paradoxical findings, such as one registered in 2020 and stating ‘the fear that refugees can spread diseases decreases in the year of worldwide pandemic’ (UNHCR, 2022).

Until the military conflict in Ukraine, refugees and those seeking international protection arrived in our country mainly from the Middle East and Africa. Grounds for concerns and fears regarding them in the Bulgarian society were based mainly on significant cultural differences and prejudices accumulated over generations towards people originating from certain religious communities. After the military conflict in Ukraine began, it became clear that the Bulgarian nurture not only fear of cultural differences, as Ukrainian refugees do not differ so sensitively either culturally, religiously or racially from Bulgarians. Nevertheless, their arrival in the country caused fears and suspicions, similar to those registered in our society regarding culturally, racially

and religiously different people seeking asylum in Bulgaria for years (see: П. Георгиев “Кривият портрет на украинския бежанец”) P. Georgiev The crooked portrait of the Ukrainian refugee), In: <https://aej-bulgaria.org/ukrainian-refugees>).

### **THESIS STATEMENT**

Migrants, even for a short period of time, are aware that migration is a combination of many cultural, social, administrative, domestic, psychological, in some cases even physical challenges to which adaptation is a must and it is necessary to deal with step-by-step in order to integrate into the host society.

For those for whom migration is an unexperienced phenomenon (neither directly nor indirectly), it is rather a threat - to culture, to security, to labor market, to health, to people peace of mind, etc. Such groups shape their views and beliefs about migrants based on stories by other people, information from the media, rumors, etc.

Similar, often negative, public attitudes are frequently felt and expressed in schools. Most obviously, such manifestations are found in within the school community relationships - between students, between teachers and students, between teachers and parents, between parents themselves, etc. Among such processes most negative consequences are the tangible impacts on children success in school, on students' individuality shaping, on self-confidence and motivation for learning, for progress and performance.

Such attitudes permeate into the schools environment frequently through heard or observed, by the children, reactions of parents or significant adults regarding actions or situations concerning participation of certain social groups established as problematic in public consciousness. Such, for example, are the Roma and migrant communities in Bulgaria.

In order to master these interactions challenges and difficulties in school communities, the schools in the country are increasingly taking actions to increase the parents and those performing parental functions socio-cultural competences, based on the rule proven over the years, that, 'a well-educated parent is not only responsible in his functions, but also has good interaction with the school, is open to communication and support' and helps to establish a 'calm and balanced environment for the educational process functioning' (Nikolova, 2023).

Such activities help parents to realize 'the parents need to improve, to educate and self-educate on issues of raising children, to adequately solve arising problems' (Nikolova, 2023) 'in view of both social processes dynamics in general, as well as education in particular' (Dimitrov, 2023).

### **Problem-solving educational pursuits for parents**

Andragogy is the science studying the specifics of adult education. Established andragogic approaches and methods should be taken into account in training students' parents. Among the most important features of andragogic process are the exclusion of 'any prescriptions,' 'its problem-oriented approach,' and as practice - 'imperative in presence of differences causing a change in views, attitudes, positions, and value orientations,' as well as dialog orientation. According the eminent andragogue prof. V. Gyurova: 'the dialog is among the andragogy most important features.' It is associated with 'listening (the ability to listen to the other), which involves hearing what the other is saying, understanding the message and responding (to the ideas, thoughts and feelings of others),' and its problem orientation is 'defined as from the problems that brought the learners to the classroom, as well as from problems that they would face when performing one or another task or social role' (Gyurova, 2011).

This publication focuses on two proposed scenarios for problem-solving educational pursuits in dialog groups of parents, both included in the e-guide for parental dialog groups moderators: 'The Living Laboratory - Building a Supportive Community' (accessible at: <https://medus-project.eu/moodle/course/view.php?id=45>). The guide is produced within the project 'Innovative educational approaches and practices to increase the effectiveness of social inclusion and academic results of educated migrants' (MEDUS) framework, implemented during

2021 - 2024 with the participation of scientists and pedagogy specialists from Bulgaria (University of Ruse A. Kanchev and Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski), Turkey (Association of Unity in Diversity), Romania (Liceul Tehnologic, St. Pantelimon), Lithuania (Kaunas University of Technology; Kaunas Region Educational Center, etc.), within the European Union Erasmus+ program.

**Travelers** is a situational game in three stages, based on the so-called basket method - a behaviorally oriented activity for working strategies for action, requiring decision-making to solve problems.

Course of action:

Stage I - Participants are asked to imagine that they are on a beautiful ship for a family trip around the world. The ship has cozy cabins for all them, including their children, plenty of food, places for entertainment, opportunities to learn new skills in arts, sports, etc. The trip is expected to last entire summer, so the participants actively get to know their companions, make contacts, the children find new friends. The voyage is wonderful and going according to plan, until in the middle of the second week the captain is alerted for a serious failure in ship engines needing immediate ship stop in the middle of the ocean waiting for help on the spot.

Following are the discussion questions listed below.

Stage II – A strong storm is brewing, the ship anchor breaks. A part of the ship passengers managed to evacuate in lifeboats. Other passengers, including you, did not make it to the lifeboats and remain on board. The ship subsequently shipwrecks on an unknown island. There is no telecommunication with the unknown location. The local population had never seen such a large vessel and so many people with ‘colorless’ skin. S, the natives advance upon the castaways with hostile stares and ready to use weapons.

Following are the discussion questions listed below.

Stage III - The locals accept the castaways in their village. From day one, to newcomers is made clear that they must strictly comply with the hosts laws, culture and customs, and specifically:

- ✓ communication with hosts is possible only in their language;
- ✓ local traditions and climate favor scanty clothing consisting of loincloths instead of clothes - for both men and women;
- ✓ men are included in groups to fish for ocean food or gather one in forest - catching fish, game, etc., with tools unknown to newcomers;
- ✓ women are involved in activities in food preparation and cooking according local traditions and available food products;
- ✓ children are involved in activities such as water procurement, animal care, etc.

Following are the discussion questions listed below.

Following the role play final stage, the participants, with the facilitator assistance, turn to the migration theme by replacing the ship image with the community/state/city/village. A discussion focused on forced migration challenges is provoked to encourage reflections and ascertain the participants conclusions, the proposals generated, the decisions nature, and the actions they would take in real analogous conditions.

**The pursuit purpose** is to overcome barriers to full refugees and migrants’ participation in the community and school everyday life, by understanding the reasons and challenges accompanying forced migration and provoking empathy among parents in the receiving school community.

**Tasks:**

1. To clarify the reasons for taking action on forced migration.
2. To gain insight into the conditions provoked by dangers and dilemmas accompanying forced migration.

3. To understand the difficulties and challenges faced by the migrant during the migration process, as well as those related to resocialization and integration into the host society.

**Discussion questions in the three stages:**

1. How do you imagine yourself in such a situation?
2. What would you do/undertake in such a situation?
3. What risks would you take in such a situation?
4. What risks would you refrain from?
5. How would you take care of your children in such a situation?

**Reflective questions:**

- How did you feel in your role as a forced migrant?
- What did you learn about people forced to migrate?
- What did you learn about yourself and your options in a similar situation?
- What could you do if you had to help migrants and how would you do it?
- What did you expect to get in the role of a person caught in an asylum seeker situation?
- How could you help such people yourself?
- What wouldn't you do for a migrant?

**Moderator discussion plan (teacher, psychologist, social worker...)**

Target group: parents (including parents-migrants)  
Duration – 1 hour and 30 minutes.

Time	Activity description
10 minutes	A brief introduction to the discussion ‘Why should parents discuss the on the topic?’ Discussions presentation.
5 minutes	Introducing the rules for communicating in dialog discussion groups.
25 minutes	Stage 1 and discussion
25 minutes	Stage 2 and discussion
25 minutes	Stage 3 and discussion
30 minutes	Return to theme, by replacing the ship image with that of the community/state/city/village. Discussion focused on the forced migration challenges. Conclusions, reflection, proposals, decisions.
10 minutes	Final part - reducing tension and sharing impressions.

**Andragogy educational pursuit: ‘Let's write the homework together.’**

It is no secret that in schools where children with various differences (socio-cultural, biological) study, there are concerns and worries among parents regarding those children, defined as ‘normal’ general progress in studies. These parents motivate their concerns with the need to transform learning process according each student needs and abilities in class. With such adaptations, there is a possibility that the teacher attention will be directed primarily to those students who have difficulties in learning and neglect those with advanced and excellent achievements, thus jeopardizing their progress and success, especially in stages of school education where external evaluations and/or applications to schools requiring a higher admission grades take place.

Such concerns rarely take into account the fact that education is a basic human right, and the school is an institution designed to grant all children access to this right. The need for social and pedagogical support for parents of children with some kind of difference is also missed as they face daily challenges in supporting their children in social, physical, psychological, educational and other aspects. And last but not least – the teacher professional competence is not taken into account.

Overcoming such concerns among the parent community is essential, both for the full desegregation of school institutions, and for promoting inter-cultural access for children, helping

them in the process of shaping work life and educational competences for peaceful coexistence in the diversified modern global society .

The educational andragogy pursuit ‘Let's write the homework together’ purpose is to put the parent in a situation of urgent need for specialized pedagogical support, thus assisting them to realize the difficulties of parents to children with different mother tongue than the state official language.

The tasks set by the author aim at:

- Clarifying the needs of general and additional support in day-to-day school education.
- Understanding the need to take actions for general and additional support for children with differences and their parents.
- Gaining insight into situations where parents find themselves, provoked by difficulties accompanying the care and support of children with sociocultural differences.
- Empathy and understanding of both difficulties and challenges faced by both children with socio-cultural differences and their parents, and search for opportunities for support from parent community.

In the pursuit course, the participants are asked to imagine that their child is assigned homework in mathematics, the assessment of which will make up the term assessment for an academic discipline. The child experiences difficulties in solving the assigned tasks and seeks help from his parent.

An example homework assignment can be found on the MEDUS project page: <https://medus-project.eu/moodle/course/view.php?id=45>.

## CONCLUSION

Such kind of andragogy educational pursuits for parents are still not popular in Bulgarian school practices. Despite the difficulties experienced by school institutions to active parent involvement in school community life, efforts in this direction have long proven their benefits - both for the children themselves and for all adults involved in one way or another in one or another role in shaping adolescents as full-fledged individuals. One of the most visible benefits in this direction is the positive change of relationships within these communities and the increase of socio-cultural competences of all participants.

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