CULTURE, COMMUNICATION AND INTERCULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS: EXPERIENCE-ORIENTED TRAININGS

Lora Spiridonova, Stella Palioura, Eleni Nevena Vazaiou, Rallitsa Nikolova, Tsubasa Takahama, Anna-Magdalena Schulze

Abstract: The affective aspects of intercultural competence are expressed in intercultural sensitivity through active self-motivation for understanding, appreciating and acceptance of differences between the cultures. The article presents experience-oriented trainings as a content of the discipline Intercultural education, regarding these affective aspects of teacher's intercultural competence. The trainings are related to the concepts of culture, communication and intercultural misunderstandings in modern multicultural society. Their goals include expressing one's one point of view, experience and perception, discussion and self-reflection. The emphasis is on the reflection in teamwork and taking into account each individual idea. The experience-oriented trainings are followed by tasks related to cognitive and behavioural aspects of intercultural competence.

Keywords: intercultural competence, teacher, affective aspects, teamwork, students

Резюме: Афективните аспекти на интеркултурната компетентност се изразяват в интеркултурна чувствителност чрез мотивираност към разбиране, оценяване и приемане на различията между културите. Статията представя ориентирани към опит тренинги като съдържание на дисциплината „Интеркултурно образование" по отношение на тези афективни аспекти на интеркултурната компетентност на учителя. Тренингите са свързани с концепции за култура, комуникация и интеркултурни недоразумения в съвременното мултикултурно общество. Техните цели включват изразяване на гледни точки, опит и възприятия, дискусия и саморефлексия. Акцентът е върху рефлексията в екипната работа и отчитането на всяка индивидуална идея. Ориентираните към опит тренинги са последвани от задачи, свързани с когнитивните и поведенческите аспекти на интеркултурната компетентност на учителя.

Keywords: интеркултурна компетентност, учители, афективни аспекти, работа в екип, студенти

INTRODUCTION

Who are we?

We are an example of a multicultural group. We are from different countries, age groups, and have different family backgrounds and ways of living.

My name is Stella. I am from Greece, and more specifically from Thessaloniki. I am a little bit older than the others. I have my own family and I belong to a different generation in comparison to my friends. I am a student at FESA.

I am Eleni. I am from Greece, but from Athens. I have also Bulgarian relatives, and I come from a big family. This is my fourth year as a student at FESA.

My name is Rallitsa and I am from Bulgaria, from Pleven. I am the only child in my family. I am a student at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", FESA, specialty "Pre-school pedagogy and foreign language".

My name is Magdalena and I'm 25 years old. I study Primary school education and I'm an Erasmus exchange student at FESA. I'm from Munich. I got one older sister and one younger brother. I have studied in Eichstätt for the last four years. That's a small village in Bavaria, Germany. I liked Sofia from the very first beginning. I'm taking a lot of interesting classes where I also get to know a lot about Bulgaria and its culture. I'm very glad and thankful that I got the opportunity to go abroad and to get to know so many different people from different countries.

My name is Tsubasa. I'm from Japan, Tokyo. I have three younger sisters and I have two dogs. I'm 22 years old and I'm the oldest child in my family. I really like Bulgaria.

Assoc. Prof. Lora Spiridonova is a lecturer at FESA, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in the disciplines Intercultural Education, Pre-school Education and Pedagogical Technologies for Play Interaction.

INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

The trainings, that are described in this paper, are part of the content of the discipline *Intercultural education* and more precisely – a part of the content linked to the affective aspects of intercultural competence of the teacher. They were taken from *Mirrors and Windows: An Intercultural Communication Textbook. European Centre for Modern Languages, Council of Europe* and *Intercultural communication resource pack, SALTO Cultural Diversity Resource Centre, UK National Agency, London.*

The first textbook is the result of a research supported by the Council of European Centre for Modern Languages in Graz, Austria. The main aim of the project "has been to incorporate intercultural communication training into teacher education in Europe. The main objective of this textbook is to assist trainers and teachers in achieving this aim by providing teaching materials that focus on intercultural learning."

The second textbook is "an outcome of the Intercultural Communication Training Course organised by SALTO Cultural Diversity Resource Centre and the
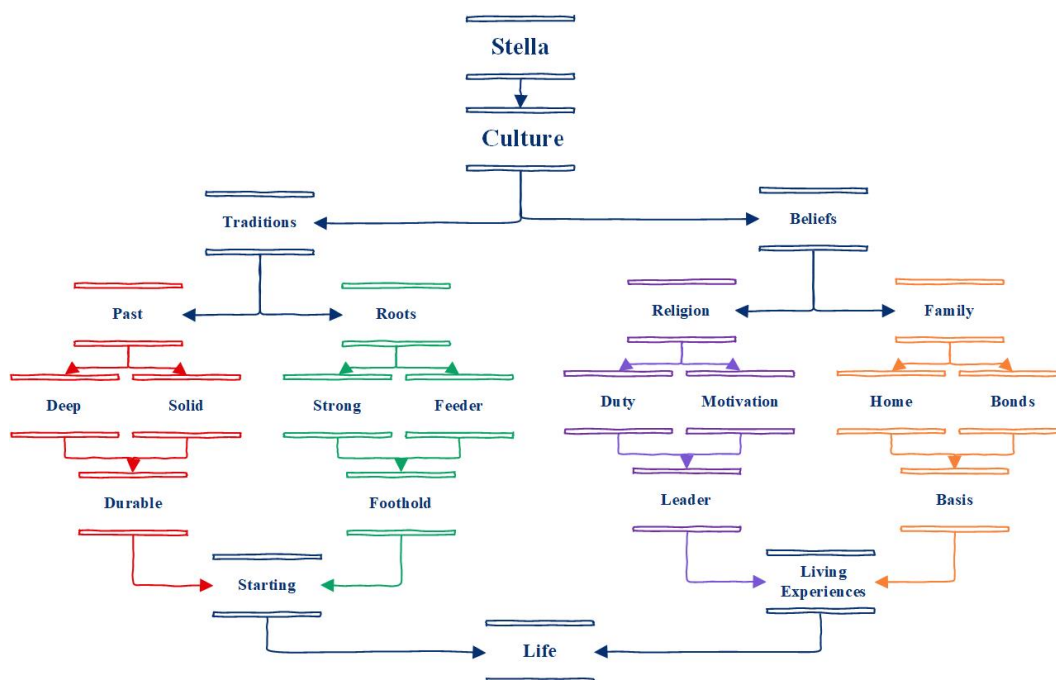
Bulgarian and Romanian National Agencies of the Youth in Action Programme. The Training Course was open for youth leaders working with young people throughout Europe to explore and develop intercultural communication skills and knowledge, leading to intercultural dialogue in action."
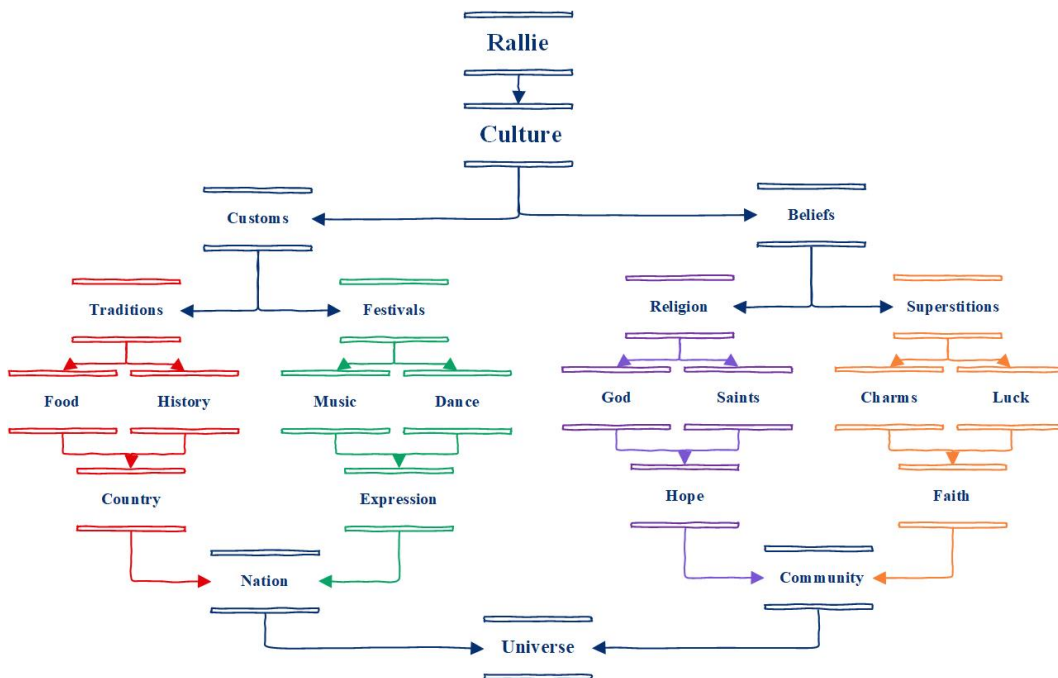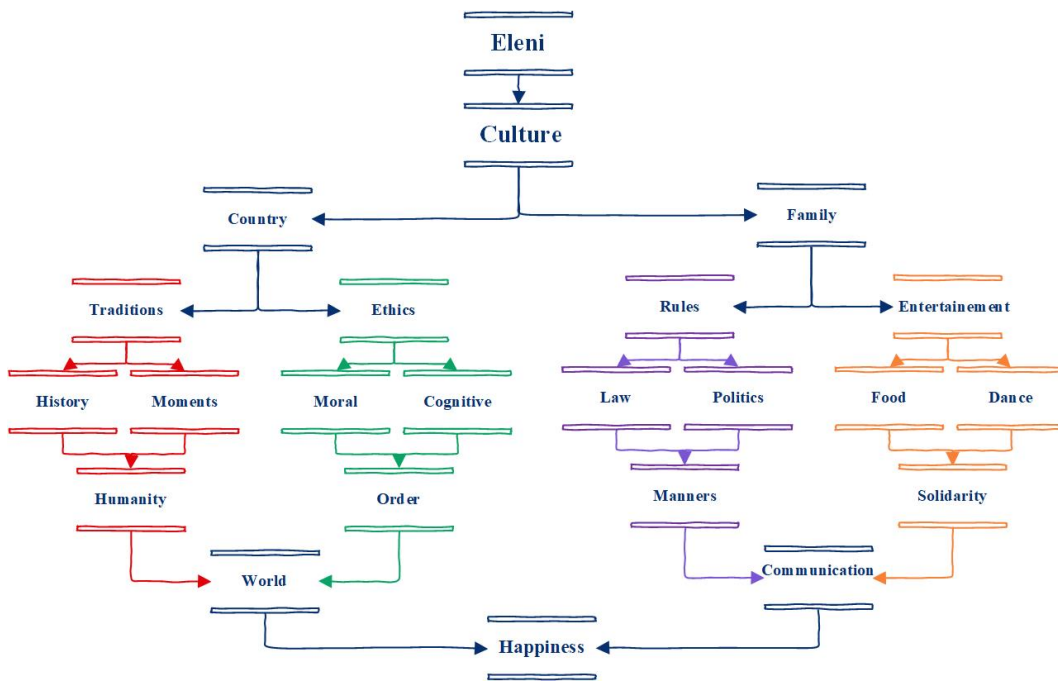
The content of the discipline *Intercultural education* itself is divided in three areas, according to each of the aspects of intercultural competence – affective, cognitive, and behavioural. The affective aspects are represented through experience-oriented trainings, the cognitive aspects include different theories of the field of intercultural education, and behavioural aspects are linked to the design of different activities in preschool age aimed at development of children's intercultural competence.

The goals of experience-oriented trainings are self-reflexion, discussing different point of views and perceptions. This is the first step of the content of the discipline which can be interpreted as an introduction to theories and as a way to consider these theories through one's own personal experience.

PART 1. CULTURE

Instruction. Students start from the word "culture": they write two words that they associate with the word "culture". Those two words are taken further and four more associations are added, all the way until the web has eight words. Then the web goes down from four to two and then to one word. In the end, a single word closes the web.

Eleni

Culture

Country — Family

Traditions — Ethics | Rules — Entertainement

History — Moments | Moral — Cognitive | Law — Politics | Food — Dance

Humanity | Order | Manners | Solidarity

World | Communication

Happiness

Rallie

Culture

Customs — Beliefs

Traditions — Festivals | Religion — Superstitions

Food — History | Music — Dance | God — Saints | Charms — Luck

Country | Expression | Hope | Faith

Nation | Community

Universe

The definition that fits best with the students' definitions:

- "The ways of life of people; includes norms, learned behavioural patterns, attitudes, and artefacts; also involves traditions, habits and customs; how people behave, feel and interact; the means by which they order and interpret the world; ways of perceiving, relating and interpreting events based on established social norms; a system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting" (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (TESOL)

Conclusion. This training presents the culture as a way of life, encompassing all manifestations of life, religion, ethics, law, technology, education systems, tangible and intangible products, environmental issues. It is about the understanding that society has no culture, it is a culture. This is the open understanding of culture which is the basis for intercultural education as opposed to the close understanding, which leads to differentiation between higher and lower cultures, focused on literature, education and arts as the elements of culture.

PART 2. COMMUNICATION

Instructions. Each student chooses words that come to their mind when they hear the term "communication" and note the words down on paper.

- Communication is understanding, getting closer, feelings, laughing, sadness.
- Communication is fun, connection, solidarity, positivity, solution.
- Communication is sharing, emotions, getting closer, thoughts, open-minded
- Sender, receiver, message, verbal, non-verbal, misunderstanding, using different words for different persons and situations, language.
- Fun, understanding each other, universal, high context, low context.

Instructions. Students create a common definition by using the words or meaning of the words they associated.

- Communication is understanding others, sharing emotions by connecting, and having fun. By getting to know each other we feel positive finding solutions while we are open-minded. Communication is a process which contains a sender and at least one receiver or audience. A verbal or non-verbal message should be sent from one person to the other. Purpose of communication is understanding each other using different words for different persons and situations, language. Communication is verbal and non-verbal. There are different styles of communication like high-context and low-context communication.

Instructions. Students have to decide which definition fits best with their own definition. It should be a common decision. Two definitions have been chosen:

1. "Communication is the exchange of ideas, opinions, and information through written or spoken words, symbols or actions." (1995-2002 by Pearson Education)

"Communication is the process of conveying information from a sender to a receiver with the use of a medium in which the communicated information is understood the same way by both sender and receiver. It is a process that allows organisms to exchange information by several methods. Communication requires that all parties understand a common language that is exchanged. There are auditory means, such as speaking, singing and sometimes tone of voice, and nonverbal, physical means, such as body language, sign language, paralanguage, touch, eye contact, or the use of writing. Communication is defined as a process by which we assign and convey meaning in an attempt to create shared understanding." (Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. Psychological Bulletin 117, 497-529.)

Afterwards, the students present their definitions.

- Stella: "Communication is our will to understand others in order to get closer. Communication is a way to express our feelings, it can result to positive or negative feelings."
- Eleni: "Communication is a positive process of connecting with each other which is done by finding solutions with positivity and solidarity."
- Rallitsa: "Communication is a process of sharing thoughts and feelings with others, which assist us in getting to understand ourselves as well as other individuals better. In this way we become more open-minded."
- Tsubasa and Magdalena: "Communication is the process of conveying information and understanding each other. It is verbal and nonverbal."

Conclusion. The obstacles people need to avoid in order to be successful in the communication:

- prejudices are an obstacle to people's communication since there are entrenched opinions and negative beliefs, that hinder people's communication in a free communicative environment also religion is often a barrier to people's communication. Persistent beliefs do not allow communication to take place at a level of acceptance and understanding. For example, sports preferences lead to extremes and behaviours that make communication difficult;
- nationalism makes it difficult to communicate, not only on national issues but also in the general attitude of people towards their interlocutors according to their national identity furthermore political beliefs create a strong political framework that from the outset, it limits people's communication;
- in many cases, gender discrimination is what stands in the way of communicating, which leads to failed attempts to alter the views that support gender inequality;
- insecurities prevent communication from being free and natural. Second thoughts and unconfessed opinions are created, which then hinder communication between people additionally physical conditions can contribute negatively to people's communication. People with disabilities

are not easily understood by others which leads to misunderstandings when it comes to communication due to discrimination;

• wealth or poverty, respectively, create problems to people's communication. Additionally, inequality due to money causes barriers to it as well.

PART 3. CULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDING

3Facial and bodily expression, eye contact, voice pitch, volume, silence, special distance, touch behaviour, room layout and architecture, time are forms of nonverbal communication (Ting-Toomey, 1999) which add to our voice messages and are sources of intercultural misunderstandings. Intercultural communication comprises all forms of communication between individuals with different culture background. Mutual understanding in communication is difficult to achieve within one culture (Wiio, 1978), and the challenges multiply in intercultural communication due to the use of unfamiliar nonverbal symbols (Kinast, Scroll-Machl, 2010).

We present the content of training regarding silence and volume as sources of intercultural misunderstandings.
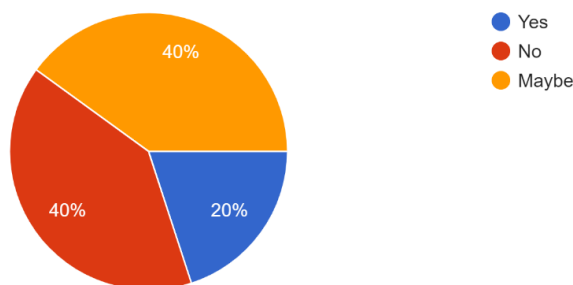
Silence

„In many cultures, people who are known to each other but not related and who are in the same room or space together expect that conversation will take place. Silence is seen as awkward and embarrassing. There are cultures where close friends and relatives – or even business partners – can sit together in silence, simply enjoying each other's company. Gender and age play important roles.“

The goal of this training is not to draw conclusions about different cultures, but to discuss and reflect our own perceptions of silence and volume, their impact on the interaction and the possibilities of communication problems due to the different interpretation of their meaning.

Chart 1.

1. Is it acceptable for people in your culture to sit together silently?
5 responses

Yes
No
Maybe

Four of the students agreed that it is acceptable for people in their culture to sit together silently (Chart 1.). In the discussion afterwards they shared the opinion, that silence is natural part of conversation. However, in their opinion the silence can't last a long period of time (Chart 3.)
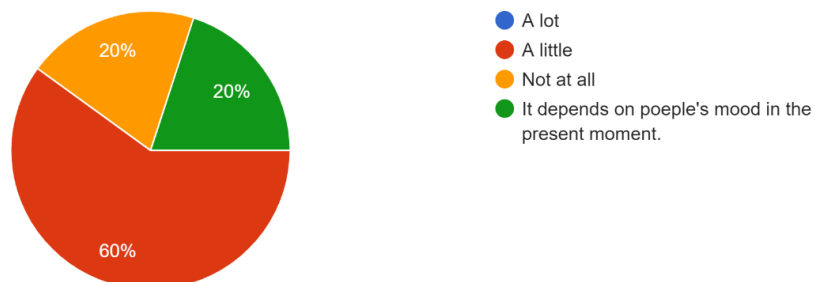
Chart 2.

Does turn-taking have any special rules in your culture?
5 responses
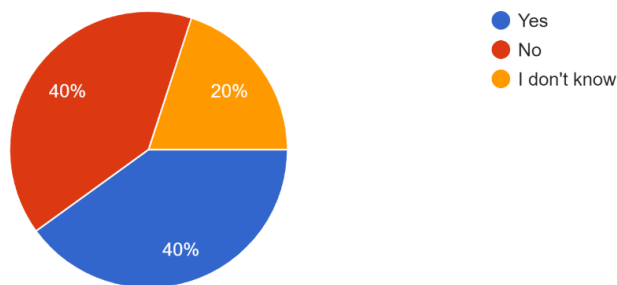
According to the students who took part in the training age plays the most important role in the turn-taking during the conversation. To them social position and gender don't have a strong influence on this process. However, in the discussion afterwards, the different ways of showing respect in the interaction were considered as main sources of intercultural misunderstandings, as their wrong interpretations could offend the partner in intercultural communication. In this point of view the turn-taking was discussed as a way of showing respect regarding the social position in the interaction.

Chart 3.

3. How long can the silence last?
5 responses

Volume

The participants in the training defined Greek and Bulgarian cultures as louder than Japanese and German cultures (Chart 4.). Most of them find the reasons for the loudness in cheerfulness (Chart 6.), but their attitudes towards loudness differ – tolerance, ignorance and irritation are considered as possible responds (Chart 5.). The discussion was followed by an introduction of the six dimensional model of Hofstede and country comparison (https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/bulgaria,greece,japan/) based on scientific data.

Chart 4.

1. How loud do you think people in your culture are compared to other cultures?
5 responses

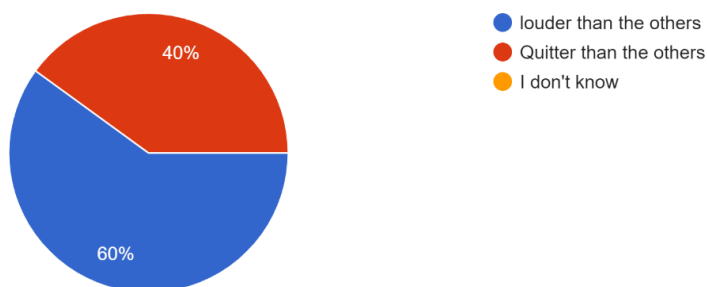- louder than the others
- Quitter than the others
- I don't know

Chart 5.

2. Are people who speak very loudly tolerated, ignored or considered irritating in the cultures you are familiar with?
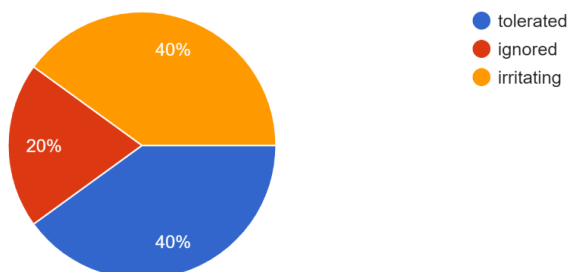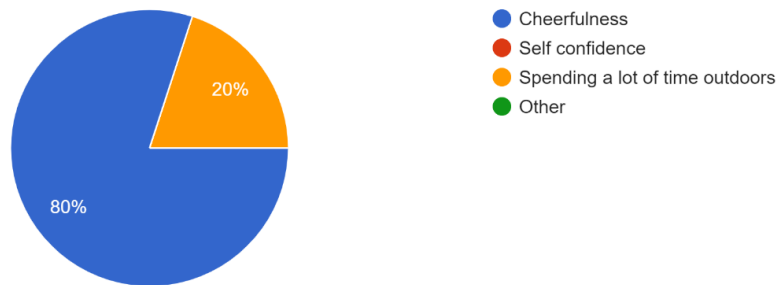5 responses

- tolerated
- ignored
- irritating

Chart 6.

3. What do you think the reasons for loudness could be in some cultures (for example, cheerfulness, self-confidence, spending a lot of time outdoors)?
5 responses

- Cheerfulness
- Self confidence
- Spending a lot of time outdoors
- Other

80%
20%

Conclusion. Mutual understanding during the process of intercultural communication requires awareness about many varied aspects of misunderstandings, often caused by our wrong evaluations and interpretations. From this point of view these trainings are followed by training, called "Description – Interpretation - Cultural Context - Evaluation". The students consider the difficulty of staying objective and focused on what they know, talking about people or objects as objectively as possible without adding opinions, commenting, guessing, interpreting, evaluating, or giving their personal reactions.

This system of trainings continues with definitions of concepts *stereotype* and *prejudice* and ends with the six dimensional model of Hofstede, the Hall's model, the Schwartz value survey, the model of Kluckhohn and Strodbeck, as a way to make generalisations based on scientific data and not on stereotypes and prejudices.

The main goal of the experience-oriented training is to create a relationship between one's one perceptions and thoughts and the different theories of the field of intercultural education. This provides personal involvement in the process of acquiring knowledge which is crucial for intercultural education as it has always an emotional aspect.

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За автора:

Лора Спиридонова – доц. д-р във Факултета по науки за образованието и изкуствата, Софийски университет „Св. Климент Охридски“. Област на научни интереси: предучилищна педагоика, педагогически технологии на игровото взаимодействие, интеркултурно образование.
Адрес: София, бул. „Шипченски проход“ № 69А
E-mail: loraih@uni-sofia.bg

Стела Палиура – студент във Факултета по науки за образованието и изкуствата, Софийски университет „Св. Климент Охридски“.
Адрес: София, бул. „Шипченски проход“ № 69А
E-mail: stella.pali@hotmail.com

Елени Невена Вазаиу – студент във Факултета по науки за образованието и изкуствата, Софийски университет „Св. Климент Охридски“.
Адрес: София, бул. „Шипченски проход“ № 69А
E-mail: elenavazaiou@gmail.com

Ралица Николова – студент във Факултета по науки за образованието и изкуствата, Софийски университет „Св. Климент Охридски“.
Адрес: София, бул. „Шипченски проход“ № 69А
E-mail: ralingr10@gmail.com

Цубаса Такахама – студент в университета Тойо, Токио.
E-mail: s1d201901666@toyo.jp

Анна-Магдалена Шулце – студент в Католическия университет в Айхщет, Германия.
E-mail: magdalenaschulze@web.de

About the Author:

Lora Spiridonova – Assoc. Prof., PhD at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". Area of scientific interest – Preschool Pedagogy, Pedagogical Technologies for Play Interaction, Intercultural Education
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6534-9225
Address: Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts, 1574 Sofia, 69A Shipchenski Prohod Str.
E-mail: loraih@uni-sofia.bg

Stella Palioura – student at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".
Address: Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts, 1574 Sofia, 69A Shipchenski Prohod Str.
E-mail: stella.pali@hotmail.com

Eleni Nevena Vazaiou – student at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".
Address: Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts, 1574 Sofia, 69A Shipchenski Prohod Str.
E-mail: elenavazaiou@gmail.com

Rallitsa Nikolova – student at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".
Address: Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts, 1574 Sofia, 69A Shipchenski Prohod Str.
E-mail: ralingr10@gmail.com

Tsubasa Takahama – student at Toyo University, Japan.
E-mail: s1d201901666@toyo.jp

Anna-Magdalena Schulze – student at Katholische Universitaet Eichstaett, Germany.
E-mail: magdalenaschulze@web.de