

Presence and Re-categorization – Pedagogical Application of the Contact Hypothesis on the Example of an Intercultural Community Model

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This paper explores the theoretical and practical connections between intercultural pedagogy and the contact hypothesis through the example of a Hungarian model, the Taléta Intercultural Center. The author argues that reducing social exclusion and prejudice requires not only structural interventions but also pedagogical presence, direct interactions and reinterpretation of identity categories. The paper shows how the conditions defined in the contact hypothesis, such as shared purpose, cooperation or institutional support, are realized in an intercultural learning environment, even if equal status is not formally fulfilled. Using social identity theory and the theory of re-categorization, the author highlights how learner identity can function as an intermediate category in framing social differences. The paper explores the links between inclusion, social mobility and motivation to learn, and how intercultural pedagogy can become a tool for dignity-based education. The relationships discussed here should not be understood as definitive empirically verified impact claims, but rather as interpretations and hypotheses derived from reflective pedagogical observations. Community practice, as illustrated by the example of Taléta, offers answers not only to questions of education but also of social coexistence.

Kulcsszavak: intercultural pedagogy, contact hypothesis, social identity, re-categorization, social mobility

Introduction

Addressing social inequalities, especially those that are deeply rooted in structural causes such as ethnic, cultural and socio-economic differences, is one of the most pressing challenges facing education systems. Intercultural pedagogy not only aims to promote tolerant coexistence between cultures, but is also a prerequisite for genuine participation in education, equal access and social mobility.

The aim of this paper is to show how Gordon W. Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis can be applied in intercultural pedagogical practice, especially in a complex social context where institutional exclusion and cultural differences are cumulative. The case presented – the Taléta Intercultural Center – functions as an alternative pedagogical space where refugee, Roma, children from deep poverty and middle-class backgrounds, as well as teachers and university students meet, learn and interact.

The paper is structured by first reviewing the theoretical framework of the contact hypothesis, and then presenting the context in which Taléta was established, its pedagogical practices, its practical experiences of inclusion and prejudice reduction, and lessons learned that also address issues of teacher education and social responsibility.

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The paper also engages with the Hungarian scholarly discourse published in the journal *Neveléstudomány*, particularly with analyses addressing teachers' views on intercultural education and related institutional practices, as well as with studies summarizing Hungarian experiences of inclusion and educational integration (Gordon Győri, Németh & Cs. Czachesz, 2014; Varga, 2016). By analyzing a concrete pedagogical practice – the operation of the Taléta Intercultural Center – the present paper seeks to contribute to these discourses by linking theoretical approaches in intercultural pedagogy with the pedagogical applicability of the contact hypothesis.

Theoretical background: the relationship between the contact hypothesis and intercultural pedagogy

Basic principles of the contact hypothesis

The intergroup contact hypothesis is one of the best known and most frequently referred to theories in the field of social psychology in the field of prejudice reduction. According to Gordon W. Allport (1954), appropriately structured, positive contact between members of different social groups can reduce prejudice and promote intergroup understanding (Allport, 1954, p. 261). The basic premise of the theory is that prejudice is mainly rooted in fear of the unknown, which can be broken down by personal experience.

Allport has identified four key conditions to ensure contact is effective. The first is equal status, which means that the members of the interacting groups must be in a similar social or role position in the situation. This is particularly important because if one party is in a dominant position, the interaction can easily reinforce existing power asymmetries and thus perpetuate prejudice (Dixon, Durrheim & Tredoux, 2005, p. 706).

The second condition is a shared goal, i.e. that participants cooperate towards a goal that can only be achieved with the active participation of the other party. This kind of interdependence increases motivation to cooperate and reduces rivalry between groups (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000, pp. 118–120).

The third condition is cooperation, which is a structural dimension of positive contact. According to Allport, cooperative tasks promote mutual understanding and the development of empathy, whereas competitive situations tend to reinforce hostility and negative stereotypes (Allport, 1954, p. 262).

The fourth key factor is institutional support, which means that interactions should be supported at a formal, normative or societal level. This can be school, workplace or even legal support that legitimizes and encourages interaction (Allport, 1954, cited in Paluck, Green & Green, 2019, p. 129). Without institutional support, interactions can easily become isolated events that fail to trigger systemic change.

Although the influence of Allport's theory is still dominant today, subsequent research has further refined the contact hypothesis. In a large meta-analysis, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) analyzed 515 different studies and concluded that the effect of contact is significant even if not all conditions are met. Direct personal contact, quality of interaction and frequency of repetition all have independent bias-reducing effects (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, p. 753, 766).

Contact is most effective when it is established through long-term relationships, where parties learn about each other's complex identities, rather than judging each other solely on the basis of their group membership (Brewer & Miller, 1984, pp. 289–291). Moreover, reduced categorization and re-categorization also play a key role: if, during the interaction, participants are able to redefine their own position along the lines of a shared identity (e.g. 'students', 'parents', 'fellow students'), prejudices are further reduced (Gaertner et al., 1994, pp. 8–10).

Hässler et al. (2020) conducted a 69-country study on the impact of intercultural contacts on openness to social change. Their results show that the positive effect of contact is evident for more advantaged groups even where there are significant status differences, but is more complex for disadvantaged groups. It is only 'solidarity' that can clearly be a bridge: it is the only form that increases support for change in all groups. It can only be truly useful if structural inequalities are openly acknowledged and action is taken against this background. This suggests that the structure of the interaction and the intentions of the participants are often more important than the objective social position (Hässler et al., 2020, pp. 382–384).

The application of the contact hypothesis is particularly relevant for educational science, as schools function as structured contact spaces. Relationships between students are strongly influenced by institutional conditions such as group assignment, curriculum, teacher attitudes (Slavin, 1995, pp. 22–23). If the school environment supports cooperation and inclusive attitudes, these relationships can indeed contribute to prejudice reduction.

Critics of contact theory, however, point out that the conditions for positive effects do not arise by themselves. To avoid reinforcing the status quo, contacts must be developed through conscious pedagogical and social planning. Furthermore, individual attitude change does not always lead to collective, structural change, and therefore, in addition to contact, a systemic critique of social injustice is necessary (Stephan & Stephan, 2001, pp. 86–88).

All this suggests that the contact hypothesis can be understood as a framework that can be applied not only at the individual level but also at the societal level, especially in the field of education. Intercultural learning, cooperative forms of learning, mixed group teaching and mentoring are all pedagogical tools based on the principles of contact theory.

The role of intercultural pedagogy in society

Theoretical and conceptual positioning: applying discursive frameworks

Intercultural and multicultural pedagogy do not constitute a single, stable theoretical tradition within educational discourse, but rather function as umbrella terms encompassing diverse pedagogical paradigms. The literature commonly distinguishes between, among others, assimilationist or conservative approaches, liberal-pluralist orientations, and critical-transformative pedagogical frameworks, each of which conceptualizes cultural difference, power relations, inequality, and the social role of education in distinct ways (Banks & Banks, 2019; Nieto & Bode, 2013). The present paper employs the concept of intercultural pedagogy within this plural theoretical landscape and builds primarily on the intersection of liberal-pluralist and critical-transformative approaches. From the liberal tradition, the emphasis is placed on mutual understanding, cooperation, and the pedagogical value of heterogeneous learning spaces. From critical pedagogical perspectives, the recognition of structural inequalities, the reflexive awareness of power relations, and the social responsibility of education as a transformative force become central.

Rather than aligning exclusively with a single theoretical orientation, the paper deliberately integrates elements from different discursive frameworks. This choice reflects the assumption that empirical pedagogical practice – particularly in highly stratified and structurally unequal social contexts – can rarely be adequately described through a single coherent theoretical model. In this understanding, intercultural pedagogy is not merely a set of attitude-shaping or relationship-building techniques, but a reflective practice that simultaneously responds to individual learning experiences and to structural social inequalities.

The terminology used throughout the paper – such as inclusion, social participation, difference, diversity, social visibility, and inclusive pedagogical spaces – should be interpreted within this multi-directional theoretical tradition. The analysis consciously avoids deficit-based approaches: learners' experiences are not described as shortcomings, but as socially structured conditions that can be reshaped through pedagogical intervention. Accordingly, references to learners' "empowerment" or their "experience of being valued" are not intended as normative judgements, but as descriptions of pedagogical experiences related to participation, addressability, and agency within educational spaces.

The key concepts employed in the paper – particularly inclusion, social participation, difference, diversity, social visibility, and inclusive pedagogical space – are not used in a colloquial or normative sense, but are embedded in international educational research and critical pedagogical discourse. Inclusion, in this interpretation, does not simply denote institutional access, but refers to a pedagogical and social process that foregrounds learners' active participation, addressability, and capacity for action (Banks & Banks, 2019; Nieto & Bode, 2013). Difference and diversity are understood not as essentialized cultural traits, but as socially and historically constructed categories whose meanings are continuously reproduced within institutional norms and educational practices. This perspective aligns with approaches that conceptualize the pedagogical handling of cultural differences not as an adaptive task, but as a reflexive interpretative challenge.

The concept of social invisibility is used in this paper to describe situations in which learners may be formally present within the education system, yet their experiences and needs remain pedagogically uninterpreted and unaddressed. Visibility, therefore, does not refer to physical presence, but to pedagogical and symbolic recognition, which constitutes a fundamental precondition for inclusive learning spaces. Consequently, the notion of an inclusive pedagogical space does not denote a neutral educational environment, but rather a consciously structured learning and relational space that enables interactions between learners from different social positions while simultaneously reflecting on structural inequalities. This conceptualization resonates with critical pedagogical traditions that view education not merely as a reproductive mechanism, but as a potentially transformative social practice.

The alternation between liberal-pluralist and critical-transformative discursive elements in the language and argumentation of the paper does not stem from theoretical inconsistency, but from a deliberate authorial decision. In practical contexts of intercultural pedagogy – especially within highly stratified and structurally unequal societies – pedagogical situations simultaneously require relational, interactional, and dialogical approaches, as well as a critical engagement with structural inequalities. While liberal-pluralist discourse primarily highlights the pedagogical significance of cooperation, mutual understanding, and shared learning spaces, the critical-transformative framework enables the visibility of power relations and social injustices reproduced within education. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, but function as complementary interpretative horizons throughout the paper. Their integration is particularly justified in the analysis of pedagogical practices that aim both to create learning spaces based on personal relationships and to address social inequalities pedagogically. For this reason, the paper does not sharply separate these discursive frameworks, but proceeds from the assumption that pedagogical presence, dialogue, and cooperation cannot be meaningfully interpreted without taking structural conditions into account.

Expressions appearing in the paper such as learners' "empowerment," their "experience of being valued," or their "becoming visible" do not reflect a deficit-oriented pedagogical perspective. Rather, these formulations refer to pedagogical processes through which previously structurally marginalized learner experiences become pedagogically addressed and recognized. In this context, "value" or "empowerment" does not constitute a

normative assessment, but describes pedagogical experiences related to participation, addressability, and agency. The emphasis is therefore not on the “development” of learners, but on the transformation of the educational space itself – on the process through which learners can become active participants in learning by drawing on their own experiences and forms of knowledge. This approach aligns with critical pedagogical perspectives that shift the focus from presumed learner “deficits” to the normative frameworks and inclusivity of educational institutions.

Pedagogical model and social responsibility

Intercultural pedagogy is an educational theory and practice that sees cultural diversity not as a problem but as an opportunity. It aims to treat the co-education of learners from different social and cultural backgrounds not only as a technical challenge, but as a social potential (Banks & Banks, 2019, pp. xvii-xviii). This approach contrasts with educational practices based on the deficit model, which treats 'difference' as a deficit and does not recognize its educational value.

Intercultural pedagogy is based on the assumption that cultural differences can be incorporated into education in a constructive way. It not only teaches tolerance but also encourages active participation and dialogue. This is particularly important in pluralizing societies, where public education can become the most important tool for social integration (Mecheril, 2012, p. 27–28).

The teacher in this model is not only a knowledge mediator but also a cultural mediator. His/her role is to interpret, mediate and contextualize learners' experiences and language, thus forming a bridge between the school's normative system and learners' world. In this context, the teacher becomes a community actor who is able to sensitize members of the majority culture and strengthen the self-identity of minority pupils. This is not an ideological commitment, but an educational competence – based on empathy, reflectivity and dialogue.

Co-education offers an opportunity in which students not only learn from each other, but also become more aware of their own identities through their differences. Learning experiences in heterogeneous groups contribute to the development of social sensitivity. This is particularly important in intercultural social spaces where reducing social distance is the basis for inclusion (Akkari & Radhouane, 2010, pp. 59–61).

Intercultural pedagogy not only shapes individual attitudes, but also seeks to bring about change at institutional level. This requires schools to be able to reflect on their own functioning, their hidden curricula and their system of norms. Institutional self-reflection is key, as schools often reproduce – unconsciously – majority norms while marginalizing minority voices (Ferguson, 2008, pp. 121–123).

Introducing this approach means not only imparting multicultural knowledge, but also developing pedagogical practices in which students can truly participate in shaping the learning process. This is in line with Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, according to which learning is emancipatory when learners participate as active subjects in the construction of knowledge (Freire, 1972, pp. 96–98).

In this pedagogical model, social engagement is not an incidental element, but the goal of education. Schools must consciously take action against social injustices, especially when they are based on ethnic, gender, linguistic or social grounds. In this sense, intercultural pedagogy is therefore not only a pedagogical innovation, but also a moral duty.

Research has shown that culturally sensitive pedagogy has the effect of increasing the participation rate, academic achievement and school well-being of pupils who remain in public education. Empirical studies by Ladson-Billings (1995) show that teachers who consciously integrate students' cultural backgrounds into their

learning develop more successful relationships with their students and are able to influence their social attitudes in the longer term.

In the long term, social inclusion is not achieved through economic or socio-political means alone. The learning environment and the relationships experienced in it shape students' perceptions of society, their sense of justice and their social skills. If schools are able to provide an inclusive environment in these dimensions, learning goes beyond the development of individual competences - it becomes a force for shaping society.

Teachers cannot therefore be passive agents in the social process. His role is not only a curricular one, but also a social one. The development of cultural mediation, interpretation and dialogue skills is a prerequisite for learners to be able to understand the world of others, to rethink their own world and to build a shared social future.

The Taléta Intercultural Center – a practical model

Methodological and authorial positioning

The presentation of the Taléta Intercultural Center is not based on the results of a formal impact assessment or an empirical study relying on systematic statistical data collection. Rather, the analysis is grounded primarily in the author's long-term, active professional involvement in the program. I myself have worked as the pedagogical director of the Taléta Intercultural Center, and the pedagogical practices, interpretations, and relationships presented here are the outcomes of several years of continuous reflective processing.

Throughout the pedagogical work, the operation of the program has been accompanied by regular weekly supervision sessions, joint case discussions, and reflective professional interpretations, which have enabled the ongoing re-examination and reinterpretation of experience. This process can be understood as an action-research-like professional learning space; however, the analysis did not aim at impact measurement in the classical sense, nor did it involve control-group comparisons. Consequently, the claims articulated in this paper should not be interpreted as definitive empirical findings, but rather as interpretations and hypotheses derived from pedagogical experiences observed over an extended period. These may serve as points of departure for further, targeted empirical research.

At the same time, the operation of the Taléta Intercultural Center has already been the subject of an independent qualitative case study. In her article published in *Civil Szemle*, Julianna Kiss (2026) provides a detailed analysis of the program's social impact, operational logic, and innovative pedagogical elements. The present paper builds on the findings of this research at several points, and the pedagogical interpretations presented here are consistent with the results of this independent empirical investigation.

Accordingly, the analytical material of the paper consists of several interrelated sources:

1. the author's sustained professional involvement in the program as pedagogical director;
2. documentation generated during the program's operation, including pedagogical processes, supervision sessions, and collective reflections; and
3. publicly available documents and media representations related to Taléta, which are interpreted not as outcome indicators but as contextual and discursive sources.

From a methodological perspective, the paper is situated at the intersection of reflective practitioner research and exploratory case analysis. Its primary contribution lies in fostering dialogue between theory and practice: it seeks to enrich theoretical discussions through pedagogical experience, while simultaneously offering conceptual tools for the future empirical investigation of similar intercultural pedagogical initiatives.

Historical overview

The Taléta Intercultural Center was established in March 2022, immediately after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, in response to the situation of children of Roma origin, most of them from deep poverty, who had fled from Ukraine to Hungary. The majority of the children came from severely disadvantaged communities: many of them had not previously attended school or were formally present in the education system but remained virtually invisible to teachers. Some had 'graduated' from several grades without ever being approached at school. This 'silent exclusion' has become an extreme, institutionalized form of social invisibility.

The founders of Taléta, Szilvia Moldován and Ágnes Maczné Pletser, did not initially aim to deliver the curriculum, but to establish a positive emotional relationship with the school. They sought to build trust in learning, emotional security and relational presence as prerequisites for education. The location was the border of an affluent district of Budapest, which functioned as a particularly special social meeting point. Here, children from the center and the periphery of society could meet face to face for the first time.

The common space was not free of conflict. According to the Magyar Kurír, in several districts tension was caused by the 'sudden appearance of many Roma children in the playgrounds', which some locals perceived as a threat (Magyar Kurír, 2022). However, the Taléta's response was not to avoid conflict, but to interpret and manage it through dialogue and presence. The program began to function as a social meeting space where relationships, attitudes and prejudices could be reinterpreted through collective activities.

The story of Taléta is not only a story of a service, but also a story of pedagogical and social reflection. The project was jointly developed by students of Pázmány Péter Catholic University, teachers, social workers and civic-minded people, following the ethos of "presence in service" and horizontal learning.

Pedagogical strategies for inclusion

The pedagogical response of the program was to make children from the social margins visible - not only physically but also symbolically. Presence here did not mean mere participation, but a kind of value-based pedagogical act: a statement that 'whoever is present matters'. As the volunteers and organizers in the Magyar Kurír report emphasize: 'We did not want to teach them, but to be present with them' (Magyar Kurír, 2022). For the children, this experience was the first time they were not excluded but spoken to, considered and acknowledged as participants.

The process of inclusion was therefore not an administrative one, such as school admissions or language tests, but a relational and communal one. Members of the parish community, university mentors, social workers, teachers and family members together shaped the 'pedagogical space' where learning first emerged from human connections. This space allowed children to gradually enter the world of learning - not by force, but by invitation.

The program used the so-called "pedagogy of presence", which is also linked to the teaching of Pope Francis. The Pope stresses in his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*: "It makes us realize that "the scandal of poverty cannot be addressed by promoting strategies of containment that only tranquilize the poor and render them tame and inoffensive. How sad it is when we find, behind allegedly altruistic works, the other being reduced to passivity". What are needed are new pathways of self-expression and participation in society. Education serves these by making it possible for each human being to shape his or her own future. Here too we see the importance of the principle of *subsidiarity*, which is inseparable from the principle of *solidarity*." (Pope Francis, 2020, no. 187). Taléta has made this possible through the active participation of children. Learning together is a concrete ex-

perience of the capacity of even the most vulnerable to create value, to care, to connect, to shape programs, to make things happen.

Educational presence is therefore not a one-way "helping" but a mutual learning process. The volunteers involved in the program also report that their personal worldview, social awareness and understanding of their vocation have been shaped by their encounters with children. This horizontal learning – learning from others – is in line with the theoretical framework of intercultural pedagogy (Banks & Banks, 2019).

The pedagogy of inclusion was not only inclusive but also reflexive. The pedagogical situations were accompanied by a continuous interpretative dialogue: the students received mental health support, participated in joint supervision sessions and case discussions. This reflective learning allowed difficulties, failures and tensions to lead to professional development rather than burnout.

Furthermore, the program did not treat inclusion as an exclusively "individual" issue, but also as a social dimension. The joint presence, the sharing of experiences and the public testimonies created the opportunity for intercultural encounters to become a space for community learning – not only for the participants but also for the surrounding society.

The Taléta Intercultural Center is thus not only a facilitating project, but also a pedagogical space that seeks to re-learn the concept of community education through real social differences. Learning together, doing art, listening to stories together, learning to write, being together: they educate, connect and shape at the same time. For those from the margins, this presence is the first step towards social visibility. And for those at the center, it is the first real encounter with those who until then existed for them only in statistical categories or stereotypes.

Condition of the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954)	Pedagogical realization in the Taléta program	Analytical remark
Equal status	The participating children do not occupy equal social positions in a formal sense; however, within the pedagogical space, all children appear as active participants through shared activities.	Equal status is not realized structurally but pedagogically: within learning situations, participation and competence become the primary organizing principles.
Common goals	Educational activities are organized around shared, cooperative goals (learning, creative work, play, and the implementation of joint programs).	Common goals allow social differences to recede into the background, enabling cooperation to become the basis of interpersonal relations.
Cooperation	Learning and community activities are structured in a cooperative manner; children rely on mutual support and joint problem-solving.	Cooperation provides a structural framework for positive interactions and reduces tensions arising from competitive situations.
Institutional support	The program is supported by cooperation among church-based, civil, and university actors; pedagogical frameworks are consciously reflected upon.	Institutional support is manifested not only in formal regulation but also in normative recognition and sustained professional presence.
Repeated and sustained contact <i>(later extensions of the hypothesis)</i>	Encounters are regular and extend over longer periods; relationships are not incidental or one-off.	Sustained contact enables the gradual reduction of stereotypes and supports more complex identity interpretations.
Emotional involvement and personal relationships <i>(Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006)</i>	Pedagogical presence is built on emotional safety and trust; relationships are grounded in personal experience.	The emotional dimension compensates for formally existing status asymmetries between participants.

Table 1. Pedagogical Realization of the Conditions of the Contact Hypothesis in the Practice of the Taléta Intercultural Center (M. Sz.)

Inclusion, community building and social mobility

The role of encounters in reducing prejudice

In this paper, social mobility is not interpreted in the narrow sociological sense of measurable structural indicators such as spatial relocation or formal changes in educational institutions. Rather, it is used in a pedagogical and relational sense, referring to shifts in learners' self-understanding, motivation to learn, perceived possibilities, and patterns of participation within educational contexts.

Accordingly, social mobility is not presented as a direct or empirically verified consequence of the Taléta program. Instead, the analysis focuses on how the pedagogical environment created by the program may contribute to conditions that are widely considered prerequisites of social mobility, such as educational engagement, recognition, and access to meaningful learning relationships.

The observations discussed here therefore do not constitute causal claims about mobility outcomes, but analytically grounded reflections on pedagogical processes that may support longer-term trajectories of social participation and educational advancement, and which may serve as hypotheses for future empirical research.

The observations presented in this section should be interpreted not as empirically verified causal claims, but as analytically informed reflections emerging from pedagogical practice. References to inclusion, learning motivation, or prejudice reduction indicate experienced pedagogical dynamics and potential developmental trajectories, which may serve as hypotheses for future empirical research.

The practice of the Taléta Intercultural Center clearly shows that inclusive pedagogical spaces not only support participation in school but also mediate personal and community experiences that can contribute to social mobility in the longer term. Through these interactions, pupils, especially children from extreme poverty, experienced for the first time a sense that their presence was valued, that they were being spoken to and that they were receiving feedback not only on their behavior but also on their existence.

The positive educational presence gave learning a new meaning: it was not a constraint but an opportunity. The supportive presence of mentors and peer helpers provided a safe framework for progress. Children who had previously been completely invisible in a school environment were empowered for the first time. The growth in self-esteem gradually extended to openness to learning.

In the process of building relationships, not only personal but also communal goals emerged. Initial motivations, such as reducing fear of school, were transformed over time into concrete school performance goals. Red points, recognition, then merit marks and grade jumps became signs of progress. Through learning, children experienced that they had value – not only in their own communities, but also in the eyes of other social groups.

From the point of view of the contact hypothesis, several conditions for positive interaction were met here: shared goals and cooperation structured the experience. Although equal status was not formally established – there was a significant difference in social status between the Roma refugee child and the child attending an elite secondary school – the relationships were nevertheless reciprocal and meaningful.

Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006, p. 766) meta-analysis suggests that a reduction in prejudice may occur even if not all theoretical conditions are fully met. This is exactly what happened in Taleta: cooperation, repeated encounters and emotional contact compensated for formal status asymmetries.

The interconnectedness of children in common activities – drama classes, choir, outings, shared theatre, cinema, games – not only helped to break down stereotypes, but also created opportunities for empathy to develop. For the mentors from the majority group, too, this connection was a new experience: they learned through experience, rather than theory, what it means to live in a situation of social injustice and how to change it.

Taléta is therefore a contact space where reducing prejudice is not an end but a consequence. The interactions between children are not defined by differences but by the experience of being together. This is the real starting point of inclusion: when children begin to see each other not as "coming from elsewhere" but as "existing together".

Pedagogical management of status differences

The pedagogical management of social differences in the Taleta was not done by equalizing status, but by keeping these differences out of the foreground in interactions. Shared experiences – playing, creating, gardening – rearranged the social coordinates of interactions. Children interpreted each other not in terms of social categories but through experiential, affective relationships.

The encounters were not about who came from where, but about what they did together. The structuring of pedagogical situations did not emphasize awareness of differences, but rather their marginalization. However, this was not to suppress, but to create a relationship that allowed for a sensitive dialogue later on.

Rather than maintaining the status quo, the quality of interaction was key. A young gypsy boy learning to write his own name and a high school student helping him to do so – from the same age group, yet from completely different social worlds. This scene, as reported in Magyar Kurír (2022), shows that the quality of the relationship can override the tensions that arise from social differences.

Global research by Hässler et al. (2020, p. 382) confirms that positive contact makes members of the majority group more open to supporting social change, even when status differences exist. In Taléta's daily operations, this was not an abstract statement but a lived experience. Joint activities generated new social relations: not hierarchical but horizontal relations.

During the operation of the Taléta Intercultural Center, a new, intermediate identity emerged that partially suspended the differences that stemmed from the social background of the participants. This identity is 'being a learner', which offers an alternative to the polarities between extreme poverty and elite status as a new category.

According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), when an individual belongs to a disadvantaged social group, he or she may react in several ways: for example, by redefining his or her own position by reclassifying himself or herself into another, less stigmatized group. This is what the literature calls *recategorization*, whereby the individual tries to change the social perception of his or her own group or finds affirmation in a new community affiliation. (Dombi, Koltói & Kiss, 2015) For Roma and refugee children in the Taléta community, this learning identity offered not only a new framework but also an alternative self-understanding: they were not seen as "poor" or "laggards" but as "participants", "present", "learners" – in a role that carried competence, community participation and positive feedback. This kind of re-categorization also transformed the motivation for learning: learning became not a field of failure but an opportunity for connection, collaboration and self-affirmation.

This re-categorization does not deny the existence of social differences, but it can temporarily suspend their impact. The learners' self-understanding thus becomes dominated not by belonging to 'poverty', but by the experience of being able to learn, to grow, to connect – and to do so as part of a community. Learning identity does not therefore equalize, but connects, creating new social relations in a pedagogical context.

This approach does not relativize differences but creates a pedagogical space in which differences do not separate but invite connection. Distance in status can thus become a bridge rather than a chasm. This, however, requires the conscious pedagogical planning and presence that the Taléta program has put in place.

Conclusions

Intercultural pedagogy as an educational movement is based on the recognition that the increasing cultural diversity of societies is not a marginal given, but a prerequisite and resource for education (Banks & Banks, 2019, p. xvii). Schools cannot be neutral spaces in the face of social differences: they must take an active role in achieving social justice and equal opportunities (Nieto & Bode, 2013, pp. 8–11). Hence the ethical and pedagogical responsibility to foster relationships between students from different social backgrounds. One of the most effective theoretical foundations for this is Gordon Allport's contact relationship thesis, which argues that interpersonal encounters, under the right conditions, reduce prejudice (Allport, 1954, p. 261).

The effectiveness of the contact hypothesis has been widely researched. Based on a meta-analysis of more than 500 empirical studies, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) conclude that the prejudice-reducing effect of contact

is robust and context-independent, even when not all of the four classical conditions (equal status, shared purpose, cooperation, institutional support) are met. In practice, therefore, pedagogical situations in which status differences persist but the contact is long-term, empathic and reflective can be effective (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, pp. 752–754).

The example of the Taleta Intercultural Center confirms this claim. The encounter between children from extreme poverty, refugee and Roma backgrounds and middle-class students, often from church schools, was made functional not through the eradication of social differences but through their reframing. Through shared activities, play and learning, it was not social status but human presence and reciprocity that became the defining factor (Moldován 2025, pp. 491–493).

This experience is also in line with the findings of Hässler et al. (2020), who showed in their study in 69 countries that solidarity and social openness can be created even when contacts take place in less-than-ideal conditions, provided that the relationship between participants is cooperative and personal (Hässler et al., 2020, pp. 381–382). This type of contact has the potential to break down stereotypes, develop new attitudes and support social cohesion in the long term.

It is important to emphasize that the pedagogical relationships presented through the example of the Taléta Intercultural Center are not articulated as definitive impact claims, but rather as reflected professional observations and hypotheses derived from a complex pedagogical practice unfolding over an extended period. The primary value of these experiences lies in their capacity to offer empirically relevant questions and interpretative frameworks for future research into intercultural pedagogy and the pedagogical applicability of the contact hypothesis.

The Taléta program organized meetings not only between children but also between adults. University students, volunteer mentors, parishioners and social professionals were involved in the process. This allowed intercultural learning to take place on several levels - individual, community and professional. The program thus also functions as a kind of pedagogical space where students can shape and redefine their own professional identity, attitudes and role perceptions.

This is particularly important for teacher training. As Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasizes, the aim of culturally relevant pedagogy is not only to enable students to be successful, but also to strengthen their identity and social context. Taleta's practice offered pedagogical spaces where teachers not only taught but also learned – from marginalized communities, from children, from each other.

The experience of the program highlighted that social participation is not just a matter of access, but a result of trust, invitation and shared presence. Experiences of pedagogical success – such as a grandmother writing her own name for the first time, as well as the shared creations of children, parents and mentors – have also strengthened children's self-esteem and motivation to learn. This is particularly important where previous school experiences were humiliating or invisible (Ferge, 2006, pp. 482–483; own manuscript, 2025, p. 12).

Taken together, the cited sources and empirical experience show that the precondition for social mobility is not only economic but also relational. In this sense, the pedagogical application of the contact hypothesis is not only an educational policy issue, but also a moral issue: it offers the possibility for education to become a real social opportunity creator (Banks & Banks, 2019, p. xviii)

The educator in this framework is not a 'savior' but an attendant. He or she does not provide solutions, but is present – and this presence itself becomes an educator. This is in line with the teaching of Pope Francis, who says that "The scandal of poverty, for example, cannot be dealt with by promoting isolationist strategies that only reassure and transform the poor into gentle, harmless beings. How sad to see that seemingly altru-

istic actions condemn others to passivity." New channels of self-expression and social participation are needed. Education is at the service of this path, so that each person can be a shaper of his or her own destiny." (Pope Francis, 2021, no. 187).

To sum up, the practical application of the contact hypothesis in intercultural pedagogy enables educational and social practices capable of fostering social inclusion, the development of empathy and the formation of long-term patterns of coexistence. Schools, and teacher training in particular, must be open to incorporating these experiences, otherwise the pedagogical discourse will become divorced from reality.

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Jelenlét és újrakategorizálás – A kontaktushipotézis pedagógiai alkalmazása egy interkulturális közösségi modell példáján

A tanulmány egy magyar modell, a Taléta Interkulturális Központ példáján keresztül vizsgálja az interkulturális pedagógia és a kontaktus-hipotézis közötti elméleti és gyakorlati összefüggéseket. A szerző azzal érvel, hogy a társadalmi kirekesztés és az előítéletek csökkentéséhez nem csupán strukturális beavatkozásokra van szükség, hanem pedagógiai jelenlétre, közvetlen interakciókra és az identitási kategóriák újraértelmezésére is. A tanulmány bemutatja, hogyan valósulnak meg az interkulturális tanulási környezetben a kontaktushipotézisben meghatározott feltételek, mint például a közös cél, az együttműködés vagy az intézményi támogatás, még akkor is, ha a formális egyenlőség nem teljesül. A társadalmi identitáselmélet és az újrakategorizálás elméletének segítségével a szerző rávilágít arra, hogy a tanulói identitás hogyan működhet közbenső kategóriaként a társadalmi különbségek keretezésében. A tanulmány feltárja az inklúzió, a társadalmi mobilitás és a tanulási motiváció közötti összefüggéseket, valamint azt, hogy az interkulturális pedagógia hogyan válhat a méltóságon alapuló oktatás eszközévé. Az itt tárgyalt összefüggéseket nem empirikusan igazolt, végleges igazságokként kell értelmezni, hanem inkább reflektív pedagógiai megfigyelésekből származó értelmezésekként és hipotézisekként. A közösségi gyakorlat, amint azt a Taléta példája is illusztrálja, nemcsak az oktatás, hanem a társadalmi együttélés kérdéseire is választ ad.

Kulcsszavak: interkulturális pedagógia, kontaktus-hipotézis, társadalmi identitás, újrakategorizálás, társadalmi mobilitás