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## The transition from a multicultural society to an intercultural society: Educational implications

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### Abstract

From the second half of the twentieth century, the presence of immigrants in Europe has become increasingly significant and structural. The problems and difficulties arising from this presence and, above all, from the coexistence between people of different cultures require the promotion and the development of intercultural societies, in which the encounter between people belonging to different ethnic groups produces profound changes in virtue of impact of diversity of people, in a dynamic interchange between the parties. In this regard, interculturalism does not refuse the specificity and originality of a culture, but recognizes the right of everyone to preserve and to strengthen their cultural identity. At the same time, since the cultures are characterized by dynamism, the encounter between different people pushes individuals to be open to changes and differences, in order to encourage a continuous redefinition of themselves. Foreigners and natives are called to live their everyday life on base of a common value system which makes possible the interchange and the supportive collaboration between individuals of different cultures. I adopt the method of theoretical research and I focus attention on the extensive literature dedicated to these issues.

Keywords: Intercultural societies, overcoming ethnocentrism, promoting dialogue between cultures.

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## 1. Introduction

Starting from the second half of the 19th century, the presence of migrants in Europe has become more and more meaningful and structural. The presence of migrants and the cohabitation among different cultures generate questions and issues. It becomes apparent the need to promote the development of an intercultural society with the awareness that, as stated by M. Rey, “whoever says “intercultural”, certainly means - giving the full meaning to the prefix inter - interaction, exchange, openness, reciprocity, and unbiased support. It also means – giving the full meaning to the word “culture” – the recognition of values, ways of life, and symbolic representations which society, people and human beings relate to when they live together and try to understand the world. Intercultural also means the recognition of diversity and of the interactions which occur from time to time within the same culture and among different cultures in space and time” (Macchietti, 1995).

## 2. From a multicultural to an intercultural model

Experiencing interculturality means recognizing and sharing universal values identified by human beings respecting other’s diversities. It is possible changing from multicultural to intercultural whereas people – native and foreigners – start a mutual knowledge and acceptance relationship. Receiving country needs to go beyond the ordinary tolerant attitude which can degenerate into hostility and it should recognize foreigner people as active, able and responsible individuals. They have – as all human beings do - a unique and a cultural identity which needs to be respected and valued in every kind of situations. Interculturality does not cancel specific characteristics of culture, but it opens up to them with the aim to guarantee to all the right to keep and make stronger one’s own cultural identity. Because of a dynamic nature of culture, the encounter between different people let them open up to a continuous redefinition of self. (Orlando 2003). *Intercultural* is very different from *assimilation*, where the aim is to reduce the differences in order to turn the foreigner into a citizen of the receiving country of which he or she adopts not only duties and rights, but also values, costumes, language, ways of thinking and acting.” (Falteri, 1996, p. 26). If this were the case, it would be not correct talking about interactions and interchange because the need of changing would be unilateral clearly affecting only migrant people. Society becomes intercultural when inner changes are produced by the encounter-clash among different ethnic groups. Changes are produced by the very clash among diversity. Such a clash “does not lead to the sum of different cultural traits, but to their mutual modification” (Falteri, 1996, p. 26), in a dynamic interchange, made possible by the willingness to accept the newness and the others. The knowledge of one’s own and other people’s cultures is assumed without forgetting that “understanding one another is not cumulating information, not talking about the others, but with the others, it means going beyond the descriptions of typological studies and monographs, it means listening to and replaying.” (Rizzi, 1992, p. 42).

## 3. Overcoming ethnocentrism and promoting dialogue between cultures

The path toward interculturality is marked by few essential processes without which it will be hard to achieve predetermined goals. As previously stated, interculturality does not mean “integrate bearers of different cultures into the unique cultural model present in the receiving country” (Di Agresti, 1992). It concerns the creation of interpersonal interactions, exchanges, and sharing, based on the awareness that different people have got their own personal and cultural identities. It is obviously that all human beings have a large amount of ethnocentrism\* to a greater or a lesser extent. Ethnocentrism is essential in the life of human beings because of its role in building people’s personal and cultural identities. As identities are generated by the interactions with the actual cultural dimension where people live in, it is important that what is offered by society is believed valid by

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\* It is considered useful the definition of ethnocentrism given by C. Tullio Altan in “*Verso una scuola interculturale*” p. 3, by Durino Allegra, *Verso una scuola interculturale*, La Nuova Italia Editore, 1993.

people. Hence, “the need to see and recognize one’s own culture as a reference point to identify and affirm cultural identities responds to a clear and licit necessity.” With such a peculiarity, ethnocentrism has a very positive role especially when it is characterized by a discriminating approach toward one’s own culture, that is to say when people are “able to tell positive aspects from negative ones within one’s own culture” (Bernardi, 1993).

Unfortunately, ethnocentrism turns to be pathological especially when “the licit claim of one’s own ethnicity switches from its celebration to the disdain of others ethnicities and the bearers of them.” (Ibid. p. 425) Even though ethnocentrism has a positive value when it is experienced in a balanced way - with the right amount of self-criticism -, history tells about different implications. Looking back to the past, it is easy to realize how western society has developed a value of superiority over other cultures. From the colonial period until these days – a period characterized by modern technological discoveries and economic and industrial development without equal in the world – Europe has considered itself “the repository of a definitely superior culture than others, or rather the repository of the one and only culture” (Durino Allegra, 1993), but, as a matter of fact, many of these technological innovations have been produced by other cultures and cleverly stolen by Europeans. Moreover, a strong nationalistic mentality – which has marked the last two centuries - has to be incorporated into the supremacy as stated before. It was and still is one of the obstacles to the openness toward other and different cultures. Receiving countries have to carry out “an effort to decentralize usual frames” in order to “take distance from routine and what is known, learning different options and points of view” (Rizzi, 1992). Such a perspective makes it possible to accept the *newness* of others, without losing one’s own past and identity. No one culture is allowed to claim to be *the culture*, this is the only way to eradicate that dangerous prejudice of assuming one culture as a paradigm for the others. In this historical moment – a complex scenario where different ethnics live together –it is required a preventive education aimed to create a mind open to cultural pluralism, going beyond the absolutistic vision of one’s own culture (Pinto Minerva, 2002). Switching from ethnocentrism to cultural relativism does not mean creating similarities among cultures. In fact, what characterizes cultures is their own specificity, that is to say the way people have found the essential answers about existence. Therefore, cultural relativism means identifying as valid one’s own and others’ cultures. Both have virtues and vices. For this reason, it is required to “compare regularly one’s own culture with other cultures carrying out then a strict connection between knowledge and routine” (Secco, 1992), with a continuous dialogue between groups, identifying those particular values needed for a peaceful and harmonic pluralist cohabitation. It is necessary to take into consideration that this argument presents some implementation problems because at least three different evocations might arise comparing oneself to foreigners. “*Evocation* of stereotypes and prejudices with regard to other’s mentality, intelligence, sentimental behaviors, and daily routines. *Evocation* of territorial defense strategies. The presence of other people within one’s own living and working spaces represents a risk. It treats the balances of one’s own ecosystem; it also treats the acquired or established privileges of a human group allocated in a specific urban or extra-urban context – a human group which might have already experienced migration itself. *Evocation* of fear of potential loss of one’s own certainties and regulator values which people believe – by assumption or reason - to be the safety “maps” of one’s own survival. (Demetrio, Favaro, 1992). Considering what said before, where the actual chance of different ways of life is admitted, it will be achievable to realize a pluralistic cohabitation able to communicate one’s own cultural traditions and values to the others (Pizzi, 2006).

#### **4. Difficulties experienced by migrants in the receiving country**

What has achieved shows how the opportunity of a practical integration among different cultures takes shape when the ethnocentric vision is overtaken, when the openness to alterity is characterized by respect, dialogue and mutual understanding. Even if it is a great prerequisite, a well-balanced cultural relativism is not enough. It is required to take into consideration that, from the perspective of cultural identity, foreigners, as such, present a wealth of difficulties which does not belong to native

people that need to be familiar with and take on if they want to get a real integration with foreigners. "Immigrants find themselves living in two different cultures with a deep sense of uncertainty. They are not nourished by their origin cultures anymore and they feel not accepted by the receiving culture. They leave a social life based on the community support and find themselves overwhelmed by human conglomerates aiming at individual success, competitiveness, exploitation of others, doing on one's own account" (Rizzi, 1992).

Furthermore, the question of communication should not be underestimated. "Immigrants need to learn a new language and they usually learn it almost only in the streets. They learn a set of rules, codes and symbols by which they find their way in a new space and time." (Vico, 1992). One of the primary goals of the intercultural approach should be to help overcome those cultural patterns related to old clichés and prejudices, and, the consequent fear of losing their safety or even their own cultural identity. In this sense, intercultural education means helping to make our own perspective of "Education of a thought capable of holding together the polarities and extremes to avoid radicalism dimensional. And therefore in order to defend, on the one hand, the universalistic principles at the basis of human rights (including the right to differences), the other the principles of protection of human dignity are found in the singularity of its different manifestations". In essence, the aim is to educate to switch from one mode of thinking "only rigid and static thinking plural, mobile migrant" in order to recognize the personal and cultural identity of the other, without anxiety and foreclosures (Pinto Minerva, 2002). In this regard, in fact, we know how the lack of openness and mutual understanding of the differences can lead to serious relationship conflicts which, if handled poorly, they end up fueling feelings of exclusion and intolerance, and tend to favor the emergence of xenophobic behavior and violent.

Obviously, intercultural dialogue is not a 'panacea' for all problems related to immigration and integration, as well as not even pretend to give answers to all the questions that may arise in this regard, however, it can certainly make a valuable contribution "The development of democratic stability and the fight against prejudices and stereotypes in social and political level, and facilitate the development of partnerships between cultural and religious communities, thus helping to prevent or mitigate conflicts in post-conflict situations conflicting or 'frozen conflicts'" (Council of Europe, 2008). Intercultural dialogue contributes, therefore, to promote the political, social, cultural and economic cohesion in culturally diverse societies and "promotes equality, human dignity and the sense of sharing common goals. Intercultural dialogue is aimed at better understanding the habits and views of the world, to strengthen the cooperation and participation (or the freedom to make choices), to allow people to grow and change and, finally, to promote tolerance and respect for others".

Moreover, the significant presence of entire families of immigrants leads, inevitably, the need to rethink the entire social order and to promote co-existence based on mutual exchange between different cultures, as well as the sense of urgency to start new educational processes to encourage communication and interpersonal relations. Exit the logic of individualism to approximate closing and other means, undoubtedly, the effort to understand their needs and the many difficulties not only inevitable problems and misunderstandings that come from belonging to a different culture, but also state of insecurity and inadequacy that the lack of reference points can arouse in an individual who finds himself living in a reality that does not belong to him and that, especially in the beginning, is not able to handle (ibid., p. 17). The intercultural relationship requires, in fact, not only a willingness to learn about other cultures and to recognize and accept differences, but also a commitment to put at the center of the relationship individuals - themselves the bearers of a specific cultural identity - with their experiential experiences, their hopes and their specific needs. The integration is characterized, therefore, as a sequential process aimed on the one hand to promote the integration of immigrants as citizens who actively participate in social, political, economic and cultural life of the host country and, secondly, to promote the 'cultural enrichment and ethical society that welcomes them. In the light of these considerations, it understands the need to entrust the "pedagogical thinking and practice educational task to imagine and sustain a sense of shared humanity, strengthen social ties, promoting

a sense of community in diversity, cultivate the art coexistence, in short, to invent, to live together in a world that has become, at the same time, too small and too big" (Ibid., p. 17).

From this point of view, it becomes clear the importance of the role played by the school in educating the new generations to deal with otherness and identity building 'global', able to overcome the limitations of a cultural focus on whether same and unable to open up to new horizons cognitive.

On a practical level, the school environment must carry out a series of training and education designed to promote integration and learning, but most importantly, it must point to a strong cross-cultural training of teachers. In this regard, is crucial for teachers to provide a valid and continuous professional training which also includes the acquisition of all those soft skills and education necessary to effectively carry out a process of intercultural education. In this respect, the conception to their cultural means, on the one hand, to promote in students the ability to interact and engage with the otherness of the other, work on themselves, on their way of relating to immigrant pupils and to consider the their cultural differences, as well as: "Rethinking their teaching methods through a review of the content and methods; adopt attitudes favorable to the emergence of a 'school climate' of openness and dialogue in the classroom and the development of a perception of diversity as enrichment mutual access to new knowledge necessary to be able to manage this complexity; adopt attitudes critical and reflective teaching practices in relation to experience, adopt an attitude of research in collaboration with groups of teachers and with the help of external experts, aiming at the achievement of a research project -action, which constitutes an active method of in-service training and continuous updating" (Fiorucci, 2011, pp. 79-88). Finally, in relating to foreign students, we must always keep in mind that the specification of immigrants must never lose sight of the fact that these students are first and foremost children or teenagers with their own personality and their own way of thinking and acting, for which belong to a different ethnic group must be evaluated simply as one of many variables to consider, because, regardless of the culture to which they belong, each of them has the personal characteristics that make it different by those who belong to the same ethnic group. In addition, each has had a history of his own life, his own life with its experiences and a particular way of perceiving changes related to migration and to adapt to the social and cultural reality of the host country.

Moreover, the obstacles that the student immigrant faces are not few: just think of the difficulty to communicate and interact with their classmates because of the lack of knowledge of the language and inability to decode the implicit cultural system of the new company. This last difficulty also often causes a number of misconceptions and misunderstandings in relationships with peers and with the same teacher and the students can give rise to a strong sense of disorientation due to the fact that, in addition to ignore the new system of implicit cultural, he already "brings with it a parallel system of implicit rules regarding their culture of origin, which in most cases are not known or are even subject to opposing interpretations in the culture of the host country" (Pinto Minerva, 2002, p. 44). In order to transform these barriers to communication into an opportunity for growth and mutual understanding for the students, the teacher must be able to recognize and consider the symbolic meanings and values of the cultures of the children in that class in order to understand their needs and promote the common rules of coexistence (Demetrio, Favaro, 1997, p. 88). In this case, however, a valuable contribution may be offered by intercultural mediator who, alongside the teacher in dealing with the student immigrant, can provide all the information related to culture and value system of the country of origin, as well as help the student to settle in and to orient themselves in the school, helping the immigrant pupil relationships with his classmates.

## 5. Conclusion

We are dealing with different ways of interaction which claim a higher consciousness of one's own methods of communication and the ones used by others. This way, it is possible to avoid unfounded-prejudice fears and the creation of divisions and ghettos produced by misunderstanding (Santagati,

2004). Therefore, integration is an achievable goal if it is searched for and wanted by both parts. It is based on the respect for every human being and her or his values. Undoubtedly, among the merits of intercultural education, one cannot detect what he had brought into the classes "different languages and not the usual practice in daily teaching," but the fact of using "tools of different and original" (Fiorucci, 2008, pp. 17-67) and implement educational activities more attractive and engaging than the usual traditional methods. Suffice it to say, just to name a few, the workshop activities, arts and entertainment, or to recreational activities, which include a variety of games: Those interactive ones role, simulation games, etc... And still, think of all those practices and to promote interpersonal relationships and knowledge of through dialogue, narration and autobiographical stories. Obviously, these methods are closely related to the objectives that intercultural learning paths arise and, in other respects, are also essential in classes without foreign children as they offer students the opportunity to incorporate intercultural those principles from which one cannot ignore if you want to build a society open to pluralism, the 'culture of life' and respect for differences and human dignity. In essence, implement intercultural education in school means to deal with other stories and memories open the prospects of their culture. To teach a truly intercultural thinking, means, therefore, also teach others to develop feelings of empathy, reciprocity and solidarity with those who belong to a different culture.

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