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Multicultural Societies, Pluricultural People and the Project of Intercultural Education

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based on the text *Context, concepts and theories* of the 'Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters'

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Contemporary societies are multicultural and Europe as a whole is multicultural. It was ever thus but the complexity is increasing as a consequence of mobility and migration. It is important to clarify the impact of this societal phenomenon on individuals who are potentially or actually pluricultural as a consequence of experiencing multicultural social life. The threats to social cohesion which increased multiculturalism brings, have to be counter-acted by education for intercultural dialogue which depends on intercultural competence. Compulsory education is thus required to respond to this situation by developing learners' intercultural competence. It can do so through language education which introduces learners to other cultures external or internal to their own society. Educational systems can also give learners access to other cultures and their discourses within the curriculum, i.e. the cultures of the different subjects and the identification with the specific modes of being and perceiving which inhere in each subject and group of subjects, for example in history as a subject and in the social sciences as a whole. The school thus introduces learners to different kinds of culture, a concept that hence needs careful definition.

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1. Complex phenomena, concepts and terminology¹

Contemporary societies are complex and the role of education is changing as a consequence of societal change. What may have previously been perceived as simple realities – notably the idea of the nation-state with one language and culture shared by all its citizens – are no longer true, and in fact have seldom been so. The role of compulsory schooling, in the life of individuals and in the evolution of societies – and of language education as a major constituent of schooling – has changed and will probably continue to do so. Multilingualism in societies and the plurilingualism of individuals is now commonplace and education for plurilingualism is necessary.

Plurilingual individuals belong to and identify with complex groupings, some of which are temporary, resembling interconnecting networks more than the stable and named groups such as professions, nationalities or minorities. Whereas the role of compulsory education may have previously been to confirm established groups and introduce young people to identification with them, it is now wider than this and includes familiarisation with the alterity of comparable groups – other nationalities for example – and their perspectives on the world, including their perceptions of one's own taken for granted beliefs, values and behaviours. It also includes education and training in the requisite competences for interaction with people of other groupings – and other cultures – in the form of intercultural competence and awareness.

'Intercultural education' is a response to these needs, but the term 'intercultural education' is part of a wider terminology which needs to be clarified before the precise nature of intercultural education can be described.

2. European societies are multicultural societies

European societies and Europe as an entity are culturally diverse, sometimes as a consequence of changes in political borders leading to the incorporation of people from another polity – in recent or more distant times – sometimes as a consequence of the immigration of people from other polities, sometimes as an 'accident' of history as states have been created where previously there were other kinds of polity each with their own different culture. All 'new' groups bring elements of their heritage culture to the new society. Such societies are 'multicultural'².

Some views of multicultural societies represent cultures as distinct traditions, with minority cultures functioning in their own private space, and depending on the values of the dominant culture for their continued existence. However, this idea of a multicultural society does not correspond to real life experience. Not only are the boundaries between groups unclear, but minority cultures are themselves internally pluralistic, and the symbols and values of their various constituent groups are open to negotiation, contest and change. Moreover, individuals from any background may identify with values associated with a range of sources. At the same time, there are also individuals who claim a more bounded cultural identity.

¹ This text is in part derived from the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters – context, concepts and theories* where more detailed analysis of concepts can be found

² This use is therefore to be differentiated from the use of 'multiculturalism' to refer to the public policy of formally recognising and politically accommodating minority communities equally alongside the majority community.

Thus, a multicultural society is not a patchwork of several fixed cultural identities, but a network of crosscutting networks and identifications which are situated, contested, dynamic and fluid, and heavily dependent on context.

2.1. Culture

The term '*culture*' has many different meanings and interpretations and has itself shifted in meaning over time. In the fifteenth century, it referred to the tending of crops or to rearing animals. During the next two centuries it was used, by analogy, to refer to nurturing the human mind. During the eighteenth century, 'culture' became associated with the arts and scholarship – in philosophy and history, for example – and was considered to be for the wealthy. At about the same time, an alternative view emerged, namely the idea of distinct and variable cultures. A generalised or 'essentialised' culture was regarded as the collective 'heritage' of the national group and identified with a particular ethnic group.

This idea of uniform, completely distinct cultures is still to be found in popular discourse. Thus, nationality is sometimes described as if it were a fixed identity or entity, with its own distinct culture. Such closed views provide simplistic criteria for judging whether someone is 'truly' Polish, French, Greek, etc. This tendency to reify is often the *dominant discourse* about culture. There is also a *demotic discourse*, the language of culture *making*, which is often used when people from different backgrounds interact in discussing issues of common concern or engaging in projects of mutual interest. Demotic discourse views culture as multifaceted and diverse in its range of values, beliefs, practices and traditions – some of which may be recent inventions – and hence as negotiable and subject to personal choice, as a dynamic process through which both meanings and the boundaries of groups or communities are renegotiated and redefined according to current needs.

From the perspective of cultural discourse, then, 'culture' may be seen *both* as something *established*, belonging to a particular national, ethnic, religious or other 'community', *and* as a *dynamic process* relying on personal choice.

3. European societies are plural societies

All European societies exhibit some degree of diversity or *plurality*. First, there is the plurality that comes with the diversity of multicultural societies. This form of plurality, which draws attention to different groups within a society, can be called 'traditional plurality'.

Another form of plurality reflects the fact that, in contemporary European societies, individuals are often in a position to choose values and ideas from a variety of sources. For example, individuals may reject religions and their claims, and seek beliefs and values from religious and humanistic sources. Such individuals make their own personal synthesis of ideas, just as they might utilise a range of cultural ideas and practices. This form of plurality has can be called 'modern' or 'postmodern plurality'.

There is an intertwined relationship between traditional and modern/postmodern plurality which creates changes and developments within an established cultural tradition. For example, there are changes in beliefs and practices across the generations and these have to be seen not just in terms of traditional plurality, but under influences from modern/postmodern plurality. European societies can thus encompass variety of belief, practice and expression, and modern/postmodern plurality accentuates this diversity within cultures even more, blurring their edges.

4. Pluricultural people with intercultural competence

Many people living within multicultural and plural societies are *pluricultural*. Pluricultural individuals are more likely to come from ethnic minority than ethnic majority backgrounds, because minority individuals usually have not their own ethnic heritage culture but must also engage with aspects of the dominant majority national culture in which they live. Members of majority groups by contrast have hitherto not needed to adopt any of the values, beliefs or practices of other groups, especially if they live in an ethnically homogeneous area, but are now increasingly obliged to notice the multiculturalism of their own society and others. This gives them opportunity to grow into pluriculturalism through the complex networks which cross-cut established groupings, to acquire the competences needed in such dynamic situations and experiences.

Pluriculturalism involves identifying with at least some of the values, beliefs and/or practices of two or more cultures, as well as acquiring the competences which are necessary for actively participating in those cultures. Pluricultural individuals are people with the competences of knowledge, disposition and linguistic and behavioural skills required to function as a social actor within two or more cultures.

Pluricultural individuals can express their pluriculturality in a number of different ways. Some individuals simultaneously affirm their multiple cultural allegiances irrespective of context. For example, children born of mixed-parentage often maintain a simultaneous allegiance to the distinctive cultural heritages of both their parents. However, other pluricultural individuals commonly engage in 'alternation'. For example, minority youth whose ethnic culture is very distinct from the prevailing national peer culture frequently adopt ethnic values and practices within the family home but then switch to the national peer culture when they are outside the home, either at school or out with their friends. A third way in which pluriculturality may be expressed is through hybridity, that is, through the eclectic fusion of resources and elements drawn from multiple cultures to create a novel cultural synthesis.

4.1. Interculturality

Pluriculturality needs to be distinguished from *interculturality*. Pluriculturality refers to the capacity to identify with and participate in multiple cultures. Interculturality refers to the capacity to experience and analyse cultural otherness, and to use this experience to reflect on matters that are usually taken for granted within one's own culture and environment. Interculturality involves being open to, interested in, curious about and empathetic towards people from other cultures, and using this heightened awareness of otherness to engage and interact with others and, potentially, to act together for common purposes. Interculturality, finally, involves evaluating one's own everyday patterns of perception, thought, feeling and behaviour in order to develop greater self-knowledge and self-understanding. Interculturality thus enables people to act as mediators among people of different cultures, to explain and interpret different perspectives. Interculturality does *not* involve identifying with another cultural group or adopting the cultural practices of the other group.

Interculturality entails a number of underlying cognitive, affective and behavioural competences. These include knowledge (for example, knowledge about other cultural groups and their products and practices, and knowledge about the ways in which people of different cultures interact), attitudes (such as curiosity, openness, respect for otherness, and empathy), skills of interpreting and relating (for example, interpreting a practice from another culture, and relating it to practices within one's own culture), skills of discovery (such as the ability to search out and acquire new knowledge about a culture and its practices and products), and

critical cultural awareness (that is, the ability to evaluate critically the practices and products of one's own and other cultures).

5. Intercultural dialogue and social cohesion

The Council of Europe's *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* emphasises the dependence of social cohesion on interculturality. Social cohesion denotes 'the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding polarisation' (para 24). The role of intercultural dialogue is fundamental in creating and maintaining social cohesion and intercultural competence is its practical foundation since 'The learning and teaching of intercultural competence is essential for democratic culture and social cohesion' (para 151).

The need to promote social cohesion within a society is not a new concern and has been one of the purposes of compulsory education since its inception. However, the increasing frequency of migration and mobility – a phenomenon which divides industrial and post-industrial societies irreversibly from agrarian societies – has created new minority social groups within states which hitherto considered themselves, with only some justification, to be homogeneous. Such new social groups are often vulnerable because lacking social status, and the Council of Europe is particularly concerned to ensure the social inclusion of vulnerable groups of all kinds and, in particular, migrant or immigrant groups.

Social inclusion can take many forms in terms of rights, duties and activities in a community. The White Paper posits five policy approaches to the promotion of intercultural dialogue and one of these is the acquisition of intercultural competence through planned teaching and learning. Key competence areas are 'democratic citizenship, language and history'. Education about religious and convictional diversity in an intercultural context is seen as contributing to education for democratic citizenship, although education about religions would be dealt with under different subject headings in different states. Similarly, interreligious dialogue is recognised as an important dimension of intercultural dialogue. The Council of Europe has pursued the improvement of teaching and learning in the three areas of [democratic citizenship](#), [language](#) and [history](#) and in [education about religions](#) in numerous projects over many years.

A democratic citizen needs the competences of a social actor i.e. someone actively involved in the communities around them, often sharing the same language. However, since European states and the European community as a whole is multilingual and multicultural, the competences of citizenship need to be complemented by linguistic and intercultural competences, and the label 'intercultural citizenship' can be used to recognise this extra dimension.

An intercultural citizen, first, has the competences of active citizenship needed in a community – whether local, regional or national – where there is shared language and shared culture. Second, an intercultural citizen has the attitudes, knowledge and skills of intercultural competence which enable them to participate in multilingual and multicultural communities. Such communities exist within states as a consequence of mobility and migration, but they also exist when citizens of different states participate together in any form of joint activity.

5.1. Tolerance, respect and intercultural dialogue

An intrinsic aspect of analysing intercultural social activity is the reflective process of relating new knowledge to one's own self-understanding and values. Sensitivity is an important

element in attempting to understand another's way of life, but part of the reflective process is to relate new understanding to one's own values and beliefs with tolerance and respect for those of others.

The concept of *tolerance* is often used in the etymological sense as 'enduring' (Latin: *tolerare*) something, even that which we do not agree with or appreciate. In this sense tolerance suggests the need for people of different cultural backgrounds to develop the ability at least to endure the fact that others believe and live differently within a particular society, or in the wider world, even though they might share some core values. In addition to being an individual attitude, tolerance can be a guiding principle for state relations regarding cultural diversity, whereby the state accepts the existence of a variety of traditions and cultures. Tolerance can thus – in both senses – be seen as a *minimum* standard or precondition for peaceful co-existence in multicultural societies.

The concept *respect* refers to a more positive attitude, where one does not simply tolerate difference, but regards it as having a positive value. Before one can respect a way of life, or a person, one needs to have some fairly close acquaintance with or understanding of it, her or him. Respect can be combined with tolerance, since it does not require agreement with that which is respected, but can be seen as a way of appreciating 'the other' and his or her differences, thus reducing the need for toleration.

Approaching 'other' ways of life, and those who practise them, with tolerance and respect are steps in the direction of interculturality, and both tolerance and respect are necessary prerequisites for effective intercultural dialogue to take place. *Intercultural dialogue* refers to an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups from different cultures. Such dialogue is based on mutual understanding, openness and a genuine respect for and appreciation of diversity, equal human dignity and equal human rights. It involves a positive attitude towards diversity, seeing the meeting between people with different beliefs and cultural practices as enriching for all, and seeing one's own individuality as being developed through meeting 'otherness'. This is the process of intercultural dialogue which underpins the achievement of social cohesion within multicultural societies, and the fostering of a sense of inclusion where no individual or group is marginalised or defined as outsiders.

Tolerance, respect and intercultural dialogue do not require one to see all cultures, practices and beliefs as equally true or valuable. Rather, they are based on the fact that one approaches other people, groups and practices with a certain identity and worldview of one's own, although these might change and develop through encounters and exchanges with others from different backgrounds. Tolerance, respect and intercultural dialogue therefore do not imply indifference, relativism (the idea that contrary beliefs from different cultures are equally true) or syncretism (the combination of different forms of belief). This means that intercultural encounters may involve tensions among people of different value-orientations, but the Council of Europe's defence of human rights provides a clear standpoint which includes a duty to be intolerant of values and practices which offend human rights.

6. Intercultural education and multicultural societies

Of crucial importance for the maintenance and development of multicultural societies is the provision of educational strategies that raise awareness of the issues and foster intercultural dialogue and communication. Educational strategies need to identify common or overlapping ideas and values, but they must also identify and address difference. Effective intercultural dialogue requires the acquisition of intercultural competences, including multiperspectivity

and the ability to see oneself and familiar situations and events from the perspectives of cultural ‘others’.

Multiperspectivity can be promoted within the curriculum of obligatory schooling in diverse ways which are embodied in the languages of education. The panoply of languages which consists of regional, minority and migration languages, the language(s) of schooling and foreign languages is the means for expressing these perspectives, and the modes of teaching these languages need to take this into account in various ways, in particular comparing and contrasting perspectives on ‘the same’ phenomena.

In second or foreign language curricula, the teaching of languages of different communities – local, regional, minority or national – draws attention to perspectives which vary from one social group to another and from society to society. Methods for teaching and raising awareness of experience of otherness, associated with a different language exist and continue to develop.

Within the language(s) of schooling, the acquisition of the discourses of subjects – both Language as Subject and other subjects – also involves reflection on multiperspectival modes of analysing and understanding reality. A discourse from the natural sciences will for example permit learners to understand a rainbow in a different way from a literary or pictorial description from the human sciences or an account of its symbolic significance from the social sciences. This academic discourse as a whole is different from the language of everyday life, as well as each subject having its own distinctive discourse.

Each school subject and the scientific discipline which underpins it, is the manifestation of a community into which learners are introduced and socialised by their teachers, with the intention that they should be able to identify with that community and its modes of seeing and being (*‘Languages and Identities’*, Byram M.) and that they should as a consequence be able to apply their knowledge and skills in the discipline to critically analyse their experience of life in society. For example, through their identification with mathematics, learners can analyse the use of quantitative representations of the world and critique the mis-use of terms such as the trite critique of schools that they are failing because ‘fifty per cent of children are below average’.

Learners’ intercultural encounters are therefore not limited to experience of otherness through foreign or second language learning. Such experience is found within the curriculum through engagement with the cultures of subjects, where it is a language-based experience too, but one which is less immediately evident.

Teachers are members of subject communities, identifying with the disciplines but in varying degrees. Some teachers – usually in secondary schooling – tend to identify strongly with their (one or two) subject(s) whereas others tend to identify with their role as pedagogues and the sciences which underpin pedagogy. As gatekeepers to the cultures of subjects, teachers act as mediators, inter alia by making the language of the discipline accessible to learners. Teachers of foreign and second languages are more aware of this role than other teachers because it is explicitly part of their training and the definition of their subject: to introduce learners to the cultures of other groups who speak the language in question. Others, such as teachers of history or of literature, may share a similar purpose of introducing learners to alterity diachronically and synchronically.

The task of teachers is made more complex when mediating the access to subjects for learners in vulnerable groups, particularly those of immigrant background. The burden of learning in a language which is not their dominant language – particularly for learners already of school age at immigration – is made heavier by another dimension of teaching and learning. Modes of teaching and conceptualisations of subjects and subject communities may differ in their new school to that which they experienced in their country of origin.

On the other hand, the discourses of different subjects are not entirely different from each other. The discourses of groups of subjects such as the natural sciences share features which reflect a common basis in scientific method. The discourses of the human sciences share other features which reflect their expression of human emotions or aesthetic responses for example. In this sense, the cultures of subjects and their underlying disciplines are as fluid and interconnected as the cultures of other social groups as explained above. Rather than distinct and bounded communities and their cultures, learners experience networks within the whole curriculum and the task of teachers as mediators is to make the overlaps explicit so that learners experience the interlocking nature of different subject perspectives on their world, and do not perceive their task as being the acquisition of endless lists of terminology for each subject without reference to other subjects.

Related instruments of the Council of Europe

The *European Language Portfolio* is a document in which those who are learning or have learned a language - whether at school or outside school - can record and reflect on their language learning and cultural experiences. It encourages learners to assess autonomously their existing language competences and to plan how they will progress

The *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* is an instrument with which learners can analyse an encounter of any kind with someone whom they experience as 'other', to reflect on how they and the other responded to the experience and to evaluate their reactions.

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