

# An Intercultural Approach to Education

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This article focuses on an intercultural approach to education. After outlining why an intercultural approach is necessary today, the characteristics of an intercultural perspective in education are presented, highlighting that such an approach constitutes an intentional political project aimed at all for the construction of spaces in which relations between individuals with different cultural backgrounds are possible. In this sense, the objectives of such an approach concern the promotion of social justice and the recipients are all the citizens in a democratic society.

**Keywords:** interculturalism, education, multicultural society, intercultural relations, migrations.



## 1. A Cultural "Counter-Narration"

**W**hy is an intercultural approach to education necessary today? To answer this first question, it is useful to start with the case expressed in Greek mythology by Sophocles' *Antigone*.

Sophocles tells us that, having waged war against Thebes, Polynices (Antigone's brother) was to remain unburied, by order of the new king of Thebes, Creon. But Antigone refused to respect the order of the king and decided to bury his brother's body. Upon discovery of her act, Antigone was condemned to live the rest of her days imprisoned in a cave, where she eventually committed suicide.

Why did Antigone refuse to respect the order of the king of Thebes? She claimed that the prohibition against burying her brother imposed by the king was in contradiction with a superior law – the “unwritten norms of the gods” – which prevail over those imposed by men.<sup>1</sup>

Within this conflict between dissonant polarities, between law and ethics/human rights, we are shown another possibility. Antigone is presented essentially as a dissident, not by chance, at a time and in a society where politics was the exclusive domain of men – yet Sophocles assigns this role to a woman.

What do the events of *Antigone* have to do with intercultural education? The radical nature of these examples clears the field of easy formulas that usually reduce the intercultural approach to one of compromise, looking for a peaceful state of neutrality or absence of conflict. Instead, their struggles suggest the need for public action, in order to outline further possibilities beyond the usual ones, on the basis of essentially ethical motivations. The idea of intercultural education which is reduced to activities simply aimed at familiarity with elements of other cultures, often translates into the “rhetoric of diversity” and is based on crystallized and often trivialized traits of cultures.

Real intercultural education, on the other hand, moves precisely into the space of conflict between different cultural elements, between several horizons of meaning, between diverse political, ethical, and socio-economic orientations. It often relies on perspectives that are in contrast with dominant opinions, foreshadowing future horizons that are also in open contrast with what is traditional. Such an orientation

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<sup>1</sup> Sofocle, *Edipo re – Edipo a Colono – Antigone* (Milan: Oscar Mondadori, 2007).

thus carries out a cultural “counter-narration” clashing with dominant ideology,<sup>2</sup> in order to affect the patterns of meaning with which subjects interpret the world.

## 2. Characteristics of Intercultural Education

*What, then, is intercultural education?* No doubt it can be argued that intercultural education constitutes an intentional political plan to be implemented through education for the promotion of dialogue and cultural exchange between all, both natives and foreigners. In this way, cultural, gender, class, and biographical differences become points of view enhanced by educational processes, offering the opportunity for each person to develop starting from what they are.<sup>3</sup>

Intercultural education therefore presupposes an intentional political plan:

**a)** an educational plan, as it requires an active investment in a society, aimed at establishing relationships between subjects that interact with different cultures, on the basis of an “interactionist” option. In this sense, intercultural education holds a fundamental connection with and a tendency towards social justice; that is to say, it addresses conditions of disadvantage (in establishing these relations), in order to guarantee not only equal opportunities in education but also fairness and scholastic success for foreign students, as an essential criterion for the evaluation of the effectiveness of the education system as a whole.

**b)** political, as it is aimed at the future and connected to an idea of a society to be built. Speaking of education means then always planning community projects with

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<sup>2</sup> See Jack Goody, *Il furto della storia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> For more, see: James A Banks, “Citizenship Education and Diversity: Implications for Teacher Education,” in *Global Citizenship Education: Philosophy, Theory and Pedagogy*, eds., Michael A. Peters, Alan Britton, and Harry Blee (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2008), 317-331; Ravinda Barn, “Interculturalism in Europe: Fact, Fad or Fiction – The Deconstruction of a Theoretical Idea,” *Unedited Workshop Proceedings: Debating Multiculturalism*, London Dialogue Society 1 (2012): 101-110; Kenneth Cushner, Averil McClelland, and Phillip Safford, *Human diversity in education: An intercultural approach*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2012); Carl A. Grant and Agostino Portera, eds., *Intercultural and Multicultural Education: Enhancing Global Interconnectedness* (London: Routledge, 2011); Jagdish S Gundara, *Interculturalism, Education and Inclusion* (London: Paul Chapman, 2000); and Jagdish S Gundara, “Intercultural Education, Vulnerable Groups in Vulnerable European Nations,” *Studi Emigrazione/Migration Studies* 186 (2012): 302-324.

the men and women in mind who will live in such a community. It is not possible to tackle the subject of intercultural education if we do not first ask ourselves the fundamental question about what kind of society we intend to build through this educational orientation.<sup>4</sup>

This is an unavoidable reference, since, in a sort of “mirror effect,” the foreigner reflects a version of the society in which he or she is immersed, highlighting, in particular, its structural weaknesses, inconsistencies and problems, as well as the inability to translate the recognition of formal rights in their effective exercise. In this regard, Abdelmalek Sayad recalls that migrants are, from the point of view of the societies in which they arrive, a “redundant” presence – because they bring into question its basic services, institutions, even national behavior.<sup>5</sup>

This is evident, for example, when the reasoning on immigration issues inevitably leads to the question of what kind of Europe one intends to construct.

A clarification in this sense is due in light of the recent “refugee crisis”, which has been developing in Europe over the past few years. This crisis is certainly not only determined by the number of arrivals, which remains far lower than the migrations in the southern hemisphere of the world.<sup>6</sup> If we speak about a “crisis,” we should speak instead about the loss of the idea of Europe as a “cradle” of human rights, a purpose shipwrecked on the rocks of rejection, closure, and even violence at the entrance points to Europe that refugees face, while fleeing war and persecution.

c) intentional, because it is the fruit of precise choices, the outcome of planning, reflection, and research; certainly not coincidence.

This approach translates, in fact, into a commitment to be implemented, consciously and continuously, in formal educational spaces (schools, universities, etc.) and non-formal ones (local and community associations, etc.), with a long-term perspective aimed not only at immigrants (young foreigners and their families), but at the entire population (all young people, schools, and society as a whole), in relation to different age groups, with a genuine perspective of lifelong learning.

To analyze the problem of intercultural relations, we need to take a broad and long-

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<sup>4</sup> See Paulo Freire, *La pedagogia degli oppressi* (Milan: Mondadori, 1971); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogia della speranza. Un nuovo approccio alla Pedagogia degli oppressi* (Torin: EGA, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Abdelmalek Sayad, *La doppia assenza. Dalle illusioni dell'emigrato alle sofferenze dell'immigrato* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> See The United Nations Refugee Organization, *Global trends. Forced displacement in 2022* (UNHCR: Geneva, 2023).

term look at the issue:

- broad, because it is necessary to go beyond local and national contexts, realizing that migration is a phenomenon on a global scale, which involves many areas all over the world;
- long-term, as the historian Fernand Braudel would say, because migrations, beyond the contingent events, have always been part of the history of humanity, increasing the cultural diversity of the population.

From this point of view, we can undoubtedly affirm that education is, in itself, intercultural. The adjective “intercultural”, used in this reflection, could even be omitted without any consequence for the reasoning that has been developed, adopting just the expression “education.” In other words, education is either intercultural or it is not authentic education at all.

### 3. The Goals of Intercultural Education

*What are the goals of intercultural education?* To answer this question, it is first of all necessary to note that the discourses on intercultural education often refer to difficult realities and work-life situations that pose problems and contradictions in the lives of subjects: the theme of a possible intercultural educational plan basically translates into the problem of protecting the dignity and integrity of human beings.

For this reason, without any rhetoric, it must be recognized that the immigrant is such in society, essentially because he or she is “poor”, that is to say, because he or she lives at a disadvantage in terms of social, economic, cultural, and political opportunities. As Hans Magnus Enzensberger states, “[f]oreigners are more foreign the poorer they are.”<sup>7</sup>

It is indeed the condition of socio-economic inconvenience, connected to migration, which produces a disadvantage, very often not cultural differences in themselves. This clarification is necessary, because the immigrant is a vulnerable subject not because of their migration but becomes one when he or she comes into contact with the context in which he or she is immersed. In other words, it is the insertion in this new environment that makes them socially weak.

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<sup>7</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *La Grande Migrazione* (Torin: Einaudi, 1993), 26.

It is interesting to note how often the problems inherent in social inequalities are relegated to the sphere of ethnic and cultural differences, which tends to conceal the materiality of historical-social forces. Subjects respond, in a system of asymmetric and unequal relationships, to their placement in society and to the social role assigned to them.

Racism plays an important role in a system that generates inequality. In its most complex form, “systemic-institutional” racism acts fundamentally as a form of discrimination that is not rooted so much in the actions of individuals or groups, but in the processes at the heart of the way a society functions, which produce situations of inequality and disadvantage.<sup>8</sup>

The purpose of intercultural education is, therefore, exactly that of affecting the educational, cultural, social, economic, and political contexts, which, with their devices of social differentiation, make migrants vulnerable. Among the different systems of differentiation in particular, formal and non-formal forms of education play a decisive role. Peggy McIntosh clarifies this point, recounting the educational implications of the structures of power in cultural and social systems: “I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring racial dominance on my group from birth.”<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. Recipients of Intercultural Education

*Who are the recipients of intercultural education?* A rather superficial interpretation could lead us to believe that this approach is aimed only at migrants, to facilitate their inclusion into the target society.

Without a doubt, this is an important issue, since the very presence of migrants is the reason that leads us to address the issue of intercultural education. However, it would be short-sighted to stop at this finding. In fact, intercultural

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<sup>8</sup> See Pietro Basso, ed., *Razzismo di stato. Stati Uniti, Europa, Italia* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2010); Tahar Ben Jelloun, *Ospitalità francese* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1998); and Michel Wieviorka, *Il razzismo* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies,” in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, eds. Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 1998), 94, 96, 100-101, 104.

education is not a “pedagogy for foreigners” in terms of how it is set up in Italy and in countries that refer to an “intercultural” model in dealing with the recent immigration phenomenon.<sup>10</sup> Instead, it is a broader approach, which involves all natives and foreigners alike. Moreover, since this is a perspective aimed at tackling the problem of intercultural relations, it would be particularly risky to formulate a one-way request for change, with questions addressed only to minorities, without the majority being asked to question themselves.<sup>11</sup>

In identifying the recipients of intercultural education, we need to adopt an “interactionist” perspective, focusing on a strategy to build interaction, comparison, and dialogue. Therefore, the problem arises of constructing the cultural bases for the development of open relationships, as well as of a critical thought on which to base such interactions.

Intercultural relations are configured, in the context of life and work, primarily in the form of a relationship between a majority and a minority. From this there are at least two consequences. The first is that we have a structurally asymmetric relationship, as power is not equally distributed between the two sides. The second consideration concerns the fact that the problems of immigrants are also those of the natives, not only because the latter have the same dilemmas as the former (even when they are not aware of it), but also because the problems immigrants face cannot be resolved with policies that are directed only at them. Instead, better policies have the ability to take into account the many “particular” immigrant needs, while addressing those of the entire population. From this perspective, raising the quality of educational, cultural, and social services for the most fragile segment of the population ensures an increase in the quality of these services for the entire population, since a service able to offer answers to the most vulnerable will be able to respond better to

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<sup>10</sup> See Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, “Osservatorio nazionale per l’integrazione degli alunni stranieri e per l’educazione interculturale,” *La via italiana per la scuola interculturale e l’integrazione degli alunni stranieri* (Rome: MPI, 2007); Ministero dell’Istruzione, dell’Università e della Ricerca, *Linee guida per l’accoglienza e l’integrazione degli alunni stranieri* (Rome: MIUR, 2014); Ministero dell’Istruzione, dell’Università e della Ricerca, *Diversi da chi? Raccomandazioni per l’integrazione degli alunni stranieri e per l’intercultura* (Rome: MIUR, 2015); and Ministero dell’Istruzione, *Orientamenti interculturali. Idee e proposte per l’integrazione di alunne e alunni provenienti da contesti migratori* (Rome: MI, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> See Francesco Susi, *L’educazione interculturale fra teoria e prassi* (Rome: Università degli Studi Roma Tre, 1998).

everyone's needs.

Notions of security, integration, and duty, used in the public discourse on immigration, more than corresponding to rights, and the conditions for their effective exercise, are presented as problem-free and do not ask anything of or involve the native component, which is always represented as open, inclusive, and monolithic. For this reason, a strong emphasis on education must be implemented, first of all, towards the natives, the majority, to urge them to critically question their identity, which is often used as a “weapon” to exclude others.<sup>12</sup> (Maalouf, 2001 and 2008).

### 5. Collective Removals

An example of the need for critical interrogation can be made in reference to the Italian context. But no doubt a similar analysis could be developed with reference to the whole European context or to other national cases.

Today, Italian society is, without a doubt, “multicultural” (designating with this term the simple acknowledgment of the coexistence of different cultural groups in the same social space), with about 5 million immigrants (a proportion similar to that of other countries of the European Union) and eight hundred and twenty thousand people with non-Italian citizenship currently enrolled in the school system. Italy is not yet, however, a multicultural country as a consequence of the current phenomenon of immigration: at the same time, an intercultural/pluralist perspective has always been part of the history of the country. This is evidenced by some significant examples.

First of all, in Italy, there is a historical presence of linguistic and cultural minorities, made up of those population groups that speak a native language different from the official language of the state. Italy has recognized 12 minority linguistic groups in our country, corresponding to about 2 and a half million speakers, whose mother tongue is a language other than Italian (e.g. Franco-Provençal, Albanian, Slovenian, Friulian, Ladin, Occitan, Croatian, German, etc.).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Amin Maalouf, *L'identità* (Milan: Bompiani, 2001); Amin Maalouf, ed., *A Rewarding Challenge: How the Multiplicity of Languages Could Strengthen Europe* (European Commission: Brussels, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> See Giovanna Campani, *Dalle minoranze agli immigrati. La questione del pluralismo culturale e religioso in Italia* (Milan: Unicopli, 2008).



Secondly, the story of the emigration of Italians to other countries of the world represents an extraordinary event in contemporary Italian history. It is estimated that between 1876 and 1988, 27 million Italians had emigrated (first to North Europe and then South America, North America, and Australia).<sup>14</sup>

The conditions of the migrant experience of the Italians were generally very harsh, with circumstances of violence, discrimination, marginality, and even real massacres. Nor can we say that the Italian emigration is an event to be relegated to our past, considering that even today 5 million Italians live and work abroad: a figure similar to that of immigrants who are present in our country.

Finally, alongside the phenomenon of emigration, from the mid-fifties and throughout the sixties, the phenomenon of internal migration from the south to the north of the country and from the countryside to the cities increased, which led to an impressive shift of people: nine million Italians.<sup>15</sup> This represented the opportunity for an unprecedented reshuffling of the Italian population in society and in schools. In this scenario, the attempt to represent Italy (or any other country) as a culturally homogeneous context cannot be defined in any other terms than “totally misleading.”

What is striking about these mass experiences (to reiterate the proportions of these events: 2.5 million Italians belonging to linguistic minorities, 27 million emigrants, 9 million internal migrants, compared with 5 million immigrants today) is the fact that today they appear mostly forgotten by the Italian population, the object, in many cases, of a real collective amnesia. They appear completely irrelevant to the practices that are adopted in our country towards immigrants.

## 6. Conclusion

An intercultural approach to education contributes, in short, to questioning ourselves about the authentic meaning of education, which must be traced to the need to address the needs of the most vulnerable, and to discover, then, that only through this fundamental passage can we respond better to the needs of all the recipients of

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<sup>14</sup> See Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina De Clementi, Emilio Franzina, eds., *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana. Vol. I- Partenze* (Rome: Donzelli, 2001); Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina De Clementi, Emilio Franzina, eds., *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana. Vol. II-Arrivi* (Rome: Donzelli, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> See Paul Ginsborg, *Storia d'Italia dal dopoguerra ad oggi*, vol. 2 (Torin: Einaudi, 1989).

educational practices.

In this sense, the intercultural orientation represents a way to reread education in light of all of its diversity, not only cultural, but also gender, social class, biographical, sexual orientation, etc.

Emancipation is a peculiar aspect of education and is, in fact, the price of education. In this sense, education is strongly connected to the condition of conscious citizenship. But there's more. It is a "good in itself," and a right of the subject. In this sense, training people in their rights becomes an instrument of citizenship because, if effectively guaranteed, they allow individuals to identify their needs, to plan their personal and professional trajectories, and to better define strategies to claim and protect their rights. Education therefore assumes a value of empowerment, as a process through which the subject reinforces his or her capacity for choice and self-determination.

A robust democracy presupposes, in fact, the right of individuals, especially the most vulnerable, to acquire information and knowledge, while knowledge is constantly protected and ensured. In fact, learning must first be considered a right, the exercise of which allows everyone to develop, participate, and act socially and politically.

From this perspective, dealing with intercultural education does not mean adding something to education, but rereading education as a tool for thinking and building a better world, characterized by greater social justice, and by more humanity. A critical and transformative toolbox, which, in a world characterized by growing disparities in terms of opportunities, appears increasingly important.

In conclusion, analyzing the intercultural approach contributes to the questioning of the real meaning of education, which must be traced to the need to address the needs of the most vulnerable subjects, to discover, then, that only through this fundamental passage can one subsequently better respond to the needs of all the recipients of educational practices. It is thus highlighted that emancipation is a peculiar dimension of education. In this perspective, intercultural reflection has, still today, much to say, to think and build through education – a better world, characterized by greater social justice, and more humanity.