

Chapter 3

Intercultural Education: A Positive Approach to Difference

Looking at:

- the discovery of relationships
- mechanisms and resources
- the school
- out of school
- stages in intercultural processes
- using activities

Where Does Intercultural Education Come From?

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We - as the writers of this education pack - have tried to be very careful in our use of the terms “multicultural” and “intercultural”. Our choice of terminology is not innocent; it is even subversive; we are not playing with words. We mean to challenge your ideas and actions, and we hope you will challenge ours.

Educational responses to multicultural society

As we have seen in chapter one, the pace of change in our societies has increased dramatically in the last decades. The meeting of different cultures continues to be a major factor in, **and** a result of, these changes. At the same time we have begun to realise that even within dominant cultures there are people who do not conform to the usual norms, who are identified as belonging to sub-cultures. Along with this realisation has come the gradual, if stormy, recognition that these people have rights and demand respect and acknowledgement. Governmental responses to all of these changes have been mixed, often within the same country.

From the Sixties onwards some countries started special educational programmes, which were targeted at children from long-standing minorities and at the children of more recently arrived immigrants. Depending on the political and cultural context, educational systems were called on to fulfil a variety of aims, for instance:

- to ensure that immigrant children could return to their country of origin and be able to fit in to their specific social and educational systems with ease.
- to incorporate the children of minority cultural groups into mainstream society and thereby strip them of their cultural identity completely - this is sometimes known as a policy of assimilation. This could be summarised by

extending the old maxim “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” to “When in Rome, think, feel, believe and do as a Roman”.

- to assist the children of minority cultural groups to fit into mainstream society whilst maintaining parts of their own cultural identity - this is sometimes known as a policy of integration. “When in Roman society, do as the Romans do; but you can cook what you want at home if you close the windows”.

Various educational forms and approaches resulted, sometimes in combination with each other. But there were grave problems associated with such aims and practices. They were based on a belief in the implicit superiority of mainstream culture which was supposed to remain unaffected by contact with other cultures. It was very much a one-way street: change was only expected from “them”. Add to this the fact that the vast majority of immigrants have not “returned” to their countries of origin and we can see that such aims do not correspond with current reality. And they have little in common with the aims of intercultural education.

“The discovery of others is the discovery of a relationship, not of a barrier” (Claude Lévi-Strauss)

Gradually, perceptions of multicultural society have evolved. It is neither a mosaic where cultures are placed side-by-side without any effect on each other, nor is it a melting pot where everything is reduced to the lowest common denominator. Intercultural education proposes processes to enable the discovery of mutual relationships and the dismantling of barriers. There are close links to other educational philosophies, such as education for human rights, anti-racist education and development education. It is therefore a normal reaction if you find elements here which correspond to your experience in other fields. We have learned much from the experiences gained in the pioneering work of multicultural educationalists.

But we choose to use the term “intercultural”. Because, as Micheline Rey points out, if the prefix “inter” is given its full meaning, this necessarily implies:

- interaction
- exchange
- breaking down barriers
- reciprocity
- objective solidarity.

Intercultural Education: A Social Education Process

For a society to become really intercultural, every social group must be able to live in conditions of equality regardless of their culture, lifestyle or origin. This means reconsidering not only how we interact with cultures which seem strange to our own, but also how we interact with minorities such as homosexuals or people with disabilities