

INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

Culture, cultures

Every culture is a global, complex and changing proposal of order to face chaos, the particular elements of which, however, may seem arbitrary from any other global proposal and from any critical situation of change... We know that values are internalized, reasoned, acquired and learned in a particular culture, in every person's daily context, which is why nobody can escape his/her own cultural heritage/background. At an adult age, this heritage, strengthened and influenced by a life experience, conditions the person's perceptions and actions, and is reluctant to questioning.

Think of what you do from the moment you get up until you go to bed, the clothes you wear, the things you use, the images you see in the street and in the media. Our own life is just another reflection of the fact that the world is growing bigger and bigger, but still we feel it getting closer and closer.

From multicultural societies to intercultural societies

The word multiculturalism stands for a fact, the *presence of various cultures on the same scenario*, whereas interculturalism points out at *a relation among those cultures* since, one way or the other, contact between cultures has always existed. Three concepts are frequently used to describe these relations: ethnocentrism, cultural relativism and interculturality.

Multicultural societies

Different cultural, national, ethnic, religious... groups inhabit the same territory but they do not necessarily interact; the difference is often seen and used as main argument for discrimination.

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism means judging one people's beliefs, historical events and social behaviours with the cultural codes of another; this attitude causes lack of understanding and assimilation¹.

¹ Assimilation: in the theories of Jean Piaget, the application of a general schema to a particular instance.

Cultural relativism

Cultural relativism considers all cultures to be equally valid and introduces no criticism whatsoever, respecting in the same way all cultural behaviours; all situations are accepted as cultural values, even if they attempt on fundamental rights. It promotes a respectful racism which prevents evolution in the name of tradition. It brings a static vision of cultures and their history and denies any possibility of change.

Interculturality

In the same territory, different cultural groups hold interactive relations. Interculturality defends the idea that peoples, nations or states are not natural entities but the circumstantial makings of history; the world is in permanent change.

Intercultural conflicts

Any multicultural situation causes conflicts that must be assumed, for it is not possible to avoid them nor convenient to ignore or repress them.

Conflicts are key factors in the evolution of peoples and individuals. They occur naturally and their solution depends both on the attitude adopted and the strategy used.

Interculturality as a learning process

Intercultural education is the answer to conflicts arisen as a consequence of multiculturalism. Its methodology is based on constructivism and a socioaffective approach.

Starting from group experiences, situations that help individual experience will be posed; afterwards, these experiences will be compared to those of the rest of the group and to theoretical approaches. This process has three steps: feeling, comparing and analysing

The objectives of intercultural education are:

- To be aware of the fact that diversity must be considered and valued from equality and never be used to justify marginalization.
- To make an effort to distinguish the different cultural identities and to promote respect towards minorities

- To solve peacefully the possible conflicts of interest that may appear between the groups.

It is addressed to the autochthonous population as much as to the different ethnic groups.

Intercultural education expects that the autochthonous society:

- 1.- knows and modifies stereotypes and biases about the different cultural groups
- 2.- favours knowledge and a positive and critical assessment of the different cultures
- 3.- stimulates awareness of the need for a fairer world
- 4.- promotes attitudes, behaviours and positive social changes which avoid discrimination and favour good relations and the specific development of minority cultures.

It promotes that the different ethnic groups:

- 1.- know and modify stereotypes and biases about the different cultural groups.
- 2.- favour knowledge and a positive and critical assessment of the culture of stay
- 3.- make own culture known
- 4.- promote attitudes, behaviours and positive social changes which avoid discrimination and improve their life conditions

In order to achieve that, it is necessary to:

1. Start from the recognition and integration of a plurinational and plurilinguistic reality in Spain and Europe, of the gypsy culture, of religious diversity, of the reality of the foreign immigrants.
2. Analyze stereotypes and biases of people from other cultures.
3. Analyze the influence of the media in creating stereotypes and biases.
4. Analyze the reasons claimed to reject immigrants (“there is no work...”) looking for the real causes of rejection or indifference.

5. Analyze words like integration, multiculturalism, assimilation, interculturality, cultural relativism... and the consequences of choosing each of them: indifference, exclusion, crossbreeding...
6. Overcome ethnocentrism by questioning our Eurocentric analysis.
7. Analyze socioeconomic, political and cultural consequences of peoples' interdependence: North-South relations
8. Learn to live multicultural conflicts from positions of respect and with attitudes of dialogue.
9. Encourage participation at all levels in both the host and immigrant populations, arranging the necessary meeting spots.
10. Make an intercultural reading of reality.

Steps:

Group building

It is necessary to start by establishing a communicative and cooperating atmosphere that provides confidence to explore perceptions, experiencing and reflecting about concepts.

Analyzing perceptions

Finding out what feelings the others rouse as members of a particular culture, and why.

- First we must uncover our perceptions about the people around us, analysing their origin and the influence of stereotypes and biases.
- Second, we must study what mechanisms support them (resistance to change, fulfilment of expectations, memory...)
- Lastly, we must see what behaviours they provoke (hostility, rivalry, discrimination, paternalism...) and see how this reflection helps in understanding the origin of conflicts.

Analyzing our images, ideas and beliefs. In the first place, one's image of oneself as member of a group and a culture. Then, our image of those belonging to a different culture or group: origin, learning process, values, behaviours, etc.

Broaden our point of view

Here we want to reflect about the concept of culture, the different attitudes that may appear when we relate to other people (ethnocentrism, cultural relativism and interculturality) and the relation between majority and minority cultures.

At this stage, the objective of activities will be to discover and overcome ethnocentrism, that is to say, recognising how one's own culture influences when judging the other, and how we can know other peoples experiencing their values with the help of group dynamics.

Interdependence

At this point, the socioeconomic side of intergroupal relations will be analyzed. We live in an interdependent world, cultures are not static, relations and influences grow and grow everyday

This interdependence can be appreciated in every day's life events, like the fact that raw materials come from Southern countries.

Planning for change

At this stage, the concept of *conflict* is analysed –what does everyone understand by conflict, why multiculturalism is intrinsically problematic- and what strategies will be used to control it. Actions on the short and long term will be planned with the objective of allowing participants to take part in specific multicultural conflicts' problem-solving. Eventually, the changes resulting from this process will be evaluated.

How perceptions are built

Hidden behind perceptions we find society's real values; we need to identify them in order to be able to take them to pieces. They are the result of certain cognitive processes, there are two key concepts: stereotypes and biases. They organise the information by simplifying reality, stressing differences between social categories and establishing expectations. Main social agents like family, school and the media are responsible for their transmission. Stereotypes feedback of these socially shared values.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes are the simplification of the characteristics attributed to a group. They are widely believed and attributed to a person as member of a group and not as an individual.

Stereotypes can be positive, neuter or negative. They are resistant to change, even if there are evidences against them, they complete ambiguous information, direct expectations and are easily remembered.

Biases

Biases introduce two elements: emotion and action. They can be described as unchecked judgements, they can be favourable or not, and refer to individuals or groups.

Discrimination refers to the behavioural component of negative, hostile biases. It can be direct (physical or verbal aggressions) or indirect (through legislation, language, attitudes...)

Psychological mechanisms that maintain these perceptions

Stereotypes are developed inside the person, but are born from social perception and socialization processes. At least three basic cognitive processes coincide in their development, which explain how we perceive reality:

Social categories

Reality is complex and, in order to apprehend it better, we **organise** the stimuli we received into categories, we group them. In the same way, we perceive social stimuli (people) in social categories. These categories can be large (blacks, whites, Jews, women, men...) or small (feminists, male chauvinists, the Smiths, my family, my friends, my clients...).

Social comparison

Social categories are not independent. Stereotypes point out and exaggerate differences between categories. We usually exaggerate differences in order to organise better the information coming from outside.

Attribution of characteristics

Social categories are not mere recipients of information. As cognitive structures, they influence codification and organization, but also our interpretation of information, judgements, beliefs, expectations, behaviours...

Resistance to change

It is related to the values associated to each group. I identify myself with the values associated to my group as opposed to other groups with different values. When someone belonging to a group other than mine does something distinctive, his/her behaviour will be related to his/her membership of the group. For instance, if we see a black person selling drugs, the stereotype "black persons sell drugs" will be strengthened.

Stereotypes direct expectations

Faced with the stereotype "black persons sell drugs", if I see a black person waiting alone in a park, I will foresee his behaviour. Even if I am wrong and he was just waiting for a female friend, I will reinterpret the facts to make them fit with my expectations and the stereotype, for instance, I will think he is going to show her the drug somewhere else.

Self-fulfilment

Not only do we perceive the others according to our expectations, but also we tend to act as we think the others expect from us.

Memory

We remember more easily what matches with our stereotypes. Curiously, also the opposite happens, and information not consistent with stereotypes is remembered and can have a reinforcing effect on them (We will still say "Gypsies are dirty people" when we see a really tidy gypsy person).

Relations between perceptions and groups

We are born inside a social group. Little by little, we become aware of our sense of belonging to this group. In the same way that we acquire a personal identity, so we also acquire a group identity.

Neither persons nor groups live isolated, so both identities are acquired by comparison. But if social identity of someone belonging to a group is not positive, two reactions are possible:

- ❑ either the person leaves the group in order to **assimilate** to the majority group.
- ❑ or he/she reinterprets the group characteristics he/she does not like or works to improve the life conditions of the group.

In the relations between the different groups and in situations of conflict between them, there always happens what is called endogroupal favouritism, which explains phenomena like ethnocentrism. Together with this endogroupal favouritism, there is an emphasis on intergroupal differences and intragroupal similarities.

As a result of the groupal process, we have spent most part of our history pointing out the differences between us and them, encouraging competitiveness, rivalry and bringing up the concept of enemy.