

INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION RECONSIDERED: A DISCUSSION BASED ON COMMUNICATION THEORY AND WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO RELIGIOUS EDUCATION.¹

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Abstract

The article discusses how the concept intercultural can be used to understand human relations in general and educational settings in particular. Drawing on the theory of intercultural communication, it is argued that all human encounters may be interpreted as being intercultural. Intercultural situations in a more narrow sense occur when one actor experiences, expects or introduces culture as part of the interaction. Educationally, such situations may be both constructive and counter-productive. In order to deal with intercultural settings, the teacher should first analyse the situation in light of knowledge about cultures and religions as well as the sociocultural context. Then, one strategy is to focus on culture by enhancing complexity breaking down stereotypes, another is to avoid culture, by reducing complexity and focusing on the school subject. By alternating between these two strategies the teacher contributes towards establishing a third culture in the classroom, facilitating both reflection and negotiation.

Key Concepts: Intercultural, communications, interaction, socio-cultural context, stereotyping

Introduction

The emergence of intercultural education in Norway has as its background the immigration from late 1960's onwards which has changed the Norwegian society significantly by introducing a more visible *traditional plurality* of ethnic and religious groups. Plurality in itself was not unknown, but the focus had mainly been on the individual, and on what I have elsewhere called *modern plurality* (Skeie, 2002). The new plurality was mainly conceived as a plurality of groups – it included immigrants from South, and many of them belonging to non-Christian religions. This immigration introduced a difference to Norwegian society that had further reaching consequences than the volume of immigration would suggest. Among the consequences was also the recognition of existing cultural differences with long historical presence in Norway. This has improved the situation particularly for the marginalised, indigenous Sami population. Another result has been to increase self-reflection on the meaning of being *Norwegian*, including rewriting parts of the history of Norway. A newly published three-volume history of immigration to the country has shown that intercultural relations are permanent parts of society, not the recent phenomenon many thought it to be (Kjelstadli, 2003).

¹ This article has benefitted from discussions with colleagues at SIK – Centre for Intercultural Communication in Stavanger, Norway.

As a result of the changes towards a more visible and openly multicultural Norway, also the welfare state system has attempted to adjust itself. The Parliament and different governments have issued laws, rules and regulations as well as political statements in order to deal with the challenges of a multicultural society. In addition different professions within the sectors of the welfare system have taken initiatives to secure that people belonging to all cultural groups benefitted from their rights according to law. Many individual teachers, social workers, health workers and others have shown solidarity with cultural minorities. Call for improvements in the welfare system has come from below and from above, however strong political controversies have also appeared.

Gradually the institutions of higher education, in particular those educating the groups of professionals mentioned above, have started to integrate multicultural perspectives into their curricula, and research has been done in order to establish a more solid base of knowledge about the field. In many cases the researchers who first took interest in these issues did it more out of principle and personal commitment than based on institutional priorities or good funding possibilities. Multicultural perspectives are now often declared to be central both in education and in research, even if this is not always put into practice. One example of the official priorities in this field is the establishment of a National Centre for Multicultural Education from January 2004.² *Intercultural education* can therefore be seen as part of a broad political strategy to secure a successful integration of different groups into one multicultural society.

Among professionals, the ideal of a multicultural society is not only a question of opinions or political strategies, even if this certainly plays a part. It is also considered the duty of a professional teacher, social- or health worker to achieve certain aims connected to education, social participation or health. Their work situation is therefore directly influenced by ideals about a well functioning multicultural society. Some have their jobs directly linked to the work with immigrants or refugees, while others are more indirectly involved. In their daily work these professionals combine scientific knowledge with practical as well as normative knowledge. They often speak positively of *multicultural understanding* or *multicultural community* and a purely descriptive approach to the issue therefore seems insufficient. In a wider context of research, as well as public debate, concepts in this field are generally shown to be contested.

In order to reflect more systematically on issues of intercultural education, it seems appropriate to clarify what constitutes an intercultural *situation* in the first place. How is this type of situation understood and managed? What is specific for intercultural meetings between people, and therefore different from encounters? The following reflections make use of theory about intercultural communication and proceed to raise some questions concerning intercultural education. Finally, the question is asked what this means for religious education. Is it possible that religious education can serve as a special case of intercultural education, and therefore giving deeper insight into this complex field? Even if the following reflections are situated in a Norwegian context, they are intended to be of more general significance drawing also on international research.

² The Centre is situated at The University College of Oslo, and is mainly a body for carrying out the strategies of the Ministry of Education, particularly by stimulating local and regional activities including networking between schools, colleges and education authorities. Web site: <http://www.hio.no/content/view/full/4855>

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