

Using Education as a Tool for Promoting a Common European Identity: Lessons from Different Educational Paradigms

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Abstract

In a time of increasing debates regarding the future of the European Union and Europe in general, the questions regarding ways to promote common identity gain in popularity. In such a time, the responsibility of the educational systems to provide answers to those pressing issues becomes very important because education can serve as a tool for promoting tolerance and understanding as well as a drive towards commonality and togetherness. In order to do so the educational interventions need to be carefully planned and based on a well developed paradigm.

However, such paradigm is still not well defined. Therefore, this paper will start by exploring the Social Identity Theory to provide a baseline understanding on how identity is conceptualized and developed. It will then move towards discussing the educational paradigms aimed at promoting multicultural education in different contexts. By doing so, the paper will try to provide a unique cohesion of different approaches to promoting mutual identity. As a result, the paper will try to uncover certain conclusions from each paradigm that can be of help when trying to design a program that can help in promoting a common European identity through education.

Introduction

As the diversity of Europe and the European Union increases the debates over important identity issues and building a cohesive society become increasingly important. It is not enough to just acknowledge diversity anymore. The questions that arise from group belonging are part of everyday

dialogue and become unavoidable. The issues of equality, dignity and human rights are gaining momentum coupled with a debate over building a more cohesive European society.

Therefore, the issue of intercultural dialogues has gained popularity in recent years. The dedication to the process of building a more cohesive society is visible in many activities of the Council of Europe and other European organizations. The paper recognizes that only through dialogue and open discussion about the issues of discrimination, stereotyping, scapegoating and intolerance can we overcome suspicion, anxiety and tension and move towards a more cohesive society with respect for all. The intercultural dialogue is defined as: "(a) process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. It requires the freedom and ability to express oneself, as well as the willingness and capacity to listen to the views of others." (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 17) This intercultural dialogue can help in developing a deeper understanding of the diverse worldviews and religious practices as well as tolerance and respect for the other. This includes building open-mindedness, willingness to engage in dialogue and capacity for peaceful conflict resolution. It also includes a fight against prejudice and discrimination in public and private life and dialogue between different cultural and religious communities in order to prevent or de-escalate conflicts, even in post conflict or conflict situations. The bottom line is that intercultural dialogue has to be tied with the multiple cultural affiliations in a multicultural environment (Council of Europe, 2008). Therefore, it becomes very important to understand the subtle nature of social identity, especially cultural and ethnic identity to be able to work through all the important sensitive issues and remain open to challenges.

A successful intercultural dialogue can be developed only through a coordinated effort of different stakeholders working on important aspects, where education is a very important aspect and the formal and informal educational sector is a key stakeholder. An important aspect is the coordinated effort reaching all levels of education, focusing on different aspects and areas of intervention such as dealing with diversity, learning to live together and paying attention to the quality of the information given to students (Batelaan, 2003).

Focusing on intercultural cooperation can be a starting point towards the development of a common denominator such as a broad, inclusive, diverse

and shared European identity. However since the issue of identity is crucial to promoting better understanding the paper will start by outlining a psychological view of social identity. The paper will then continue with the presentation of the main lessons that can be implemented from the intercultural education and the contact hypothesis.

The Nature of Identity and Social Identity Theory

Social identity is a very important concept for people. We all hold membership in different groups and those social memberships help us to define who we are. The issue of social identity becomes very important when one encounters contact with members of different groups which is quite common in diverse societies. In this process people's ethnic, cultural, religious and national identities come into play. Many complex phenomena such as stereotypes and various prejudices are rooted in those identity differences. Therefore it becomes important to understand how people form their social identities, especially the ethnic and cultural identities. By doing so we can understand the importance of different factors as well as the obstacles to creating a new identity and ways to overcome them.

According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) individuals define themselves in terms of their social group membership and tend to seek positive social identity (Hewstone & Cairns, 2001). Social identity is a part of an individual self concept which derives from the knowledge of a person's social group membership together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). Hence, the social identity is a part of the self image which derives from the social categories to which people perceive they are members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Furthermore the social categories are defined as cognitive tools that not only segment, classify and order the social environment, but also provide a system of self-reference which creates and defines the individual's place in the society. Therefore social groups provide their members with an identification of themselves in social terms as they are collections of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement, and achieve some degree of social consensus about their group and their membership in it (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This means that members of social groups seem to share no more than a collective perception of their own social unity and that is sufficient for them to act as a group (Turner, 1982). Thus, the most powerful determinants of group formation are the knowledge of a

common social category with other people and a critical attribute of the group which is positive rather than negative (Turner, 1982). The necessity of positive evaluation is very important to people since social identity is part of their self-concept and people strive to have a positive self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Furthermore some authors have emphasized that the positive and negative evaluations of one's group are determined with reference to other relevant groups in terms of value laden attributes. Therefore the aim of differentiation is to maintain or achieve superiority over an out-group concerning some dimensions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Additionally in that search for superiority, intergroup competition might arise which might be unrelated to the objective goal relations between the groups, but it would be on dimensions which are of general social value or of particular importance to one of the groups (Hogg & Abrams, 1990).

Another important aspect of the social categorization is that it perceptually assimilates people to the relevant ingroup-outgroup distinction and causes people to be viewed not as unique individual people, but through the lens of category membership (Hogg & Abrams, 2003). Moreover there is a continuum of self-perception and self-categorization ranging from defining one's self as an individual person and as a group member, so situations that provoke group distinctiveness lead to accentuated self-perception in terms of group membership (Turner & Reynolds, 2001). Therefore when social identity is salient people construct a context specific norm from the available and usually shared social comparative information. People are influenced by the norm because it prescribes context-specific attitudes and behavior for group members. That norm is then represented as a group prototype that prescribes beliefs, attitudes, feelings and behaviors that minimize ingroup differences and maximize the differences between the ingroup and outgroup (Terry et. al., 1999). Moreover the closer a social situation is to the intergroup extreme in the interpersonal-intergroup continuum, the more uniformity will the group members show towards the perception of the outgroup and the tendency to perceive the outgroup members as "undifferentiated items of a social category" gets stronger (Tajfel, 1981, p.243). This out-group homogeneity effect stems from the fact that the judgments about the outgroup members are made on the basis of intergroup comparison whereas judgments about the ingroup are made on the basis of intragroup individualized comparisons (Turner et. al., 1994). This undifferentiation of the outgroup members forms the basis of depersonalization and dehumanization, which occur when

intergroup relations deteriorate, leading to strong stereotypes and prejudice about the outgroup (Tajfel, 1982).

This theory is quite important in situations of frequent contact between members of different social groups in a diverse society, such as the countries in Europe. Interactions often tend to be on the intergroup level and in many interpersonal situations the group identity might become important by raising issues along the way. Therefore it becomes very important to address issues related to the different social identities in European classrooms where students with different ethnic, cultural and religious background study together. It is also important to stress those aspects in situations of mutual encounter between students from different countries, regions or ethnic and cultural groups.

Moreover, it is important to stress those issues because national or ethnic identities that are too strong might hinder the process of building a common European Identity. The common identity should provide an overarching superordinate category of identification that encompasses both groups and transforms the "Us" and "Them" into a more inclusive "We". However in the process of doing that the initial social identities should not be threatened as that would hinder the creation of an overarching identity (Brewer, 2003; Gaertner et.al., 1993). In that process relying on multiple social identities might prove quite helpful. For example ethnicity, religion, gender, and occupation are some of the categories of social identity which divide the whole into different subgroupings with overlapping membership. Therefore, as Brewer and Gaertner (2001) emphasized there are reasons to expect that simultaneous activation of those multiple identities has better potential for reducing prejudice than distinction based on only one category. Brewer (2000) noted several reasons why multiple cross-cutting categories might help this process. First, cross-cutting categories would make social categorization more complex thus reducing the magnitude of ingroup-outgroup distinctions. Second, they would reduce the evaluative significance of intergroup comparison and undermine the motivational basis for intergroup discrimination. Third, they would reduce the importance of any social identity for satisfying an individual's need for belonging and self-definition. Finally, if a person is judged positively on one dimension as an ingroup member, but judged negatively on another dimension as an outgroup member the inconsistency of the judgments would lead towards more balanced and positive judgment toward the outgroup based on overlapping membership. Furthermore, the benefits of cross-categorization might be enhanced when

the cross-cutting categories become a part of a common superordinate group identity. In such a case crossed categorization and recategorization might work together to produce enhanced inclusiveness (Brewer & Gaertner, 2001). The above mentioned theory points to the need of taking care of all the elements of identity in the educational programs aimed at promoting cohesion and building a common European identity.

There are few areas of intervention that need to be considered when looking at a way of building a common European identity. One area of intervention is to tackle the issues through curricular interventions in each country and the other one is to enable contact between students from different countries and backgrounds. The curricular interventions are part of the concept of intercultural education and the contact programs can be developed having in mind the Contact Hypothesis. The next parts of the paper will deal with each one.

Intercultural Education

The countries in mainland Europe prior to the 1970's regarded the migrant workers as temporary non-citizens who would eventually return to their countries of origin and did not deem it necessary to provide any special provision for migrant children (Lynch, 1986b). However as the migration raised and the population became more diverse the need for some educational strategies which would help in maintaining the social cohesion and help the accommodation of the migrant children in the society grew. The answer has been sought in developing the intercultural educational approach. It has focused as Lynch (1986, p.32) stated on the special problems of the migrant workers' children through home and host country language provision, preparation of the teachers for that task and marginal changes to the curriculum in response to the problems "caused" by immigrants. For example, France started to provide classes on the language and culture of origin and some remedial language classes (Hinton, 1997). At the same time in Germany measures such as bilingual classes, establishment of mixed-culture learning groups, mother tongue lessons, reception centers and classes for migrant children and overall revision of curricula were implemented (Lynch, 1986b). However all the programs were again focused on incorporating the migrants into the dominant culture and creating homogenous states.

Although the initial policies of the countries were mainly assimilationist and the intercultural education has been viewed as just a means of

assimilation, as time passed the paradigm evolved to a more just approach towards the minorities and migrants as the societies became more diverse. Thus the final goal shifted from assimilating the migrants to the dominant culture to preparing young people with different cultural, ethnic and social backgrounds to live in highly segmented, multilingual and multifaceted societies which seemed to be developing across Europe. Therefore, the intercultural paradigm began to emphasise the ideal that cultures had reciprocal influence on each other within society and changed in their interactions, but the society could function harmoniously if it was based on common values and respect. As Perotti (1994) noted it was clear that the diversity in Europe would never disappear and that true democracy was based on it, so the main challenge was to find the correct relationship between cultural diversity and social cohesion, as it was seen that every group had the right to maintain its cultural identity but the society could not function without common bonds between people. The shift from assimilation to respect of all cultures came mainly as a result of the work of the Council of Europe and the definitions and policy documents that it adopted. According to Taylor (1997) the aim of the intercultural education as defined by the Council of Europe was to raise awareness of certain key issues: belonging to a culture, the consequences of that belonging, existence of different cultures and the differences between them, and all of this geared toward learning to respect and appreciate other cultures and cultural diversity. Furthermore, as Leonetti (1992, p. 153) stated, the intercultural education movement articulated the cultures into a harmonious whole while respecting the difference and legitimacy of each culture.

In addition, Flecha (1999) in his critique of the anti-racist approach in Europe gave an example of the need for policy change and the path of development. He argued that focusing on diversity and difference while excluding the idea of equality obscured the possibility of solidarity and the idea that people can live together sharing the same space and educational institutions. Thus he proposed that the thought "we are different" should be replaced by the thought "we are equal and we are different". However, he argued that in order to obtain a true equality of difference the education systems and societies as a whole should obtain multicultural solutions which are both pluricultural and intercultural. They had to be pluricultural in order to enable all individuals and groups to live their differences; and they needed to be intercultural to allow the exchange between different cultures and to help with structuring new cultural forms, as the orientation towards cultural

dialogue and greater understanding needed communication between different cultures, mutual exchange and developing new cultural forms based on that exchange. He claimed that adopting a dialogic approach which fostered living in a society based on rules agreed upon via free and egalitarian dialogue by all people sharing a territory and implementing that approach in the educational system could help eliminate different sorts of racism. Thus according to him educators should base their teaching, educational theories and pedagogies on the concepts of human rights, democracy, equality, solidarity and difference, as only that would create possibilities for different ethnicities, cultures, nations and populations in Western Europe to share the same schools and territories and respect each other.

The intercultural paradigm and programs developed under it concentrated on building communication sensitivity and skills, enabling young people to discover difference and diversity in others and to respect that diversity, incorporating knowledge from different cultures into the curriculum, incorporating foreign teachers into the teaching staff and placing special emphasis on the values that are transmitted through the educational system. The accent has been on transmitting and inculcating the values underlying the human rights paradigm as it was seen that they can place the basis of common rules for communication, common legal systems, democratic rule by consensus and the freedom of individuals in the face of community pressure (Perotti, 1994).

This shift in thinking meant developing different educational policies and interventions. For example in the Netherlands in 1985 the Primary Education Act was passed which required all primary schools to provide intercultural education for all children and that intercultural education should not be a separate subject but an integrated part of the whole curriculum with the main objective of enabling children to acquire knowledge of each others' cultures, become free of prejudice and racism and learn to live harmoniously with each other. Since the policy Act did not bring a lot of practical change the Intercultural Education Project Group was set up in 1994 to stimulate the development of intercultural education in schools. It led to the development of different materials and practical guidance for schools and teaching staff and in 1998 the intercultural education shifted from local level school responsibility to national policy (Leeman, 2003; Hermans, 2002).

Furthermore, Leeman (2003) proposed several educational objectives of intercultural education. The first objective was the development of knowledge about ethnic-cultural diversity which incorporated learning about other

cultures, processes of change, differences and similarities between cultures, and processes of communication and image forming. The second objective was the development of a multiple perspective outlook which was concerned with enabling students to see that knowledge was socially constructed and there was more than one way of looking at the world. The next objective was concerned with the development of knowledge about inequality in the multi-ethnic society and of values and skills to tackle inequality. The fourth objective was the development of values and skills aimed at safeguarding ethnic-cultural diversity, personal autonomy and communality in the school and society and enabling students to take active responsibility for such values. The final objective was the development of values and skills necessary for living democratically in a multi-ethnic context which was concentrated around the development of social competence including respect for others, the ability to empathize, and the development of skills for resolving conflicts in a multicultural context.

The paradigm stresses the importance of incorporating the issues of ethnic and cultural diversity in the curriculum and opening possibilities for discussion that can prove very useful in creating an overarching common denominator for all European citizens.

Contact Hypothesis

The contact hypothesis was first defined by Allport (1954) and in the original formulation it stated that if the members of two groups engage in an equal status, cooperative encounter which leads towards achieving a common goal and the encounter has institutional support, it should lead to improved intergroup relations. Its popularity fluctuated over the years and a key concern was the disagreements over the optimal conditions of contact. As new conditions were added, Pettigrew warned of turning the contact hypothesis into an "ever-expandable laundry list" which is very cumbersome and hard to implement (Pettigrew, 1998). However it was also pointed out that the conditions proposed by the contact hypothesis may not be essential but rather facilitating conditions for change (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). As a result, attention was turned to establishing knowledge of not only when contact works, but also to how and why contact works, accentuating both quantity and quality of contact as important variables. It became essential to engage in understanding of not only cognitive but emotional, situational and contextual variables present prior to and during the contact situation (Hewstone &

Brown, 2005). Therefore, current formulations of the contact theory suggest that different sets of factors should be considered when planning the contact situation. Consequently, the outcomes of contact are complex and vary from one situation to another. One model proposes interaction between different sets of variables to produce personal and societal outcomes of contact. The first category of variables in this model stems from the broader societal context. It includes the structure of the society, the historical relations between the groups, the current relations of the groups, and the group's socialization practices. The second set of variables is the situational context in which the contact takes place and it includes: the setting in which the contact occurs, the nature of interaction, the composition of the groups and the task in which the participants are involved. The third set of variables that must be taken into consideration is the personal factors such as: demographic characteristics, personality traits and prejudices, stereotypes and other expectancies of the contact participants. During the contact situation itself behavioral, cognitive and affective processes of the participants serve as mediators of the contact. The contact situation can have personal and societal outcomes. Changes in behavioral, cognitive and affective processes of the participants form the personal outcomes. On the other hand modification in public attitudes, social norms or the legal system, and the relative economic or social status of the groups form the basis of the societal outcomes (Stephan & Stephan, 1996).

Therefore, the contact hypothesis might provide useful input into the efforts to build a common European identity by providing advice on the factors that need to be taken into consideration when planning a contact between students with different backgrounds and to plan realistic expectations for the program. Another important note from the contact hypothesis is that the contact needs to be sustained over a long period of time (McGlynn, Niens, Cairns, & Hewstone, 2004) and address issues important to the participants in the contact situation (Tomovska, 2010).

This perspective sheds light on the issues that need to be considered in all situations of mutual encounters between people from different backgrounds. It is especially useful in planning encounters focused on overcoming differences and misunderstandings and providing a fruitful ground for encounters centered around promotion of common identity. It also points out that the outcomes of the efforts for building common ground can have impact on many different levels and as such might take some time to become effective and visible.

Integrating the Perspectives and Conclusion

This paper is focused on integrating various standpoints in an effort to open up a discussion for building a common European identity for all European nations. As such three different theoretical viewpoints were presented. The main lesson from each one can provide a starting point in the debate.

The Social Identity Theory outlines the basis of social identity building. By utilizing its main ideas it can be concluded that the identity building process is a very complex one. It is even more complex to add additional overarching identity in the diverse reality of Europe. Each group has already developed a strong affiliation with its own ethnic background and cultural roots. Therefore all the efforts towards building a common identity should be carefully planned to provide accommodation for the existing identities as well as a superordinate identity that will be acceptable to all. As such the superordinate category has to be well defined to provide a starting point but also open enough so as to allow for different elements to be added. By doing so, it will not jeopardize the already existing identities and will not be assimilatory, but will open up a space for exchange of ideas in the process of intercultural dialogue and exchange.

The intercultural education paradigm and the contact hypothesis provide useful theoretical ideas as well as tools for implementing this process. Therefore the three theoretical paradigms should be used synergistically as they complement each other and provide ideas for different levels of the educational system and different viewpoints that can be applied in various interventions. The aim of the paper was to open a field for further theoretical and practical papers and interventions.

By accentuating the changing nature of the identity, accentuated by the intercultural education paradigm and the multi-faceted nature of the change process from the contact hypothesis we can fully appreciate the possibilities of achieving the creation of a common identity. It can also be accentuated that the process is quite complex and many different factors need to be taken into consideration if a successful move towards a common identity is to be achieved. The main conclusion from both paradigms is that the efforts need to be well planned and centered on the issues of commonality, difference, cooperation, trust and respect as well as other issues specific for the regions and countries. The main emphasis should be put on building an inclusive

identity based on citizenship values, human rights, mutual understanding, cooperation and conflict resolution. The educational efforts can be concentrated on introducing the issue of common identity as part of the curriculum in each country and region; the changes should aim to provide space for constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing the notion of identity, diversity, commonality and mutual encounters. It also need to engage the students in issues of their interest and provide answers to their most pressing questions regarding identity and identity building as well as issues of common European diversity and equality. The curricular changes should be filtered down to include pupils and students of all ages and should be introduced in a number of subjects, such as literature, history, geography and even some natural sciences. Moreover, the mutual contact encounters between different students need to be more frequent and sustained. More programs for student exchange at all levels of schooling need to be initiated and realized. The programs should be organized within the countries with different ethnic groups as well as between countries and should be centered on discussing the issues of belonging and identity. These programs should also incorporate all the elements of the curricular changes, so that the two aspects could reinforce each other and provide a cohesive realization of the strategy. This implies that the curricular changes call for an overall intervention and that the teachers need to be trained to successfully implement the program and guide the change process.

The paper therefore calls for overall change in education touching on all stakeholders and beneficiaries. It is also important to align the educational change with broader societal and political initiatives to enable their success, by overcoming the societal resistance to change.

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