

## Intercultural Competence in Education to Foster European Identity

Agostino PORTERA<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*The paper summarizes the results of a qualitative study that aimed to identify the positive outcomes and opportunities, as well as the risks related with the identity building in migration and living in a multicultural context. Research consisted of a 7-year longitudinal case study, during which the life-stories, conflicts, crises, and problem-solving strategies of 23 young people of Italian origin with migration experiences – some of which were still living in Southern Germany and some of which had returned to Southern Italy – were observed. The sample was composed of both adolescents with intellectual disabilities or other psychological and social disorders and adolescents who seemed to have benefited from living and growing up in different cultures. From the biographies it was possible to identify the main risk and protective factors related to migration and life in a multicultural context, and the adequate coping ability associated with their development. Based on the main findings of the study it was also possible to hypothesize that migration can inhibit or facilitate the fulfillment of fundamental human needs. So, the qualitative data was analyzed in order to identify the needs which seemed to be related with the harmonious development of the personality and a tentative theory of fundamental needs of human development was proposed. Finally, the results suggest that intercultural education can play an important role in determining whether subjects experience enrichment and growth or increasing difficulties or mental illnesses and social disorders. Therefore the paper takes the position that education can be an effective measure for fostering stable, flexible and multiple European identities. Given the research results, intercultural education, as developed and applied in a European context, can be considered as the most appropriate approach.*

**Keywords:** identity, risk factors, protective factors, fundamental needs, intercultural education.

### 1. Introduction

The beginning of the third millennium has seen an increasing of human mobility, more interdependence, and new and diversified migration flows. Due to the increasing differences between rich and poor countries, the longevity of dictatorial regimes, violence and war in many parts of the world, and crimes against humanity, a reduction in

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<sup>1</sup> Professor of Intercultural Education and Head of the Centre for Intercultural Studies, University of Verona (Italy), via Vipacco, 7, 37129, Verona, e-mail: [agostino.portera@univr.it](mailto:agostino.portera@univr.it)



migration flows is not expected in the near future (Bauman, 1977; Soros, 1988). On the other hand, services in many industrialized States, the low birth rates and the growing demand for foreigners workers, services migration should be considered also as a new resource and opportunity. The evolution of relations between nation states as a consequence of globalization can give new importance to the phenomenon of migration, as it evolves from a transient, marginal phenomenon into one that permanently alters societies at a structural and systemic level. The benefits, however, are not always realized.

Education, especially at school, is deeply affected by globalization and mass migration. Fears and insecurities slowly emerge; educational strategies, curricula and teaching methods are hastily revised, with the result that solutions are often technical and devoid of clear aims and stable moral principles: instead of being solved, problems escalate. The situation degenerates resulting in a “treatment” which is often worse than the “disease” itself (Portera, 2011; Gundara, 2000).

Nowadays the main questions are: a) In a time of increasing interconnectedness between people, is migration and growing in a multicultural context a risk or an opportunity for the development of a stable identity?; b) What are the main risk and protective factors for mental disabilities faced by children and adolescents with experiences of migration and multicultural backgrounds?; c) Which interventions are the most appropriate for prevent disease and promote stability and health?

## **2. Research on young people of Italian origin in Germany**

For several decades many authors have been trying to find possible answers to similar questions. The broadest amount of researches conducted in Germany (mostly quantitative and/or based on the cause and effect hypothesis) as main results considered emigration and leaving in multicultural societies as a stress factor and migration children as a risk population (Tietze et al., 1942; Tyhurst, 1955; Busch, 1983; BfAuSs?, 1986; Prodehl, Geiger, & Korporal, 1990; Siefen, 1996; Kirkcaldy et al., 2006; Waller, 2008; Knipper & Bilgin, 2009; Novák, 2012). The qualitative study conducted by the author (see also Portera, 1995, 1997, 1998, 2014) discussed whether migration represents a greater risk for distress and disease, or a possibility for enrichment and growth. The aim of this work was to identify positive outcomes and opportunities, as well as negative factors and risks related to migration and living in a multicultural context. Research consisted of a 7-year longitudinal case study of the life-stories, conflicts, crises, and problem-solving strategies among young people of Italian origin with migration experience. Specifically, some of the interviewees were living in Southern Germany, while others had returned to Southern Italy.

Regard the *methodology*, the use of a longitudinal case study allowed an appropriate consideration of specific social norms and values, that is of “subjective reality” (Wiedemann, 1982, p. 66). It also allowed the holistic identification and exploration of the origin and development of symptoms and disorders among foreign children. The

collection of the biographies was carried out using semi-structured interviews. The author largely followed the method of problem-centered interviews developed by Witzel (1982). However, the study also incorporated elements of Rogers's person-centered approach (Rogers, 1951, 1961) without marginalizing the role of the respondents' social context. Following Bronfenbrenner (1986), the study aimed to analyze the adolescents and their environment as an "integrated system". For this purpose, it was considered useful to also employ the methodology of participant observation in the most important spheres of their lives (family, school, free time). Finally, when possible and appropriate, interviews with the most important people in the subjects' lives were also conducted, such as parents, teachers and friends. This led to a better understanding of the respondents' specific life situations, and helped to examine their situations from other points of view and to obtain additional important information.

The *sample* consisted of a diverse, but non-representative, group of 23 adolescents of Italian origin living either in Südbaden (Germany) or in Southern Italy. The criterion for selection was diversification, in order to sample a wide range of attributes which had been regarded as important in previous studies (Tyhurst, 1955; Riedesser, 1982; Pfeiffer, 1983; Zimmermann, 1983; BfAuS, 1986; Prodehl, Geiger, & Korporal, 1990; Siem, 1992; Siefen, 1996): gender, social status, education, period of residence in Germany and experiences of return migration. Care was also taken to select a sample of young people with intellectual disabilities, other psychological and/or social disorders as well as adolescents who seemed to have benefited from living and growing up in a different culture (based on self-assessment, social status and clinical diagnosis). Special attention was also paid to the conditions and mechanisms that – thanks to or despite their experience of migration – promoted psychological stability. The study also sought to explore the systemic functions (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Ochs & Schweitzer, 2009) of family and school and the development of the disorders so as to gain a deeper understanding of the origin, development, forms and functions of individual symptoms.

The *findings* largely confirmed the results of previous studies (see Murphy & Moriarty, 1976; Belsky, 1984; Rutter & Smith, 1995; Knipper, Bilgin 2009; Novák M. 2012), which suggested that migration constitutes a stress factor for adolescents dealing with bi-cultural or multi-cultural enculturation and/or acculturation. The likelihood of success through adequate coping strategies was strongly reduced mainly because of differences in cultural values, norms and behavior.

More specifically, from the biographies it was possible to identify certain risks and protective factors, but it was not possible to isolate a single risk factor as directly responsible for specific illnesses or disorders. No single negative factor (even early separation from the mother) appeared sufficient to predispose a subject to a particular disorder. Subjects dealing with one strong, lasting stress factor were usually dealing with other stress factors concurrently. In addition, negative and positive factors were seen to affect human development not only during childhood, but also in all other stages of life. The study also suggested that negative factors and early childhood disorders may be

compensated or corrected with positive experiences. Finally the results highlighted that many developmental disorders and “normal” development are neither static nor mutually excludable. Instead, they constitute a continuum ranging from vulnerability to adequate coping ability, and the subject’s mental health can change in different contexts and phases of life.

### 3. Risk Factors

On the basis of the research results, the following main risk factors for adolescents in a multicultural context were identified: “supra-cultural” factors, separation, “Pendeln” (commuting back and forth or frequent (re)migration), ambivalence, social marginality, discrimination, loneliness, language problems, strict upbringing, and bicultural orientation.

1. *Supra-cultural developmental risks*: the adolescents who were interviewed were affected by the same negative factors which are experienced by all human beings during human development, regardless of one's personal migratory experiences. The most frequent factors were: *prenatal and perinatal difficulties* (sometimes also resulting from the parents' scant knowledge or acceptance of the German health care system); *chronic difficulties*, for example serious psychological disorders of one of the parents; *unstable somatic illness*; *negative socio-economic conditions*, such as belonging to the lowest social class, unstable environmental conditions; *highly disruptive life experiences* like the death of the father, moving, change of school or town, separation or divorce of the parents; and *family burdens* like severe family conflicts, a large family in inadequate or unsafe housing, a single parent household, the father's unemployment, or a working mother with limited time to be with the children.
2. *Sudden, unprepared separation*: it has been largely acknowledged that children who are suddenly separated from their mother are not able to develop a feeling of protection and trust in a “Bezugsperson” (primary caregiver; Bowlby, 1969); consequently, a strong lack of self-worth often arises (Erikson, 1968). Although the study confirmed the psychoanalytic theory of maternal deprivation, an analysis of the biographies collected by the author showed that the following aspects must also be emphasized: the mother does not necessarily have to be the primary caregiver; somebody else can fulfill this role, as long as he/she is stable and reliable; relationships with other people are significant and may have compensatory effects; other factors or circumstances (e.g. social groups and large families in which each adult feels responsible for the children; a strong predisposition of the child to require attention and be positively valued) may have

compensatory functions. In the biographies it was noted that the experience of separation even in adulthood often has negative consequences. The subjects who suffered the most, and manifested the most negative symptoms, were frequently those who were not (adequately) prepared for separation or those who did not have regular contact (even by means of letters or phone calls) with their parents after separation.

3. *Frequent journeys between Germany and Italy* (Commuting back and forth or frequent (re)migration): this is due to the fact that migratory Italian families often do not adequately plan for their futures; frequent commuting may be due to sudden crises or unrealistic expectations of one of the two countries (Riedesser, 1982, Klitzing, 1983; Zimmermann, 1986). Consequently, families migrate back and forth between the home country and the host country and, as a result, neither the parents nor their children can make adequate decisions (to buy a house in Germany or Italy, whether the children should continue studying in Italy or Germany, whether it is convenient to learn German, etc.). The research results suggested that instead of facing such problems, whose solution would lead to growth and personal stability, migrants often find shelter in a world of their own (what Zwingmann, 1961, calls "nostalgic illusion"). Italian parents often use territorial separation as a coping strategy. Separation was also frequently applied to avoid sending the children to the "Sonderschule" (school for children with special needs); however, the experience of separation turned out to be one of the main causes for their actual enrolment in a German "Sonderschule".
4. *Ambivalent behavior*: a further difficulty faced by the subjects was that they had to face a range of ambivalent situations and attitudes. Specifically, many of them experienced educational norms in *school* which are different from those within their families. On the one hand parents often teach their children to remain within the family, to respect and obey adults (which often entails passivity and submission). On the other hand, teachers encourage children to be active, inquisitive and more independent from their families. Contrary to the results of other studies (Schrader, Nikles, & Griese, 1976), students who do not overtly demonstrate their "cultural difference" at school, those who do not exhibit an obvious external stigma (physical features or a different appearance), usually experience cultural conflicts more acutely and have more profound identity crises. At school and during their spare time these young children are considered to be "German", and hence are not expected to be different. Consequently, they are almost obliged to remove the cultural identities constructed within their family or their Italian subculture and to take on behavioral and coping strategies typical for German society. Ultimately, these adolescents are bound to have conflicts with their teachers, their German friends and their families: at school, because of the

removal or negation of one part of their personality (frequently unconscious conflicts), at home due to manifest differences in thinking and behaving.

In some of the biographies it was noted that one or both of the parents (often the mother), showed ambivalent feelings and behavior. Italian emigrants experience drastic changes in family structure and roles, including: a nuclear instead of an extended family; an incomplete family (often only the father moves, followed by the mother and some of the children); lack of help from neighbors; isolation and lack of social contacts; "indistinct" or conflicting family roles; higher rates of divorce and family separation. Less stability in the family structure caused by migration implies a stiffening of the rules and values acquired in the original society. The migrants' social role is further destabilized by the paradoxical way in which they are treated, socially and legally, in Germany: as both "*Gäste*" (guests) and "*Arbeiter*" (workers). The consequences of this "double bond" situation (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967) are increasing diffidence towards German society, fear, depression, aggressiveness, and dogmatism.

Further ambivalent behavior was observed among teachers (especially in German schools). Their relationship with children of Italian origin frequently ranged from admiration and encouragement of their diversity (for example their liveliness), to the opposite tendency of rejection, and forcing them to assimilate "German" behavior. During the course of the study it was possible to notice that both types of behavior may cause disorientation and even cognitive or emotional disorders.

5. *Social marginality, and practical problems:* generally, financial problems, debt, the loss of social status, unsafe housing and insufficient legal protection are some of the main causes of crises (Riedesser, 1982; Pfeiffer, 1983; Siefen, 1996; Boos-Nünning, 2002). The study found clear evidence that meager opportunities to achieve economic success, serious debt, downward social mobility, marginality and insufficient legal security, which occur at higher rates in immigrant populations (BfAuS, 1986; BfMFI, 2012), lead to frustrating experiences which may be qualified as the triggering factors of various psychological crises and scholastic or socioeconomic failure. Other factors may be added to these heavy burdens, e.g. exclusion, or difficulty in school due to language problems, differences in teaching methodology, lessons on Italian language and culture.
6. *Discrimination and stigmatization from peers or adults:* most of the difficulties related to stigmatization (Goffmann, 1964) are attributed to features of people with conspicuous physical or religious differences. Although citizens of Italian origin do not manifest obvious differences in German society, the study showed that many adolescents were ostracized both in Germany and Italy (after returning

home) mainly because of differences in language, behavior or even in thought processes.

7. *Isolation and loneliness*: many of the subjects interviewed were isolated both upon arrival in Germany and after returning to Italy. Some had great difficulty making friends during their stay in Germany. At times they experienced a feeling of loneliness (*Einsamkeit*) or a feeling of being different from others. The experience of being isolated from parents, especially from the mother, proved to be a very negative factor in the child's development.
8. *Language problems*: such problems are mainly due to inadequate or insufficient social stimuli (isolation, lack of help, code switching, a mixture of dialect and official language). Many studies in Germany (Pfeiffer, 1983; Siefen, 1996; Boos-Nünning, 2002 BfAuS, 1986; BfMFI, 2012) have found a lower proficiency of German amongst the Italian immigrant population than in other immigrant communities. The research results confirm that inadequate linguistic competence leads to negative experiences which contribute to a reinforcement of isolation and the feeling of being an outsider. The interviewees also showed linguistic deficits deriving from prolonged social and emotional deprivation.
9. *Very strict upbringing*: many interviewed parents had raised their children more strictly than the norms of the country they live in would require; this phenomenon occurred both with Italian migrants living in Germany and those who had returned to Italy, possibly because of their long absence from their homeland and because of an unconscious need to atone for having abandoned their family and friends in Italy. Some authoritative behavior is intensified by the living conditions of Italian families in Germany, characterized by isolation, hard work and social conflicts. Parents often do not notice that the traditional norms of behavior which they are trying to transmit to their children have become outdated even in Italy. This leads to crises, especially among the adolescents who have noticed the gap between family upbringing and the liberal norms typical of the external world.
10. *Bicultural orientation especially during puberty*: the results showed a general worsening of difficulties during the pre-adolescent phases when children most need both the help of their parents and that of their peers and teachers. Dealing with different cultural standards is not necessarily negative. However, for many young people the fact that they have to choose between their families on the one hand and their school and peer group on the other can be very upsetting and destructive. The choice is impossible. The developmental stage they are going through requires both the love of their parents and acceptance and stimulation at

school and from their peers. All this leads to marked loyalty conflicts. The consequences are identity crises and cultural disorientation.

#### 4. Protective Factors

In addition to the above-mentioned negative factors, which led to crises and seem also to be related to intellectual disability and other mental or social disorders (though more comprehensive further research is needed to verify this), the study also revealed some positive and protective factors which help adolescents cope with crises and in many cases seem to transform crises into opportunities. For some adolescents these factors also contributed to a positive reassessment of emigration and to the acquisition of a stable identity in a multicultural context. The most important factors were:

1. *Personal features*: certain factors, some of which are also hereditary (e.g. physical appearance, social attitudes, intelligences, resilience), played an important role in the positive development of a stable personal identity and also helped the subjects to cope appropriately with crises.
2. *Establishing a stable and secure relationship* with a person of reference during childhood: the presence of the mother, or both parents, in the first years of life seemed to have had a very positive effect on the overall development of the subjects interviewed. Those who spent the early years of their lives with their mother or with both parents appeared to be strongly aided in their further development. Moreover, the presence of other significant individuals (grandparents, nurses, brothers or sisters) took on a similar protective function for some of the subjects.
3. *Parents' openness towards the German environment*: when parents had a positive attitude towards the German social environment, did not try to inculcate prejudices, or negatively interfere with their children's development outside the family, it was easier for the subjects to interact positively within the new social environment.
4. *Parents' understanding and trust*: self-esteem was better developed in those subjects whose parents trusted them and allowed a certain amount of freedom; later on, these adolescents were also better equipped to solve problems within and outside their own families. In these cases behavioral difficulties were rare and the advantages of growing up in a multicultural context prevailed over the difficulties.

5. *Readiness for separation*: the parents who prepared their children for the experience of separation due to migration and who always tried to maintain contact (e.g. phone calls, letters or frequent visits) greatly helped their children reduce the negative consequences of this experience; moreover, they supported and accelerated the maturation of their children by strengthening their psychological stability.
6. *Positive experience of acceptance and respect in the host country*: especially during the initial contacts. When interaction with the German environment was mainly positive, due to adequate preparation by the parents or by other educators (no discrimination or sense of inferiority), the subjects interviewed were able to positively accept and were interested in new situations and people.
7. *Understanding from teachers and educators*: when teachers respected and showed interest in and comprehension of the cultural differences of the subjects interviewed, the subjects more easily developed self-esteem, openness and trust in oneself and others. A further indicator of these attitudes can be seen in the subjects who found serious discrepancies between the rules and values of their family and the values of the school; this was highlighted in those who had to change class and teachers frequently. The importance of this factor is also noted by the fact that some pupils improved their schoolwork and social behavior immediately after the change from a teacher who was not as open to a more sympathetic one. In some cases the teacher's positive attitude was transmitted to the German schoolmates. This was very important in coping with challenges and crises.
8. *No pressure to assimilate in or outside school*: when teachers, educators and German friends did not immediately reject and did not exercise cultural pressure on the children with Italian cultural backgrounds, the latter overcame their integration problems more easily. These subjects were able to make positive compromises between the requirements of the environment and their personalities.
9. *Important role of friends as a "bridge" between the cultures*: this factor is highly protective. It eased or even allowed the taking on of non-conflicting contacts both with the new culture and with the rules, regulations and values in Italy upon their return. In some cases, after arriving in Germany, Italian friends or friends of other nationalities took on the role of highly efficient cultural mediators. The interviewed adolescents were able to take advantage of these experiences and to apply previously tested coping strategies.

10. *External support*: in some cases the help on the cognitive and emotional level, in the form of school guidance, counseling or therapy, turned out to be highly effective for scholastic, family and social inclusion and also in the management of conflicts, diseases and/or disorders. However, these measures should not oblige foreign subjects to adopt pre-set solutions, arbitrarily fixed by counselors (no assimilation pressure). Instead, counselors and therapists should allow adolescents with migration backgrounds to have compensatory experiences, to be understood, accepted and appreciated as they are, without prejudice, and should help them develop their own personal identity.

## 5. Theory of Fundamental Human Needs

Based on the main results of the study it was also possible to hypothesize that migration can inhibit or facilitate the fulfillment of fundamental human needs. Therefore, after determining the main risk and protective factors related to migration and life in a multicultural context, and after identifying the most appropriate coping strategies, the qualitative data was analyzed in order to identify the needs which seemed to be related with the harmonious development of the personality. Principally based on the work of Maslow (1954), but also considering other psychological theories, mainly Rogers (1961) and Erikson (1968), a tentative *Theory of fundamental needs of human development* was proposed which also takes into account the effects of globalization, cultural differences and life in multicultural context. The most important needs are: *Physical Well-being; Social Relations and Sense of Belonging; Social Bonds; Separation; Positive Emotional Regard (Respect, Acceptance, Love and Acknowledgement); Deep Understanding (Empathy); Congruence; Trust; Active Participation; Structure; Continuity.*

## 6. Intercultural Education To Foster Flexible, Multiple European Identities

Based on the research results education can play a preeminent role for fostering stable (and in the main time), flexible, multiple identities. Education, considered as the best form of “caring”, can foster personal enrichment, and inhibit the development of disease or disorder. Unfortunately, both families and schools still seem to be unprepared to deal with multicultural situations. Many of the interviewed teachers and educators do not seem to have sufficient knowledge of the cultural background of the children with foreign origin and do not adopt specific educational approaches.

Intercultural Education, as developed and used in Europe since the 1980s, is widely considered the most appropriate approach to education in a time of globalization, in which diversity has become the norm rather than the exception; and it is conceived as especially suitable to discover, respect and cope with all forms of cultural diversity

(Gundara, 2000; Portera, 2011 Barrett, 2016; Chermeleu & Rus, 2019)<sup>2</sup>. Intercultural education is a process that leads to a complete and thorough understanding of the concepts of democracy and pluralism, as well as different customs, traditions, faiths and values. It constitutes a Copernican revolution in pedagogy, mainly because: a) it does not define identity and culture rigidly, but views them as being dynamic and in constant evolution; b) it perceives diversity, otherness, emigration and life in a complex and multicultural society not only as risk factors, but also as opportunities for enrichment and growth. A person from a different ethnic or cultural background poses a positive challenge, a chance for discussion and the study of values, norms and ways of behaving. The intercultural approach is placed between universalism (a transcultural approach which emphasizes cultural similarities like universal human rights) and relativism (a multicultural approach which stresses cultural difference) as it takes into consideration both the opportunities and the limitations, yet transcends and synthesizes them to permit improved chances of dialogue, exchange and interaction. Whereas multiculturalism aims to discover and tolerate people from different cultures, living peacefully side by side, the prefix inter- implies relationships, interaction, and exchange. Intercultural education rejects immobility and hierarchy; it is meant to encourage dialogue and relationships on equal terms, so that individuals do not feel forced to sacrifice important aspects of their cultural identity. It is based on a direct exchange of ideas, principles and behavior, on a comparison of concepts and mutual discovery.

Finally, in the era of globalization and interdependence there is an urgent need to overcome strategies of verbal, physical or psychological violence (which ignore or exacerbate problems), of assimilation (which are bound to fail, as the process of identity construction always implies free will) and of universalism (which only considers cultural similarities and risks becoming a new form of colonialism). In Europe, given the growing diversities and according to many studies and scholarship (Gundara, 2000; Allemann-Ghionda, 2008; Barrett, 2016; Portera and Grant, 2017;), intercultural competence in education are crucial, both in family and schools, in order to prevent mental and behavioral disorders and promote healthy and positive European identities.

Europe is a complex reality where linguistic, cultural, political, juristic, religious diversity constitute the norm rather than an exception. Many differences are related e.g. with the ancient Greek, Roman heritage, colonial empires, Christian reference and religious diversity, wars, East-West division, Renaissance, etc. (Chermeleu & Rus, 2019) Today there are 48 countries member of United Nations and 28 countries are member of the European Union. Therefore, if understood and applied correctly, intercultural education could help identify the opportunities of developing flexible and multiple identities. Since intercultural education takes into consideration both common human dignity and the specific peculiarities of individual cultures, it offers the opportunity to

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<sup>2</sup> For more details about the many studies and the development of intercultural education both in the USA and in Europe and for a semantic clarification of multicultural and intercultural education, see Grant & Portera, 2011.

live as an equal by respecting the differences. Therefore, the use of intercultural education in families and schools and of intercultural principles in the workplace, media and civil society, could allow Europeans (specially adolescents with experiences of migration) to contrast stereotypes and prejudices and to take advantages and benefits from all form of diversities present in Europe. It could also help fostering and acquiring competences related not only with knowing and respecting diversities, but also to get in contact, to compare and exchange cultural standards, to interact and to manage internal and external conflict positively.

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