

## Multicultural Schools: Supporting Diversity in Education

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*Multicultural classrooms are a growing phenomenon, as migrant flows are increasing exponentially. Schools and educators have a great challenge to integrate these students in the classrooms, preventing prejudice and discrimination and at the same time opportunity to strengthen and increase cultural consciousness and intercultural awareness. The Multicultural Schools project ([www.multicultural-schools.org](http://www.multicultural-schools.org)) is an EU funded project which offers valuable support for teachers dealing with the urgent need to foster integration among different cultures and languages within their classrooms. The goal of this paper is to present the project with a special focus on its goals, working methodology, rationale, outputs and materials.*

**Keywords:** Lifelong learning, intercultural education, multilingualism, multiculturalism, diversity in education, innovative project

### Introduction

Immigration has dramatically increased in recent decades in the European Union and is a trending topic nowadays. According to the UE Statistics Bureau “Eurostat”, in January 2015, there were 34.3 million people living in an EU member state who had been born outside the EU, and 18.5 million European people who had been born in a different EU member state. In 2014, a total of 3.8 million people immigrated to one of the EU-28 member states. From this group, approximately 1.6 million were citizens of non-member countries, 1.3 million were citizens of a different EU member state from the one to which they immigrated, and around 870 thousand migrated to an EU member state of which they had citizenship (i.e. returning nationals or nationals born abroad) (please see <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>). These figures do not include illegal immigrants nor the refugees migrating to Europe over the last months, an issue considered one of the main conflicts in our society nowadays. According to Eurostat, the percentage of foreign-born people and their children (both Europeans and people from outside the EU) could increase from 10.4% of the total EU population in 2011 to 26.5% in 2061. This number might grow as high as 34.6%.

This article will concentrate on the linguistic and cultural diversity immigrants bring with them when they move from one country to another. I will also focus on the need to preserve multiculturalism as a resource and treasure instead of a barrier to integration for future generations. This is necessary from the very early stages of education, as our children will have the power to build a better future and society.

However, children of such families often suffer problems and conflicts related to their integration in schools, i.e. language troubles, cultural misunderstandings, or

xenophobia. This situation goes against the EU motto “unity in diversity”, i.e. diversity of cultures, religions, custom, beliefs and languages. In fact, despite most countries implementing legal measures to promote and encourage diversity and respect (Ferrer, 1992, p. 125), the results are far from satisfactory. A possible solution is to trust schools, teachers and parents will work together to alleviate the situation.

However, schools seem to approach the issue of multiculturalism from a global perspective that does not tackle diversity properly. In fact, many of them consider themselves “multicultural” simply because they have an ethnically and racially diverse student population. It is necessary to think beyond this and ask ourselves whether this is what makes an organization really multicultural.

The issue has been contentious over the last 50 years. According to Rosado (2006), in the 1960s and 70s, individuals were granted access to an educational system based on the assimilation model, in which immigrant minorities were absorbed by the culture of the host society. In the 1980s, while cultural plurality started to be considered, a segregation model was supported, seeing cultures as separate and thus avoiding contamination. During the 1990s, there was an increase in the push for diversity, but challenges still remain as we move on to the 21st century, where the focus should be placed on possible forms of integration making cultures valuable.

Working toward this goal, we should start talking about interculturality, a term that should be differentiated from multiculturalism (Akper 2006; Berri, 2011; García 1999; Muñoz, 2000; Vilá 2003; Williamson, 2011). Multiculturalism refers to two cultures coexisting in the same space and at the same time, competing for their respective values, belief systems, and ideologies; in other words, for what Balcomb calls the “high moral ground” (2003, p. 15), and Hunter “culture wars” (1991). In Balcomb’s words, this is a representation of “different groups expressing different sets of values that find their legitimating moral base in different meta-narratives” (2003, p. 15). Within this context, racism and segregation can flourish as the minority culture is undervalued and looked at with distrust (Tatum, 1999).

Interculturality, on the other hand, implies contact between cultures at a much higher level of interaction, as there is communication, dialogue and an open attitude to accept and listen to the other. Despite holding different values, there is no privileged theology, no privilege set of values, and no race is considered better than another (Jonker, 2000; Tracy 1987; West, 1992). Authors such as Henze (2002), Williams (2003) or Muñoz (2000), describe interculturality as a context which promotes the construction of a society based on inclusion and where everyone can live together in harmony; a society in which beliefs and behaviors are acknowledged, recognized, respected, encouraged and empowered, thus promoting communication, understanding, cooperation, broadmindedness, discovery, tolerance, respect, and growth, rather than prejudices, stereotypes, division and exclusion. In so doing, interculturality celebrates and maximizes everyone’s full potential, in a culturally inclusive context where no one is left out. Needless to say, the 21st century demands citizens who are culturally sensitive and internationally focused, thus making

interculturality the right approach for education. We then need to train children to be world citizens and achieve what Troy Duster calls bicultural competence:

Competence in this context means being able to participate effectively in a multicultural world. It means being bicultural and bilingual. It means knowing how to operate as a competent actor in more than one cultural world; knowing what's appropriate and what's not, what's acceptable and unacceptable for cultures differing radically from our own. Competence in a pluralist world means being able to function effectively in contexts people had previously only read about, or seen on television. It means knowing how to be different and feel comfortable about it; being able, in short, to be the insider in one situation and the outsider in another (Duster, cited in Bensimon & Soto, 1997, p. 44).

Are our teachers ready to face the challenge of making instruction culturally responsive for all students while not favoring one specific group over another? Are they ready to deal with the challenge of integrating these students? Are they ready to prevent prejudice and discrimination? Are they ready to strengthen and increase their students' cultural consciousness and intercultural awareness?

A study carried out by the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality and Public Agenda (2008) found that 76% of new teachers said they were trained to teach an ethnically diverse student class, but fewer than 4 in 10 said this training helped them deal with the challenges they faced in their everyday teaching. Banks (1986; 1989), on the other hand, suggests a holistic model in which not only teachers, but the whole institution needs to consider the issue and participate actively. Within this context, the EU project Multicultural Schools was born.

### **The Multicultural Schools Project**

#### **General information**

The project "Multicultural Schools-Enhancing Cultural and Linguistic Treasure of Europe through Teachers" (Ref. 2015-1-PL01-KA201-016963) is an Erasmus+ KA2 EU funded project whose main objectives are to promote, preserve and enhance the cultural richness of European society, to address teachers' lack of appropriate skills and competences when dealing with multicultural classes, and to strengthen their profile by helping them address situations involving children from different cultural backgrounds. The duration of the project is 30 months, starting in September 2015 and ending in February 2018 (please visit: [www.multicultural-schools.eu](http://www.multicultural-schools.eu))

The audience of the project covers a wide spectrum of individuals, namely multicultural children, teachers and teachers associations, primary and secondary school principals and directors, schools and universities, multicultural and multilingual families, parents and parent associations, social, cultural, and national institutions and associations focused on multilingual-multicultural education, and public authorities and policy makers in the field of education, culture, immigration and minorities.

### **Partnerships and Working Methodology**

Various European countries are involved in this partnership: Poland, Italy, Belgium, Greece, and Spain. Three of them (Belgium, Italy, and Greece) house relatively high numbers of citizens born outside the country. Experts in the field from different sectors have merged their collective experience and specific skills in the field of multicultural education and have produced several publications on the project (Gamuzza, 2009a, 2009b; Gamuzza & Kaczynski, 2014; Gómez, 2015a, 2015b).

The partnership holds five meetings over the life of the project, where partners from the five countries gather together. These meetings, normally lasting two days, are an excellent opportunity to discuss project issues face-to-face. As they are transnational meetings taking place in different countries, they constitute an excellent opportunity to get to know other places, cultures and languages.

Work is also done online, thanks to the use of new technologies. Thus, there are regular Skype meetings, frequent email exchanges, and GoogleDrive to keep in touch and share documents.

Partners contribute to the project according to their expertise. A leader guides the team for each program output, checking the work done by the partners in their countries. Once the first version of the product is created, it is evaluated by the control group, a quality manager and an external evaluator to guarantee quality before it is launched.

The goals, timing and impact of the project were carefully described in the application sent to the EACEA (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency). Throughout the project's life, reports on its progress must be submitted to the European Commission. A final report summarizes the project, placing special emphasis on the audience reached, the dissemination done, and the sustainability of the project once completed.

### **Intellectual Outputs**

Intellectual outputs refer to the work or products created by the project partners during the life of the project. All of them are closely related and organized in a timely manner so that results, materials and findings from one output can be used for the next one. This section describes the rationale of each output and the main objectives and products of each of them.

#### **Output 1. Report on the challenges faced by teachers in their educational work.**

The main aim of this report is to analyze the challenges, problems and constraints impacting teachers facing multiculturalism on a daily basis. This is done via an online needs analysis survey on the following issues:

- the kind of support teachers and schools need regarding knowledge about religion, tradition, economy, society of origin, learning methodology or learning tools and materials

- the kind of support they need regarding skills and competences connected with building trust, building relations, conflict management, influence on pupils' attitudes, involving family, or empowerment of pupils
- their attitudes towards cultural diversity, their ability to understand multicultural children's needs, or their strength to deal with problems between such children and other classmates
- the kind of solutions (effective problem-solving skills) they use in everyday situations which may be promoted as good practices

The results from this questionnaire can help partners concentrate on, and develop materials for, the most problematic issues. So far it has already been filled out by 395 teachers from the partners' countries.

### **Output 2. Repository of Activities for Teachers**

This output will provide teachers with ready to use active materials that can be used in their teaching. These resources will have different formats (lesson plans, activities, handcraft, games, quizzes, songs, videos, theatre, etc.) and a user-friendly design to facilitate their implementation. They can also be handed to parents to use at home with their children. While the materials will be created by the partners, teachers can also share resources by uploading their ideas on the project website through the application available at <http://www.multicultural-schools.eu/form/>

### **Output 3. Teacher's Handbook on Culturally Inclusive Education**

Topics covered in this handbook will be related to the results of the report in Output 1. It will sport a Q&A model for teachers on how to deal with multiculturalism and how to work with children and parents. Answers will consist of information about the problem, possible solutions, guidance on where to find more information about the issue and the external link to related activities on the repository of the project.

The handbook will be firstly produced in English and tested with a small pool of teachers (100 teachers from 5 different countries) in order to receive feedback which can help improve it. Comments and suggestions will be added, and the final version of the handbook in English will also be translated into 24 EU languages.

### **Output 4. Good Practices of Cooperation among Schools and Parents**

This document for teachers and parents includes inspirational examples from real people –mainly teachers and families- living in multicultural contexts. This output will also be translated into 24 EU languages.

### **Output 5. Online Networking and Learning Platform**

The project will develop a wide European network in which institutions, teachers, parents and anyone interested in multicultural education, will share and

exchange tips and suggestion about teaching in multicultural classrooms. An open-source platform in English and partners' languages will be created for this purpose.

Project partners will prepare a schedule to maintain the platform live and enhance group discussions by posting interesting themes and news. In addition, partners will schedule regular weekly online mentoring for teachers asking for help about problems/issues related to multicultural schools and partners.

### **Output 6. e-Course for Teachers**

An online course will be designed, based on the handbook developed in Output 4. To reach a wider audience, it will have a user friendly format and will be accessed easily through an account or Facebook. It will be designed in English and tested with the reference group and the external evaluator to get feedback before being subtitled into the partners' languages.

### **Multiplier Events**

Several multiplier events during the life of the project are intended to publicize it: roundtables, workshops and a final international conference. A big dissemination campaign will also be organized which will include publications, presentation of the project in international conferences, national and regional media, contacts with the educational authorities, and meetings with teachers, to involve as many teachers as possible into the project.

Roundtables in partners' countries will seek interaction among participants. Representatives of public administration departments dealing with education will be invited to share their views on the topic. Attendees will receive information about the project and will be asked to implement it in their schools.

Dissemination Workshops will be aimed at gathering teachers, school principals, representatives of public administrations, and other educational/parent organizations interested in the field of multiculturalism/multilingualism. The workshop will be partially devoted to "Laboratories-EXPO of Ideas," during which teachers will present their own good practices and examples of activities with children.

Project partners will organize a conference in Brussels at the conclusion of the project, in November 2017. The city is considered a key place for multiculturalism, and the base for many cultural/foreign associations/communities. The scope of this conference will be much wider than the previous events, as it will have an international flair. Main key stakeholders from the area of multiculturalism or multilingualism, together with representatives of EU parliament and agencies, will be invited.

### **Conclusion**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century demands a citizenry that is culturally sensitive and internationally focused. Understanding one another is a prerequisite for living together harmoniously. In order to achieve the dream of a continent without dividing lines,

Europe needs citizens who can communicate in some of the many languages spoken within its borders and understand a variety of cultures.

In this context, the Multicultural Schools project aims at the promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity by creating more effective, responsive and diverse education and societies. Thus, the project aims at making multilingualism and multiculturalism more visible and acceptable in European societies, and especially in educational contexts, en route to make multicultural education an added value to enable the full integration of immigrants.

This article has tried to summarize the work planned during the life of the project, making special emphasis on the reasons and rationale behind it.

Although the project timing is from November 2015 to February 2018, it does not mean it will finish there. Quite the opposite: that will be the time when the products will be ready to be used.

One of the most important goals of the project is to welcome everyone who is interested in it. They can become involved by clicking on the following link: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1Y2LP4LdHgmHJ0DVhNeBIyilBkxsZCzlnWCVADXOjGck/edit#>

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