

## “Your Chance to Ask”

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**Introduction** - Within the European Union, intercultural education is defined as a theoretical and practical approach that is basically centered on promoting and developing *interaction* among pupils of diverse backgrounds, and *knowledge* of the different cultural, religious, linguistic traditions present in schools and in societies, in the belief that meaningful encounter and dialogue will foster *mutual understanding*, *enrich* intellectual and social life and *fight* prejudice, xenophobia and racism in everyday life and in classrooms. In the effort to affirm a non-hierarchical view of cultures and people, intercultural education runs the risk of not taking into full account the fact of low social status and even stigma attached to *other* cultures and consequently to the persons whose identity has been mostly shaped by those cultures. The treatment of Sinti and Roma people in various countries of the EU is a stark example of policy-making based on the belief of the other’s inferiority. This is why I will begin this presentation by talking of an educational strategy that specifically addresses the learning and interaction problems of low status pupils in heterogeneous classrooms. I will then present a website - devised in Great Britain and currently being reproduced in Spain, Italy and Sweden – that aims at confronting and fighting racism. The third example is an educational project developed in a primary school in Vicenza (Veneto region, Italy). I must add that I have direct experience of all three examples, since I participated in the European school experimentation of the first two and I keep in close touch with the teachers at the Vicenza primary school.

**1) Cooperative learning for intercultural education** – *Complex Instruction* is an educational strategy that addresses those classroom features (classroom tasks, role of students and teachers, patterns of interaction among students and between students and teachers) that are often responsible for students’ failure in traditional classrooms. E. Cohen’s sociological analysis of the social system of heterogeneous classrooms acknowledges that the changes obtaining inside them (as a consequence of enrolment of more and more pupils and students of immigrant and low-income households) are a potential source of strength and richness for the life of the schools provided that teachers can capitalize on the multicultural resources precisely represented by those pupils and students. Yet the same analysis reminds us that our societies are characterized not just by diversity but by social and economic stratification as well. Therefore, outside the schools the students’ cultural and linguistic differences translate into inequality of opportunities

and low social status. Inside the classrooms, the same differences too often depress the students' academic standing and their standing among classmates. Such academic and social differences then set the stage for less and less equitable classrooms<sup>1</sup>. Since the same ones produce differential expectations for students' competence on the part of the teacher, the first step toward creating equitable classrooms consists in what she defines as “status treatment”. Low status students have fewer opportunities to interact in a group than the good or even average students. Consequently they learn less as well since in Cohen's perspective greater interaction among peers is positively correlated to better learning. Teachers trained in *Complex Instruction* become aware of the status problems among their students and are ready to treat it specifically when it surfaces during group work or when it affects a multiple ability curriculum. They alter their students' and their own differential expectations for competence by organizing group work in such a way that every individual fully participate in it and interact with her/his schoolmates. Conversation, discussion and valuable multiple ability contributions toward accomplishing the task increase both the learning *and* the status of individual pupils and students, but also that of the class as a whole. The teacher's responsibility to foster interaction among students is best expressed in the delegation of authority to groups. In a condition of learning autonomy, students make an effort to accomplish a task by discussing different options and hypotheses among themselves, and by working together toward the creation of products. Though they delegate authority to groups, teachers must be keen observers of the interaction within groups so as to intervene quickly and briefly if status problems arise to block group interaction and work. Teachers' specific and detailed feedback is also necessary in order to make groups accountable for what they did (or did not do) and for the way they did it. Evaluative research in classrooms where this cooperative learning approach is used indicates that *Complex Instruction* works very well with higher level tasks and multiple ability curricula but at the same time it enhances basic skills. In this approach it is not a matter of celebrating diversity *per se*, but of seeing classroom heterogeneity as a positive thing since it brings together people with multiple abilities and the latter can be best made to work according to a cooperative way.

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<sup>1</sup> See E. Cohen “Creare l'equità nella classe attraverso l'*Istruzione Complessa*: i principi di base”, in F. Gobbo a cura di, *Educare nella società e nella scuola multiculturali*, Imprimerur, Padova (forthcoming in 2002).

Complex Instruction was experimented in schools of 9 different European countries, during a 3 year Comenius project called CLIP, and its results published in 1998. As it happens whenever an educational strategy is transferred from its original context to new ones, we Comenius project partners were confronted by various challenges, one of them being – and I’m speaking in particular for the Italian experimentation – the different perspective and expectations that teachers expressed at the time of training. For many of them it was not always easy to detect the status problem or to consider it a relevant problem. Anxiety about delegation of authority was also an important factor but not a Europe-specific one. Since the completion of the Comenius project, I have organized training in Complex Instruction both at the compulsory school level and at the university one, noticing that the school culture and organization – rather than teachers’ interest and willingness to try a different educational practice - is often responsible for making implementation of the cooperative learning approach rather difficult.

**2) Intercultural education on the Internet: the “Britkid” website** – “Britkid” ([www.britkid.org](http://www.britkid.org)) was created at the time of the “European Year against Racism” (1997) by its author (dr. Chris Gaine, University College Chichester. UK) who has a long standing interest in the issue of young people’s racial attitudes. He defines “Britkid” as a “curriculum resource about racism”<sup>2</sup>, but though explicitly anti-racist it guides rather than preaches to its audience. The website addresses one of the tenets of intercultural education, namely that the encounter and dialogue with diversity should be promoted even in those situations where diversity (of language, ethnicity, religion, etc.) is not an actual issue. Yet it is well known that lack of contact does not mean lack of conceptions about the others. Those who seldom have any contact with “visible minorities”, think of them as either the descendants of the colonized nations or as sport or media stars as well as people involved with crime or religious fundamentalism. The stereotypes they hold, even at a young age, are mostly negative since people have no way of checking their prejudiced attitudes against reality. This is why *representation* of minorities becomes a key issue in any intercultural education endeavor. In this particular case, the site becomes a space for the authentic voices of those hit by racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism, and it is centered on an interactive “dialogue” that takes

into account the users’ language, perceptions and knowledge and aims at giving information to them about racist myths and how to fight them, indicating the positive contributions made by minorities to society, questioning misconceptions, presenting information on ethnic identity and multiculturalism. The characters are invented but they are based on rigorous empirical research: the 9 young people belonging to different groups discuss racism and what it means to grow up in an ethnically diverse society. They explore and discuss issues of immigration control, religion, jobs, housing, food, language and cultural maintenance. The user chooses one character and stays with her/him going home with her/him, for instance, or accompanying her/him to a meeting place in town where friends are waiting. As “Britkid” is based in the Internet, it provides the possibility of being accessed (free of charge) by people (in and out of school) in countries other than Britain. Because some of us (in Italy, Spain and Sweden) thought it was an successful way of learning and self-educating about racism, we joined a Comenius Project that is currently under way and are trying to construct a similar website for our countries. In the process of gathering material (once more from original research) and constructing it into the lives and stories of 9 other characters, we met challenging questions that are of particular interests to this session, such as – only to mention the most relevant ones – how far can a format be successfully and convincingly replicated in a different socio-political context? Is there a real risk of reproducing stereotypes while we strive to compress many questions and issues in the stories and conversations taking place among youngsters<sup>3</sup>? How do we account for ethnographic research that tells us how the “others” – especially the ones of school age – learn to participate in different cultural environments and then switch from one identity to another?

### **3) Communication and learning across the continents: “A Day in the Life of ...” –**

This local project is one of the many invented and launched by a teacher (Anna Maria Comin) who believes that intercultural education can ensure a lively learning climate

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<sup>2</sup> See C. Gaine “Britkid: una risorsa educativa contro in razzismo in Internet”, in F. Gobbo, a cura di, *Educare nella società e nella scuola multiculturali*, Imprimeria, Padova, (forthcoming in 2002).

<sup>3</sup> I had to confront this question when I coordinated and edited a website on Sinti and Roma people ([www.zingari-net.net](http://www.zingari-net.net)) that was also aimed at presenting and discussing racist and prejudiced attitudes among *gagé* so as to fight them, at portraying Sinti’s and Roma’s own view of schooling and of everyday life in campsites, and at narrating their history and in particular that of Holocaust.

and make even very young persons<sup>4</sup> reflect on the common aspect of different ways of life. “A day in the life of ...” extends the experience of communicating, interacting and learning among peers well beyond the classroom’s walls and reaches out to pupils in different continents and various nation-states<sup>5</sup>. The partners are schools in Japan, Brazil, Burundi and Poland, and they were chosen thanks either to contacts the Italian teacher had in those countries<sup>6</sup> or to the help of people working with NGOs. Once the project proposal<sup>7</sup> was ready, it was distributed to all the schools that then agreed to participate in it. The pupils in the different classrooms were asked to draw what a “typical” or a “normal” weekday in their life was like, and they could accomplish the task by working individually or in groups. The project is planned to last the whole school year and will become part of the curriculum, i.e. its drawings and descriptions will be used alongside the teaching of various subject matters such as geography, social sciences, language. In fact, once the drawings arrive to the Vicenza pupils, the latter study and discuss them so as to learn what children’s life has in common regardless of the different natural, social and school environments, on the one hand, and what different lives their distant schoolmates can live, on the other. The pupils in Burundi, Poland, Brazil and Japan are invited to do the same, and to share their thoughts with their pen/drawing-pals. This offers the pupils a chance to notice – with the help of a teacher – how differently different “days” and environments can be interpreted by outsiders, as well as to learn that a drawn description is itself the result of how a “typical” day in a child’s life is defined. The Italian drawings are a good example of such interpretive “native” point of view, since their “normal” day is represented as a school day, due to the fact that they stay in school from 8:30 am (and some of them from 7:30 am) until 4:30 pm (and some of them until 5:30 pm), and therefore that the biggest slice of their weekday is spent with teachers, schoolmates and friends. In addition to this, pupils will possibly learn that the way an environment or an event is represented may reflect a cultural style and thus become aware of the different ways in which something presumably familiar (a classroom, a school, a human figure, for instance) can be portrayed. It can be imagined

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<sup>4</sup> The Italian pupils were 6 years old when last year they started to send and receive drawings from their distant friends.

<sup>5</sup> Because of each country’s history, the pupils’ age may differ widely from the Italian one, as in the case of the school in Burundi.

<sup>6</sup> The teacher herself taught in Burundi for a period of time.

that the questions each group of pupils asked itself were something like “What do we put into the picture? What do we want our distant friends to know? What is more significant about ourselves, about our lives? How do we draw this or that event?”. Communicating and interacting via postal and electronic mail adds an additional bonus, namely the creation of a network of peers that is presently entering its second year. To me this is an indication of the project’s success, as it is the fact that the Vicenza children are deeply involved in it: last year they researched further on the “network” countries and put together a collection of photos, cartoons and music that expanded and enriched the knowledge acquired from the drawings. Later this year, they plan to make an exhibit with the drawings so as to share what and how they learned with the other Vicenza schoolmates.

The same teacher has invented another intercultural learning/interacting experience called “YOU tell MY story”. 9 years old children interview each other and then each writes and narrates the other child’s story that can be supervised and revised by the original narrator. The text will then be bound as a book for the school library. It is the interviewed child’s task to choose and narrate what she/he considers her/his life’s memorable events. The listener has an even bigger task as she/he must practice the arts of listening to and remembering the narration, and then recreating the life-story. Unlike the more common school activity of telling one’s own story in front of the classroom or to the teacher, the choice made in Vicenza maximizes peer interaction and ties it directly to learning. One of the expected results will be the effort to grasp the narrator’s point of view as well as that of understanding how difference is embedded in a life-story. As important as they are, the written story, the notebook-turned-reading book should be seen as part of the ongoing process of getting acquainted with another person’s life, of reflecting about how different circumstances shape a singular story, of learning how emotions are deeply intertwined with events and social roles.

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<sup>7</sup> The text was in Italian so Anna Maria Comin had to make sure that there was someone capable of translating from and into Italian on the other side of the line.