

DIALOGUE BETWEEN IDENTITIES IN A MULTICULTURAL
SOCIETY – THE CASE OF ISRAEL

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In this article (the summary of my lecture), I chose to bring handful of personal stories by people who participated in training programs of the institute in the subject of: "Multiculturalism – a dialogue between identities", since I believe that a personal story has a better capability to transfer powerful social messages.

Background

Israel was only ten years old when I was born, first generation to Italian parents who moved to Israel to escape the anti-Semitic atmosphere of the Fascists then in power. As a first generation in Israel, I had, and still have, the privilege to observe the social changes that the Israeli society has been going through and more over, experience the social mechanisms that so efficiently, are serving as the designers of the complex social existence of the Israeli society.

I inherited social and personal values, of which the principal ones are: membership in a homogenous establishment; clear gender identities (clear delineation of tasks between men and women); and primarily, getting married and having children is required to create a new generation.

The individual's will and need to live as a free individual with his/her own chosen identities, created conflicts with the dominant values expected of the individual. More over, secrecy and muteness were the prices demanded to experience the illusion of belonging. These personal and social prices were taken from groups and individuals in Israeli society: Middle-Easterners, who had to give up their Levantine culture when they came to Israel; women, who had to be satisfied with the roles they were assigned; Israeli Palestinians, who were forced to sing the Jewish anthem, in which they have no place or function; homosexuals and lesbians who were forced into the closet, because they were not continuing the Jewish dynasty, and others.

This policy, of "Melting Pot", formed patterns and stereotypical ways of thinking towards minority groups. This patterned thinking brought about condemnation, distancing and suppression of the other groups, and created social stratification and conflicts between the hegemonic group and minority groups; in essence, the former pushed the latter to the margins of society.

Some thirty years ago, minority groups started protesting this situation, demanding equality and a place at the table of public discussion. These protests eventually led to changes in social outlooks (at least in declarations) from the melting pot to pluralism.

More than thirty years since the nation declared a change in its social outlook, we still witness social conflicts between various groups. The principal social conflicts characterising the present Israeli society are: Mid-Easterners –Ashkenazis (immigrants from Eastern and Western of Europe), Palestinian-Jews, men-women, Religious-Secular, Immigrants-Veterans, Rich-Poor, Homosexual-Heterosexuals and more. The conflicts are manifested first by stereotypes and prejudices, which have a multitude of ramifications, and lead to discrimination at various levels, verbal violence, physical violence and even murder.

The educational environment is also replete with stereotypical messages. They exist within the total absence of representational children from different cultures and identities (Ethiopians, Arabs, Mid-Easterners, Handicapped, etc.) in the books we read to kindergarten and school-age children, as if they are not part of society; they are hidden in the arrangements of play areas (division into "boys' toys and games" and "girls' toys and games"); they are inherent in the figures who serve as role models in animated films shown to children; and they are especially evident in television programs and commercials that we, and children, watch. (See the original project proposal for a more extensive treatment of this issue).

These mechanisms are difficult to identify. They are very sophisticated, elusive, and usually hidden from view. Over the years, they've become a daily language and culture of thought and behavior. They've become a structured reality, which society accepts and utilizes.

Are social mechanisms characterizing only the Israeli society, or maybe, those social mechanisms are universal?

Michel Foucault in his book *Madness and Insanity: History of Madness in the Age of Reason* attempts to identify the universal mechanisms of the human cultures in its attitude toward the 'Other'. He begins his study with the description of attitude of society to leprosy in the past, when they were sent to a desert island to die there. Leprosy is only a metaphor for each of those who embodied the 'Other' throughout history (mentally ill patients, poor people, uneducated, homosexuals, women and more). The "leprosy" always wore a different identity, but the attitude of society to the "leprosy" during different periods was characterized by social mechanisms. According to Foucault, the human society always used different "leproses", in order to define "normalcy".

It is also in his play “Huis Clos” (No Exit), that Jean-Paul Sartre presents three female characters, sinners who have lately died, and who believe that they are bound for Hell. However, the room in which they are confined does not look like Hell – no sulphur, no flames or slaughterer’s knife. At the end of the play, one character says: “If this is really Hell...I’d never have believed it...You remember the sulphur, the fire, the skewers? What a joke! They don’t need skewers. Hell is other people!”

The professional literature and the course of our lives present the difficulty of accepting and coping with otherness. However, many researchers are of the opinion that it is just this encounter with otherness that is the route to development and fulfilment, both personal and social; and that, in this way, it is possible to create a society that respects the diversities endemic to it. This is because we can use the other as a mirror through which we learn both about ourselves and about that other. The encounter with otherness can rescue us from stereotyped ideas and allow us to view reality as it is – multifaceted, dynamic, and constantly in flux.

Would it be possible to modify the encounter with otherness from an experience of suffering to one of humanity? Can we create a dialogue with the other? Could we free ourselves of preconceived notions? Experience empathy? Respect other in the fullest sense of the word?

What would be the educational milieu in which we could create, for pedagogues and pupils alike, a space that could encompass a broad spectrum of personalities, feelings and needs, conflicts and coping, together with awareness of the legitimacy of each and every one of us, and the right to a free existence, each in our own unique identity and culture?

In order to create a society that is able to acknowledge and accept others, that allows and encourages contact with others by means of humanity, it is vital to begin the process at a very early age. We are born without stereotypes, free of the prejudices that, as adults, we have absorbed throughout our lives; whereas children are influenced by their surroundings, especially by the figures of authority that they encounter – parents, relatives, teachers, as well as their environment, stories they are told, the media, and all the rest. Thus, in order to encourage the process of change, we must begin not with the children but with the voices of authority. The educators are

mediators between the children and social reality, and are thus key figures in education. Arousing awareness of stereotyping and prejudice and of how they affect professional work is the first condition for creating social change.

The training program

Two basic assumptions are leading our work at the training program for educators in the institute:

1. Educators are social leaders
2. Multiculturalism is a daily practice (and not a separated content)

The leading four components are essential part of the training program:

1. Reflection and self-awareness: arousing awareness of stereotyping and prejudice, and their effect on professional work in the educational field. Researches have indicated that, contrary to the basic assumption that people in education are aware of the processes of decision-making, including self-examination regarding emotional attitudes and evaluation, they are also influenced by stereotyping based on race, religion, nationality, age, gender, etc. Such attitudes affect evaluation, expectations, and communication with the children. In light of this, we decided to devise a strategy that would emphasize awareness of such processes, in order to reduce their influence as far as possible.
2. Implementing the multicultural approach in all educational programs as an educational tool: In order to implement the approach in daily practice, it is important to integrate it in all aspects of the kindergarten / classroom sessions, rather than as a discrete subject. The multicultural encounter between individuals from different backgrounds is, first and foremost, an encounter between people, arousing emotions, sensibilities, and diverse attitudes. Most of the syllabus taught in Israeli curricula – the festivals, family days, children's stories etc. – focus on encounters, interaction, ideas and conflicts between people. All of this can become an educational tool that embodies the multicultural approach. The training program is intended to instruct the teachers on how to implement multiculturalism in the kindergarten. Indeed, allowing the children to express their ideas and feelings in connection with the program is, in itself, a message about accepting otherness. Hence we

encourage the teachers to help the children to express themselves verbally and to acquire language abilities that will help them when they learn to read.

3. Working in a small groups - the training group should comprise teachers with different backgrounds and lifestyles, thus encouraging positive contact with others by learning about their identities and emotions, and to participate in this group interaction as a personal and social learning tool. I believe that everything that occurs in the professional environment and in life is applicable to the study group. Effective study derives from experience of the here and now.
4. Practical tools: all practical tools should serve the perception of multiculturalism as daily practice.

The following personal stories of variety of participants will illustrate in a much better way the personal and professional process people are going through, in order to begin the process of social change. (all names were changed)

Personal Stories

“And what if Dolly was Billy?”

At the first session, Suha (Israeli Palestinian teacher) took it upon herself to mediate between the Arab and Jewish teachers – as if she needed to confirm that both were present but there was no conflict, that they should all be friends. She put a great deal of effort into this, even when she finally said: “I try and try, and give and give, but I still don’t have equal rights as a citizen of the State”. The immediate response was “Perhaps you’re in the minority socially, but here, you’re one of us”. The group was rather scared of opening this ‘can of worms’. It was rarely that they dared to discuss matters of identity – Palestinian-Israeli vs. Jewish.

Sometime around the sixth session, Suha came to the meeting in a state. She told us that in the dolls’ corner of her kindergarten there is a black doll. One morning she came in and noticed that the doll had been thrown aside. After she had heard, during our course, about the problems of Ethiopian children with integration, she felt she had to clean the doll up and return it to its place among the other dolls. The next day, she again found the doll thrown aside. She was angry, baffled – why just the black doll? When it happened a third time she decided that something must be done. She took it home and made new clothes for it – a brightly colored skirt and a pretty blouse. Then

she took it back to the kindergarten and told the children that this special doll must be respected like all the others.

The black doll joined our group. At every meeting Suha was asked how the doll was faring, and she was happy to relate that after a while, and with her encouragement, the children's attitude to the doll began to change. Some weeks later, she brought the doll with her to the meeting. It was passed from hand to hand, and the new clothes were admired.

Then one of the teachers lifted its skirt, to examine it more closely, and found that a strip of paper had been glued across the doll's crotch. So she asked Suha whether this was a boy or a girl doll. Suha said that she does not remember. Now there was no end to curiosity. The participant removed the strip of paper, to realize that it is a boy doll! To everyone's amazement, Suha replied: "What does it matter? I wanted it to be a girl."

Such a strange end to the story! Now I still wonder whether, if it had really been a boy doll – a Billy instead of a Dolly – would everything have been different? Perhaps this was Suha's way of saying "I'm the black doll here (as the Palestinian participant N.V). Why don't people have the same respect for me as for the others? Why do they cast me out? Like that doll, I want to decide who I am, without people telling me. I want to be Dolly, not Billy". Certainly Suha made herself a focal place in the group after that story.

"I am old but not ignorant"

Two years ago I carried out a workshop for nurses in a hospital in the north of the country on the topic 'providing service in a multicultural society'. In one of the meetings, I asked one nurse to leave the room. I asked the rest of the participants to choose a typical patient that is accepted for the first time in the department. The participants chose the following character: Jewish woman, immigrant from an Arab country, 65 years old, mother of two children, suffers of continuous stomach aches. We wrote the identities on paper. I invited the nurse to enter the room. The paper on which the patient's identities were written on was stuck to her back. The participants were requested to begin the customary procedure to admit a new patient into the department. The nurse had to identify "who is she". Not more than two minutes passed and the nurse inside, angry and amazed says: "please stop, if I'm old, does that mean that I'm deaf? Why do you almost shout when you talk to me? And by being

from Middle-Eastern origin, does it entail that I'm illiterate? You talk to me using simple sentences, words and syntax. This is not your language, I know you".

I am not a "group". I am an individual

In a workshop that carried out for insurance agents on this topic, one of the agents told me the following story: "I wanted to sell life insurance program in an area where many immigrants from Ethiopia live. So I prepared for it, studied the codes, norms and customs of the members of this ethnic group, in order to be able to offer a life insurance program that is suitable to their needs. When the plan was ready and after setting several appointments, I arrived to the first customer. I told him about the life insurance program, detailed it to him and how this particular program is very suitable to their needs. The man who sat in front of me listened very patiently and at the end said: "thanks for the time that you dedicated, but this program is not suitable for me". I was very surprised and answered: "but how can it be? This program is tailored for the needs of your ethnic group'. 'Perhaps', the customer replied, 'it is made for the needs of our ethnic group, but it is not tailored to my needs and lifestyle'.

“Lazy butterflies”

During the course, the participants had been asked to write two short essays. One of them was to be personal – about defining an identity that they felt to be problematic, to describe how this problem affected their work in the kindergarten. This happened on the day of the national elections in Israel, a free day. I remember the telephone ringing and cutting short my thoughts about possible election results. Naama was on the line, apologizing for disturbing me, but she had to ask me something. She said: “I’m sitting down to write that essay. My ideas are pouring out on the paper. When I read what I’ve written, I’m ashamed of myself, ashamed of my conduct, of the extent to which social mores influence my professional work. I want to hand in the essay as it is, honest and authentic, but I’m afraid that when you read it you’ll decide that I’m not fit to be a kindergarten teacher, and you’ll get rid of me.”

As I listened to her I realized that something very meaningful had happened to her. She had found the rare courage to look inside herself, learn something important about herself, and want to change it. Whatever it was, I wanted to support her. It was exactly for such matters that I had set up the workshop – to help the teachers get to know themselves, the children and their parents. I told her that I had not yet read her

essay, so that I could not know what she was referring to. “I’m sure that when I have read it” I told her, “I’ll want to say ‘Good for you!’ and to recommend all my friends to send their children to such a courageous kindergarten teacher.”

I wasn’t joking. I was really impressed when I read her essay. Naama wrote that she had always had a problem with children who lagged behind – as if they were not very bright, either cognitively or in physical ability. Faced with such children, she boils with fury inside. She doesn’t show her feelings, keeps them to herself, telling herself “it’ll pass when they grow up.”

When she asked herself why she had such a problem with this kind of otherness, she worked out that her mother had been a sportswoman, a national champion. At home, excellence and achievement were what counted – no room for mediocrity, for slowness, and this had become a central value in her own life. Whenever she encountered a child who was backward in some way, she found herself in conflict with the familial and social values that made her feel accepted, appreciated, belonging. It upset her dreadfully. How could she, who so believed in equality, not pay equal attention to all such children?

Naama was asked to suggest activities that would reflect an egalitarian attitude to each and every child, and it was evident that she had decided to make a complete switch in her ideas. Formerly, in a ‘Spring’ activity, the children flitted about like butterflies, moving to a unified rhythm that she saw as appropriate. “Today” she writes, “I do it differently. From time to time I stop them, and we look at the different butterflies and ask each other ‘which butterfly are you?’ the room rings with answers: “I’m a lazy one. I’m a naughty one. I’m an athletic one. I’m sleepy, happy, etc. etc. There’s room for all of them, and they explain why they are like that at that moment – a crowd of butterflies, each different from all the others, all perfectly legitimate.”

I wondered later, whether Naama had deliberately chosen election Day for this task, and whether there was any connection between our daily personal or social choices and the responsibility imposed on us by those choices.

About five months after the course, I was talking to Naama on the phone, listening to her three-month-old daughter gurgling in the background. Naama wanted to tell me about an experience she had had during the course. “Some of the sessions were very tough for me,” she began. “About single-parent families; things were said about egotistical choices to have babies and raise them alone, and about the emotional damage to the child. I kept quiet because I am one of those women. At first, I was

furious about what was said. But when I look back, I am so pleased with my decision, I'm so happy and fulfilled that now I can talk about it. I understand that the problem is not irresponsibility or neglect, but the difficulty of discarding entrenched social values that have persisted for years. As soon as I grasped that, all the anger and confusion melted away."

Naama certainly knew what she was talking about. She knew about the upheaval that she had undergone when she wrote her essay. With such understanding, she could exchange her doubts and fears for compassion and acceptance.

"To cut myself off?"

Almaza is headmistress of a day nursery for Moslem, Jewish and Christian children. She is a Christian Arab and believes wholeheartedly in coexistence, the multicultural encounter, and mutual acquaintance for achieving equality. She teaches about the festivals of all the faiths in her kindergarten, all the languages, and encourages parents to come and tell the children about their family traditions. Two professional actresses attended one of our sessions, to discuss with us the dilemmas that teachers encounter in their work.

Almaza went to the storyteller's chair. The actresses stood centre stage and listened to her carefully. She said that although she is so careful to establish mutual equality in the kindergarten, in her private life things are rather different. She is very concerned because her eldest daughter has met and may want to marry a boy who is not of the same religion. She worries about the social and personal price her daughter might have to pay. She talked about the dichotomy between running an interfaith kindergarten and preaching acceptance of the other while, as a mother, she is not prepared to let her daughter marry someone who is not a Christian.

The actresses acted out the dilemma – the transposition from home to kindergarten, the dichotomy between personal and professional attitudes, the great distance between cognition – acceptance of and respect for others – and the need to belong, to be accepted by society, that compels us to conform.

"We all know about the high price to be paid for being different. I educate towards coexistence and acceptance, but the bottom line is that I feel that what I do is valueless. No matter how hard I try, this will always be the case. How can I bridge this gap between what my head believes in and what my heart feels?"

“And if they do notice that I’m not wearing makeup?”

Dalia began by telling us why she had not been at the previous meeting: “I caught an eye infection from one of the children in the kindergarten, and my eyes were all red and swollen. I couldn’t put my makeup on. At the weekend I went for a vacation with my husband, and I was careful to wear my sunglasses all the time because I didn’t want to be seen looking like that in public”.

When she speaks to the group, Dalia uses the plural – *we* feel distress, *we* feel that multiculturalism is... Several times we, the facilitators, had asked her to speak for herself – I think, I feel - but Dalia went right on talking about ‘we’ and ‘us’. Once, when Avi said something about this to her, she answered directly – “Perhaps speaking in the plural protects me, allows me not to disclose things? Perhaps I’ll be hurt if I reveal things, be rejected? I’ve learned about that from experience, what it’s like to give my opinion and be rejected. This is how I protect myself.” Cautiously I asked her whether speaking in the plural offered the same protection as wearing makeup. “Maybe”, said Dalia, and was silent.

“I let my friend choose for me”

When we did the ‘identities’ exercise, in which all the participants selected five slips from a pile on the floor, each with a different identity written on it, Efrat had remained sitting, asking a friend to bring her the slips with the different identities. “Here” said the friend. “Take it. I chose the same one”, and Efrat took it and stayed where she was.

Almost an hour later, after an intensive discussion about the chosen identities, Efrat suddenly said “I’m not satisfied with mine. I want to change them. I was lazy and asked my friend to choose for me, and while we were talking I realized that sometimes it’s easier to let someone else choose my identity, and perhaps that’s what I do all the time. But right now I felt bad about it. I want to choose for myself and be satisfied with my choice.” Later, she added “It’s really hard to absorb all those various identities, quite impossible in fact. So we look for instant solutions. When there are Jewish and Christian children in the same kindergarten, we’re careful to have both the Christmas tree and the hanukka candles. Does that really fulfill multicultural aspirations? I think it’s only pretending to educate for multiculturalism.”

“What am I doing in this course?”

Dana was very dubious when she began the course. She asked herself “What am I doing? I came because it’s obligatory, but I don’t belong here. Do I have stereotypes and prejudices? Do I relate to the children differently?” But she decided that if she was already here, perhaps she could learn a couple of new things. At the eighth session Dana was particularly quiet. Towards the end of the meeting she had said “I want to say something. I’m very embarrassed, and it’s not easy for me to admit, but a few days ago there was a parents’ meeting in my kindergarten. I sat with the parents of each child separately. And then I suddenly realized that I was relating to each of them differently, talking differently, having different expectations of the child whose father is a doctor and the one whose father is a municipal worker. Inside, I was so ashamed of myself. I did talk to the municipal worker, but I could not look him in the eye. He apparently didn’t notice the difference. But I did, inside.”

This was at the beginning of the school year. In Dana’s kindergarten they learn about so many different identities, cultures, socio-economic unfortunates. “I noticed” said Dana to me on the phone, “that at the parents’ meetings there’s almost no contact between parents from different strata of society. Apart from which, I hear objections from the wealthier parents – that the less well-off ones don’t contribute their share to the kindergarten. The minute I heard that, I reverted to my old strategies. I knew that what they said was based on prejudice and not on fact, and I decided to do something about it. We needed to renew the play yard in the kindergarten, and I decided that we’d do it with all the parents. The gardening skills – digging, hoeing, planting, and weeding – that were needed are common to everyone. So the parents were co-opted, and together we made a new garden, everyone making the same amount of effort. Slowly, slowly there began to be heard discussions among the different parents. They finished the job sweaty, but as a unified group.”

The Outsider

At one of the meetings, the participants were asked to write, anonymously, on a slip of paper, one identity they find it hardest to deal with. Then I collected the slips and placed them on the floor in the centre of the room. The characteristics included physical disability, derangement, mental disturbance, single mothers, lesbians and

homosexuals. “It’s interesting that nobody wrote ‘Arab’, said one teacher. “As an Arab, I constantly meet all kinds of very unpleasant problems”.

“Yes, and it’s interesting that nobody wrote ‘Ethiopian’ so many problems arise in the group working with them” said another. “I’ve no problems with any of them or with accepting people as they are” said a third. “And what if, heaven forbid, a child of yours was one of those characters?” someone asked. Silence.

“It’s so easy to talk when it’s someone else. I don’t know what I’d do if my child was a homosexual, or mentally ill.” Finally, a participant said – What scares me most is that I have no control over those identities. Even if it’s hard for me with Ethiopians or Arabs, I’ll never be one. I can cope with that. But physical disability?? Or mental illness? Or sexual orientation? – I’ve no control over that, not for myself, and not for my children. Perhaps that’s what frightens me so much – having no choice...”