

# Immigration and education in the Us. A sociological glance

A path towards equal opportunities.

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## Abstract

This paper represents a socio-political process synthesis concerning integration in the US, as one of the first countries to experiment multicultural practices and realize a multiethnic consciousness, for overcoming the social discrimination. It explains how, in more than a century of social and political activism, has almost been impossible to eradicate completely the racism stronghold, creating a civic consciousness. At this point, can we think about racism phenomenon as a biological matter? Actually, as explained by R. Siebert (Siebert, 2001), the racism has grown up in the collective imaginary as something that belongs to the humans naturally. It is just a historical process of Modernity, appeared in the west territories. The US, as this paper highlights, are an example of how the racism is connected to the historical events.

**Keywords:** education; immigration; inclusion; intercultural policies; bilingualism

*Some historical notes: from the second half of the XIX to nowadays*

During the last two decades of globalization, the words which have mostly crowded the mass media, supporting lots of social actors' expressions, are certainly *multiculturalism*, *multiethnic* and *inter-culture*. These two important phenomena, concerning the ethnic mixture and its main cause, that is the economic and multidimensional process of the globalization, are actually connected. It means that thanks to the web reality, the immigration stream around Europe has increased, giving new hope to people who dreamt a better life.

In a so complex situation, it comes out a fear feeling in the impact with different individuals from us, the so called *others*, because of their culture and thus their thought. But through a deeper reflection, we have to convene with R. Kapuściński's idea that the *other*, even though a dissimilar symbology holder, is part of the great universe carpet which everybody belongs to. In effect, in one of his conferences, he stated that this new subject:

seems to be composed by two beings, two parts often difficult to divide [...]. One of them is the being who is equal to us, with his pleasure and sufferance, his pomp and sinister days, who is afraid of famine and cold, who feels the pain as a wretchedness and

the success as a satisfaction, a fulfilment. The other guise, overlying and weaved with the first, is that of a diverse ethnic, cultural and religious characteristics holder. The two parts never appear distinguished, at the pure state and isolated, but cohabit each other. (Kapuściński, 2006, p. 10)<sup>1</sup>.

So, from this consideration, it is possible to affirm that our world image becomes really richer and wider in a cultural interchange, encountering the *other*, listening to different languages and trying to understand diverse life ways. The *other* thus represents our mirror, in fact he reminds us our human nature, but at the same time, we acquire a new knowledge, as we were in a mutual learning laboratory. But, it is necessary to emphasise that, in these last years, the large people's movement, from one planet's area to another has represented an extraordinary phenomenon only for few European territories, which, on the contrary of others, for more than a century exclusively accumulated and kept an emigration memory.

This article aims at analysing briefly the social policies path concerning the hard and contrasted inclusion of immigrants in the US. This process, begun since the colonies constitution, developed above all during the XIX century, where the America countries assisted to higher immigrants' waves coming from all around the world and looking for better life conditions.

Nevertheless, during the industrial expansionism, we are very far from the US 's multicultural conscience birth. The word *multiculturalism*, in fact was only used from the 40s of the XX century, when the ethnic cohabitation, rather than being considered as a social problem, seemed a daily condition by now, a specific situation which required precise and accurate exigencies. At the same time, the *melting pot*, that had been the most used political practice covering the first decades of 1900, started its decline, affirming to the world the failure of one of the first assimilation strategies. By the 60s, in fact, the multiculturalism experimented new forms, more or less connected to the individual' s personal rights, sometimes people witnessed and still attend nowadays to a prevalence of groups' specific traditions, so called ethnic rights, while, in other cases, the universal rights prevail to protect the social subject' s person. For instance, as concerns the Muslim infibulations practices, the ethnic rights are not recognized by west countries, because of their violence on women's body and soul.

Immigration of course is strongly related, as a social question, to education processes. In the US, since the beginning, many scholars have tried to understand the complex issue of immigrants as well as of their hard inclusion at school. Interethnic methods in education had been experimented from the beginning of the people's mixture, up to nowadays. We can state that this process in the US has no a final points, but only

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<sup>1</sup> All the translations have been made by the author.

new next guidelines to better the condition of all students' instruction, making them emerge their own civic sense and grant equal opportunities.

The racial interaction process at school, to integrate different groups of American students, presents a complex structure. The goal is to exercise best practices and create a real intercultural dialogue, as a double entering channel, where every culture can keep its specificity, even though it is in the same *salad bowl* of the others. E. Morin stated that culture has to maintain

the human identity in what it has as specificity; cultures keep social identities in what they have as specificity. Cultures are apparently closed in themselves to save their own singular identity. But actually they are also open: integrating in themselves not only knowledge and techniques, but also ideas, dresses, food, individuals from other sites (Morin, 2001, p. 58).

Moreover, we can't forget, as U. Hannerz (Hannerz, 1996) argued, the extraordinary fact that our culture permits us to relate each other. Thus, the more we share, in the cultural change, the more we simplify the communication and comprehension with and of the *other*.

The framework of a multiethnic area represents nowadays an important factor of the social complexity. In fact the best intercultural policies push social actors to create positive action in cooperating together. Observing the historical path of the north America, we can assert that its population development happened through a migratory process, which started during the XVII century, never stopped.

When the Pilgrim Fathers arrived at Plymouth (1620 ), (Jones, 2007) <sup>2</sup>, gave a fundamental footprint to the historical American identity. In fact, their puritan faith and their democratic organization forms constituted, after the Revolution, the peculiar features for the Constitution. Some years before the Revolution, the American population counted 3,9 million of people on the area of New England. And since then, it was considered a multicultural land. After a while, the phenomenon of the chain migration started to catch on, it means that who wanted to come there from other parts of the world, could link to his American relatives or friends. At the end of the XIX century, the migratory streams were increased, for the bad conditions which the continental people lived in. The places on the old world were crowded and offered no jobs. On the matter, more than 100.000 Irish people left their land towards America, to escape from the Great Famine (1845-1848).

The migration, in the last decades of the XIX century, interested also the oriental groups. Chinese people, for instance, reached the Canadian coast as first destination, but their particular features were not well accepted by American society. In fact, xenophobia

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<sup>2</sup> The first contact with the American coast from Europe happened in 1513, thanks to Juan Ponce de León, who reached Florida.

phenomena brought up towards oriental groups, in particular Chinese ones. In fact in 1882, it was emanated the *Chinese Exclusion Act* that kept out Chinese people from all kind of integration, thus from the American citizenship (Lee, 2003). In effect, analysing the social and political view of that period, the Supreme Court supported and justified this act with two key principles

Chinese people, précised the Court, remain foreigners, they choose to live apart and adhere to unknown traditions as concerns our country. They appear unable to modify their habits or their way to live, it is apparently impossible for them to assimilate to our people (Lacorne, 1997, p. 102).

This amendment prohibited the family reunification, Chinese people, who were mostly men, had no the naturalization right, both for themselves and their sons born on the American territory. They were submitted to these restrictive laws up to 1943, when, thanks to their patriotism against Japan, they obtained the same rights of other minority groups. The Chinese was the most extraordinary case in American history, but it was not an exception if we think about the black ethnicity. So, the consequences of the white supremacy often were xenophobia episodes. Nevertheless, In the first years of the XX century, the population was increased quite significantly, in fact, it amounted to 9 million (Jones, 2007).

The melting pot policy, which was utilised at the beginning of the century, originated from a theatrical piece by I. Zangwil, represented in 1908. So it started a real propaganda campaign to promote the Americanization of immigrants. During the first decade of the XX century, it was a relevant analyses subject of the Chicago School. The major sociologists of the period contributed with important surveys not only studying the social actor (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1920 | ed, 1996), but also observing how the social interaction and the communication would have determined social changes (Crespi, Jedlovski & Rauty, 2007). It took more than fifty years to declare this policy a failure. The suprematism of *wasps*<sup>3</sup> has represented in the American history a strong barrier against the making of a multiethnic consciousness. This situation started changing in the 60s with the establishment of equal civil rights for everyone.

After the 70s, the migration scenery was a little bit altered. In fact since then, the new comers were mostly from Latino America and Asia. Mexican people, in particular, have been considered, since then, holders of a new migration way. They in fact have the ability to keep a link with their own origin area. So, this population represents thus no more the old migrant figure, the traveller described by G. Simmel who came to stay, but, in many cases, these new immigrants, from territories not very far from the US, conduct their life coming and going back, as seasonal workers. Mexican people, often, before reaching the American land, are constricted to live for some years in some

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<sup>3</sup> White Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

unhealthy border areas, because of the police. And many of them will stay all their life in these places, expecting to pass the frontier line (Valdés, 1996).

Today is very complex to enter the US in a legal way, that means to obtain visa document. People require it, but the wait can be decades. Up to the first years of the XX century, it was sufficient to stop to Ellis Island, at that time America needed workers in its factories. It was in 1921 that the first law concerning immigration limits passed. Since then, the American law has been modified, following a restrictive line about immigration, which has become more and more selective. So, under today's limited rules, the American dream seems to end before starting.

At this point, we can suggest, as affirmed by A. Schlesinger (Schlesinger, 1998), that the United States represent a land which is possible to analyse only throughout its ethnic communities a country that, with its great multicultural policies experience, should demonstrate how a so different ethnically environment can realize its unity on the universal values of dignity, equality, justice, freedom and opportunities.

### **Multicultural Education. A political struggle between inclusion and segregation**

According to the theories that are in favour of the racial mixture,

multiculturalism improves the relations among ethnic groups, because it speeds new ways to perceive the *other* up (Donati, 2008, p. 8).

The space of the classroom represents for children the first real experience of autonomy, as affirmed by T. Parsons (Besozzi, 2006). The child leaves his parents and begins his independence and responsibility pathway. But, if we consider a multiethnic audience, it is not trouble-free to create a balanced atmosphere and a racial equality environment, both for teachers and students. Immigrant students, of course, have to work harder to obtain a social integration, in spite of the new millennium. Actually, the cultural diversities interaction process has not an easy approach. This reminds us that migrants, not only run off their family when they start school, but very often, because of the insufficient means which some societies can dispose of, leave behind them the fundamental supports, belonging to their cultural background. And, beyond the language, these just represent some of the difficulties they face with, entering a new knowledge contest. Speaking of it, J. Habermas (Besozzi) observed that a good socialization can't abstract from the interactive action between the subject and the other individuals, where the linguistic aspect represents one of the fundamental points.

Another important element, which can create a natural differentiation process in the classroom space, concerns students' success and unsuccessful. And also in this case, migrant students are not very good at school subjects, this is strongly related to their

difficulty to learn English language in a short time. On the matter, we can quote P. Bourdieu's concept on the education system. He sustained that first of all it is

the central institution of modern societies. It is so important because it represents the main control institution as regards the allocation of privileges [...] The school system has the function to reproduce the dominant systems of classifications through which they exercise the symbolic power (Ghisleni & Privitera, 2009, p. 97).

Actually, the exigency to get equal chances in education came out after the industrial revolution. In that period, education became necessary for the emancipation of people and thus it started to be considered in Europe as a universal right. If we look back to the sociology classics, in particular M. Weber and K. Marx, it is possible to observe that the classification process at school, concerning the matter of success/unsuccessful, could be generated by two diverse causes, belonging to ascribed factors. According to Marx, for example, it depended on a determinism, that is from the affiliation or membership to a specific social class; Weber, instead, suggested that it probably derived from a precise conditioning, so from the subject's cultural background. We can affirm that among the sociology classic authors, Simmel appears the most contemporary one. In fact he stated the necessity for students to learn through an autonomous thought and to develop the capacity to link knowledge and experience (Besozzi).

So the analysis of the intercultural school-space in US, appears fundamental to make students acquire efficient tools to remake their identity in view of cultural diversities. Z. Bauman, analysing the post-modernity processes, gave us a new concept of identity, that according to him is just a puzzle, many painting pieces to assemble as the situation requires us. Unfortunately, this biographic drawing doesn't grant us a perfect final result as a real puzzle box does, in fact he clearly explains

a puzzle bought in a shop is all in a box, it has already its final image on the cover [...] all the pieces to reproduce that image are in the box [...] (Vecchi, 2005, p. 55).

The individual of the *reflexive modernity* is just a *bricoleur*, who will pass all his life trying to make himself. Positive actions and policies have been elaborated and enacted in US above all starting from the 80s of the last century, but racism and discrimination still represent an important social plague, which both students and teachers tackle with in the classroom nowadays. Actually, the expression *multicultural* has been used to indicate a school representing every ethnic group and any other typology of diversity, included the gender.

At beginning, there were no specific indications of what and how a multiethnic education could mean. So, many white teachers thought that the best practice was to promote rites and folk traditions of different communities, almost entirely neglecting

its sociological aspect, that is the discrimination overcoming in the classes. Instead, it is fundamental to consider this kind of education

in the Civil Rights struggle for freedom, political power and economic integration (Sleeter & McLaren, 2000, p. 1)

At the end of the 60s, the feminism imposed at school the amendment of Title IX, it meant

No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, or denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal assistance (Editors, 2000, p.1).

It was in these years that the Ethnic and Women's Studies rose. So we can state that only when American sociologists and educators understood, at the end of the XX century, that many minority people showed a strong deprivation about education and culture, multicultural methods started to be considered as fundamental to make a better society in the new millennium (Sleeter & McLaren). It occurred new reforms to support multiculturalism at school, so many teachers started to do supplementary lessons concerning different cultures. But it has not been very simple to realize a good integration among diverse communities. Today, many scholars wonder the same questions of ten or twenty years ago, that is

in what proportion do immigrants students participate in the education offered by American community colleges? How do immigrants perform at two-years colleges, and what role does the community college play in their advancement to further degrees in American higher education? How do colleges strive to serve their population of immigrant students? (Szelenyi & Chang 2002)

To educate someone towards the multiculturalism, means to understand and learn the people history through different points of view. So, when we use multicultural practices in a classroom, each student should be represented, their learning have to include the cultural background of everybody. Thus, you can consider multicultural education as a *modus vivendi*, and it is not enough to substitute the expression *melting pot* with *salad bowl* or *mosaic*, rather we should understand how to establish a national unity and a pair opportunities society. The scholar bell hooks, or G. J. Watkins, has theorized, basing it on her own student's experience, the practice of the dialogue between teachers and students, *as a practice of freedom*, to stimulate a communitarian solidarity feeling, thus a spontaneous and democratic collaboration. In fact she has affirmed in her work on education that

to engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standings [...] (hooks, 1994, p. 13).



So, according to her, the class space should become a creative site where the students' subjectivity can come out, making them to perceive a new world vision. Her thought was influenced firstly by P. Freire's education concepts, then, in the last years, by the Buddhist monk T. N. Hahn. And we still read by her

to educate as practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the soul of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can [...] begin (hooks, p. 13).

## **Bilingual Education Practices**

The American education policy began to worry seriously about school integration only after the melting pot failure and the affirmation of the ethnic rights. Since then, lots of methodologies and techniques have been evaluated and experimented. The first education exercise, to help migrant students, was the bilingualism practices. This method was supported by the Education Act of 1968, so called Title VII. It was applied in some American territories, but, as lots scholars had strongly supposed, its results had not always been those they hoped. And during Bush's education larger reform, at the beginning of the new millennium, bilingual practices were considered inadequate to the needs of that time. In fact, a new measure, known as *No Child Left Behind*, was approved with broad bipartisan support.

### *At the beginning*

Actually, the introduction of this method in the US happened two centuries ago, in 1830. It was the state of Ohio to give firstly the authorization for this new experiment in the classrooms, to support German people. After fifteen years about, also Louisiana approved a law which favoured at schools the learning through two languages, English and French. Just three years later, it was used in New Mexico with the Spanish language. In this project, which seemed to have success in learning, they thought to launch also some natives' languages as the Cherokee one. Nevertheless, after some years of experimentation (1864), the bilingualism was restricted by the American federal government. No children belonging to minorities could speak their origin language in the classroom. Moreover, at the end of the century, in 1896, a new law forbade the black students the access into the whites' classrooms.

In the first years of the new century, because of the growth of a racism feeling by *wasps*, the bilingual education disappeared, and mostly American schools came back to the monolingualism. The logical consequence of this, which appeared after a while, was the failure in learning of *non English speaking* students. Only fifty years later, in 1954, finally the 1896 law was abrogated, so African-American students could enter freely the same classes of white people, earning the same opportunities. But the struggle to abolish some classes privileges was long and hard yet. Then, it was the Civil



Rights Movement which changed completely the sort of minority communities in the US and all around the world.

### *After the seventies*

As it has already been said, in 1968 it was approved a new law which concerning American education, the *Bilingual education Act*, better known as Title VII, to grant the special educational needs of many children of limited English speaking ability, who lived in the United States.

The initial project, which the education reform derived from, concerned the insert in Texas schools of the Spanish and its culture. English would have been the second language. The Act predicted the curricula innovation and supported students from poor families. In 1974 a new amendment joined to it, the *Equal Educational Opportunity Act*. It affirmed that government's action had to be appropriated and supported by adequate programs to overcome language barriers, giving equal chances.

In fact, the teaching methods were also focused on the original languages of minority ethnicities, so that all people could proceed in knowledge learning. Of course these practises aimed at helping boys and girls to integrate themselves in English classrooms, as soon as possible. Anyway, bilingualism education was not troubles-free. One of them was the expensive cost to realize an efficient support training. In 1984 the Act was still modified. It was established major autonomy and flexibility for schools in changing curricula and utilising funds, according to their own necessities.

Later, the reform was enhanced to better favour a pluralistic approach. Actually this method has been chosen because scholars and experts observed that migrant children using their own origin language, could improve their English expression. Nevertheless, the bilingualism often revealed failure results, above all we refer to Latino students. So, at this point, we can wonder how is it possible? Well, we have lots answers. First of all the incessant stream of migrants created difficulty to the program efficiency if we consider the narrow number of specialists, as it happened in California, for instance.

### *The new millennium*

At the beginning of the new millennium, the bilingual education began again its decline. The most important reform plan was purposed by G. W. Bush as *No Child Left Behind* (Crawford, 2002). The new educational reform was approved in 2002 by the Department of Education and regarded the Elementary and Secondary level for disadvantage students. This legislation represented a significant change in the American school landscape. Among the various measures, the most important were: a stronger accountability for results, major flexibility and control, parental involvement policy and new teaching methods. As concerns migrant students, the plan established

they could attend for no more than three years a bilingual program, even though lots of specialists stated that it would have been better for six. It were introduced standard tests starting from the school year 2005-6, students were required reading and maths tests annually. Then, by 2007-8 the tests also concerned the preparation in science at all levels. But the results were not the best, as they waited. The standardization of the tests was not fit for the multiethnic society of the time. This plan reform was soon considered a failure for American schools and it was not a help for students, people stated that American education was coming back to the early 60s (Monty, 2003).

After a short period of experimentation, many American states have been constricted to introduce some modifications to Bush's law, so the reform started to become unpopular.

B. Obama's education policy, instead, is based on the competition. In fact in 2009 the new education reform has been the *Race to the top*. It purposes innovations and reforms to make American children achieve the success in the globalization planet. Obama's aim is to give a new input to knowledge and have by 2020 the highest percentage of graduated students in the world. He wants to improve accountability systems to be informed about the individual students' learning and progress. In this plan, teachers will be supported by innovative strategies and by every tool can be useful for students' outcome. But, at this points we should wonder, is really the competition the best practice to improve our educational system in the globalization era?

## Conclusion

Coming back to the bilingual policy at American school, some institutes as *The Swahili Institute* of Chicago, keep on working with projects focused on origin languages from Kindergarten to 12 level.

In the age of *yes, we can*, the education should be based on democracy and equality, giving to every student his own recognition. The building of an open dialogue and the development of the cooperation ability can be considered two positive actions to overcome old racial conflicts. The collaboration, as sustained by R. Sennett (Sennett, 2012), is a social ability and it is able to create relations using sophisticated diplomatic techniques which could be more useful than competition when we meet the *other*.

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