

# HOW TO TRAIN PROFESSIONALS FOR MANAGING THE CONTRADICTIONS OF A MULTIETHNIC SOCIETY?



The society we live in is so diverse and mixed that we are no longer able to understand it only through traditional research perspectives. It is multiethnic and we often see that the stories shared in the public arena do not reflect what happens in everyday life.



People are living a fragmentation of cultures and

traditions due to the contact between persons and groups who have different life perspectives, which generates a form of "situated translation" of principles, rules of conduct and socially acquired beliefs. For example, young people are learning from peer-mixing practices and lifestyles that often generate cultural confusion or estrangement from their parents or the community where they have grown up.

Therefore, the different contexts of modern life cannot be defined only as multiethnic or multicultural. It is not only a new conversational area, but a learning arena. To be able to understand why people close their minds from different points of view or develop violent behaviors, we need to produce more "situated knowledge". How are students defining their identity at school or how are professionals developing informal ways to work beyond cultural, religious and ideological perspectives?

Traditional macro categories are not enough when we want to deeply understand the possibility of generating inclusive communities, when we want to manage contexts with a high multicultural density and we try to prevent phenomena of radicalization.

Many phenomena are changing faster than our static model of interpretation in theory. Therefore, we need to engage the knowledge generated through informal learning processes. For example: we could use the signs of aesthetics - or the symbols of a culture - to understand the levels of integration or exclusion of a person or group in our community. Or we could use them to understand the level of radicalization. In many cases we may need a deeper level of enquiry to understand what those signs or symbols mean for the specific, local community.

Multiethnic communities encourage the localization of broader processes of socialization. Let's think about informal peer education at school. Students learn elements from very different cultures, sometimes generating misalignments in the families they belong to.

Another informal learning process is created by the dialectical relationship between generations. People of different ages create a proximal development area that does not depend on the multicultural density of the context but on different learning experiences. What are the perspectives of a young person who has studied and lived, since childhood, in multicultural classes and an adult who has experienced mono-cultural walks of life?

To understand the outcomes of these processes, it is necessary to be able to enter into the contradictions of everyday life and grasp the meanings generated by contingent situations. Sometimes this is how we discover that some signs of belonging are no evidences and testimonies of a monolithic and sometimes radical adherence to an ideology, a culture or a religion. The signs that were manifested and exhibited do not necessarily correspond to the meanings attributed to them by society or by communities.

Apparently, the distinctive trait in terms of today's life contexts is that people have greater margins of freedom in regards to the translation of the cultures of belonging. So, what knowledge is useful for us to manage these contexts and support inclusive informal learning? How can we use this informal learning to generate the setting for emancipatory learning into schools or workplaces? How do we train professionals to become able to do this?

Are we forgetting to study everyday life?

Despite the wealth of studies on the theme of human rights, on the creation of an inclusive society and on phenomena of radicalization, we cannot assume that we have generated all the knowledge useful for understanding and planning actions for contrasting opinions, stereotypes and for the promotion of dialogue between peoples and cultures.

Professionals can take advantage of scientific knowledge and case studies that illustrate the reasons and causes of certain phenomena in detail. But, despite this, the application of models and grids of analysis only partially facilitate the solution or management of emerging problems in multiethnic societies.

Some examples taken from empirical research are symbolic. There is a broad convergence of studies showing that inmates, over the span of their detention, develop even more radical perspectives of thought than they had previously. Therefore, it is difficult to balance certainty and proportionality of the sentence with effective rehabilitative action. Moreover, professionals often use assessment scales to try and define or understand the level of a prisoner's radicalization, usually focusing only on religious radicalization. After a few years, the outcomes of these actions ended up "educating" prisoners to hide the signs used to identify the affiliation to a group, ideology or religion. Now, they often exhibit neutral behaviors. Or, inversely, professionals are no longer able to read the new signs of adherence to a path of thought radicalization. A similar outcome can occur in everyday life. What are the religious symbols, what are the evidences that can be accepted as certain elements to understand the sense of belonging to an ideology,

to a tradition or to a culture?

While it may seem like a paradox, increasing the general knowledge about something does not necessarily mean that we are increasing the quality of professional actions.

There is a risk that we end up adopting approaches that are only diagnostic and oriented to develop standards and general theory. We are losing the educational approach, and above all we are missing the opportunity of enhancing what, even in an informal way, is happening in terms of inclusion and coexistence.

Supporting professional development to produce a “situated knowledge”

The critical point in professional practices is that problems do not emerge to professionals as well-formulated structures. This element is further stressed by multicultural professional practices. Problems tend to present themselves as chaotic, uncertain and undetermined. Those who are involved in professional practices need to produce a “situated” and unique knowledge because general criteria cannot inform experts on the right decision to make. Conflicts of values, personal and organizational implications, and complexity of situations are not understandable by stoic knowledge.

When different cultures, traditions or expectations are in concert, they produce learning phenomena that arises spontaneously in everyday life or in the workplace. People generate a knowledge that is only partially intercepted and formalized in scientific studies.

Professionals working in contexts with a high multicultural density often declare that there are no appropriate categories of analysis to resolve problematic situations, or they have not been suitably trained in a professional sense for these situations. Real-life is ways ahead of the current status of research. The gap between theory and practice, encourages professionals to use standards, schedules and theories with no connections with the situations in which they operate. We are providing below an example where a professional, a teacher, relied on procedures uncritically.

A few months ago at the University of Siena

we inaugurated a series of seminars that focused on leadership and management of contexts with high multicultural density, where primary attention was given to methods of intervention that were useful for preventing the phenomenon of radicalization. This series of seminars was part of F.O.R.w.A.R.D, an international project funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR). During one of these seminars, a colleague reported the example of how a teacher in North America had made decisions guided by procedures rather than by understanding the situation. The teacher was certainly competent in her discipline, she was much loved by her students and she had studied a lot in regards to methods of radicalization prevention. She never thought she would find herself in the following professional situation.

Following the attack of November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015 at the Bataclan, she asked her students to compose an essay on the tragic event. Her intent was to support reflections on the phenomenon of terrorism in the classroom. She was expecting a unanimous condemnation of the attack.

At the time of the correction of the texts, she had to acknowledge that a large part of the students was reflecting on the reasons for the violent act. Many students had written a text where they explained their surprise that there was still someone ready to die for a political ideal. Some students had framed the event in a more general story, quoting the theme of oppression of the poor people or the decline of the values as the main motivational factor. The teacher found herself in what is metaphorically described by Schön as "the swamp of professional practice". The teacher did not correct the papers that expressed arguments, not condemnation.

Worried of the contents of these written tests, she left no scope for further reflection on what those texts meant to some of her students. This inevitably implied a loss of trust, contact and relationships within the class. Parents were obviously involved and monitoring procedures were activated. The first effect on the class was the generation of distance and distrust. Some of the students felt attacked and blamed the teacher for not being able to handle the situation, for misrepresenting the texts and for not understanding their need for further discussion. After a few days, the news was on the local newspaper and the students had been labeled. A part of the classroom came out of this story with the idea that at school, in that class, they could not be trusted nor could they argue. Some teachers inside the institute were implicitly led to take a position publicly. Ultimately, we do not know whether that teacher had a preventive effect or fed further forms of radicalization, but her action certainly reflected many of the theories she had learned. The teacher did not seek a comparison with colleagues or professionals to validate her didactic decision. She did not address the problem, which would have been the best way to intervene in that particular situation, but instead she used the procedures as the best way to take charge of the problem.

This experience shows that sometimes, professionals adopt perspectives with a limited space for situational management of the problem. The teacher used her representations and scientific knowledge, believing that she could not do otherwise, because she had been taught to manage the problem this way.

So, how can we keep contact with adolescents who express clear positions that are in contrast with the values shared by their socio-cultural context? How can the school remain an open environment for comparison and management of the complexities that are also reflected in everyday life? How can we train professionals to make them capable of managing the contradictions generated by multiculturalism without generating further tears and cultural divisions?

The professionals as researchers. The case at University of Siena

The project

F.O.R.w.A.R.D, a year-long experimentation conducted by the University of Siena aims at developing methodologies to support inclusive societies and prevent the radicalization processes. One action of this project is focused on developing a training program for social educators. The core idea of this program is: an educator needs necessary multicultural skills to manage educational and learning processes, one of these skills is the ability to produce "situated knowledge". Some of these skills could be useful in preventing and understanding the phenomenon of radicalization in its various forms: religious, political and cultural. The objective of this action is to support future educators in learning cultural skills and functional methodological devices to respond to the challenges of multiethnic environments. The idea is not to build an ad-hoc degree course to train experts in de-radicalization, but to make educators able to manage the complexity of multicultural practices.

Following this

hypothesis, we have included optional teaching modules within the three-year degree in Education Sciences at the University of Siena: Pedagogy of de-radicalization, Psychology of radicalism, Sociology of migration, Philosophical practices for the prevention of new radicalisms, Psychology of multicultural processes, European immigration law, Trans-cultural pedagogy, Philosophy of intercultural education, and Intervention methodologies and tools for inclusion in jail, in institutional settings and related welfare services.

Currently, in the

first year of experimentation, about 25 students have enrolled in these courses, a portion of which are from other countries. Some students have been involved in research on the territory, aimed at producing data on the phenomena of "micro-radicalization". In some cases active development methodologies have

been used to support the critical analysis of the most contradictory situations that we analyzed in everyday life. We created a mixed community composed of academics, professionals and students where we could study the inclusion process generated by informal learning. Sometimes we found stories of micro-radicalization in daily life.

Ultimately, the initial question addressed by this article came up while facing a case study about a youth who was showing the initial signs of a radicalization process. We knew the cultural origin of this young man and we knew about his community. We also had a scale of the classification of radicalization processes to use, we must therefore ask: how could we act in terms of real professional practices where the first objective is not to generate further fractures between people and communities? We have been challenged as researchers. How can we reconcile the need to remain adherent to our institutional mandate and not lose contact, relationships and trust with people who risk moving from the stage of radical thought to that of transforming this thought into violent actions?

We need to stick with meanings and actions made by people in everyday life because the general categories risk to generate new forms of stereotypes and misunderstandings. The informal learning generated within families, workplaces, communities could be the new opponent while working towards a more inclusive and open society.

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