

**Jadwiga Romanowska**

*Stowarzyszenie INTERKULTURALNI.PL\**

E-mail: [tamilnadu@wp.pl](mailto:tamilnadu@wp.pl)

ORCID: 0000-0002-7588-2373

## **Explanatory potential of the concepts of transculturation/transculturality in intercultural education\*\***

### **Summary**

The text introduces the explanatory potential of the concept of transculturation in intercultural education approaches. In the context of today's migration situation in Europe, there is a need for alternative educational strategies. In these circumstances, the concept of transculturation/transculturality might be one of the proposals that should be considered. Giving consideration to the changing globalised reality that poses new challenges to education systems around the world, I discuss two important concepts of transculturality: Fernando Ortiz's concept of transculturation and Wolfgang Welsch's proposal of transculturalism and transcultural identity. I supplement them with other threads related to transcultural proposals. I am referring primarily to Dirk Hoerder's concept of Transcultural Societal Studies and the proposal set forth by Lyudmyla Gorbunova. Next, I mention two international research projects in which Polish researchers have taken part, and which, in my opinion, are of a transcultural nature. Finally, I enumerate the most important elements of the discussed concepts of transculturalism/transculturation, which demonstrate their explanatory potential in the context of intercultural education.

**Keywords:** transculturation, transculturality, intercultural education, migrations, cultural exchange

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\* Address: Lwowska 2A/48, 30-548 Kraków

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## Introduction

The text aims to present the explanatory potential of the concept of *transculturation* in the context of intercultural education. In light of today's migration situation in Europe, it is clearly visible that there is a need for alternative educational strategies. This strategy should be aimed at turning it into a means of social and personal transformation to build a fair world of a global society. This situation generates greater socio-cultural educational challenges and motivates us to finding ways to improve mutual understanding through a new vision of culture (Gorbunova, 2015). In these circumstances the concept of transculturation/transculturality might be one of the proposals that should be considered.

In the context of the changing globalised reality that poses new challenges to education systems around the world, two important concepts of transculturality will be discussed: Fernando Ortiz's concept of transculturation and Wolfgang Welsch's proposal of transculturalism and transcultural identity.

It needs to be highlighted that the two basic understandings of the concept of transculturation/transculturalism are related to the different contexts in which they arose, and therefore their meaning is not the same. Ortiz's approach, followed by researchers from the field of literary studies and Latin American and American cultural studies (Rama, 2008; Sobrevilla, 2001), is associated with the phenomena of colonialism and post-colonialism, and thus with the theories of power and subordination, as well as with the politicization of this concept. Welsch's understanding of the term in question is related rather to aesthetics, art history, and broadly understood postmodernism (Romanowska, 2013).

Being aware of these differences, I strongly believe that both of these concepts can be regarded as complementary. Both of these proposals are mentioned by authors who propose that the category of transculturalism should be related to education and intercultural education (Benessaieh, 2010; Gorbunova, 2015; Wulf, 2011). This leads me to present two international research projects funded by the European Commission under Horizon 2020 program, which in my opinion can be examples of a transcultural approach to intercultural education of migrant children.

## Transcultural theoretical approach

The term transculturation (Spanish: *transculturación*) was coined in 1940 by a Cuban lawyer, anthropologist, ethnographer, historian, musicologist, and a pioneer of African-American studies, Fernando Ortiz (Bascom, 1970). Ortiz officially used the term for the first time in the work “Cotrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar”, which is a treatise on cultural changes in Cuba from the time of its colonisation by the inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula to the present day. According to the researcher, the word transculturation describes in the best way all the processes of the transmutation of cultures present in Cuba.

The true story of Cuba is, according to Ortiz, a history of intricate transculturations (Ortiz, 2002). His proposition was a counterproposal to terms such as harmonious mestizo or acculturation, which was extremely popular at the time (Kubiacyk, 2013). Importantly, Ortiz’s work was introduced by Bronisław Malinowski, who gave the term scientific “blessing” and wanted to popularise it in the scientific world (Romanowska, 2013). Malinowski (2004) defines the term proposed by Ortiz in this way:

Every [...] transculturation is a process in which something is always given in return for what is received: the «give and take» system. It is a process in which both sides of the equation change, a process from which a new reality arises, a changed and complex reality that is not a mechanical set of features, or even a mosaic, but a new phenomenon, original and independent. (p. 445)

Ortiz himself states that the word transculturation “expresses in the best way the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another, because it is not just about acquiring another culture” (as he thinks happens with acculturation) but “implies the loss or eradication of an earlier culture [...] and, what is more, it means the resulting creation of new cultural phenomena.” (Ortiz, 2002, p. 260). On this basis, Ortiz distinguishes the elements/stages of the transculturation process. Those are:

- partial deculturation (*parcial desculturación* or *exculturación*) – that is, the eradication of certain elements of culture subjected to the process of transculturation;
- neoculturation (*neoculturización*) – the creation of new cultural phenomena with different forms and meanings.

The newly created ‘creation’ is always endowed with the features of all cultures that participate in the transculturation process, at the same time having a new feature.

In the process of transculturation, there is a mutual exchange between the subordinate and the dominant culture, as a result of which the dominant culture is also changed through the influence of the former. As noted by postcolonial researcher Ania Loomba (2011), transculturation is for Ortiz a term that describes a phenomenon in which “marginal groups selectively appropriate elements passed on to them by the dominant group” (Loomba, 2011, p. 84). At the same time, the culture of subordinate groups influences the dominant cultures (Nagy-Zekmi, 2016). Therefore, the Ortizian approach to colonial interactions more accurately reflects their character, showing the agency of marginalized groups.

Silvia Nagy-Zekmi believes that transculturation can be viewed as a creative praxis that deconstructs the conceptual apparatus of modernity. In this context, following the comparative literary scholar, Silvia Spitta, she uses the term *transcultured/transculturing subject* (*el sujeto transculturado(r)*) to describe people who consciously or unconsciously find themselves between at least two cultural realities, still mediating between them, or this situation in a different way, which «here» is problematic and perhaps undefinable.

Although the term transculturation was first used by Ortiz, it seems that Wolfgang Iser's concept of transculturalism is much better known in Europe. Iser, a German philosopher and art historian, uses the term under discussion in the context of aesthetics, art history, and identity. His description of the transculturality concept begins with a critique of Herder's vision of culture as a unified whole and denounces the concepts of multiculturalism and interculturality (Iser, 1998). Iser is critical of the concepts of multiculturalism and interculturality and although they face the problem of coexistence in many cultures and contemporary societies, they use a similarly Herderian definition of cultures as closed, independent and internally homogeneous creatures, separated from each other by boundaries that do not “understand” each other, they can only “collide” (Iser, 1998, p. 202). “Cultures today are extremely interconnected and entangled with each other. Lifestyles no longer end at the borders of national cultures, but go beyond these, which are found in the same way in other cultures,” he argues (Iser, 1999, p. 197).

Cultures today are in general characterized by hybridization. For every culture, all other cultures have tendentially come to be inner-content or satellites. This applies on the levels of population, merchandise and information. Worldwide, in most countries, live members of all other countries of this planet; and more and more, the same articles – as exotic as they

may once have been – are becoming available the world over; finally the global networking of communications technology makes all kinds of information identically available from every point in space. (Welsch, 1999, p. 200)

In regard to the micro-level, the level of identity of individuals, Welsch notes that they are also cultural hybrids. What is significant, according to the researcher, is that only the capacity to cross cultural boundaries will guarantee us the identity and competences important in the future.

Transcultural identities combine a cosmopolitan aspect, but also local affiliation. “Transcultural people combine both these aspects” (Welsch, 1998). This thesis is important in the context of intercultural education. Welsch argues that the processes of transculturality cause the differentiation of individuals, but individuals are always shaped by some common elements. This explains why people characterised by transcultural identity are much more open to “others” and to the mutual exchange of views than monocultural ones. “Transcultural identities, although different in many respects, also often have some common elements. This overlap provides the basis for exchanging, understanding and communicating views. Hence, individuals with a transcultural identity are certainly more capable of interpenetrating and tolerating each other than monocultural individuals have ever been” (Welsch, 1998, pp. 209–221). This is a point of view that is important in the context of today’s migration.

This issue is strictly connected to Dirk Hoerder’s concept of Transcultural Societal Studies (Hoerder, 2006). According to the author of this proposal “transculturalism denotes practices of living in two or more differing cultures and in the process, of creating a transcultural space” (Hoerder, 2006, p. 91). Transcultural space is a category which describes a place of inter-or transcultural exchange. There is no doubt that the school and the classroom is a transcultural space for migrant children and a transcultural field of exchange. Moreover, any space in which migrant children stay when entering into relationships with local children is a transcultural space. In this context, reference can be made to contact zones by Mary Louise Pratt (2011). According to the author, contact zones are a kind of social space “at the meeting point of diametrically different cultures, in which they collide and struggle, often remaining in strikingly asymmetrical relationships of domination and subordination (Pratt, 2011, pp. 25–26). The idea of Pratt, firmly embedded in the colonial discourse, is in this respect consistent with the idea of Ortiz: the binary division into colonising and colonised must be replaced by a more

complex theoretical model showing the multidirectional borrowings between the two groups. The relationship between immigrants and the host community must also be equality-oriented. The two-way creative power of these relationships should also be recognized.

Returning to Hoerder's concept itself, it should be noted that strategic transcultural competences require the conceptualisation of life projects in multiple contexts and informed possibilities between cultural alternatives. "Transculturation is the process of, individuals and of society changing themselves by the integration of diverse lifeways into a new dynamic whole. Subsequent interactions and transcultural life will again change this new – and transitory – culture" (Hoerder, 2006, p. 91). In sum, Hoerder states that: "Transcultural Societal Studies unite the discourse-based humanities, the data-based social sciences, the habitus-centered, behavioral approaches, the normative discipline of law, ethnics and religion, the life sciences, the environmental sciences, as well as other fields into a transdisciplinary whole" (Hoerder, 2011, p. 92).

Dirk Hoerder's proposal is not the only one of its kind. The term in question is already used in the formation of educational theory. An already mentioned example includes Lyudmyla Gorbunova and her text: "Transcultural educational strategies: networks, identity competence". The researcher bases her proposal to a large extent on Welch's concept, just as he refers to the category of cultural networks. She mentions transcultural educational networks as an exemplification of as good practice in the intercultural educational approach. Transcultural educational networks form a large potential of social work. She gave examples of these kinds of networks which are already functioning well. On this occasion she speaks about the Learning Network on Sustainability (LENS<sup>1</sup>), which was established "as an informal educational network between higher education institutions in a pilot didactic and research project" (Gorbunova, 2017, p. 53). LENS incorporates seven universities in industrialised countries and developing countries. The purpose of this project is in fact that by making a network between universities, the "multilateral process of transcultural studies combines new advanced research problems of

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<sup>1</sup> LENS "The International Learning Network of Networks on Sustainability" – is an EU-supported (ERASMUS+) project connecting 36 universities from Asia, Africa, Europe, South America and Central America, aiming at the encouragement of a new generation of designers (and design educators) competent to effectively contribute to the transition towards a sustainable society for all; <http://www.lens-international.org/> (accessed 09.03.2021).

didactics through the development of specific social projects for sustainable development” (Gorbunova, 2011, p. 53).

### **Transcultural approach in practice – the MiCREATE and the New ABC projects**

A large number of transcultural projects benefit from funding under the Horizon 2020 program. For the purposes of this text, due to the limited number of pages, only two projects in which Polish researchers take part will be mentioned<sup>2</sup>.

The MiCREATE<sup>3</sup> project (Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe) funded by the European Commission under the Horizon 2020 program (grant agreement no. 822664, January 2019 – June 2022) is a great exemplification of transcultural thinking about the migration process. The overall objective of the project is to stimulate the inclusion of diverse groups of migrant children by adopting a child-centered approach to their integration at the educational and policy level. More than 550 children with a migration experience participated in the research carried out under the MiCreate project. Research was conducted in physical as well as virtual transcultural spaces (due to the pandemic). During the project implementation, research has already been carried out on educational staff and school systems, as well as newly arrived migrants, long-term residents and local children in schools in Slovenia, Denmark, Spain, UK, Austria and Poland. In addition to field work in schools, research was carried out on children in a transition situation in various camps and establishments: in Palermo (Italy), Calais (France), Moria (Greece), Şanlıurfa (Turkey), at the Reception Center for Foreigners in Bezwola and Targówek (Poland) and in asylum centres in Slovenia and Austria.

Findings from the cross-sectional analysis and findings from field studies among teachers, local children and migrant children form the basis for recommendations on integration policies and the development of integration tools through the activities of the Integration Lab.

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<sup>2</sup> The author of this text is a junior researcher in both described projects.

<sup>3</sup> MiCREATE – “Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe” – the aim of the project is to stimulate the inclusion of diverse groups of migrant children by adopting a child-centred approach to their integration at the educational and policy level; <http://www.micreate.eu/?lang=pl> (accessed 09.03.2021).

The overall objective of the Integration Lab is to create brand-new ways for encourage integration of migrants, strengthening the values of inclusive societies and tolerance between all children in educational systems. In the Integration Lab, two digital information-communication tools will be created, whose task will be to support the learning of language, creativity, expression and provide innovative ways to enable all children to participate in cultural dialogue at their schools. Those two tools will be: the digital storytelling application and the awareness raising application.

The MiCREATE project also develops the transcultural competences of children, thanks to which, according to Welch's concept, they will function much better in the host society. The project's objective is also to design a space allowing children to manifest themselves and their interests. The child-centred approach to explore integration challenges is followed throughout the work packages with an aim to avoid the common-sense presuppositions about what adults tend to think of as the standards of integration. The goals are achieved by collecting the experiences and perspectives of migrant children regarding their lives in host societies (present), their assessment of the barriers and problems they have faced (past) or are still struggling after arriving in the destination country and their judgements about how these challenges can be overcome (future). Finally, one of the most important transcultural activities in this project is the creation of a Children's Advisory Board in each country participating in the project. The council will be made up of migrant and local children. It will create a network of cultural exchange. This will give children a space for discussion and development of new good practices related to the integration of foreign children with their peers. This transcultural child-centered activity will provide empowerment children in their integration efforts.

Another proposal financed by the Horizon 2020 program is "New ABC<sup>4</sup> – Networking the Educational World: Across the Boundaries for Community Building" (grant agreement no. 101004640, January 2021 – August 2024). New ABC is a project that focuses on the comprehensive development and integration of migrant children in the local environment, with great emphasis on numerous forms of education. In this project, which began in January 2021, small-scale projects concentrated on integration in each of the participating

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<sup>4</sup> NEW ABC "Networking the Educational World: Across the Boundaries for Community Building" – is a project that aims at the comprehensive development and integration of children in the local environment, with particular emphasis on various forms of education; <https://www.unibo.it/en/research/projects-and-initiatives/research-projects-horizon-2020/3/34/2642> (accessed 09.03.2021).



countries will be managed as well as retest programs from other countries to check how they might be adjusted to local circumstances. The New ABC project contributes to educational, cultural and social inclusion by using a collaborative and participatory approach in the co-creation of nine innovation pilot actions aimed at enhancing the integration of immigrant children and young people in education through collaborative partnerships that foreground young person-led innovation activities.

The idea is that the pilot actions should be co-created with the aim of ensuring their adaptability, scalability and long-term sustainability. This kind of perspective is also highly transcultural. Thanks to participatory action research and co-creation approach, each pilot is transcultural in its essence. The use of transcultural networks to work on pilots allows for more flexibility and easier adaptation each proposal to local conditions. In result, it combines locality with globality. The project will be implemented in nine EU countries with 13 partners so the variety of cross-cultural solutions for each pilot will be extremely extensive. The Polish pilot, "Together we learn our worlds" focuses on creating a space to implement peer and intergenerational as well as intercultural tutoring with multi-agency support. The result of the actions undertaken will be strengthening the adaptation process of children in the new, transforming cultural environment. The pilot will supply multi-dimensional tools and didactical scripts for transcultural navigation in the local environment to generate regional cultural identity, accepted by region inhabitants and helping in the integration. Those goals will be achieved by raising the competences of cultural assistants who are mediators between students, parents and teachers. This competence will be related to the regional cultural heritage and diversity and understanding of alluvial cultures and national culture. The cooperation of the migrant and local children will transform the cultural knowledge of stakeholders and provide the space to express the primal and learn local culture through art and process of creation.

The proposals described above are the selected examples of transcultural projects. What connects these projects with the concept of transculturation, which, however, is not explicitly stated in their descriptions, is international and intercultural multidisciplinary networking at many levels of cooperation and an open-minded approach. Both projects are characterised by multi-directional intercultural interactions which take place in transcultural spaces. Must also be mentioned that the two proposals are in progress, therefore the final results and their assessment are still to be seen. The MiCREATE project is more advanced, The New ABC is just beginning. However, at this stage both

proposals seem to show an exploratory transcultural potential in the context of education and integration of migrant children.

## Conclusions

As Afef Benessaïeh (2010) claims, transculturality “is a concept that captures some of the living traits of cultural change as highly diverse contemporary societies become globalized. Most importantly, it offers a conceptual landscape for considering cultures as relational webs and flows of significance in active interaction with one another” (p. 11). Summing up, I would like to list the most important elements of the discussed concepts of transculturalism/transculturation, which show their explanatory potential in the context of intercultural education:

1. The concept of transculturality is focused on a multi-network and is inclusive, not on exclusive and a separatist cultural understanding. “It embodies the pursuit culture and society understanding that provides the pragmatic qualities of cultures that are not in delimitation and the ability to bind to overcome differences and transitions between them” (Gorbunova, 2015, p. 54).
2. The concepts of transculturation emphasises the creative nature of intercultural exchange. Children as transcultural and transculturating entities gain subjectivity and agency. This kind of perspective is part of the whole child approach that gives a broader view of the skills and knowledge that all children (including migrant children) must develop for long-term success.
3. Approaches to transculturation referring to Ortiz’s thesis draw attention to the power and subordination relations in which intercultural exchange occurs. This explains why they take into account the problem of inequality in intercultural relations. This may draw attention to the relationship of power and subordination in the middle of the migrant child world.
4. In metaphorically woven transcultural networks, both migrant and local children create their own interpenetrating worlds. Thanks to this, they start to understand each other better and acquire increasingly more cultural competences, which will result in a better understanding of the globalized world.

5. While the idea of a transcultural identity needs further clarification, it has the potential to describe and explain the migrant children's identity in the transition phase.

At present, we can say this with certainty: a culture which focuses on diversity includes the national culture and culture of the other. This is a central reference point for education in Europe (Grobunova, 2015). Therefore, we should base our approach to intercultural exchange and intercultural education on an open-minded attitude. A transcultural approach to these issues may be a response to a theoretical gap that can be noticed in the education of migrant children in Poland and Europe.

The previously discussed projects on the integration of children with the experience of migration partly fill this gap. They are examples of transcultural good practices in the field of intercultural education. Combining holistic transcultural thinking with a whole child approach in education of local and migrant children can provide solutions to pressing migration problems, such as children's difficulties in adapting to host communities, their sense of alienation and lack of agency and control over their own lives. Open to multicultural exchange, a transcultural view based on a theoretical basis and at the same time focused on a child's perspective is a proposal that should be considered as an aid in integration and intercultural education.

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