Intercultural Trends and Social Change in the Euro-Mediterranean region

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Intercultural education between local values and universal principles

Nayla TABBARA

Nayla Tabbara addresses the tensions arising in intercultural education between universal principles and cultural diversity. Analysing the ALF/Ipsos Survey responses to what key values parents on both sides of the Mediterranean promote, the author points to three kinds of fears currently influencing the perception of universal principles: the fear of influence on culture and religion, the fear on economic and political stability, and the fear of diversity in the public sphere. Making direct comparisons to European and SEM responses with her own observations, Tabbara concludes by making recommendations for practitioners and education policy makers.

In the name of respect of diversity of cultures, should intercultural education focus solely on building capacity for acceptance of diversity, empathy and mutual understanding or should it concentrate on fostering universal principles and public life values? The UNESCO guidelines on intercultural education assert that: 'One significant tension arises from the nature of Intercultural Education itself, which accommodates both universalism and cultural pluralism. This is particularly evident in the need to emphasize the universality of human rights, whilst maintaining cultural difference which may challenge aspects of these rights' (UNESCO, 2007:10).

Through the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey, we can infer some guidelines for this problematic tension within intercultural education and propose some recommendations.

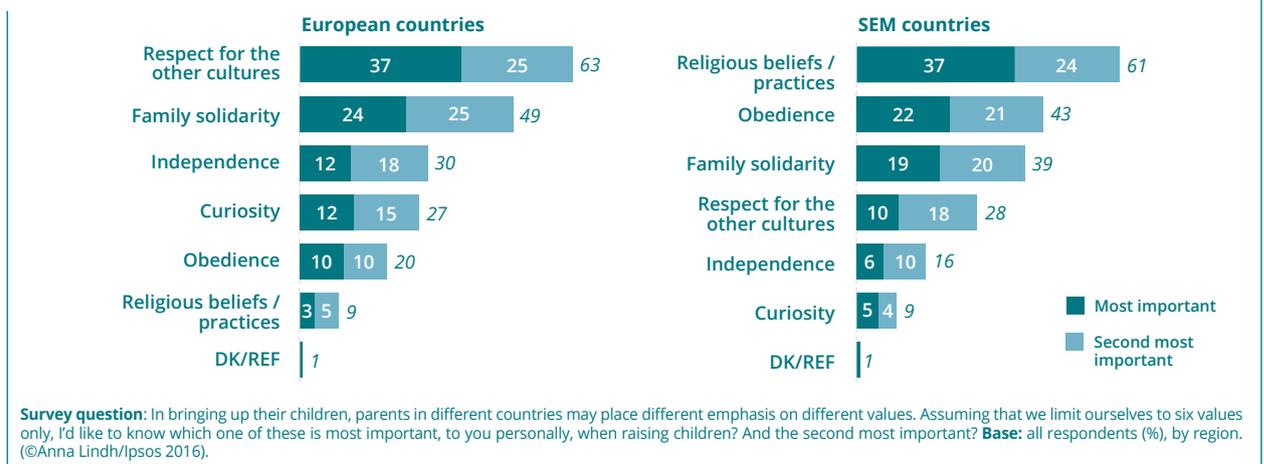## Frames of reference across the region

In answering the question of what key values parents on both sides of the Mediterranean put emphasis on,

a sticking difference is apparent between European countries and SEM countries (Chart 7.1).

61% in SEM countries put the emphasis on religious beliefs and practices as most important or second most important, i.e. their primordial reference is the religious frame of reference, whereas such frame of reference represents only 9% in European countries. On the other hand, 63% in European countries put the emphasis on respecting diversity, having as primordial or second top value one from a secular frame of reference rooted in political philosophy and the right to difference. In SEM countries only 28% of the individuals surveyed put emphasis on respect of diversity.

It therefore appears that there is a need to take into consideration the cultural gap between both secular and religious frames of reference and between a focus on society as a whole and on values of public life (respect of diversity) on the one hand, and a focus on the communal identity and its preservation, as well as safeguarding its values, on the other hand.

Chart 7.1
Key values when raising children, by region

European countries

Value	Most important	Second most important	Total
Respect for the other cultures	37	25	63
Family solidarity	24	25	49
Independence	12	18	30
Curiosity	12	15	27
Obedience	10	10	20
Religious beliefs / practices	3	5	9
DK/REF			1

SEM countries

Value	Most important	Second most important	Total
Religious beliefs / practices	37	24	61
Obedience	22	21	43
Family solidarity	19	20	39
Respect for the other cultures	10	18	28
Independence	6	10	16
Curiosity	5	4	9
DK/REF			1

Survey question: In bringing up their children, parents in different countries may place different emphasis on different values. Assuming that we limit ourselves to six values only, I'd like to know which one of these is most important, to you personally, when raising children? And the second most important? **Base:** all respondents (%), by region. (©Anna Lindh/Ipsos 2016).

Furthermore, the study of the emphasis on values shows the difference around the two shores of the Mediterranean between post-modern and traditional values. Obedience, a traditional value, is seen of utmost or second utmost importance in 43% of cases in SEM countries, whereas it is seen of utmost/second utmost importance in 20% of cases in European countries. Independence, a modern value, on the other hand, is seen of utmost/second utmost importance in 30% of cases in Europe and 16% in SEM countries. Yet it is quite interesting to note that family solidarity, considered among traditional values, is seen more important in Europe (49%) than in SEM countries (39%).

The influence of fears on universal principles

Yet what I find the most alarming is the answer concerning the affirmation – 'people from different cultural and religious backgrounds should have the same rights and opportunities' (Chart 7.2). Although this answer belongs to a set of questions related to perception of diversity, I read it in relation to fundamental principles, and find it worrying that in Europe 7% disagree and think that people from different cultural and religious backgrounds should not have the same rights and opportunities, and that 23% 'somewhat agree', meaning that they do not see access to equal rights and opportunities for all people regardless of their religious and cultural belonging as a fundamental inalienable human right. In SEM countries, 17% disagree and 22% somewhat agree, which is even more alarming.

Thus, even in Europe where one would expect a deeply rooted culture of human rights going hand in hand with a secular frame of reference and the primacy of common good for all constituents of society, there is no unanimous agreement on equality as a fundamental human right.

This calls practitioners and policy makers in education not only to focus on this in educational policies and programmes but also to have a closer look at the drivers of this regression vis-a-vis human rights principles and at the fears behind these positions.

The answers pertaining to xenophobia or fear of difference in Chart 7.2 show more of it in SEM countries: 13% mind having a person from a different cultural background as a work colleague versus 6% in Europe; and 15% mind having a person from a different cultural background as a neighbour as opposed to 8% in Europe. Numbers get higher when it comes to children: 25% in SEM countries mind having their children go to school with children from other backgrounds versus 7% in Europe. And when it comes to having someone from a different background entering the 'inner group' for life as in the case of marriage, Europe and SEM countries show similar numbers of fear of the stranger entering the inner group – 27% in SEM countries and 21% in Europe mind if close relatives marry someone from a different background.

At a time of a crisis of refugees and of fear of migrants in Europe and of heightened far right movements, it is important to stop at the fact that people in the SEM region show higher numbers in xenophobia and fear of diversity. One reason could be religious, if we connect this answer to the answer in Chart 6.1 concerning the primordial values – the fear of having someone of a different cultural background as a classmate to one's children could be a fear that the other influences the child's beliefs and set of values. In Europe, this fear would be the fear that the stranger would not uphold the cultural values of the host country.

Chart 7.2
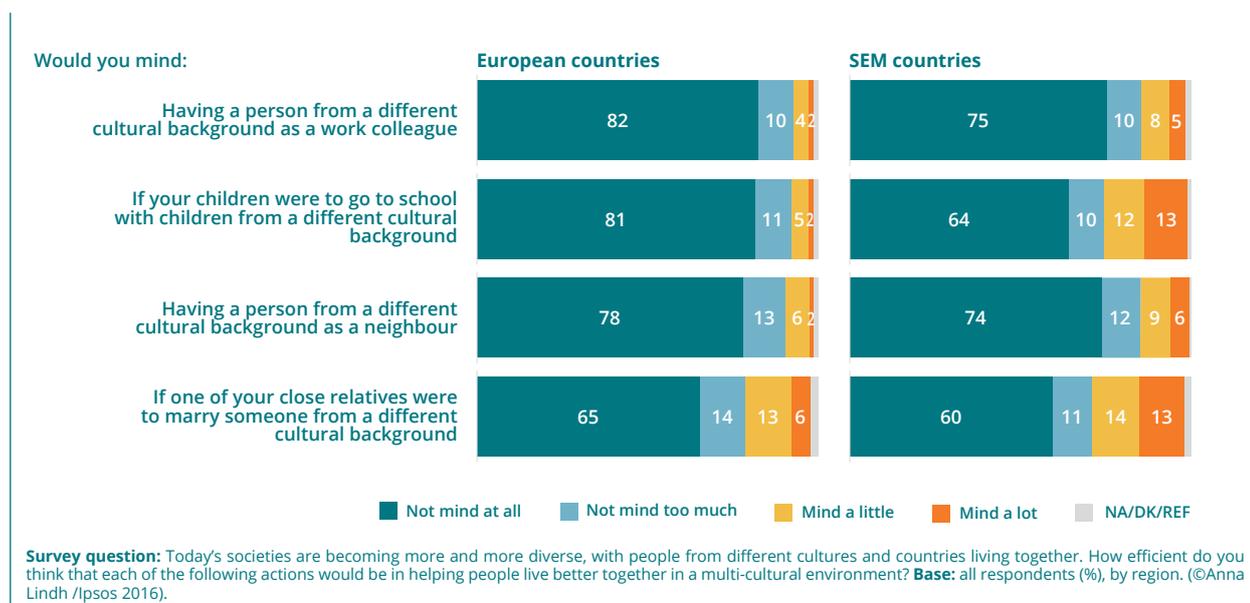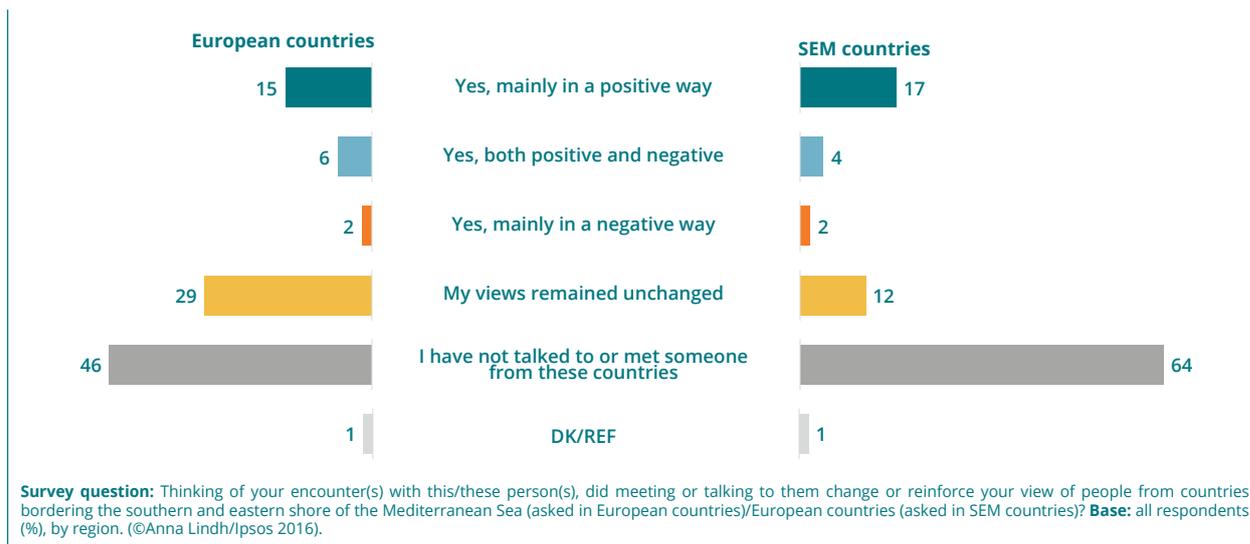### Tolerance towards people with a different cultural background

Would you mind:	European countries	SEM countries
Having a person from a different cultural background as a work colleague	82 / 10 / 4 / 2	75 / 10 / 8 / 5
If your children were to go to school with children from a different cultural background	81 / 11 / 5 / 2	64 / 10 / 12 / 13
Having a person from a different cultural background as a neighbour	78 / 13 / 6 / 2	74 / 12 / 9 / 6
If one of your close relatives were to marry someone from a different cultural background	65 / 14 / 13 / 6	60 / 11 / 14 / 13

Legend: ■ Not mind at all ■ Not mind too much ■ Mind a little ■ Mind a lot ■ NA/DK/REF

Survey question: Today's societies are becoming more and more diverse, with people from different cultures and countries living together. How efficient do you think that each of the following actions would be in helping people live better together in a multi-cultural environment? **Base:** all respondents (%), by region. (©Anna Lindh /Ipsos 2016).

Chart 7.3
Impact of cross-cultural encounters on perceptions about people from SEM/European countries

European countries | | **SEM countries**

European countries		SEM countries
15	Yes, mainly in a positive way	17
6	Yes, both positive and negative	4
2	Yes, mainly in a negative way	2
29	My views remained unchanged	12
46	I have not talked to or met someone from these countries	64
1	DK/REF	1

Survey question: Thinking of your encounter(s) with this/these person(s), did meeting or talking to them change or reinforce your view of people from countries bordering the southern and eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea (asked in European countries)/European countries (asked in SEM countries)? **Base:** all respondents (%), by region. (©Anna Lindh/Ipsos 2016).

In the Chart 7.2, on the affirmation 'cultural and religious diversity is important for the prosperity of your society', 27% in Europe and 24 % in the SEM disagree. A quarter of the population therefore sees the other as a threat to economy, and I believe this to be linked to the refugee crisis. Likewise, this is linked to a threat on political stability: to the affirmation 'cultural and religious diversity constitutes a threat to the stability of society', 36% in Europe agree and 54% in SEM countries agree.

Most people in Europe and the SEM region are with including intercultural education in schools – 89% in Europe and 82% in SEM countries agree on ensuring 'that schools are places where children learn how to live in diversity' (Chart 7.3). Both sides of the Mediterranean also equally agree (82%) that promoting the organisation of multi-cultural events helps people live better together.

Yet, concerning enabling expression of diversity in public spaces 67% in Europe are with, while 30% think it is not efficient. In SEM countries 80% are with and 15% think it is not efficient. We find similar positions concerning the incorporation of the expression of diversity in the work place.

The answers show more ease in having diversity displayed in public spaces in SEM countries than in Europe, yet to the question of restricting cultural practices to the private sphere 40% in Europe are with and 53% are against, whereas in SEM countries 68% are with and 33% are against.

Although these answers seem to contradict the above answers and the impression that SEM countries are more at ease with diversity in the public sphere, this last answer could also show that the SEM countries suffer from too much religion in the public sphere, and from the

fact that it is always the religion of the majority that is most prevalent with its symbols whereas other religions composing the social fabric tend to be rendered invisible.

Recommendations for intercultural education

Clearly respond to the challenge of the primacy of fundamental human rights and their values. Intercultural education cannot, in the name of equality and respect of local cultures, resign from playing the role that is incumbent on it, namely 'to emphasize the universality of human rights, whilst maintaining cultural difference which may challenge aspects of these rights' (UNESCO, 2007:10). Thus, the policy recommendation number one is not letting respect to diversity and to local cultures lead to a contextualization of principles and of rights, either in Europe or in the SEM region, but to have as a number one priority in intercultural education the universality of human rights principles and their related values.

I would therefore suggest a rephrasing of the principles of intercultural education by UNESCO to be 'transformative, enabling learners to transform themselves and society' and 'value based, promoting universally shared values such as non-discrimination, equality, respect and dialogue' (UNESCO 2017). This would allow us to move from cultural/religious supremacy to supremacy of values of public life and common good and would mean including, in the outcomes of intercultural education – besides the appreciation of diversity and of the richness that each culture brings to humanity – a common sense of purpose for humanity.

The principles of human rights are universal in the sense that not only do they apply to all but that they ought to be considered as stemming from all humanity and not only from the Western world. Once we are confident of that,

we would stop fearing to integrate them in objectives of education in the non-Western world.

The Beirut Declaration on Educational Reform for Preventing Violent Extremism in Arab Societies, published by Adyan Foundation and the Arab Thought Forum in 2016 by 50 educational policy makers from Arab countries, takes up this challenge by recommending to: (1) Work on establishing an educational system that promotes the values of citizenship that is inclusive of all forms of diversity and that affirms the principles of non-discrimination and acceptance of difference. (6) Promote schools as an open space to consolidate democratic concepts and human rights values (Adyan Foundation, 2016).

Rethink intercultural education at the time of refugee crisis. Intercultural education cannot be the same in 2017 as it was in 2011 before the changes that have shaken many of the SEM countries and the wave of refugees seeking asylum and safety in countries around them and in Europe.

It is imperative today to include in intercultural education the current world situation that explains why refugees are fleeing their homes, as well as accurate numbers about the impact of refugees and immigrants on local stability, economy and culture, including the fact checking speeches of demagogues who tend to falsify numbers and stories aiming to increase xenophobia, victimization and sectarianism or far right extremism. Including figures from this survey and other surveys and educating the youth on analysing them is also a tool to let them reflect on their own positions and perceptions.

Promote inclusive citizenship as a model. A new and nuanced concept of citizenship needs to be integrated in intercultural education. This concept of citizenship needs to take into consideration the fact that citizens have multiple cultural, ethnic, and religious belongings or philosophical positions, and that they have the right to express these belongings in the public sphere. It allows the recognition of diversity and its expression in the public sphere, without allowing the monopoly of one religion on the public domain. It therefore upholds both the principle of diversity and the fundamental human rights principles and related values, and it allows citizens from different background to participate in public life while upholding their differences, enriching the public domain instead of threating it (Tabbara, 2015).

Such a model of citizenship inclusive of cultural and religious diversity, that promotes a positive management of diversity in the public sphere, can bridge both frames of reference – the religious and the secular – around values of public life and coexistence. Education on inclusive citizenship and shared public life values is therefore a must 'in both secular and faith-based approaches.'

This coherence between religious education and formal education enables the nurturing of a 'harmony between citizenship and religious identities, and foster common civic engagement as a way to transform society and to contribute in making inclusive citizenship a reality for all' (Adyan/UCL 2017).

Promote collaboration between educational policy makers and religious education policy makers. In recent years, a renewed religious discourse in Islam is being developed in accordance with human rights and with inclusive citizenship. Such examples are the *Azhar Declarations on Fundamental Freedoms* (2012) on *Confronting Extremism and Terrorism* (2014) and on *Citizenship and Coexistence* (2017) that clearly opt for national states and not religious states, and call for equal citizenship and for religious freedom. *The Marrakesh Declaration* (2016) also calls for citizenship inclusive of diversity.

Intercultural education needs to foster the reach of these new documents to both sides of the Mediterranean, for on the one hand they nuance the perception about Islam's positions regarding the 'other' and regarding public life issues, and on the other they present to Muslims a new religious discourse, other than the one they are used to.

A collaboration between educational policy makers and religious educational policy makers could thus be a key to advancing this renewed discourse as well as the principles of human rights and of inclusive citizenship in formal and religious education.

Nayla TABBARA is the Director of the Institute of Citizenship and Diversity Management - Adyan Foundation - Lebanon.