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Intercultural education in the European context: key remarks from a comparative study

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The article focuses on some findings of a comparative study carried out by a network of scholars and researchers who are active in the field of intercultural education in the European context in the main 'old immigration countries' (United Kingdom, France and Germany), 'new immigration countries' (Italy, Spain and Greece) and some northern European countries (Netherlands and Sweden). The scholars involved in the study highlight that a structural 'segregation' of students with different cultural and social backgrounds can be largely observed in European schools. In fact, the long tradition of cultural and language homogeneity in several European education systems has in many cases led to the isolation of immigrant students in schools when they are placed in the contexts of lower social and economic opportunities. Another issue highlighted by the study relates to social equity as a major challenge for intercultural education. Inequalities between immigrant students and their native peers must be addressed by an intercultural approach that is able not only to promote cultural understanding but can also provide effective opportunities for immigrant students, challenging the problems of lack of achievement among immigrant students. A gap between statements of intercultural principles and assimilationist practices has also emerged from the study. Principles on intercultural perspectives in Europe often appear to be very innovative and exist on a progressive and democratic level. However, in the European context, real practices are often implemented under 'assimilationist' and 'compensatory' viewpoints. Finally, the study raises fundamental questions about the critical revision of the project of European society. Indeed, one of the major current challenges in European education systems will be overcoming a persistent Eurocentric setting, building effective responses for all the students and providing all the pupils with skills that are indispensable for full active citizenship in an interdependent and pluralistic Europe.

Keywords: Intercultural education; Europe; migration; immigrant students; social equity; Eurocentrism

Introduction

The perspective of interculturalism, along with its practical implementation in education systems, is among one of the most decisive topics for an inclusive and equitable Europe. Tackling this issue would first of all require the recognition that Europe itself is a context of great cultural diversity, with 23 official languages and 60 regional or minority language communities. This broad cultural diversity has not always been recognized and has often even been countered. For instance, the idea of an 'intercultural Europe' has been attacked by several leading political actors, like

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Angela Merkel (*The Guardian*, 17 October 2010) and David Cameron (*The Observer*, 5 February 2011) in relation to an alleged failure of multiculturalist policies in Germany and the United Kingdom. Without doubt, these critics have highlighted the need to critically reflect on who ‘Europeans’ are and who is excluded from being Europeans (Gundara 2000c, 47). Unquestionably, European countries form a multicultural context. This feature has not appeared only as a result of current immigration flows. Indeed, according to James Lynch, the origin of cultural pluralism in Europe can be identified in three major contextual influences: the early patchwork settlement of different linguistic groups, which made no nation-state monolingual; the later heterogeneous religious overlay, confirmed by the fact that the Reformation superimposed a plane of cultural complexity on the linguistic, cultural and political maps of Europe and the post-Second World War migration flux first from colonies, then from Southern Europe and finally from around the globe (Lynch 1986, 125–126).

Based on this perspective, the problem of how to promote intercultural interactions in European societies already existed within fundamental historical processes. Such interactions have been apparent in the histories of colonialism, the post-Second World War internal migration from southern Europe to Northern Europe, the emigration from southern Europe towards other countries and finally the historical presence of national, cultural and linguistic minorities in several European countries, which in many cases have their roots in ancient times. As a result, the discourse of interculturalism in Europe must be referred to in this broader framework, and the question of integrating immigrants must be contextualized within the dynamics of cultural pluralism, which have always taken place in Europe.

A comparative study on intercultural education in the European context

The present contribution presents main remarks based on the initial results of an ongoing comparative study carried out between March 2012 and August 2013 by a network of scholars and researchers that is active in the field of intercultural education in several European countries: Marco Catarci and Massimiliano Fiorucci (‘Roma Tre’ University, Italy), Jagdish Gundara (University of London, United Kingdom), Martine A. Preteceille (Université Paris VIII, France), Otto Filtzinger and Giovanni Cicero Catanese (Institut für Interkulturelle Pädagogik im Elementarbereich e.V. – IPE, Mainz, Germany), Teresa Pozo Llorente (Universidad de Granada), Jordi Vallespir Soler (Universitat de les Illes Balears), Lidia Cabrera Pérez (Universidad de La Laguna, Spain), George Markou and Christos Parthenis (University of Athens, Greece), Martha Montero-Sieburth and Hana Alhadi (Universiteit van Amsterdam, Netherlands) and France Guadalupe (Uppsala Universitet, Sweden).

The main aim of the study is to provide a comparative analysis of intercultural theories and practices developed in the European context in the main ‘old immigration countries’ (United Kingdom, France and Germany), ‘new immigration countries’ (Italy, Spain and Greece) and some Northern European countries (Netherlands and Sweden), in which specific approaches of intercultural education have been set up. This analysis has been carried out by using the following joint research questions adopted by the researchers in the different countries:

- What are the main features of the presence of immigrants and/or groups with different cultural backgrounds in the country?
- What are the main features of the presence of immigrant students and/or students with a different cultural background in the school?
- What are the most important issues raised by scientific research about the presence of immigrant students and/or students with a different cultural background in the school?
- What are the most relevant educational practices and strategies that have been adopted to address these problems in the school?
- What is one example of best practice in a school with reference to its educational context?
- In conclusion, what are the major strengths and weaknesses of the intercultural education approach adopted in the country?

Contributions of the scientific literature on intercultural education in Europe

According to Agostino Portera, in the early 1970s, ‘multicultural’ education became a topical issue in the USA, Canada and Australia, while the concept of ‘intercultural’ education began to take root in some European countries with relatively high immigration flows (such as France, Germany, United Kingdom, Belgium and the Netherlands) (Portera 2008, 482). After the economic miracle of the 1950s, which led to an increase in the immigrant population, the first ‘intercultural’ approaches in these states focused on the one hand on measures for learning the host countries’ languages and, on the other hand, on maintaining the students’ languages and cultures of origin in order to allow their return to the countries of origin. Through these measures in the 1970s, an educational strategy directed at immigrant students arose in schools in the forms of an *ausländerpädagogik* (‘pedagogy for foreigners’) in Germany, or a *pédagogie d’accueil* (‘pedagogy of reception’) in France (Portera 2008, 482).

Christina Allemann-Ghionda explains that the priority in Western Europe since the mid-1970s has been to address immigrant students, while in Eastern Europe the concern has been mostly on the ethnic minorities since the 1990s. Currently, however, the approach is shifting towards a ‘citizenship education’ including a wide range of forms of plurality and diversity, i.e. of culture, language, religion, gender and sexual orientation, ability/disability, socio-economic status, etc. (Allemann-Ghionda 2008, 1–6). In this setting, ‘intercultural education’ has been specifically intended in Europe as an approach through which, in a ‘multicultural’ context (a situation in which people with different cultural background live in the same territory), processes of interactions are promoted, and understanding and ethical negotiations are developed (Gundara 2000a, 65; Allemann-Ghionda 2009, 135; Portera 2011, 16–17).

By and large, in the European context, measures to support the inclusion of immigrant children are currently implemented according to two main models:

- an *integrated model*, broadly widespread across the European states, which presupposes the inclusion of immigrant children in mainstream education, following curricular content for native peers and with individual (usually linguistic) support;

- a *separate model*, in which immigrant students separately receive special tuition, either ‘transitionally’ (for a limited period and with some lessons in the corresponding mainstream classes) or ‘long-term’ (with the arrangement of special classes for one or several school years) (Eurydice 2004, 41–42).

The wide range of measures adopted in the schools with an intercultural commitment has been grouped into the following general approaches:

- *orientation measures*, among them written information about the school system, provision of interpreters, special resource persons/councils, additional meetings specifically for immigrant families, information about pre-primary education;
- *strategies aimed at enhancing parental involvement and the communication between schools and immigrant families*, basically through publication of written information usually on the school system in the language of origin of the immigrant families (generally provided only in a limited range of languages and addressing only general matters, like the structure of the education system), the contribution of interpreters and the appointment of resource persons, such as mediators, to be specifically responsible for liaising between immigrant pupils, their families and the school;
- *mother tongue instruction*, carried out in a variety of forms, usually provided in an extracurricular form at the compulsory education level and dependent on bilateral agreements as well as on availability of resources;
- the set of processes through which *relations between different cultures are analysed and made explicit in school curricula*, developing a further level of intercultural commitment that involves both immigrant and native students; such an intercultural approach can be embodied in three main aspects of the national curricula (or other official documents): (a) learning about cultural diversity in order to develop values of respect and, in some countries, also a campaign against racism and xenophobia; (b) the international dimension, providing an understanding of contemporary cultural diversity in its historical and social context (through the study of economic and social topics related to international relations and migration phenomenon); and (c) the European dimension, focusing on the cultural characteristics of peoples and the history of European integration, in order to develop a sense of common identity (Eurydice 2004, 2009).

A comparative research study commissioned by the European Parliament was carried out by Cristina Allemann-Ghionda and aimed to examine how intercultural education is provided in the classrooms of several European countries. The study showed that ‘intercultural education’ is not a term shared by all member states, and although in many countries intercultural policies are in place, the terminology and the approaches vary significantly (Allemann-Ghionda 2008, V). With regard to the ‘old immigration countries’, France and the United Kingdom have been, respectively, shifting their policies away from ‘intercultural’ education and ‘multicultural’ or ‘anti-racist’ education. In France, this shift has been towards an approach aimed at linguistic and cultural assimilation, with solidarity, equal opportunities for all students and laity as main concepts. In the United Kingdom, the shift has been towards the academic achievement of ethnic minorities, with national cohesion, citizenship

education and faith as main concepts. In Germany, the school system is characterized by early selection and tracks, which are not accessible for all early childhood education, as in not free of charge (Allemann-Ghionda 2008, V).

In the European education systems, explicit dimensions of intercultural education can be categorized as follows:

- Intercultural education or the inclusion of diversity in educational systems that are structurally inclusive (e.g. Italy and Sweden).
- Intercultural education or the inclusion of diversity in educational systems that are structurally exclusive (e.g. Germany and Hungary).
- The focus is mainly on migrants (e.g. Western Europe) or ethnic minorities (e.g. Eastern Europe) and on the interaction with them as well as on their specific educational needs, although policies declare that all students are included (most countries).
- The focus is mainly on all students, and the curricula of most subjects include an intercultural or diversity dimension. In other words, the intercultural or diversity dimension is claimed to be transversal (e.g. Germany).
- Intercultural education is not part of the official policy, but an alternative concept like citizenship education is a specific statutory subject (e.g. the United Kingdom and France) (Allemann-Ghionda 2009, 141).

Some of the common problems registered in the commitment to interculturalism are the insufficient devices for quality assessment and control, insufficient teacher education (especially in-service training) and little engagement to implement European policies on intercultural education charge (Allemann-Ghionda 2008, V). Finally, a general tendency to encourage assimilation and exclusively teach the language of the host country is still widespread in the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Italy (Allemann-Ghionda 2008, 41). To overcome this ‘compensatory’ and ‘assimilatory’ approach, ‘intercultural’ education should be aimed at promoting not only strategies for integration of immigrant students, but also a wider perspective of cultural pluralism for all students at all levels – of learning, curriculum, relationships and school climate – so as to assume diversity as a paradigm of education.

Key remarks from the study

In the European context, a broad spectrum of intercultural approaches has been developed in accordance with national histories (including the colonial past of many European countries), educational politics and the development of migration flows (Holm and Zilliacus 2009). With regard to these intercultural education approaches, some remarks can be formulated about the first results of the ongoing study described above based on the analysis of the different scholars involved.

First of all, a *framework of the presence of immigrants and immigrant students in European societies* highlighted that today, there are 32.5 million non-nationals living in Europe, three-quarters (77.4%) of whom are spread across five countries: Germany (7.1 million), Spain (5.7 million), United Kingdom (4.4 million), Italy (4.2 million) and France (3.8 million) (Vasileva 2012, 2). In particular, after the Second World War, three main migration waves can be identified as having taken place in Europe: the first consists of the primary labour migration between the 1950s and 1973–1974, driven by the needs of economic reconstruction in Western Europe until

the oil crisis; the second is related to secondary-family migration between the mid-1970s and approximately 1990, signifying the end of the Cold War, which also reflected a selection of high-skilled immigrants and finally, the asylum seeking and illegal flows since 1989–1990 (Geddes 2003, 17–18).

This migration has directly affected the European education systems. Today, the presence of students with different cultural and social backgrounds is widely recognized in the different European countries; for instance, in the United Kingdom there are 1,992,600 non-national students (24.3% of the scholastic population), in Spain 781,446 (9.9%), in Italy 755,939 (8.4%) and in Germany 665,960 (7.7%). In France, however, this category is no longer present in official statistics. These figures undoubtedly call for effective and consistent responses to the cultural and educational needs of students with immigrant cultural backgrounds in the European education systems.

A further remark made by several scholars concerns *the structural segregation of students with immigrant backgrounds in European schools*. The long tradition of cultural and language homogeneity in several European education systems has in many cases led to the isolation of immigrant students in schools placed in contexts with lower social and economic opportunities; the result is often the setting of schools with a high concentration of immigrant students. This double ethnic and socio-economic segregation makes any perspective of interculturalism simply impracticable. For instance in the Dutch context, as in many other European countries, schools having 50% or more minority students, or in relation to the proportion of school-aged migrant children in the neighbourhood, are unofficially characterized as ‘zwart’ (black) and are often widespread in urban contexts. The relationship between a high incidence of immigrant students and bad quality of education provided is not foregone at all, but the segregation foreshadows a dangerous segmentation of society in terms of opportunities for higher education, employment and citizenship for students. Furthermore, the moving of native students (and also of some students with immigrant backgrounds) towards schools with a lower incidence of immigrant students is a plain indicator of the misled perception and concern by parents that a multicultural environment is related to poor school achievement.

Another issue highlighted by the study relates to social equity as a major challenge for intercultural education. Inequalities between immigrant students and their native peers must be addressed by an intercultural approach that is able not only to promote cultural understanding but also effective opportunities for immigrant students. Several authors in the study have remarked that in many contexts, a gap in the achievement of immigrant students is still present, even in the more equitable education systems in countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) like Sweden, where 76% of immigrant girls and 74% of immigrant boys qualify for upper-secondary studies compared to 92% and 90% of native girls and boys, respectively.

The OECD has stated that although education has expanded over recent decades in many countries, inequalities in outcomes continue to hinder social mobility (OECD 2010). OECD reports show that native-born children of immigrants generally tend to perform better than their immigrant counterparts of the same age, and that significant gaps exist between the children of natives and the native-born children of immigrants (Liebig and Widmaier 2010). In this regard, achievement gaps between immigrant and native students are largely explained by language barriers and socio-economic differences (OECD 2010, 2012a, 2012b). Moreover, in

European education systems, students with immigrant backgrounds are generally more likely to drop out, especially from secondary education, and to choose secondary schools marked by vocational priorities. These aspects appear to be especially rooted in highly selective and segregationist educational systems, and call for a more accurate understanding of the overall dynamics of social marginalization and inequality of opportunities in the education as well as the overall social system.

A *gap between statements of intercultural principles and assimilationist practices* also emerged from the study. Principles on intercultural perspectives in Europe often appear to be very innovative and exist on a progressive and democratic level. However, real practices are often implemented under ‘assimilationist’ and ‘compensatory’ viewpoints, which entrench education in a linguistic and cultural homogeneity. For instance, in its ‘White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue’ that provided policy-makers and practitioners with guidelines for the promotion of intercultural dialogue, the Council of Europe intended a ‘process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect’ (Council of Europe 2008, 17). This double perspective concerning both immigrants and nationals is seldom taken into account; as a matter of fact, generally education systems are responding to the challenge of multiculturalism with an assimilationist and compensatory approach. This remark confirms previous research findings (Allemann-Ghionda 2008, 41) and highlights the urgency for policies that promote specific continuing education opportunities in which teachers and educators could reflect on those principles, and plan strategies to translate them in their daily professional practice.

Another topic that was transversally present in several analyses of the study concerns *the critical revision of the project of European society*. The riots of youth with immigrant backgrounds, which first occurred in ‘Banlieus’ of Paris in October 2005, then in the suburbs of London in August 2011, and even in the periphery of Stockholm in May 2013, put the whole project of European society in question. Indeed, the protests of these young people, often second or third generation born in Europe, highlight that being formally acknowledged as a national citizen in a European state does not necessarily mean having the same social opportunities as their peers. Thus, is the European society really able to assure equal opportunities for young people regardless of their cultural origin, and to combat social inequalities through an efficient educational system? In this perspective, students must be considered as change agents who overcome their traditional roles of reproducing the social structure (Banks 2001).

Dramatic cases, like the murder of the politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002 and the film director Theo Van Gogh in 2004 in the Netherlands, and of the British Army soldier Drummer Lee Rigby in London in 2013, have also raised serious questions about the effectiveness of the integration policies adopted towards immigrants within such a project as European society. In particular, the process of ‘integration’ cannot be intended only as a process of including immigrants into the European context, as it implies a dynamic two-way process of mutual accommodation by both immigrants and national residents. Therefore, measures not only addressed to immigrants but also to nationals must be involved in order to provide them with the skills necessary to appropriately interact with people of other cultural backgrounds. In this sense, the remark of Amin Maloouf appears particularly evocative: ‘while most of the European nations have been built on the platform of their

language of identity, the European Union can only build on a platform of linguistic diversity' (Maloouf 2008, 5).

Finally, the study highlighted *the role of the best practices across European countries* to promote the development of an effective intercultural approach in education. Among the practices described by the scholars are:

- the 'Centre Académique pour la Scolarisation des élèves allophones Nouvellement Arrivés et des enfants issus de familles itinérantes et de Voyageurs' – CASNAV (Academic Centre for Education of allophones Newly Arrived and children from migrant families and Traveller pupils), which is an expertise agency in charge of the education of newly-arrived students at a regional level in France, with the tasks of information, training, creation and dissemination of educational tools (on behalf of teachers, school principals, inspectors, parents, associations or social workers);
- the 'Agence de développement des relations interculturelles pour la citoyenneté' – ADRIC ('Agency for Development of Intercultural Relations Citizenship'), a French organization which offers continuing education opportunities on behalf of institutional actors (such as public officials, social workers, local authorities, etc.), socio-economic actors (personal business, unions, etc.) or associative actors (employees, volunteers, civil society, neighbourhood residents, etc.), in order to enhance awareness and build a common culture in modes of communication, knowledge of cultural diversity and citizen involvement, through participatory teaching methods which involve the participants in the description of situations encountered, in changing their perceptions and behaviours and in the construction of new knowledge;
- 'Aula Intercultural' (Intercultural Classroom), a project developed in 2003 by the education department of the Spanish Union UGT with the collaboration of the Spanish Ministry of Education, Ministry of Employment and Social Security and the European Fund for Integration, aimed at the construction of a website offering information on immigration and intercultural education, in order to provide teaching professionals with intercultural teaching and informative materials, and the educative community with spaces where exchange of information, reflections and experiences on intercultural strategies can take place.

All of these approaches highlight the importance of researching intercultural practices, reflecting on them and putting them into circulation in a perspective of social innovation.

Conclusion

The study raises fundamental questions about what educational initiatives contribute to Europe. The notion of a 'Fortress Europe' has been adopted to identify the closure of European politics to immigrants, particularly restricting their access from outside the European borders. But this notion also requires a deep understanding of the cultural and educational dynamics supporting such a closure. With regard to this, Jagdish Gundara has remarked that while nationals living in Europe have multiple cultural backgrounds, educational systems of the member states are still designed as if people belong to a single national culture, tying education to a 'hegemonic canon'

that recognizes only its own ‘Eurocentric’ tradition, or, even when it recognizes different ones, it evaluates others according to its point of view and values (Gundara 2000a, 116). Only through a critical analysis of excluding dimensions of the curriculum and of how humanities, the social sciences and the sciences are constructed, can a broader universalistic and human dimension of knowledge be restored (Gundara 2012, 318). Thus, overcoming ‘Eurocentrism’ in education, i.e. a tendency to interpret the world in terms of western and, especially, European values and experiences, is an essential task of intercultural education. In this sense, Edward Said has explained that the European system of knowledge has built a precise idea of Europe as:

a collective notion identifying ‘us’ Europeans as against all ‘those’ non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. (Said 1978, 7)

As Samir Amin has remarked, Eurocentrism has taken the place of rational explanations of history with partial ‘pseudo-theories’, with the contradiction of generating a dominant capitalist culture, and of denying the universalist aspiration on which that culture claims to be founded. This paradigm, which works naturally in the so-called ‘grey areas of common sense’, originated, according to Samir Amin, in the nineteenth century: a strictly modern phenomenon, then, that constitutes a dimension of culture and ideology of the capitalist world (Amin 1989, 104). In conclusion, this is one of the major current challenges of European education systems, i.e. overcoming a persistent Eurocentric setting; building effective responses for all the students, among whom are students with different cultural backgrounds (Gundara 2000b) and providing all the pupils with skills that are indispensable to a full active citizenship in an interdependent and pluralistic Europe.

Notes on contributor

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