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The role of intercultural Pedagogy in the integration of immigrant students in Europe

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Abstract

In an world that is growing increasingly pluriethnic, the intercultural pedagogy is asked to promotes an intercultural approach based on the epistemological level thus recognizing the crucial need to invest in education as a means of fighting prejudices which arise from a lack of knowledge and a restricted mentality towards anything which presents itself as being different from common national cultural paradigms.

Since, in school settings the pedagogy research engages with practical issues and becomes more action-oriented, it is primarily important to investigate the national approaches and attitudes to the integration of young immigrants into the different school systems. Moreover, it also focuses on the way the immigrant receiving countries recognize the role of intercultural education in fostering the training of individuals who can live in a complex and cosmopolitan reality which changes continuously.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the need to develop a new way of doing education has become increasingly urgent not only because of the growing concentration of immigrants in Europe, but also because of the well-known social and cultural crisis that is gradually enveloping western civilization which is facing a continuing deterioration of its traditional values.

Since the late 1970s, however, scholars engaging in pedagogical reflection have focused on the need to implement specific educational policies designed to tackle the manifold problems caused by the substantial presence of immigrants whom locals tend to view as intruders rather than a beneficial part of cultural development. Moreover, the widespread scholarly interest in questions relating to intercultural dialogue in a European and global context probably explains what has been called an “intercultural trend” (Claris, 2005: 186).

For this reason, a large number of studies were carried out over the last decades, reflecting interpretative approaches and orientations which often vary significantly or share similar premises (Claris, 2005:186 -187).

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Consequently, the growing use of indistinct expressions as 'intercultural pedagogy' and 'intercultural education' only created further confusion, thus making impossible a clear distinction between theoretical positions and methodology.

In order to better understand this distinction, it might be well to take a closer look at the role of intercultural pedagogy in the educational processes and, particularly, in the training of individuals in a time of profound social and existential transformations that inevitably give rise to a sense of disorientation or discomfort from both a general and individual perspective.

Today, pedagogy enables learners to become citizens in a global and pluralistic society by developing educational programs aiming at individuals who not only accept their own culture but are engaged in a process of constructive dialogue with other cultures.

However, it also promotes an intercultural approach that at the epistemological level recognizes the need to invest in education as a means of fighting against prejudices which derive from ignorance and a narrow mentality towards anything which differs significantly from familiar cultural figurations. Therefore, we must recognize that education cannot be identified as innate to man, but must be thought about, designed and constantly enhanced.

In school settings, pedagogy research engages with practical issues and takes the form of empirical educational action to promote intercultural dialogue between different ethnic groups encouraging a constructive exchange based on solidarity and empathy.

1. The European Union and the Intercultural Dialogue

At the heart of several political debates, the question about the intercultural dialogue has important resonances at the broader international level. In particular, it has become of primary importance for promoting social policies aimed at developing an open dialogue between different cultures. Moreover, it has become crucial to guide individual and collective choices towards those common values that are the premise of social coexistence and are inspired by universal principles, such as respect for human dignity, freedom for the individual and cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious differences.

These debates have led to a diffuse range of EU proposals and laws designed to place emphasis on the universal value of man and to protect the right of each person to maintain his/her own cultural identity and dignity as human being. Over the years, the EU has paid much more attention to the multicultural issue by issuing a range of proposals that help the Member States to develop a common policy in favor of migration (Gobbo, 2004: 39-40).

In this sense, it is important to emphasize the significance that the European Union attributes to the intercultural dialogue as well as the effort it makes to map and share the "best practices" (Quintin, 2007: 4) in order to raise awareness towards immigrants, to promote social cohesion and respect for differences, and to emphasize the importance of the role assigned to school settings to enable children to engage with difference at an equal level.

2. Immigrant Students' Integration and the Intercultural Dialogue in European Schools

The significant presence of immigrant students in schools provides, undoubtedly, a major challenge for European educational institutions and highlights the need to develop appropriate educational measures, which are taken primarily to respond to the current situation that, over the years, has undergone profound structural changes, becoming increasingly cosmopolitan and outward-looking.

In this context, it is therefore important that the European educational systems enhance the inclusion of immigrant pupils and parents and also lead to a vision of migration as an enrichment of the educational experience enabling EU citizens to deepen their linguistic and cultural knowledge. To this end, it becomes important to develop intercultural education within the classroom that aims to raise pupils' awareness of each other culturally in order to foster mutual trust, respect and understanding, regardless of nationality or religion, and to better equip learners with the key skills that will help in evaluating critically practices and products of the other culture. (Secco, 39, 1993: 456-467)².

² See also L. Secco, «L'intercultural come problema pedagogico», in *Pedagogia e Vita*, 6, 1992: 29-50.

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