

THEORIES AND ISSUES OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN ITALY AND EUROPE

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Abstract: This paper offers an overview on the evolution of the concept of intercultural education in Italy and in Europe, with special emphasis on some of the current best practices at school and in the urban spaces.

From compensatory education to intercultural education

The birth and the development of the intercultural education in Europe is the direct result of the impressive social changes occurred in the last decades, when the rise of globalization has challenged the old and congealed concepts of nation and social order, dematerializing the boundaries (Bauman, 2005) and setting new identity paradigms. The growing, unstoppable movement of people, goods and information has turned the encounter with diversity into daily practice, producing conflicts (Augé, 1992; La Cecla, 2005) and changing the urban landscapes (Augé, 1992; Callari Galli, 1996). The ability of dealing with the difference and resolving conflicts in a non-destructive way has become an essential skill for the twenty-first century's citizens and an issue that has to be explored by pedagogy (Sirna Terranova, 1997).

During the Seventies, the first educational experiments at school were driven by compensatory approaches, aimed to reduce the linguistic gaps of the foreign children through the implementation of intensive programs for learning the language or, in some cases, even creating separate classes with lessons taught by foreign teachers. These approaches have shown deep limitations on the educational outcomes and weakness in the overcoming differences and cultural conflicts (Demetrio and Favaro, 1997).

During the Eighties, the failures of the compensatory approaches proceeded hand in hand with the transformation of Western, North and Central Europe in an

increasingly multicultural society. The social emergencies, originated from the need to provide jobs to foreign immigrants and education for their children, have imposed in the pedagogical reflection the need to address the issues of cultural differences in innovative ways (Cambi, 2001). The intercultural education has been generated in this context, as one of the main answers to the social and cultural emergencies in the growing multicultural Europe.

The intercultural education

The article 26.2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that “Education shall be directed to the full development of human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial and religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace”. Education is vital to the survival and to the development of cultures: “As a collective and historical phenomenon, culture cannot exist without continual transmission and enrichment through education” (UNESCO, 2006, p. 13). The issues of language, religion, cultural diversity, cultural heritage, minority and majority groups are central to culture and have to be considered in programs and actions of intercultural education.

Beside and in continuity/opposition with the static concept of multiculturalism, that refers to the coexistence between linguistic, ethnic, cultural and religious groups in the same society and doesn't imply interactions, interculturality dynamically refers to evolving relations between cultural groups. UNESCO (2005) has defined it as “the existence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect”. Interculturality presupposes multiculturalism, as well as intercultural education needs to deeply reflect and act on the multicultural character of society. While multicultural education focuses on the different cultures and aims to spread knowledge and tolerance, intercultural education aims to go beyond passive coexistence and faces the

challenge to achieve new ways of living together through mutual understanding, respect and dialogue between the different cultural groups.

Learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be are the “four pillars of education” identified by the International Commission of Education for the Twenty-First Century (Delors, 1996); they can be efficaciously considered to determine the perimeter of intercultural education. The UNESCO *Guidelines on Intercultural Education* (2006, p. 32) identifies three recurrent principles that may guide international actions in the field of intercultural education:

Principle I: Intercultural Education respects the cultural identity of the learner through the provision of culturally appropriate and responsive quality education for all.

Principle II: Intercultural Education provides every learner with the cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to achieve active and full participation in society.

Principle III: Intercultural Education provides all learners with cultural knowledge, attitudes and skills that enable them to contribute to respect, understanding and solidarity among individuals, ethnic, social, cultural and religious groups and nations.

Intercultural education is aimed to build and promote intercultural competence among people and groups. According to Darla K. Deardorff (2006), intercultural competence is the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations; it is supported by specific attitudes and affective features, (inter)cultural knowledge, skills and reflection. It is therefore “a combination of attitudes, knowledge, understanding and skills applied through action which enables one, either singly or together with others, to: understand and respect people who are perceived to have different cultural affiliations from oneself; respond appropriately, effectively and respectfully when interacting and communicating with such people; establish positive and constructive relationships with such people; understand oneself and one’s own multiple cultural affiliations through encounters with cultural difference.” (Barrett *et al.*, 2014, p.7).

Intercultural competent individuals don't abandon their own cultural identifications and don't uncritically adopt practices, beliefs, discourses or values of other cultures; starting from the physical, moral, spiritual and behavioural specificities of people with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, they are able to critically understand and reflect also on their own cultural affiliations. According to Barrett *et al.* (2014, p. 13), "that intercultural competence is a lifelong developmental process, and that there is no point at which someone achieves 'full' intercultural competence".

Intercultural education at school

The intercultural education in developing its model in close cooperation with the social sciences, particularly with anthropology and sociology, but also with psychology, history, economy and international law. The interdisciplinary perspective allows to set the intercultural approach in a broader horizon in which the issues of migrations and multiethnic society are intertwined with those of peace, sustainable development, human rights, democracy (Demetrio and Favaro, 2002; Gobbo, 2000). According to this complex and composite model, the multiple dimensions of school life and curricula should be included in the intercultural perspective through the intertwining of a variety of knowledge from the different disciplines (Pinto Minerva, 2002). The classical model of intercultural education at school is based on four main points:

- a) *The welcoming of foreign students*, through organizational, linguistic, educational and relational tools and actions, fostering positive atmosphere in the class, paying attention to the interactions, producing bilingual materials and modulating the training activities according to the effective skills and backgrounds of the students.
- b) *Meet the specific needs* of foreign students, in particular those relating to language learning to communicate, establish relationships with peers and study.
- c) *The relationship between school and immigrant families*, to be encouraged also through the support of linguistic-cultural mediators and in collaboration with the training agencies and the immigrant associations of the territory (Silva, 2004).

d) *The intercultural education as an activity for the whole class*, that is transversal to all the disciplines, with the aim of fostering mutual understanding and appreciation. Intercultural education in its broadest sense should be given to all students, whether they are locals or immigrants, it should be considered a new way to propose the disciplines that are already in the curricula (Tassinari, 2002).

Intercultural education in non formal environments

Launched by the Council of Europe on 7 May 2008, the *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue “Living Together As Equals in Dignity”* presents the shared vision of the member states on the priority of managing the Europe’s increasing cultural diversity, to create a vibrant and open society, characterized by the inclusion of all the residents and the respect of their human rights. Such ideal society should be built on the key-concepts of respect, promotion of cultural diversity, solidarity, mutual understanding, individual human dignity. Intercultural dialogue plays a very important role to address these values and to prevent ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural conflicts. “The White Paper responds to an increasing demand to clarify how intercultural dialogue may help appreciate diversity while sustaining social cohesion” (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 5).

Promoted by the European Commission and by the Council of Europe, the *Intercultural Cities* project emerged in 2008 as the first outcome of the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue. Its origin can be clearly understood through the words of Robert Palmer, previous Director of the Culture and Cultural and Natural Heritage Department of the Council of Europe: “Cities require policies and projects that ensure the practice of equal rights for all, combat discrimination and racism, and actively promote constructive interaction between individuals and groups of different backgrounds, cultures and generations. Unfounded myths and prejudices about minorities need to be dismantled, and certain existing civic systems and strategies must be challenged if they are to promote equality of access, participation and opportunity. The distinctive essence of an *intercultural* approach to cities is its focus

on the engagement of all citizens; it emphasizes collective responsibility and action” (Wood, 2009, p. 12). Eleven pilot cities¹ from eleven European countries were selected at the beginning of the project, and new ones joined the partnership in the following years². This project was conceived as an action research and policy development programme, planned to stimulate an inclusive debate on the basis of an intercultural approach to migration, integration and social cohesion, to encourage cities to develop comprehensive intercultural strategies for the management of urban diversity and to elaborate new models for intercultural strategies, that will be examples and inspiration for other cities in Europe.

The local Intercultural Centers are one of the best practices that several European cities have in common. They are physical places, public or private, aimed to work on intercultural issues to achieve positive integration processes, avoiding exclusions and radicalizations at the local level. Each center has specific characterization and provides activities that are strictly linked with its location and to the target groups. The heterogeneous list of possible activities comprehends training courses, opportunities and events to facilitate the interaction and understanding between native citizens and migrants (exhibitions, conferences, workshops), production of intercultural materials and publications, briefings with stakeholders and members of the civil society, citizenship courses that help the natives and the migrants to learn about the environment in which they live, strategies for networking between institutional and non-institutional services, schools and centers, at the local, national and international levels.

Intercultural Centers work with immigrants to develop their civil and social skills and facilitate integration processes, promoting actions of intercultural education and networking with different kind of associations and institutions. According to Lorenzo Luatti (2004), intercultural centers, regardless of their institutional nature but still firmly placed within the non-profit, are the owners/ holders/ actuators of a complex

¹ Berlin-Neukölln, Oslo, Izhevsk, Patras, Lublin, Reggio Emilia, Lyon, Subotica, Melitopol, Tilburg, Neuchâtel.

² Bergen, Stavanger, Botkyrka, Copenhagen, Strasbourg, Limassol, Haifa, Valetta, Geneva, Lisbon, San Sebastian, London Lewisam, Dublin, Limerick, Rotterdam.

project where the objectives and the actions are constant over the time and are addressed to the affirmation of the rights of migrants and to the construction of an intercultural society.

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