

Summary report on Education

Seeing diversity as...

by Massimo Bortolini

According to Quebec residents there are three ways of treating diversity within society or at school: the first insists on seeing diversity “as a handicap”, the second sees diversity as a “temporary situation” that needs to be gotten rid of, the third considers diversity as an “opportunity”. The following text is a brief attempt at showing the various approaches to diversity within the teaching and training of experts in the social field; our information was collected in the following countries: Belgium, France, Great Britain, Italy, Spain, Luxemburg, Germany, the Czech Republic and Sweden.

1 School as a place of exclusion.

We must begin by acknowledging that no school model is representative of what happens today in Europe. There is a large margin of difference between the ultra-centralised French system and the British system, which is partly national, but where the schools are allowed great autonomy.

It also seems that, aside from Belgium and the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg (though to a limited extent), no state has so far included diversity or an intercultural approach in the basic training of teachers. Those who wish to choose optional courses or to approach specialised organisations are free to do so.

The question then arises, as will happen often in the future, of whether it is pertinent to impose this knowledge during a basic training course; or whether it is best to encourage ongoing training, or to add this to the basic training.

2 Which opportunity?

If we refer back to the three distinctions made by Quebec residents – handicap, temporary situation or opportunity – it is obvious that the first two ways of seeing are the most present in practice, and that the concept of opportunity is closer to the political discourse that underlies the richness of multicultural societies.

The way in which schools and educational policies approach intercultural teaching is, first of all, tied to the presence of immigrations’ children. The talk around diversity and

its importance can be general: nevertheless, it is their presence which initiates the reflection on the intercultural element in education.

On the subject of immigrants' children, various studies highlight the following:

1. Positioning, discrimination and school *performances*;
2. Linguistic and language skills;
3. Individual and familial factors; identification strategies, being bilingual and the role of the mother tongue, sociolinguistics tied to a returning illiteracy;
4. Constants in relation to institutional positioning; heterogeneity vs. homogeneity, the ethnic question in representations, reciprocal representations.

3 A few remarks

The material we accessed during our research clearly shows that factors such as diversity, heterogeneity and difference are present and kept in consideration by everyone who promotes intercultural projects. But acknowledging this does not imply the absence of acts of discrimination; nor does it mean that they are attended to or that they are approached from an educational point of view when they cross over into the "normal" or "normative" functioning of society. Acts of discriminations are in fact acknowledged and taken into consideration, but they don't seem to have an effect on the institutional reality of the school. Another interesting factor is the centrality of language learning in the process of school achievement and integration. But if this need is accepted in all places, it is nevertheless important to underline a few differences of approach e.g in Luxemburg primary school teachers are obliged to learn Portuguese, and Italian is optional (these two representing the two largest immigrant communities in Luxemburg); in Sweden bilingual education is promoted (even though this choice comes up against organisational difficulties), and it is possible to learn the so called language of origin as one's main language; in Brussels primary schools adopt a bi-cultural teaching. Elsewhere, courses in Language and Culture of Origin (LCO) are the only offer in certain schools.

It is also important to point out the role of organisations. The fact that organisation have access to schools is important and positive. But knowing the difficulties that schools

face in opening towards the outside, it seems to us that this signals an externalisation of the problem: people, so called specialists, are called in to intervene. This points to the division between knowledge and skills. The move towards an intercultural approach and an openness towards diversity is a matter of knowledge; but mostly it is a matter of skills that need to be developed. To promptly call upon associations to solve problems highlights knowledge, therefore limiting the extent of the school's competence.

4 Conclusion

Approaches that take into consideration the intercultural dimension and the opening towards diversity are increasingly present in Europe; but one still has to consider the following: the history of these countries, the way in which they understand integration, the different extent to which they see themselves as countries of immigration or as multicultural societies, and the way they understand the presence of national minorities. All these factors strongly determine the way in which these states decide to take into consideration the consequences of immigration, upon and within schools. If it is necessary to sustain intercultural approaches, these mustn't be thought of as ways of suppressing difference; but it is essential to include a political dimension in the multicultural future of European states and of Europe as a land of immigration. Apart from including this approach within courses, this requires a clear and unambiguous message on behalf of national governments and of the European institutions in charge of education.

5 Training

Outside of the teaching field, intercultural training covers a number of important fields; we can safely say that the "common denominator" lies within "intercultural communication". These training courses generally deal with other issues i.e. migration waves, discrimination, identity and culture, etc. They don't limit themselves to the formal aspect of communication. Nevertheless, the goal of this kind of training is the improvement of the relationships between individuals and groups of individuals, based on a better understanding of the context, the populations present in it, norms and codes. The training sessions we observed, which took place mainly in francophone contexts, had four things in common:

1. A logic of change: training aims at promoting change within people and systems;
2. The training and the person receiving it are placed at the centre: the programme is negotiated with and adapted to the person's questions and needs.
3. A theoretical and practical articulation: the transmitted knowledge is not useful until it is used or until it gives a sense of lived reality;
4. It is important that, in order to follow the process of understanding and professionalisation, the trainer should be able to state his intentions clearly, as well as his means, the context and the expected results.

6 Answer to a problem

The application for training is often submitted following a problem faced by an institution or a group of professionals. An unsatisfactory or problematic situation provokes questions such as “there are gangs of youth that..., help us understand what they want”, or “we would like for this to stop”, or “How to”; the goal is to put an end to the situation.

The goals and objectives of the organisations that offer training, the capacity to reflect, decentralisation, the awareness of cultural undercurrents, etc: all these are key to the methodology. No one seems to contest this. Therefore, on a practical level, the offer of training will tend to coincide with the wish and expectations expressed at the time of the commission: the moment following the training is rarely covered by these organisations, and it doesn't seem obvious (i.e. possible) to measure the transformative impact on people. The system doesn't seem to change much. The recurrence of the demand, the repetition of the identified problems and the issue that needs resolving in the course of generations of immigrants and their arrival seem to indicate that the institutions that get in touch with training organisations do not gain anything.

7 Conclusion

What's at stake in these training courses is a kind of work on identity, on reciprocal recognition.

Which doesn't mean a systematic removal of potential conflicts: on the contrary, the conflicts which emerge are opportunities used by the training system in order to explore “sensitive zones” of identity interaction.

As in the field of teaching, the awareness of the intercultural dimension or of the openness towards diversity seems to be more present in the training; or at least this is part of the promotion and advertising carried out by the training institutions. It is without doubt an essential element. As is the fact of concentrating on the need for reflection and the awareness of one's own cultural and social context.

Nevertheless, as with the field of teaching, the framework of integration and the way in which states think of themselves as multicultural societies, are located within the norm of demand for training.

In other words, intercultural training is seen as normative by those who have gone through it; it is seen as a solution destined to solve problems caused by foreigners and people born out of immigration: people who may have settled down for decades, and who, despite now being born in the hosting countries of their parents and grandparents, are still seen as "others", as "different". As disabilities, as disabled. Depending on the case, they are temporarily not integrated, and rarely seen as a resource. Massimo Bortolini is coordinator of information and dissemination at the CBAI (Centre Bruxellois d'Action Interculturelle). In the last ten years he has been carrying out projects for professionals (teachers, librarians, social operators, etc.) in the basic and advanced training on intercultural approaches and cultural difference.

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