Immigrants and Social Interaction: The Role of The School in The Intercultural Dialogue

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Abstract

This research paper is focused on the analysis of the link between the identity of individuals and ethnical-cultural groups and their integration in society, through the school curriculum and its organisation. In order to do this we make use of references to theory and data collected from a sample of 120 immigrants, mostly belonging to the three largest ethnic/national groups of the immigrant communities living in the country: Brazilians (40), Slavs (44) and Portuguese speaking Africans (31). Some of those asked refused to be integrated into schools or to have their identity over-emphasised in schools. This led to the discussion being centred around two points: firstly, the association of integration with a representation of equality, and secondly, that of identity with a plural reality. Both of these are conditions for a stable intercultural dialogue.

Keywords: integration, identity, diversity, school curriculum

1. Introduction

1.1 The problem

Cultural diversity has increased in Portuguese society and schools in the last decades. Immigration is surely at the center of this diversity. In 2011, there were 434,708 foreigners living legally within the country, of which, the most represented ethnic groups were: Brazilian (111,295), Cape Verdean (43,475) and Romanian (39,312).

Such phenomenon has led to a heightened awareness of other ethnicities and cultural diversity and this can be seen as “collective social identities” (Appiah, 1998, p.166).

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This new reality of primary and secondary schools, where there are now about 80,000 foreign students, calls for the curriculum to be reviewed and reorganised, questioning its development by preventing tensions and strengthening the possible balance.

1.2 The school curriculum: its nature and functions

Because of the polysemy of the word, we would like to make it clear that, in this study, the school curriculum is understood as a place of knowledge, a dynamic of power and an instrument of socialisation, which is established within a projection of society at a determined moment (Almeida, 1991, p. 164). Moreover, the different theories of the curriculum emphasise the instrumental character of the word when dealing with the interests of society or with those who represent it. In each case, the curriculum is seen as an instrument of a socio-cultural construction to act as a support for the success of society’s objectives.

1.3 Social Integration: complexity of a concept and of a reality

In spite of its diverse meanings, the term integration is generally used “in sociological literature, to designate, on a small scale, the way the actors are incorporated in a common social space, and, on a large scale, the way that different social subsystems are made compatible” (Pires, 2003, p. 13). It is crucial to understand what social integration consists of and understand how to achieve such integration in society. It is not a simple task. Sociological literature has emphasized, from Comte until now, through Durkheim and the functionalists, that co-ordination functions through central entities, responsible for the diffusion of a common morale amongst the members of society. The modalities of social integration are certainly complex; they express the different ways in which individuals situate themselves within mainstream society. Yet the old question of equating freedom with order and social cohesion as demanded by society is still relevant.

1.4 Identity: the recognition of a plural in dialogue

The importance of identity in interaction is evident, but its characterization complex. There isn’t a single identity, there are many identities; identity isn’t associated with only one attribute; it is not a finished process, but a dynamic on course. Taylor says (1998) that identity is “the way a person defines himself / herself” (p. 45); Castells (2003), emphasising the multiple in identity (“multiple identities”) associates itself with a “construction process of significance base on a cultural attribute” (p.3). Goffmann (1982) talks about “multiple belongings”. This deals with a plural in construction with several contradictions, amongst which is the self-recognition of identity within an intercultural dialogue, generally given as a condition of the above mentioned. “The failure to recognise or the incorrect recognition of identity […] can be a form of aggression, which can reduce a person to a way of being false”, says Taylor (1994, p. 45). Habermas (1994) signals that “the mistake of cultural recognition is connected to great social discrimination” (p. 128). It is not, however, generally accepted that an individual always wants to see his/her identity recognized. There are identities that, once recognized, constitute factors of marginalization! How can curriculum harmonize identity and integration in school? How can integration and identity be articulated?

1.5 Identities and social integration, and the role of school in their articulation.

The school curriculum has given three solutions to cultural diversity: assimilationism, integralationalism and pluralism (Wyman, 2000).

1.5.1 Assimilationism.

This Model is centered on the acceptance and reinforcement of an alleged common cultural heritage, where the minority groups (of language, culture, ethnicity, nationality…) are submitted to the dominant culture, constituting, at a curriculum level and of the social norms, the transformation of the heterogenous in homogenous, at all levels.
1.5.2 Interalizationalism.

It was first used in the Northern hemisphere, and corresponds to “a movement […]” of dominated minority groups “within those countries to have their cultural forms recognized and represented in national culture”, but equally “a solution for the “problems” that the presence of racial and ethnic groups poses, within those countries, for the dominant culture” ” (Silva, 2000, p. 88).

A coherent curricular response with such a perspective demands a curriculum that values to all cultures present in society. Such orientation, seen generally with sympathy by the more fragile groups, constitutes, at the same time, a risky operation when it comes to cultural preservation. Although in the short term this “tactile interculturalism” (Silva, 2007, p. 6) seems to satisfy both poles of the cultural tensions, in the medium – long term it can lead to the disappearance of a minority group’s culture.

1.5.3 Pluralism.

Cultural pluralism involves the orientation of incentive to alterity, taking ideas from post-modernism, in the questioning that it makes of the dominium of the “grand (traditional) narratives”, namely, the notions of reason and of rationalism that are fundamental for the illuminist perspective of Modernity” (Silva, 20). Its operationalization in the curriculum, placing all cultures in equal terms, would put the traditional orientation of schools at stake. In this way the curriculum becomes an instrument of transmission of scientific thought and of valorization of reason.

1.6 Study goals

The main goal of the study is to analyze the articulation between identity and the social integration of individuals and of ethnic-cultural groups in society through the school curriculum and its organisation. This means analysing and discussing the role of the school in terms of its diversity within a diverse society and, therefore, its role in social cohesion. In order to do this, we will need to make use of available theoretical resources and of the information collected from immigrants.

2. Methods and results

2.1 Collecting the information and the characterization of the sample

The data that supported the study was gathered through a questionnaire given to 120 individuals, mainly (115) belonging to the most representative groups of the immigrant communities: Brazilians (40), Slavs (44) and Portuguese speaking Africans (31). This population consists largely of young adults (64% are less than 39 years of age), living in Portugal, in most cases (78%), for more than 6 years, with a good level of education (42.4% with a degree, 22.9% having completed secondary education), working professionally within several sectors of the economy, especially in domestic services, as intermediate technicians and in industrial production.

2.2 Results

The data allows us to clearly understand the frame of mind of immigrants concerning the key-question that drives this study: that of the articulation between identity and social integration. Therefore: 1. The association of integration with equality is a condition that can lead to a well-balanced intercultural dialogue; 2. The identity constitutes a plural reality.

3. Discussion

3.1 Integration and equality

Immigrants, especially the slavs, see the curriculum as a facilitator of integration and associate this with equality.
This is what indicates the almost unanimous defence of the valorisation of the immigrant’s culture in Portuguese schools. At the same time we can see that the immigrants begin to reject the use of their mother tongue (79.5%, in the case of the slavs), as a working language.

The curriculum is seen as “praxis”, and, in a more precise way, as a “bridge between society and school” (Sacristán, 2000, p. 14). The use of the mother tongue as a working language would take time away from the learning of Portuguese and would reduce the companionship between foreign students and nationals. At the same time, the valorisation of different cultures in school is seen as a factor of recognition of different identities, this is something frequently expressed with a lot of “colour” and pride. Integration into a hosting society is the unanimous wish of almost everyone in the study.

3.2 Identity, a plural reality

The importance that immigrants give to the Portuguese language in school and to their culture of origin at the same time, allows us to perceive a model of integration that refutes the homogeniser of assimilationism. In addition to this, the idea of “fragmentation” of post-modernism (Kumar, 2006, p.141) that overemphasises the identities, might not be a good method to achieve an intercultural dialogue. Immigrants seem to assume an integration that conceives identity as a plural reality: the “multiple identities” that Castells refers to (2003), which were mentioned earlier. The recognition of one’s culture in school and in society, figures as a fundamental factor of stable interaction and as a condition of dialogue with the other: “I want the Portuguese to know that our culture is also rich”, says one of them. It transpires the preoccupation with the possibility of misrepresentation by others, which could lead to “considerable social discrimination” (Habermas, 1994, p. 128). The failure to recognise one’s identity and culture would make dialogue difficult, and at the same time belonging to the society in which they want to integrate, with its multiple “systems of interactions” (Pinto, 1995, p. 127), would be equally difficult.

4. Conclusion

From this analysis of data the defence of an ambiguous and dynamic model emerges: ambiguous, due to its diversity of meanings and of directions that it may assume; dynamic, due to the intercultural dialectic that it reveals. Such a model would express itself through the recognition in school of a culture exterior to itself, at the same time that its values would be assimilated by the “different”. The immigrants, if it was up to them, would refuse a curriculum based on an assimilationist model in school, as well as a ”fragmented” model, of post-modern inspiration; they would choose a curriculum model that, in the absence of a better designation, we would call integrationist. Such a model would, from their perspective, better facilitate a solid intercultural dialogue. A curriculum, organised using such a perspective, would demand the presence of the characteristic elements of the cultures present in society in school, which, as well as the political willingness and vision, would demand that teachers are trained in consonance.

The attitude voiced by the respondents seems to satisfy, as we said already, both poles of cultural tension, but, in the long run, this interculturalism can contribute to the destruction of cultural diversity, and therefore, in the destruction of a minority culture. Good relations between immigrants and nationals, expressed by those interviewed, and the clear desire for integration seem to indicate that tendency.

References


