“A Profession Which Infect Does not Exist! ” Intercultural Mediators at German Speaking Primary Schools in South Tyrol

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Abstract

This paper looks at the role of intercultural mediators at German speaking primary schools in the South Tyrol of Italy. The main focus of research was contribution of “intercultural media gates” in overcoming the linguistic, cultural and integrative barriers of pupils and their parents with migration backgrounds. To this end, expectations of role intercultural mediators and their diverse strategies for improving the existing intercultural mediation model were studied. The findings show that overcome the barriers to intercultural learning, it is important to provide opportunities for bilateral examination of one's cultural background within the process. Finally, I conclude that intercultural learning is a life encompassing process, in which both people with an immigrant background and individual members of host society need to be involved.

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1. Introduction

In Italy the phenomenon of immigration is still relatively young. Only in the mid-seventies has Italy developed from an emigration to an immigration country (Bonifazi, 2007). Initially Italy was not prepared for the demands of a host country, and only with a greatly increasing number of mostly illegal labor migrants, measures regarding the legalization of the resident status of immigrants were taken (Brüggemann-Buck, 1999). By the end of the eighties the phenomenon of immigration had not been addressed systematically or legally, but rather, laws and decrees were adopted on an as needed basis. As a result, this has had a negative impact on the integration of immigrants (Fiorucci, 2000). Although the concept of integration is interpreted by various theories as a bilateral process between immigrants and host societies, immigrants are still seen as those who have to make the main efforts to adapt themselves (Heckmann, 1992; Esser, 2006). Today, topics such as immigration and integration appear more relevant than ever, because the Italian territory is an increasing target of people from all over the world. Official data estimates that in Italy there are currently about 4.5 million foreigners, of which around 3.2 million people are of countries outside the European Union (ISTAT, 2011, p. 1, 4).

In the South Tyrol, the northernmost autonomous province of Italy, comprised of predominately German and Ladin communities, immigration is becoming a structural factor. The proportion of foreigners in the total population

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of South Tyrol is 8.7%, which is above the overall national average of 7.5% (Astat, 2012, p. 2). Following the analysis of Baur (2000) and Voltmer (2011), the presence of the “traditional” German and Ladin minorities on Italian territory are an additional difficulty for the acceptance of “new” minority groups. With the Statute of Autonomy of 1948, in order to protect the three official language groups German, Italian and Ladin, it came to a controlled “co-existence”, which is reflected among other things in three separate language school systems. Wisthaler commented that (2008, p. 14) “immigrants, once enrolled in a South Tyrolean school, are automatically subject to this separation and the question arises if they should be required to adapt, integrate and assimilate to one or the other group.”

For several years, immigration is increasingly noticeable in German speaking primary schools in South Tyrol (Astat, 2012). Because of a lack of language skills, diverse life-worlds and different ideas about school and education, communication difficulties can arise which adversely affect the education of children with a migrant background (Maletzke, 1996; Schütz & Luckmann, 2003). Following Bourdieu (2001), educational institutions need to be aware of cultural and social differences of the students and should grant indiscriminately, all members of society the ability to cultural practices. This requirement poses a great challenge for all education institutions and for targeted education of children with a migrant background. In order to address this issue, new didactic and organizational methods are now required. One possible approach is the use of intercultural mediators, whenever linguistically and culturally determined barriers make adequate understanding impossible (Rapo & Rapo, 2007).

Over the decades intercultural mediation has become much-used catchphrase. In Italy, the term first appeared in the mid nineteen-nineties when institutions in the social, educational and health services fields identified a response to communication and relationship difficulties with so-called “new citizens” (Saltarelli, 2004, p. 20). Based on the extensive literature on this topic (Belpiede, 2002; Liedke, 1998; Haumersen & Liebe, 2005), the following target areas have been identified as those with the potential of benefiting from intercultural mediation. These include mutual linguistic comprehension, understanding of diverse world views, and the facilitation of the integration process of immigrant students. While in Italian legal texts there is repeated mention of the importance of intercultural mediators, regulations about the profession, the roles and the necessary professional skills are not clearly outlined. According to Bush (2005, p. 21) “clarifications, more secured empirical work as well as critical analysis of what can be achieved through intercultural mediation [are] urgently needed.” Therefore it seems necessary to provide clarity on the role of intercultural mediators in German speaking primary schools.

2. Methodology

2.1. Primary objectives and questions

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe the tasks and activities of intercultural mediators as well as to propose a basic framework for successful intercultural mediation in the field of education. For this purpose three basic research questions have been asked:

1. What do intercultural mediators contribute to overcoming cultural, linguistic and integrative barriers for pupils with an immigrant background in German primary schools?
2. What is expected of intercultural mediators in primary schools and how they can meet these demands?
3. What conditions must be presented in order to improve the existing intercultural mediation approach?

2.2. Data collection and analysis

With objective of gaining information from a wide range of different perspectives and areas of experience, nine semi-structured interviews (expert-interviews and episodic-interviews) with intercultural mediators, teachers, parents and experts in the field of education as well as two participant observations in German speaking primary schools were carried out during 2010-2011 in South Tyrol. The evaluation process of the interviews was based on the “structured content analysis” according to Mayring (2010), namely through a reduction and paraphrasing of the material, a structuring of the material on content and an overall representation of typical cases with reference to the
categories. The participant observation in different classroom situations with intercultural mediators was analyzed by the method of “thick description” according to Geertz (1999).

3. Results

3.1. Challenges and responsibilities of intercultural mediators

The results show that the communication and comprehension between immigrants and different participants in field of education are often hindered. On the one hand, these communication disorders arise because of language barriers, on the other hand because of culturally divergent expectations (Habermas, 1995). However, following Auernheimer (2010) it can be underlined, that false expectations are also caused by stereotypes of the unfamiliar “other”. In a three-way relationship with the parties standing, intercultural mediators try to create an appropriate framework for constructive discussions. This brings them to challenge of moving intermediate area of interculturalism, compensating power asymmetries and taking a bridging function, without abandoning their neutral position.

One of the most common tasks of intercultural mediators includes the provision of information, advice for teachers, children with a migrant background and their parents. Using this type of support intercultural mediators can help to overcome linguistic and cultural communication difficulties. Another major area of responsibility includes translation and language learning activities. This allows them to build the vocabulary of these students and to repeat essential teaching content.

According to the Legislative Decree No. 286 of 1998 intercultural mediation in Italy mainly exists with aim to set measures for the integration of people with an immigrant background. Therefore the question of the contribution of intercultural mediators to the integration of immigrants must be addressed. As the following statement of a teacher illustrates, “The intercultural mediator did not work, as she was always outside and not in classroom” (LP2 (pseudonym), interview by author, Bolzano, February 09, 2011), intercultural mediators spend the majority of their translation and language learning time outside the classroom. Although the integration process can be promoted indirectly by improving the language skills of the pupils with migration background, at the same time the process of integration remains unilateral. In addition these activities outside the classroom promote the social exclusion of these children. Based on the reasoning that integration is a bilateral process in which every single member of the society has to make sufficient effort, the findings underline that especially intercultural learning activities play an important role in order to overcome cultural and integrative barriers.

As Mecheril (2010) makes clear, any actual or imagined constellation of participants from different cultural affiliation are potentially a case of intercultural communication and thus all pupils of a class must be addressed. Therefore, course of intercultural activities, intercultural mediators should work with all children of a class, giving them the opportunity to ask questions and talk to each other about their different socio-cultural backgrounds as well as their past and current life situations. This can be exemplified by following statement of an intercultural mediator: “We talk with the class, talk about their issues and we give them the opportunity to express diverse views and information” (intercultural mediator3 (pseudonym), interview by author, Bolzano, March 08, 2011). An expert in the field of education adds: “Intercultural learning does not just mean getting to know a different culture, but includes a consideration of their own as well as the other culture“ (expert1 (pseudonym), interview by author, Bolzano, January 24, 2011). Particularly by expressing their own social and cultural backgrounds, there can be a mutual approach to the issues by the different members of a society. If this is done, it can not only be an approach to the unfamiliar “other”, but also an examination of the “self”, with its own cultural interests and ethnocentricities.

3.2. Role expectations of the various actors in the field of education

Different interview quotes from the various participants in the field of education show that the role expectations assigned to intercultural mediators are very diverse and complex: “I’d really hoped for more, of course, that all goes a bit faster, or easier, and that she learns German immediately“ (teacher2 (pseudonym), interview by author,
Bolzano, December 12, 2010). Another teacher sees the main role of intercultural mediators to “translate”, and “learn vocabulary” (teacher2 (pseudonym), interview by author, Bolzano, January 27, 2011). While in many cases the demands placed on the intercultural mediators exceed their training and skill set, others are relegated to providing translation and language lessons.

According to the results, teachers, who collaborate with the intercultural mediators most closely, are not adequately informed about the tasks and skills of intercultural mediators. From the perspective of the teachers, intercultural mediators should mainly provide for overcoming language barriers that affect a mutual understanding. According to them, socio-cultural issues should also be addressed, but primarily be resolved on a superficial level. This makes clear that the requirements placed on intercultural mediators role expectations are significantly different from their own self-perception. Unfortunately, most intercultural mediators cannot meet the basic and frequently asked requirement to act as a language teacher, due to missing language and teaching skills. A mediator says here: “Yes I can help, but I do not know what is written here!” (mediator2 (pseudonym), interview by author, Bolzano, November 21, 2010). As a further difficulty, intercultural mediators are often called in only when the situation has reached a crisis requiring an emergency solution.

3.3. Framework of successful intercultural mediation

Due to inadequate framework, the process of intercultural mediation has its shortcomings. As an important precondition for successful intercultural mediation the relationship of mediators and teachers has to be mentioned. In order to work successfully with intercultural mediators, teachers have to be sensitized to socio-cultural issues and better informed on the process of intercultural mediation. As Mecheril (2005) points out, only the mutual recognition of the individual professionals makes it possible to work together successfully, to balance power inequalities, to identify specific cultural orientations and to create a dialog.

In order to create an environment in which collaboration between teacher, mediator, and eventually the student occurs, the administrators of the school system must provide adequate time and funds for collaborative planning and classroom implementation of the plan. In addition, there must be a clear and binding framework established for the qualifications and training of mediators. The legal recognition of the profession and the creation of a unified professional album for intercultural mediators may provide a significant part of the solution.

Finally, results show clearly that in contacts with people with an immigrant background, which comprise only a relatively short period of time; efforts are almost exclusively focused on a purely linguistic understanding. This approach is neither successful nor sustainable in the long term, as opposed to a comprehensive approach using language and culture in a partnership with immigrant and host country students.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this qualitative study was to investigate the specific role of intercultural mediators in German speaking primary schools in South Tyrol. As it has been outlined, qualified intercultural mediators could perform a wide range of different tasks such as providing information and advice for teachers, children with a migrant background and their parents as well as cultural, translation and language learning activities within the classroom. As the results show, especially intercultural learning opportunities which help to reflect their own social and cultural background contribute to the integration process of immigrants. However, intercultural learning is a life encompassing process, in which both people with an immigrant background and the individual members of the host society need to be involved. By commissioning intercultural mediators, only the basic opportunity for intercultural learning is created. Unhelpfully, the work of intercultural mediators is often complicated by excessive role expectations on the part of the various participants in the field of primary education and inadequate institutional and legal framework. As a result, a comprehensive institutional and legal framework has to be created in order to facilitate the cooperation between the various participants in the field of education and to achieve the goal of the best possible integration of immigrant students. Nevertheless, the individual responsibility cannot be discounted:
Intercultural learning as a lifelong process requires an ongoing reflection on a personal level in order to deal with intercultural tensions and the fear of the unfamiliar.

References


