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A PERSPECTIVE OF INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IN EDUCATION

Theoretical
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Abstract

The paper discusses briefly some modern visions of the topic of intercultural dialogue within the context of a multicultural education environment and pluralistic society. The main reason for choosing this topic is directly related to the globalization process that marks our existence today. Globalization might provide opportunities for education and for businesses. But it also addresses serious challenges as well. We believe that by supporting intercultural sensitivity and intercultural dialogue within the education system in the spirit of multicultural societies will generate mostly on the long-run benefits for both individuals and organizations. The paper provides mostly a theoretical perspective of intercultural dialogue that is complemented by some guidelines for an effective intercultural education with a focus on how and what kind of education should contribute to better prepare people to live in multicultural societies.

1. Brief literature review. A general overview on multicultural, intercultural and pluricultural terminology

Today, with the rapid evolution of globalization process, many employees are finding that they have to face customers, suppliers, and other business partners from different cultures. By their nature, these relationships lead to more amplified cross-cultural interactions, during which different cultural norms and values might often create misunderstandings and conflicts. Sooner or later these might contribute to increasing the number of unhappy customers or suppliers, frustrated employees, and even it might contribute to amplifying the risks for decreasing business economic and social performance (Cushner & Brislin, 1996).

Increasing human resources mobility from one place to another implies not only effective labor dislocation but also to integrate those resources according to the national and international context.

Globalization increases both opportunities and challenges for businesses. In the context of a globalized world, economic progress is more and more important but it also is harder to be achieved.

The paper discusses not only the direct and common business strategies in today's world. It is also about the human progress and the wellbeing of people acting within that organization, that are considered from a border perspective including education, health, business, creative industries and so on. An interesting border perspective looks on what today is called the knowledge dynamics with a focus on how can people be better prepared as to face the multicultural-professional challenges. Multicultural challenges are looking for how people are facing more diverse situations. Management of diversity takes into account a variety of issues such as: race, religion, language, gender, age and so on.

Multiculturalism serves as a purpose for defending diversity and plurality that characterize a modern society.

Terms like multicultural, pluricultural and intercultural are used sometime like expressing the same thing. But they are not. They have the same semantic root but express different things.

Multicultural and pluricultural ones look for the presence of two or more cultures within the same society. Those terms certify the co-existence of different things: principles, values, aspirations, myths and beliefs that shape everyday life in a different way.

The term intercultural indicates action and communication between individuals, groups and institutions belonging to different cultures. It is something that goes far beyond the simple co-existence of multiple cultures. It looks for the relationships between relatively equal cultures (seen not as dominated and dominant) who freely

seek to meet, know and understand each other better for a political project on long term.

The polycentric vision and the multilingualism look not just for the use and dissemination of working languages of European Union but also for a strategy that promotes regional intercultural dialogue within Europe.

Such a strategy will encourage citizens from all the European countries to keep their national identity and culture.

Intercultural dialogue has no common definition but it is mostly identified with: cohabitation, connections and relationships between several cultures within a society where people need to feel well represented.

Nowadays multicultural societies represent a phenomenon caused by the geographical mobility and movement of individuals in the era of globalization. Transforming common multicultural cohabitation spaces into authentic multicultural society depends mostly on three variables:

- tolerance and the way that culture is valued and appreciated by the host society;
- orientation towards a full integration of minorities in the host societies cohabitation spaces or to preserve their cultural specificities
- number of minorities and their proportion within the majority

Adapting and benefiting from intercultural component could be realized through some integration policies and specific measures that encourage intercultural interaction between the new comers and the residents.

In order to make the interculturalism effective there are required at least the following conditions within the society:

- explicit recognition of the existence of diverse cultures and the right of these cultures to express in a cultural different way;
- to identify the types of relationships and exchanges between individuals, groups, and institutions corresponding to the cohabitation cultures;
- adopting common standards that allow exchange;
- facilitation for the minority groups to help them to get the technical means for communication and negotiation so they can assert themselves as groups and resist to cultural assimilation. The cohabitation spaces might be seen also as a social sphere where they can manage to benefit on the local solidarity and creativity.

The intercultural term is one of the most debated topic in modern societies. Some authors believe that interculturality should be a subject of interest for economy, human resource management or education; others believe that is a matter of language communication and acquisition of civic knowledge.

S. Rathje (2006) considers that: ["opinions regarding the purpose of intercultural competence range from economically oriented applications that emphasize efficiency to more academic or education-based perspectives that emphasize human development"].

Other authors believe that intercultural competences are key factors of a long-run sustainable competitive advantage represented by the productivity growth that might be achieved through intercultural interactions.

Intercultural interactions mediated by economic transactions, global negotiation or cost effectiveness analysis make more clear why this topic becomes of real interest today.

Looking from this point of view intercultural competence as an instrument could be also a means to success. Thomas (2003) shares this perspective; he defines intercultural competence as the ability ["to (help) shape the process of intercultural interaction in a way that avoids or contextualizes misunderstandings, while creating opportunities for cooperative problem solving in a way that is acceptable and productive for all involved"] (141).

Schonhuth (2005) summarizes similar definitions of intercultural competence as the ability ["within an intercultural context to establish contact in an appropriate way and to establish conditions that are acceptable for the free expression and effective exchange of all involved"].

The way we might make sense of interculturalism is also expressed by D. Coulby (2006) ["Interculturalism is a theme, probably the major theme, which needs to inform the teaching and learning of all subjects. It is as important in medicine as in civics, in mathematics as in language teaching. Similarly, it is just as vital at university as it is in the kindergarten."]

Ethical principles, as well as all other forms of culture, are humanly produced and culturally transmitted mostly through education.

By engaging in intercultural contact with different cultures, we gain a relatively more objective view than if we only lived and promoted our own culture. The same process can work in reverse: people from other cultures may learn from our experiences and in the dialogue process different traditions and beliefs are likely to be adopted or assimilated.

Bleszynska K. M. 2008 says that: ["New objectives and research areas have emerged, prioritizing the issues of a global society, cultural hybridization, trans-nationalism, borderland and cultural contacts, intercultural conflicts and the responsibility of educational systems for peaceful coexistence, integration and the development of social capital in post-modern multicultural societies"]. High productivity, successful

collaboration, innovation depend more and more on well culturally prepared individuals.

2. Intercultural dialogue and education

Starting from the premise that schools are dedicated to everyone we have to answer sometime complex questions like: how can educational systems face democratic pluralism?; how can we react to the different behavior of people having a different cultures background?; how can school in the end try to support and manage diversity?

Why do we need intercultural education? Because school is a key place for both professional and personal development of each individual.

Education has to prepare human resources to understand and to live better within pluralistic societies that have to face new life styles and different cultural models. Our society is more pluralistic and needs a new dimension -education for solidarity.

Universities curricula have to prepare students not just professionally but also from the point of view of facing a more pluralistic society.

In order to fulfill this objective schools have to manage diversity with everything that diversity means based on the use of the tools that diversity offers.

Intercultural competences and intercultural dialogue request also an international co-operation in education, especially in the higher education system.

To promote a constructive intercultural dialogue within an university it is essential to perform successfully mostly from the long-run perspective. Universities that function within a multicultural framework should promote "cultural respect" for all people involved in intercultural communication, regardless of their origins and cultural choices. Intercultural competence and intercultural effectiveness are becoming of crucial importance today.

We have to understand that diversity is a key issue both for our century but mostly for the future. Having the ability to interconnect, work and live in multicultural spaces helps us to understand, behave and act in a more responsible way. The reality showed us that just having professional knowledge today it is not enough.

Labor market doesn't only ask for well skilled professionals but also for developing other abilities that are not directly related to common knowledge acquisition but mostly to personal and interpersonal development.

Mitigating the intercultural competences today it is a must and not an option. The capacity of success for leaders and organizations depends on the development of what is called intercultural competences. Essentially intercultural competences refer to the ability of recognizing individual and organizational cultural differences among

employees at all levels. Intercultural competences encourage employees to maximize their contributions within diverse groups and create a framework for global collaboration that facilitates exchange of knowledge.

These considerations go beyond the traditional nomenclature of "diversity" (race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, age, etc.) and include also tradition, religion and values.

Why is this competency so important today and for the future? First because companies that promote intercultural competences will have an advantage in recruiting and keeping the most performing human resources. People that are well prepared want to work for strong companies which provide development opportunities, interesting challenges and a positive work environment.

The topic of this paper is related to a new dynamics of human resources. Our paper promotes the idea that a new category of knowledge and skills are more and more necessary for all of us.

Clarke V (2009) underlines that most effective organizations will be those which develop intercultural competences. Companies that encourage this trend on interculturality have the possibility of effective resource movement, people and ideas all over the world. Gorski P (2008) discusses the deficit theory, inequalities are not resulting from differences in power and access but ethics and cultural deficit for certain groups of people. The author underlines the necessity of an intercultural education rather than a multicultural one. A multicultural education is, in his opinion, more rigid and unspecific for the learning environment.

The need for intercultural competence relates to several aspects. First, we could take into consideration the learning context that had become much more diverse today than before.

Second, the possibility of having foreign colleagues and why not the one that people might think of moving from one country to another along with the available job opportunities and career perspectives.

Third, intercultural competence training is a basic need concerning the external activities of the university.

As a conclusion intercultural abilities become mandatory and have to be gained as early as possible.

Intercultural competence is not something that happens automatically when people from different countries meet in the same institutional frame. In fact, as former studies have already asserted, the 'contact hypothesis' works only under very special conditions (e.g. Allport 1954; Cook 1985; Amir 1969). Intercultural dialogue should happen under a general auspice of openness and understanding of participants. The ideal situation is when it is mediated by prepared professional individuals.

Supposing we start from the hypothesis that anyone can relate and benefit from intercultural interaction we could be wrong. We have seen in the literature that cases of conflict escalate could happen if intercultural knowledge is missing or the nature and particularities of diversity are very different. We could admit in these situations that cultural diversity is intrinsically good but without effective management negative situations could happen.

The study conducted by Hiller G.G, Wozniak M. (2009) reflected that ["an intercultural competent student must be able to move confidently within the steadily alterable contexts, that is, to sense and adjust to changes appropriately and effectively: appropriateness and effectiveness"]. A definition of intercultural competence from the instrumental-rational perspective can be found in Deardorff K (2006) approach: ["Intercultural competence is the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, based on specific attitudes, intercultural knowledge, skills and reflection"].

An intercultural competence has to enable the person to think, feel and act according to the situation they are facing. The presence of intercultural competence enables individuals to correctly evaluate the situation, respond with flexibility and tact and also positively improve their knowledge, skills and experience.

The intercultural issue is extremely complex and many authors reaffirm the idea of specialty courses in curricula that encourage multiculturalism and intercultural dialogue.

We consider that intercultural competences are a must in education because they enrich student's knowledge on international cooperation and enable them to adapt faster no matter where the job is, or where and how they decide to live.

Intercultural education provides mostly:

- a far much better understanding of cultures in a global world;
- better communication abilities between different cultures and different people;
- a positive attitude in the context of cultural diversity and greater abilities to participate in social interactions;
- It encourages national identity feeling and respect for diversity.

Scholten C (2009) identifies two important research directions that motivate the existence of a subject on intercultural dialogue in education. The author says from a social point of view that mobility process of human resources affects most universities in their competition for preparing and attracting the best students. From an economic point of view universities must act more and more like organizations so they have to adapt what they offer to what the labor market needs.

RWTH Aachen University from Germany is one European University that dedicates a special program, for foreign students.

The program is called *Buddies* and offers the possibility of interacting with national students whom provide volunteer guidance for foreigners.

Another example is *Viadrina University* from Germany, university with high degree of international students and a positioning at the border of Germany with Poland.

After analyzing the internal situation and a drop out rate of nearly 50% from foreign students the university decided to take action.

At the beginning the university management didn't see the importance of intercultural competences and promoted a skeptical attitude towards applying real measures. Within a period of two years, a course program was created step-by-step within *the Department of Intercultural Learning* to deal with promoting intercultural competence. Workshops were introduced; content and methods are based on a combination of theoretical input and practical exercises concerning intercultural communication.

Methods used were: cultural simulations, role-playing, critical incidents and case studies, world café. Feedback from participants was collected and positive views and opinions were granted for the workshops.

The workshops for students have been a success and the next step is to prepare employees to deal with intercultural situations.

3. Possible guidelines for intercultural education

Working in multicultural environments we have to encourage intercultural dialogue. In order to help foster an equality climate between individuals especially in universities we believe that certain measures are necessary in developing intercultural dialogue.

Based on the brief literature review and on some examples of best practices we had identified, we consider, a possible guide for multicultural workspaces that aspire to become intercultural workspaces.

- Start with putting behind our own cultural identity and embrace an open vision of seeing and understanding the world. Riva Ortiz R (2002)
- Embrace diversity will help us to open our mind and to find the common and universal roots of all the people that are interacting. Intercultural dialogue with other cultures makes us to reconsider, rediscover and recover essential components of self culture and values.
- Recognize the differences between individuals and encourage the right to behave freely fighting for what Fernando Savater called "[globalization of rights] ."

- Avoid discrimination by promoting an equalitarian attitude in classes and in our own life.
- Embrace receptivity between individuals and promote tolerance within and outside university
- Encourage intercultural collaboration in projects that run outside or inside the educational spaces on diverse subjects and why not even on intercultural issues
- Make use of examples in presentation of cultural different situations always underlining the positive side of diversity and of a competent way to manage the diversity.
- Encourage the liberty to speak freely for all the people assuring openness and a positive climate to exchange opinions. Also grant equal importance for opinions of different individuals.

Tolerance and solidarity can not be implemented without the companionship of other values and attitudes that facilitate application in practice.

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