

Contributions of Diatopic Hermeneutics for Intercultural Education

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Abstract: The article intends to present data from the exploratory research of an ongoing doctoral project on reciprocal social representations between national and foreign students³². This research and intervention project is being developed by the LEIP (Laboratory of Research in Education in Portuguese / Line 2), coordinated by Maria Helena Ançã, University of Aveiro. Qualitative data collection occurred between January and April 2011 and its main goal was to approach the internal complexity of foreign students in Portuguese Schools, in order to identify reflection points for an intervention project in the future. We understand that there is a co-existing linguistic and cultural diversity amongst students, which does not seem valued and at times is even considered adverse, and could potentially encourage mutual interaction and enrichment. These observations lead us to advocate an intervention project based on intercultural dialogue and diatopic hermeneutics as a strategy for dialogue.

Keywords: Intercultural Education; Diatopic Hermeneutics; Social Representations

Introduction

Regarding migrant education policy, Portugal is considered “the best of the new immigration countries” (MIPEX, 2011: 159), namely for recognizing the importance of language of the destination country as a factor for integration, which led to the introduction of Portuguese as Non-Native Language in the National Syllabus of basic education since 2006 (Normative Order n°. 7/2006) and secondary education since 2007 (Normative Order n°. 30/2007).

However, some authors state that in Portugal there has not been true intercultural education, where the school becomes a hegemonic characteristic of the dominant culture, meaning that minority cultures are symbolically (and collectively) suppressed (Cortêsão & Pacheco, 1991; Pacheco, 1996; Dias, Ferrer & Rigla, 1997; Casa-Nova, 2005; Monteiro, 2010). There are also patterns of socio-cultural differences which heavily penalize young people with different ethnic backgrounds, i.e., white, Catholic, urban and Portuguese – Luso (Stoer, 2001). Vieira da Silva (2002) states that “schools are discriminatory”³³ and the target of that discrimination – from both teachers and other students – are the students from ethnic and cultural minorities. According to Pires (2007), despite the fact that state members are obliged by the European Union to receive and treat children and young people in the same way, in reality this does not happen, “the Basis Law of the Portuguese Educational System mentions Education for Citizenship but the claimed concern has not been directly proportional to reality”³⁴.

Thus, we emphasize that Intercultural Education should instead replace cultural *multi-experiencing* by *interaction and enrichment* between diverse groups (Ouellet, 2002; Abdallah-Pretceille 2006). It should transform the mere presence of different cultures into an *action plan* which ensures mutual acknowledgment of each culture through increasing interaction (Cortêsão, 1991). We agree that Intercultural Education is not only intended for schools where there are children of immigrants and ethnic minorities, but to all schools, in order to

³² - Project approved and financed by FCT.

³³ - Our Translation

³⁴ - Our Translation

enable them to build a plural and democratic society (Neto, 2007). And it should not be restricted to certain subjects, nor solidarity and human rights campaigns, nor aimed at specific targets such as migrants (Cochito, 2004).

Schools should become spaces of integration and socio-cultural diversity management, with a focus on *cultural criticism*, rather than on the self and a lack of appreciation for others. Nor should they accede to the interests of multinational corporations which promote the process of cultural homogenization, but rather promote reflection on cultural identity, under the acknowledgement and acceptance of its diversity (Castaño, Moyano & Castillo, 1999). An *essentialist notion of culture*, with a monocentric tendency, bound up in tradition and memory, should be opposed to an *ecologic, pluralist and interactionist notion*, which perceives culture as dynamic and differential, a complex set of human relations with its environment, of thinking interactions in the social space. This implies looking critically at the concept of culture. (André, 2009, 2006, 2005; Benhabib, 2006).

We are aware that respect and mutual understanding between cultures is only attained through dialogue (UNESCO, 2006), and is even potentially perceived as a “*synonym of Diatopic Hermeneutics*” (Sousa Santos, 2006, 2004), which as an “*interpretation work*” between different visions of the world and social practices promotes the conscience of “*cultural incompleteness*” through “*self-reflection*”, and ensures a “*participative, interactive and intersubjective production of knowledge*”. Diatopic Hermeneutics proposes to combine the recognition of equality and difference (André, 2009).

Finally, our research situates itself on the same level as Social Representations (SR) which are perceived as a set of concepts, propositions and explanations created in everyday life through communication between individuals, which in our society is equivalent to the myths and systems of beliefs of traditional societies (Moscovici, 1984, 1989). They are ways of practical knowledge or *naive* wisdom which help understand the world and communication, lending coherence to social dynamics (Jodelet, 1989; Vala, 1993). As interpretation systems, they dictate our relationship with the world and with others and they are also involved in processes as diverse as the diffusion and assimilation of knowledge, individual and collective development, identity definition and social transformation.

Despite being a *carrefour* concept because it places itself at a crossroads of different subjects (Doise, 1986), some authors highlight its pertinence - even when contradictory - for the study of educational phenomena, enabling the adaptation of individuals to the reality with which they are confronted, keeping its own balance and its own need for coherence in their social practices and their relation with the environment (Gilly, 1989).

In this way, the exploratory research we present seeks to understand the (de)valorization of linguistic and cultural diversity in schools through SR. The SR we have of others justifies the way we interact (Palmonari & Doise, 1986), and guide inter-group relations which allow us to anticipate the behavior of others and programme their strategy of action (Vala, 2010; Abric, 2000). Therefore, *to analyze a social representation is to attempt understanding and explain the nature of social ties which bind individuals, their social practices, as well as intra and inter-group relations* (Bonardi, 1999). As such, they are viewed in our project as tools which justify the pedagogical action (Dias, 1998).

Method of the Study

This exploratory study was developed through qualitative research which intends to emphasize the qualities of the entities and the processes and meanings which are not experimentally measured through quantity, volume, intensity or frequency (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006). Instead, they reinforce an interpretative position of behaviors and social phenomena, giving precedence to the subjective experience as a source of knowledge, to the study of social phenomena from the perspective of the “other” and to the interest of knowing the way people experience and interpret the social world which they interactively build (Almeida & Freire, 2008; Bogdan & Biklen, 1994).

The purpose of our study is to discover some aspects, ideas and hypotheses of work which could bring us nearer to the *internal complexity of the participants* (Amado, 2009) and to provide us with points of reflection for an intervention project in the future, from the perspective of the participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1994). According to this purpose we aim to identify and characterize sociability between foreign and national students in the school context and the factors which enable or prevent these relations. However, we intend in this article to demonstrate the way linguistic and cultural diversity is experienced by the subjects of our study, which seems to justify the necessity of implementing projects based on intercultural dialogue and diatopic hermeneutics.

Sample

Our sample consists of five students (S): Four are foreign, Bissau-Guinean and Cape Verdean, and one is a Portuguese national, who was chosen using a snowball sampling technique. These pupils study between the 7th and 12th years in schools of a medium-sized town in Northern Portugal, where foreign students from various nationalities are a minority. However, the universe of our study also included parents (P) (in the case of minors), a Ukrainian member of an immigration support association and a teacher whose opinions were used in order to obtain data triangulation or *subjective contrasting* in view of the consistency of the data collected and interpretations produced (Almeida & Freire, 2008).

We would like to point out that this is a non-representative sample, so the opinions expressed cannot be applied to the general population.

	Age	Occupation	Country of origin	Gender	Residence time in Portugal
Interview 1	15	Foreign Student (S)	Cape Verde	F	1 – 2 years
Interview 2	13	Foreign Student (S)	Cape Verde	M	1 – 2 years
Interview 3	Over 40	Parent (P)	Cape Verde	M	1 – 2 years
Interview 4	19	Portuguese student, the son of Portuguese parents (S)	Portugal	M	
Interview 5	Over 40	Ukrainian member of an immigration support association	Ukraine	F	+ 5
Interview 6	18	Foreign Student (S)	Guinea Bissau	F	+ 5
Interview 7	16	Foreign Student (S)	Guinea Bissau	F	+ 5
Interview 8	Over 40	Parent (P)	Guinea Bissau	M	+ 5
Interview 9	Over 40	Teacher	Portugal	F	

Data Analysis Processes

Data was collected through a semi-structured interview carried out by the researcher (R), and it was essential to ensure a trusting environment and anonymity, due to the fact that this was an interview about personal experiences.

After an audio recording, with the permission of the interviewees, the interviews were transcribed, although we are aware that any transcription system is always semi-interpretative, so no transcription represents verbal phenomena with absolute accuracy (Andrade & Araújo e Sá, 1995). Data treatment was carried out using Bardin's (2009) content analysis techniques, and we used the program Nvivo for codification and exploration.

Findings and Discussion

About the (de)valorization of foreign students in schools

The **Teacher** interviewed stated that in the schools where he taught in the last twelve years there has been a noticeable increase in linguistic and cultural diversity. However, he differentiates between the integration of Ukrainian students from that of the PALOP (Portuguese-speaking African Countries) students, stating that the latter exhibited greater difficulties with the Portuguese language (PL) and socializing, even though PL is the official language of their home countries. This is mainly justified by the proximity of the Ukrainian students' parents to the school and by the importance they place on schooling, since most of them have degrees.

The interviewed Portuguese **national student** sees the foreign pupil merely as one more student, and believes that their presence should not bring disruption or cause problems. This suggests either assimilation by the dominant culture or preservation of national identity (Cortês, 2011):

“**S:** Well, this is the thing, I don't know if... I'm not sure if it's good or not... I personally don't... don't think it's either good or bad... bad, well, it doesn't harm anyone, right? **Because it's just another one, it's just another student like all the others... hum... I mean, it ends up being disruptive... if it's a student who isn't... integrated (...) so that the Teacher doesn't have to waste more time and... and not being able to give attention to other students (...)** when they have the mentality and

the spirit to... to adapt... not being so stiff and... not... being worried about, for example, speaking good Portuguese (...) if they're open... then they make it easier." (Interview N. 4)³⁵

This student also believes that the *State* should not *finance*, for example, the teaching of Portuguese as a non-native language to foreign students. He states that if people want to *come to Portugal* they have to *take that risk*, as nationals might not be *subsidized* in the future.

The national student points out the "*support to those who arrive, and are destitute*" as a characteristic of Portuguese students, whose country is known for being "*hospitable*", highlighting a "*protective and helpful spirit*".

This specificity is accompanied by the "*pride*" of being Portuguese, someone who is "*destined*" to "*fight for a better country*", emphasizing both the history, namely the "*Discoveries*", and the current desire to give Portugal a "*better direction*".

The majority of foreign students are perceived as "*respectful, nice people*", "*interested*" in the destination country and, above all, "*hard-working*", although there are differences between nationalities. Thus, Eastern European students demonstrate a "*much greater spirit of sacrifice*" than the majority of other foreign students, "*work much harder*", "*are interested in the subjects*". In comparison, "*Brazilian students*", with some exceptions, are seen as those who do not possess "*that spirit of sacrifice and struggle*", "*trying to do their own thing*", "*not caring as much*". With regards to African students, the native pupil interviewed observes that they "*form cliques*", "*speak Creole*", "*do not fit in much with Portuguese classmates*", which causes "*distance*", and these situations are interpreted as self-exclusion "*on their part*":

"S: (...) unlike Eastern European students who... are students with a completely different mentality, who have a much greater spirit of sacrifice and... work much harder and... are interested and enjoy learning... hum... for instance, if we see students from other countries, it is the majority, right? What I see... of course there are exceptions, for example, in a country... a Brazilian student normally doesn't have that same... that... that spirit of sacrifice, that fighting spirit, right? I think that he kind of tries to do his own thing and not... he's not too worried about (...) African students... they speak, also speak the same Language... but there's one thing I... I see today... is that... there are many hum... and that **I see in our school, in my school, hum... is that... they try to... create groups, right? And speak... speak Creole (smiles), they don't speak, don't speak Portuguese, they don't fit in much with Portuguese classmates... hum... and that is bad for them, isn't it?... and for others...** and for other Portuguese classmates might also be... also create... maybe some kind of dirty looks in this way... **"those over there exclude themselves and create... their own group" and... and... causes distance**" (Interview N. 4)

Foreign students, in their turn, generally see themselves as being aware of the opportunities they have in Portugal for studying and "*fight*" "*for a better future*", although they recognize that there are cases where that does not happen. They also see themselves as less privileged, and not having the same opportunities for the future, mainly in the job market, even if they are granted Portuguese nationality. In comparison with native students, African students believe themselves to be more "*genuine*" in their way of being.

According to the following excerpt, foreign students believe themselves to be seen by native students as "*different*" and "*weird*", as those who arrive in Portugal to "*take away*" from the Portuguese what belongs to them, for example jobs. The importance given to difference is such that they believe they are seen as someone who comes from "*another planet*":

"R: How do you think Portuguese students characterize foreign students? Can you give me eight adjectives?"

S: They see different... they think... foreigners come here to take what is theirs...

R: What do you mean take?

S: Oh, for instance, work, oh... I think it's that... work and that... hum... I think some even believe... that we are from... a different... a different planet.

S: "Some look from a different planet"?

³⁵ _ Our translation

A: Yes, it seems... like it

S: Do you think it seems to Portuguese classmates that foreign classmates come from another planet?

S: Yes... exactly... they find it weird... I think that's it... I don't have more... adjectives".
(Interview N. 6)

Native students' perceptions of foreign students are diverse. One of the interviewees admits that thanks to foreign students, national pupils learn about other cultures, believing that they are "curious" to know more about them, via "books" and the "internet". Other students employ adjectives such as "spoiled", "ignorant", "uninformed by their parents", "antisocial", "insensitive"; someone who does not know another culture makes "stupid comments", pays more attention to "material goods, and what people wear". They are "difficult people to deal with", "unhelpful", "say nice things" to classmates in their presence and "bad things" when they're absent, "judge by appearances" and "not for what's inside".

One of the foreign female students describes Portuguese students as not "accepting" foreigners "easily", "always judging" and criticizing them. However, it is curious to note that, despite the negative adjectives used, the same student admits that in her home country there is a pre-conception of the Portuguese as being "racist" and "cocky", but regarding her class in the last academic year also with foreign students, she states they were "very friendly", and there was a sense of togetherness, which leads her to believe that the previous description did not match reality:

"S: In Cape Verde we have a bad image, **the majority has a bad image of the Portuguese and say "oh they are racist and what have you" and when I arrived it was completely different**, it's just that in last year's class if you were with one, you were with everyone, they were very friendly and I was a bit like.. because there we had a different image of the Portuguese, mainly youngsters and others, **they think the Portuguese are cocky and so on and so on... but when we arrived here it was a different reality.**" (Interview N. 2)

When interviewed, the **parents** demonstrated close relations with the schools and class directors, and one of them was even a member of the Parents Association of one school. Only one identifies an occasional extra-curricular activity related to interculturalism and, although recognizing its potential, regretted that there were more parents - also in small numbers - than students participating. Another parent complained that, beyond the fact that there are no intercultural activities in the school, there is still a "stigma" for not having been born in the country, and complained that her classmates mock her for being different:

"R: Those difficulties you initially felt, do you think they've been overcome?

P: Oh... yes... yes... the majority yes... because now they know the language better and are more or less integrated... and... yes, I can say that yes... occasionally there's one or two difficulties, but... there will always be because they weren't born here...they always carry that stigma, right?

R: What do you mean stigma?

P: Stigma... hum... maybe... for being... of...of certain habits... here they are not... things like that, right? Classmates notice that(...) instead of appreciating they mock. They mock the difference." (Interview N. 8)

Another two situations are described where comments from teachers, regarding certain aspects of the students' home countries, were negatively received. In the second situation it is clear how comments from teachers, unintentional or not, can cause relationship problems between foreign students and their classmates, beyond mere "embarrassment":

"S: (...) my class director now... something he says "you think something or other of Guinea-Bissau and whatever"... so, when he says something... we say something else, and he says "oh, you think this is Guinea-Bissau and whatever"... that kind of stuff.

R: And you don't like when he says that?

S: ... I don't like it! And I say "No, that hasn't got to do with anything!"

R: And how do you feel when he says those things?

S: Bad...

R: Does he say it in class?

S: In class!

R: In front of other students?

S: (Nods).” (Interview N.7)

P.: (...) they (teachers) make remarks which are... unhelpful... the fact they came from abroad, it's not... hum... regarding the recent arrival, it seems that **some Teachers used to make remarks implying that our education system wasn't (good)** and so they used to make those remarks in front of them (...) Then, when there were (good) results, Teachers used to make another type of remark, a remark meaning... which then created some confusion, hum... for example, “look, that student came from Africa and... something or other... and came here and got better results than you!!!” I mean, how... **in this case it is saying “a student that came from Africa” and interpreting “because it came from Africa can't have better results than...”** (smiles). I think that... that situation upset her a lot at the time hum... I think it was Teacher X, something or other and she told me “daddy, I'm scared because the Teacher said this to me and that might create a relationship problem with my classmates”, (...) and then... that, in fact, created some... some... some embarrassment (...).” (Interview N. 3)

Conclusions and Recommendations

Literacy cannot be seen solely as the development of basic skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic, ignoring citizenship participation both nationally and internationally; those skills, albeit necessary are not sufficient in our culturally diverse world, where it is also urgent to develop “*multicultural literacy*” which consists of the development of skills which enable the concept of knowledge to be viewed from different ethnical and cultural perspectives, and help to create a more humane and fair world (Banks, 2004).

The perceptions of the subjects in our study seem to suggest that there is multiculturalism, but not interculturalism, since we are in the presence of foreign students but diverse cultural groups do not encourage reciprocal cultural exchange, and even in some situations this presence is perceived as threatening or harmful. Therefore, the promotion of intercultural education seems urgent, beyond mere cultural teaching, since the former cannot be reduced to understanding cultural differences, as if it was a *geometrization* of these elements. It is necessary to see, to listen and to pay attention to others; above all to work towards an increased openness to diversity (Abdallah Pretceille, 2006).

The issue of self-identity in relation to others is also part of the intercultural approach, since cultural diversity also exists within the group itself, as part of the human being. Notions of identity and culture are solely definable in an intersubjective structure, and are the result of discourses and relationships. The intercultural paradigm is one of the paths which hybrid, segmentary and heterogeneous thinking tries to follow. (Abdallah – Pretceille, 2006; Maalouf, 2002).

To conclude, and considering that research in education implies “*an ethical commitment towards transformation and improvement of individuals, institutions and society in general*” (Amado, 2009: 58), we propose a project of intervention based on intercultural dialogue and which, by using *diatopic hermeneutics* reciprocity, allows the sharing of personal experiences, discoveries and difficulties and not only knowledge. This proposal for intervention should not only target foreign students, but all students and other education agents inside and outside the school community. They should jointly promote the concept of cultural incompleteness, the production of knowledge in an interactive and intersubjective way, and the discovery that difference, which exists within each one of us, is not more important than the person and the ethical commitment it demands (Aguado & Malik, 2006; Abdallah Pretceille, 2001).

In this way, it seems to us that such an intervention, which is adverse to ethnocentric behaviors and to a monoculture which hierarchizes differences, could contribute to an emancipatory education which would enable awareness of the cultural incompleteness of each group in relation to others (Cortêsão, 2001), by promoting knowledge and affection in a permanent dialogue and interaction (André, 2009). An *ecology of reciprocal acknowledgments* would allow a new articulation between the principle of equality and the principle of difference, complying with the transcultural imperative in schools which diatopic hermeneutics presupposes: “*we have the right to be equal when difference diminishes us; we have the right to be different when equality depersonalizes us*” (Sousa Santos, 2004, 2006).

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