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Intercultural Education and Sustainable Development. A Crucial Nexus for Contribution to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

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Abstract: Over the last few years, research in the educational field has conducted specific and broad analysis of intercultural education, with a solid theoretical basis and an advanced body of empirical research. However, the link between an intercultural approach and the theme of sustainable development, which has recently become an important aspect of international educational policies, remains less explored. The publication of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the definition of the goals for the millennium has made it necessary to deepen this link. The article aims to expand on the connection between intercultural education and sustainable development, highlighting the potential for the intercultural approach to contribute to reaching the objectives of the 2030 Agenda. An intercultural perspective is key to achieving the aims of ensuring quality education, combating exclusion and gaining a perspective of conscious and critical global citizenship.

Keywords: intercultural education; sustainability; agenda for sustainable development



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1. Introduction

Over the years, the 'education debate' has inspired very deep reflection on intercultural education, indicating that the approach constitutes an intentional political project to be implemented through education for the promotion of dialogue and cultural comparison aimed at all-natives and foreigners. In this way, diversities (cultural, gender, social class, biographical, etc.) become a privileged point of view of educational processes, offering the opportunity for everyone to develop from what they are (Allemann-Ghionda 2008, 2009; Banks 2001, 2008; Cushner et al. 2012; Grant and Agostino 2011; Gillborn 2004; Gundara 2000, 2003, 2012; Leeman 2002).

While a broad analysis on intercultural issues has been carried out, with a solid theoretical basis and an advanced body of empirical research, the link between an intercultural approach and the theme of sustainable development, which has recently become an important theme of international educational policies, remains less explored. The 2030 Agenda and the Millennium Goals have made it necessary to deepen this link, especially due to the fact that the contribution of an intercultural approach to achieving the aforementioned objectives can be a strategic avenue.

It must be remarked that intercultural education presupposes an intentional policy providing:

- (a) an educational project, as society requires active investment, aimed at weaving relationships between people who belong to different cultures, based on an "interactionist" perspective. This means that this project involves multiple dimensions of its participants' lives; social, economic and political, as well as cultural. In particular, it is a question of making the possibility of defining and carrying out one's own plans effective for everyone, with equal opportunities on the paths of education, work and citizenship. In this sense, intercultural education needs a fundamental connection

with perspectives of social justice, with paths to affecting the conditions of disadvantage (Tarozzi and Torres 2016), in order to guarantee not only equal educational opportunities, but also equity and academic success for migrant students, and to serve as essential criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of the education system as a whole.

- (b) A political perspective, as it looks to the future and is connected to the idea of a society to be built; speaking of education means, then, the coordination and direction of a collective project and the men and women who live there. It is not possible to comment on the topic of intercultural education if we do not first ask ourselves the fundamental question relating to what type of society we intend to build through this educational orientation (Freire 1970). In this case, as has been said, the intercultural aspect refers to a coexistence marked by inalienable principles such as those of democracy, pluralism and social justice. This is an unavoidable reference, since in a sort of “mirror effect”, the foreigner reflects an image of the society in which he/she lives, highlighting particular structural deficiencies, inconsistencies and necessities, as well as the inability to translate the recognition of formal rights into the effective exercise of them. In this regard, Abdelmalek Sayad (1999) recalls that migrants exist from the point of view of the society of arrival, as a “redundant” presence, since they question national services, institutions and behaviour. The broad scope of the problems posed by intercultural education is evident—for example, when the discussion of immigration issues inevitably leads to the question of what kind of Europe we are intending to build.

A clarification is needed with regard to what happened during the recent “refugee crisis”, which developed in Europe starting from 2015. This is a crisis certainly not determined by the number of arrivals, which remains considerably lower than migrant flows in the southern hemisphere. It should be pointed out that most industrialized countries welcome only one-fifth of the people forced to flee from all over the world, while the most consistent flows of forced migrants are from one country in the southern hemisphere to another, often immediately bordering the country of origin (UNHCR 2020). If it is correct to call this a “crisis”, then we must also deem the loss of the European project as a “cradle” of human rights one; a failure in the face of episodes of refusals of entry, border closures and even violence against people arriving in Europe, after fleeing from war and persecution (which, according to international treaties, should allow them “protection”).

Today, the presence of those who are in Europe without having actually chosen to be there—as in the case of those who simply flee—contributes to “upending” the question of social integration, which is usually defined as “one-way” from an assimilationist perspective, and as a simple introduction of the migrant. The situation represents an indicator to help us understand, on the whole, the quality of our democracy, and in particular what response we are able to offer in the face of the global processes which cause division, social disintegration and the impoverishment of entire areas of the planet, leading to the flight of millions of people.

- (c) An intentional approach, as it is the result of precise choices, planning, reflection and study, and certainly not by chance. This perspective translates into a task to be carried out, in a conscious and continuous way, in formal educational spaces (schools, universities, etc.) and non-formal (associations, community spaces, etc.). This intentional and long-term perspective is aimed not only at those of immigrant origin (young foreigners and their families), but at the entire population (all young people, the educational system and society as a whole), connected to each age group, with an authentic perspective of permanent education. The problem of intercultural relations must therefore be tackled in terms of an educational commitment, to which the entire educational system and all its pupils, society as a whole and all citizens are included. From this point of view, it can undoubtedly be said that education is, in itself, intercultural. The adjective “intercultural”, used in this way, could even be omitted without any consequence for the reasoning that is developed, by simply

adopting the expression “education”. In other words, education is either intercultural, or it is not authentic education.

2. Open Problems in the Field of Intercultural Education Regarding the Issue of Sustainability

In recent years, the issue of sustainability has become a substantial part of international educational policies. With the Resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly on 25 September 2015, which defines the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, an action program was proposed with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030 (UN 2015). There are several specific references in the text of the agenda to the issues related to the themes of intercultural education. For example, the resolution of the UN Assembly Article 23 declares that: “People who are vulnerable must be empowered. Those whose needs are reflected in the Agenda include all children, youths, persons with disabilities (of whom more than 80 per cent live in poverty), people living with HIV / AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees and internally displaced persons and migrants” (UN 2015, p. 10). Article 25 refers to the theme of quality education for all: “We commit to providing inclusive and equitable quality education at all levels—early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary, technical and vocational training. All people, irrespective of sex, age, race or ethnicity, and persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples, children and youths, especially those in vulnerable situations, should have access to life-long learning opportunities that help them to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to exploit opportunities and to participate fully in society” (UN 2015, p. 11).

Article 29 also recognizes the positive contribution of migrants to the development of a pluralist democracy: “We recognize the positive contribution of migrants for inclusive growth and sustainable development. We also recognize that international migration is a multidimensional reality of major relevance for the development of countries of origin, transit and destination, which requires coherent and comprehensive responses” (UN 2015, p. 12). Finally, in Article 36, an authentically intercultural intent is declared: “We pledge to foster intercultural understanding, tolerance, mutual respect and an ethic of global citizenship and shared responsibility. We acknowledge the natural and cultural diversity of the world, and recognize that all cultures and civilizations can contribute to, and are crucial enablers of, sustainable development”. (UN 2015, p. 13). The Agenda also establishes the Development Goals, which focus on issues of importance for development, which concern all countries and all individuals: no one is excluded, nor should they be left behind on the path necessary to bring the world towards sustainability. Among the various objectives, particularly significant from an intercultural perspective is objective 4: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UN 2015, p. 21), which aims to ensure that all children, adolescents and adults—especially the most marginalized and vulnerable—have access to education and training suited to their needs and the context in which they live. This makes education a contributing factor to making the world safer, more sustainable and more interdependent. In particular, sub-objective 4.7 aims to ensure that all students acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to promote sustainable development, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and the appreciation of cultural diversity and the contribution of culture to sustainable development. As regards progress in relation to the state of achievement of the sustainable development goals, the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020 presents an updated overview, from which it emerges that the recent COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating impacts on the path to achieving these objectives (UN 2020). In particular, with regard to goal 4, the report highlights that, despite the progress of previous years, the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly aggravated the education crisis and widened existing educational disparities. In particular:

School closures around the world can reverse years of progress in access to education. Before the Coronavirus crisis, the percentage of children and young people not attending primary and secondary school had dropped from 26% in 2000 to 17% in 2018. Despite some progress,

258 million children and young people were still excluded from education in 2018, three quarters of which were in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. In this context, women face a greater risk of exclusion. Globally, about 5.5 million more primary school-age girls did not attend school than boys in 2018.

In 2020, with the spread of COVID-19 around the world, more than 190 countries carried out the closure of schools nationwide. About 90% of all students (1.57 billion) in the world did not go to school. Although distance learning solutions have been offered, at least 500 million minors were excluded from this method (UN 2020, p. 32).

Without corrective action, the effects of COVID-19 will add to the obstacles faced by poor children in completing their education. The global primary school completion rate was estimated at 85% in 2019, compared to 70% in 2000. Middle school and high school completion rates were 73% and 49%, respectively, but with large disparities between population groups. In low-income countries, for example, the primary school completion rate is 34% for children in the poorest 20% of households, and 79% for children in the richest 20% of households.

Distance learning remains out of reach for most students in poorer countries. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of access to computers and the Internet at home, as well as the low level of computer skills in their families, meant that many already marginalized students were placed at a further disadvantage. In 2019, around 87% of households in Europe had home internet access, compared to 18% of those in Africa. The digital divide is also reflected in computer ownership: 78% of European households owned a computer in 2019, compared to 11% in Africa (UN 2020, p. 33).

School closures create additional risks to the health and safety of vulnerable children. For millions of children around the world, school is not just a place to learn; it is also a safe place away from violence where they can receive free meals and health services. 379 million children are estimated to have missed school meals due to school closures during the pandemic (UN 2020, p. 33).

The lack of basic infrastructure in schools (such as hand washing facilities) will make recovery from COVID-19 more difficult. The lack of basic hand washing facilities in many schools around the world means that teachers and students do not enjoy a safe learning environment. In areas where schools are closed due to the pandemic, it also means that they will not be able to practice essential hygiene measures when they return to school. According to the latest available data, only 65% of primary schools in the world have basic hand washing facilities. The proportion is slightly higher for middle and high schools, at 71% and 76%, respectively. In sub-Saharan Africa, the percentages of basic hand washing facilities drop to 38% for primary schools and 43% for high schools (UN 2020, p. 33).

3. The Role of Intercultural Education in the New Scenario Outlined by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

What is the role of intercultural education in the new scenario outlined by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development? Some elements of attention are proposed below relating to an intercultural education approach oriented towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and aimed at pursuing objective 4, promoting an inclusive and equitable quality education with lifelong learning opportunities for all.

3.1. An Educational Approach to Sustainability for Everyone

A rather superficial interpretation leads us to believe that the intercultural education approach is aimed solely at migrants, to facilitate their integration into the receiving society. This approach is often dismissed—it must be emphasized—as simple assimilation. Without a doubt, this is an important issue, since the very presence of migrants is the reason that leads us to take up the discussion on intercultural education. However, it would be short-sighted to stop at this finding. Intercultural education is not, in fact, a “pedagogy for foreigners”. Instead, it is a broader approach, which involves everyone, natives and foreigners alike. Furthermore, since this is a perspective aimed at addressing the problem of intercultural relations, it would be particularly risky to formulate a one-way request for

change, with questions addressed only to minorities, without the majorities being asked to question themselves. With the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in mind, it is necessary to adopt a perspective of “sustainability education”, placing at the centre of the discussion a strategy to build the cultural foundations for the development of open relationships, as well as the critical thinking on which to base these interactions. It should be remembered here that intercultural relations take the form of a relationship between a majority and a minority in the contexts of life and work. At least two consequences arise from this. The first is that it is a structurally asymmetrical relationship, as power is not equally distributed between the two groups (Giroux 2001, 2008, 2011). The second consideration concerns the fact that the relationship between these two groups is one of interdependence. This means that the two are in a dialectical relationship, for which the problem of immigrants is also that of the natives, not only because the latter have the same dilemmas as the former (even when they are not aware of it), but also because the problems of immigrants are not resolved, with policies directed solely at them. Instead, they are better addressed with policies capable of taking into account the many “particular” needs, but aimed at the entire population.

From this perspective, raising the quality of educational, cultural and social services for the most fragile part of the population ensures an increase in the quality of these services for the entire population, since a service capable of offering answers to the most vulnerable will be able to better respond to everyone’s needs. Furthermore, in the relationship of interdependence described, the presence of migrants highlights the identity of the majority and the representation that it constructs for itself, including its history. The notions of security, integration and duties used in the public discourse on immigration, more than they are used in relation to rights, and to the conditions for their effective exercise, are presented as problematic, and do not challenge or at all involve the native population, which is always represented as open, inclusive and monolithic. For this reason, a strong educational undertaking needs to be implemented on the native majority, through the lens of sustainability, in order to urge them to critically question their own identity, which has often been used as a “weapon” to exclude others. This will allow them to become aware of the major critical issues of the contemporary world (migratory dynamics, armed conflicts, climate change, etc.) through a perspective of global citizenship.

3.2. *The Contribution of Intercultural Education to Achieving the Goal of Quality Education for All*

In the new scenario outlined by the 2030 Agenda, intercultural education represents a valid strategy for promoting inclusive and equitable quality education. Regarding the different strategies used in this direction, the Eurydice network has highlighted some main categories:

- *guidance measures*, including written information on the school, intercultural mediators, specific human and instrumental resources, and meeting opportunities for migrant families;
- *strategies aimed at strengthening the interaction between the school and the migrant family*, through the publication of written information on the school system in the native languages of foreign pupils, the use of intercultural mediators or designated teachers as liaisons between immigrant pupils, their families and the school;
- *teaching in the native language*, usually carried out in extra-curricular forms, on the basis of bilateral agreements and the availability of specific resources;
- *the promotion of processes through which the relationships between people of different cultural backgrounds are analysed and made explicit in school curricula*, with an intercultural focus set up on three levels: (a) the learning of values of respect and, in some cases, anti-racism, within the context of cultural diversity; (b) an international scope, with a deepening of contemporary cultural diversity in historical and social contexts; and (c) the aspect of European integration (Eurydice 2009).

Support mechanisms for pupils with a migratory background are also adopted in European education systems on the basis of two main models:

- an “integrated” model, in which foreign students are placed in “regular” school classes. In this case, support measures (essentially of a linguistic nature) are provided on an individual basis for each pupil during normal school hours;
- a “separate” model, which can take two forms: (a) that of “transitional agreements”: foreign students are placed in groups separate from other students for a limited period of time, during which intensive support is provided; and (b) that of “long-term measures”: special classes are set up within the school for one or more school years and, often, foreign students are grouped according to their skills in the language of instruction.

It was thus highlighted that the so-called “separate” model is not very widespread in Europe, and where present, is used in combination with elements of the “integrated” model. The organization of groups or separate classes for a duration of more than one year is not very common in European countries. In most cases, however, there is a coexistence between the two models, safeguarding inclusion in regular classes as much as possible, with transitional language support measures provided on the basis of a flexible teaching schedule. In addition, in about one-third of countries, foreign students are also offered extracurricular courses, outside official school hours, in the afternoons and during the summer (Eurydice 2004).

3.3. *The Overcoming of a Flock-Based Approach and the Fight against Social Exclusion*

It should be noted that the discourse on intercultural education often refers to difficult work-life situations that pose problems and contradictions in the lives of the subjects: the theme of a possible intercultural form of education translates, essentially, into the task of protection of the dignity and integrity of the human being. For this reason, without any rhetoric, it must be recognized that the immigrant is such in society, essentially because he/she is “poor”—that is, because he/she experiences a disadvantage in terms of social, economic, cultural and political opportunities. The “rich” foreigner is not an “immigrant”; cultural curiosity is even set towards him/her. The immigrant, on the other hand, is “poor”, and no curiosity is generated towards him/her. Indeed, it is precisely the condition of socio-economic hardship connected with migration that produces a disadvantage, and certainly not cultural differences per se. This clarification is necessary, as the immigrant is a vulnerable subject not because of movement, but becomes so in contact with the context in which he/she finds himself/herself: in other words, it is precisely the new environment that makes him/her socially weak. It is interesting to note how often the problems of social inequalities are relegated to the sphere of ethnic and cultural difference. This tends to hide the materiality of the historical-social processes in which subjects respond, in a system of asymmetrical and unequal relationships, to their placement and to the social role that has been assigned to them. Racism plays a decisive role in this apparatus that generates subordination. In its most complex form, the “systemic-institutional” one, this phenomenon basically acts as a form of discrimination that is not rooted so much in the attitudes of individuals or groups, but in those processes foundational to the functioning of society, which lead to situations of disparity and disadvantage (Taguieff 2013; Wieviorka 1998; Zmas 2010). The purpose of intercultural education is therefore precisely to affect the educational, cultural, social, economic and political contexts, which with their social differentiation designs, make the migrant a vulnerable subject.

3.4. *The Need for a Critical Approach*

The stories and the instances of those who come from other contexts give an image of what society is like, and they constitute a “highlighter” of how it is made. The mere presence of immigrants and refugees in European societies today strongly pushes us to ask how society works. One of the most significant questions on this topic was formulated by Paulo Freire, who highlights the link between the pedagogy and policy in his radical

critique of “neoliberal discourse”, the dominant political-economic thought. Heterogeneously constituted, it manifests itself in the exaltation of the free market, and is associated with the idea of a reduction in the role of states in socio-economic systems. An essential aspect of the neoliberal discourse is that, in his narrative, the needs and aspirations of men and women are subordinated to the interests of the market and financial organizations, or to be more precise, to those in positions of power and privilege in such bodies. This approach is at the edge of the large and ever-increasing gap, between the few who, both on a global level and within states, have access to most of the resources, and the many, who are becoming increasingly poor. In terms of education, on the other hand, we are witnessing a change in the character of educational processes, increasingly oriented towards their direct connection with the economic systems of production. Mayo notes, for example, that dominant neoliberal discourse, through its pervasive market ideology, has in fact converted all public goods, including education itself, into consumer goods (Mayo 1999). This translates into the inclusion, within the educational pathways, of economic paradigms, originally extraneous to the pedagogical context, which transform the pupils into “consumers” of educational content and education into a “market”, regulated by the law of supply and demand. According to Freire, this task is purely educational, since it is not enough to allow the most vulnerable access to superficial knowledge, but that this knowledge must be effectively critical, to question the historical basis of exclusion (Freire 1970, 1992). We must therefore ask ourselves what educational practice is functional, what model of society we intend to pursue (more or less consciously) and what idea of man and woman underlies it. Thus, a radical critique of the dynamics that generate or legitimize exclusion, subordination, marginality and violence follows. Research in the field of education in fact has a lot to say about how to imagine and build a better world through education, characterized by greater social justice. Its results represent a real “manifesto” for a critical, intercultural and transformative pedagogy, which in a world characterized by growing disparities in terms of opportunities, appears to be more and more enduring (Giroux 2008, 2011; Wallace 2008). In this sense, it is necessary to re-examine one of the most significant assumptions of Paulo Freire’s pedagogical thought: education cannot be neutral. An education that does not take a position, that does not take sides within the oppressor-oppressed dialectic (which is the concrete historical context in which the educational process takes place), would favour, in fact, the dominant power, and with it the dynamics of marginalization. Any approach that declares itself politically neutral in matters of education is therefore already a choice of field, since it does nothing but preserve the status quo and maintain the system of pre-existing social relations. Not declaring a political approach to education is equivalent, in this sense, to a concealment of guidelines actually operating in the educational context, with unavoidable consequences in any case. The pedagogical commitment cannot therefore present itself as impartial, since a possible neutral posture would end up being functional to the maintenance of the existing order, which already represents a choice—a stance—in defence of the particular interests of the privileged and the oppressors (Freire 1970, 1992).

4. Conclusions. Emancipatory Education towards the 2030 Agenda

At the foundation of these observations is the idea that the results of research in the educational field can offer a valid “toolbox” for defining adequate responses to the most urgent issues and needs of contemporary society. This calls on us to ask ourselves about those who face educational vulnerability. In fact, the privileged recipients of education are, in the first place, precisely those who express a lower capacity to exercise rights, or a limited possibility of translating rights into effective reality. Crucial to this approach is a commitment to goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda, through the promotion of appropriate spaces for the active construction of knowledge and the attribution of meaning to the world, as well as the tools to become conscious agents of the processes of change. In this sense, an educational approach to combat social exclusion must offer the indispensable conditions for self-reflection, for the autonomous management of one’s own existence and for the

strengthening of the capacity of “agency”, to effectively participate in society and to exercise causal power. This reasoning also leads us to question the authentic meaning of education, which must be traced to the need to take charge of the needs of the most vulnerable, and to then discover that only through this fundamental passage can we subsequently respond better to the needs of all in education. An idea of education that translates into a strongly characterized perspective in an emancipatory sense aimed at, not so much the consolidation of the existing, but rather the development of a vision of what could be. The challenge for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for sustainability returns its most authentic features to education. In particular, the idea that it is a “key right”—regardless of one’s place of origin or departure—for every person for lifelong learning, which represents a key right through which to better exercise other social and political rights. It is therefore essential to ensure the material, organizational and cultural conditions that allow each individual to exercise such a fundamental right. Education ensures the subject the possibility of becoming more and more aware of himself/herself, of their own potential and place in society, and of “affirming himself/herself”, leaving the cycle of isolation and building a biographical blueprint of citizenship within the community.

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