

‘SUPERDIVERSE’ SCHOOL POPULATIONS IN SOUTHERN EUROPE: REFLECTIONS ON LANGUAGE USE AND SUGGESTIONS FOR LEARNING STRATEGIES

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***Abstract:** MERIDIUM is an EU-funded Lifelong Learning Project, which involved primary schools in six countries in Southern Europe: Italy, Spain, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Malta. In this paper we present some results of this project, and we put forward suggestions in order to adopt strategies in language teaching which may suit the language use and needs of increasingly diverse students’ populations, favouring interlinguistic and intercultural awareness. Such an issue is particularly relevant in Southern Europe, where a “homoglottic habitus” often hinders educational systems from building on the multi- and plurilingual potential of families and social contexts which pupils live in.*

***Keywords:** Migration; Primary schools; Language teaching; Interlinguistic awareness; Multilingualism; Cultural diversity; Superdiversity; Intercultural awareness; Plurilingual and intercultural education; Integration*

1. Introduction

International migration towards Southern European countries has undoubtedly led to major social changes in these contexts during the last decades, due to its huge dimensions and considerable growth rate². Furthermore, unlike many States in North-Western Europe, Southern European countries have only recently become an immigration destination. In fact, until the 1970s a number of these States generally experienced significant mass migration to other European countries or to other continents.

Due to such a sudden inversion of the migratory trend, as well as to the ethnic, religious and cultural “super-diverse” features of immigrant communities (Vertovec, 2007)³, in Southern European countries public discourse on immigration is traditionally characterized by alarmist tones that amplify any

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² According to estimates by the United Nations Population Division (UNDP), over the last two decades the percentage of the immigrant population in Southern European countries has risen from 2.9% to 9.5%, compared to the current 10.8% in Northern Europe and 12.4% in Western Europe.

³ Vertovec, Steven. “Super-diversity and its implications”. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29, Issue 6, 2007: 1024-1054. Print.

problems related to this state of affairs, leaving little room for reflection on how integration could be better understood (EUMC 2005).⁴

Immigration is often blatantly branded as a problem, especially in media discourse (EUMC 2002).⁵ Even institutional discourse about immigration and cultural diversity is not free from bias. It is therefore particularly interesting to analyse what happens within educational contexts, where increasingly diverse school populations inevitably must lead to reflections both on the challenges and on assets related to multicultural societies.

Plurilingualism and linguistic diversity brought about by immigration represent an everyday experience for pupils, and it is at school that they have to be taught to appreciate the value and potentiality of them. On the contrary, in the absence of an institutional discourse which legitimises and favours a progressive detachment from the *monolingual habitus*⁶ (Gogolin, 1994), as well as from traditional *homoglotic ideologies*⁷ (Lüdi, 2011) of many educational institutions, there is the risk that these individual and collective linguistic resources remain largely extraneous to the school community or are regarded as limitations to overcome, while only European languages of wider communication taught at school are credited with status and prestige. Very often, in fact, bilingual and/or multilingual programmes in schools are equated to the study of English while other languages, which may be extensively present in social contexts of Southern European countries, are almost totally excluded. This situation seems even more incongruous, if we take into consideration that an increasing number of children who speak many different languages join these educational institutions every year.

2. Research questions

In this paper, we will focus on the educational policies and settings of six Southern-European countries (Portugal, Spain, Italy, Slovenia, Malta and Romania), discussing data gathered through MERIDIUM, a EU-funded Life Long Learning project⁸ conducted from 2009 to 2011. On the basis of the above, the research questions to be discussed in this paper are summarized as follows:

⁴ European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC). *Majorities' Attitudes Towards Minorities: Key Findings from the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey*. Wien: European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, 2005. Print.

⁵ European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC). *Racism and Cultural Diversity in the Mass Media*. Wien: European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, 2002. Print.

⁶ Gogolin, Ingrid. *Der monolinguale Habitus der multilingualen Schule*. Münster: Waxmann, 1994. Print.

⁷ Lüdi, Georges. "Quale integrazione per i parlanti delle lingue di immigrazione?". In: Giannini, Stefania and Scaglione, Stefania (eds.). *Lingue e diritti umani*. Rome: Carocci, 2011: 81-113. Print.

⁸ LifeLong Learning Program (LLLP), key-action 2 (Languages), project number 143513-LLP-1-2008-1-IT-KA2-KA2NW.

1. At a macro-level: in these Southern European countries do official policy documents promote cultural diversity at school and do they explicitly call the attention of teachers to plurilingualism and linguistic diversity brought about by immigration? And if so, to what extent does this occur?
2. At a micro-level: are plurilingualism and linguistic diversity present extensively in today's schools, explicitly brought to the attention of pupils in everyday classroom activities and eventually exploited in order to create a learning environment which fosters interlinguistic and intercultural awareness?

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Official policy documents on plurilingualism and linguistic diversity

As far as the first research question is concerned, we have noticed, in the first place, that in the last few years these countries have made significant progress in adopting structural measures aimed at supporting the plurilingual growth of the young generations: as Eurydice reports (EACEA-Eurydice, 2008; 2009; Eurydice 2004; Eurydice-EUROSTAT 2012) clearly demonstrate, foreign language teaching has been introduced from the very early grades of schooling and methodologies such as CLIL are adopted by a growing number of schools.⁹

However, a more careful assessment of the language policies and measures taken in these countries leads to the conclusion that the exhortations of the European institutions in favour of pluri- and multilingualism have been transposed, by and large, according to a pragmatic and instrumental vision, which focuses on the formally certified acquisition of foreign languages with economic and professional marketability. The result of this is mainly an increase in the offer of English courses, as stated earlier. Moreover, although in some of these countries policy documents do include intercultural dialogue among the general objectives of school curricula and envisage specific measures for the integration of children whose L1 is different from the official language of instruction, generally they just vaguely mention, if ever, the need to support the languages and cultures of origin of immigrants. Moreover they substantially ignore the Council of Europe guidelines for the development of policies and curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education (CoE, 2007; Beacco et al., 2010).¹⁰

⁹ EACEA-Eurydice. *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe*. Bruxelles: EACEA, 2008. Web. 14 Nov. 2013 <<http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/>>; ---. *Integrating Immigrant Children into Schools in Europe*. Bruxelles: EACEA, 2009. Web. 14 Nov. 2013 <<http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/>>; Eurydice. *Integrating Immigrant Children into Schools in Europe*. Bruxelles: Eurydice, 2004. Web. 14 Nov. 2013 <<http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/>>; Eurydice-EUROSTAT. *Key Data on Education in Europe 2012*. Bruxelles: EACEA, 2012. Web. 14 Nov. 2013. <<http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/>>.

¹⁰ Council of Europe. 2007. *From Linguistic Diversity to Plurilingual Education: Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe*. Strasbourg: Language Policy Division, Council of Europe, 2007. Web. 14 Nov. 2013. <<http://www.coe.int/t/>>

On the basis of the evidence gathered within the MERIDIUM project, we can report that this state of affairs holds true both in traditionally monolingual countries, such as Italy, and in countries where bilingualism is official at state or regional level: Malta (state level); Spain, Slovenia and Romania (regional level). Only Portugal seems to be an exception, with *ad hoc* measures to foster the maintenance of immigrant languages.

3.2 Plurilingualism and linguistic diversity in schools

In order to get a better picture of everyday school practice (micro-level), MERIDIUM researchers have investigated 57 primary schools, located in areas specifically chosen in each one of the six MERIDIUM countries because of the presence of a large number of children with foreign background in the school population. In the case of Romania areas where children had a direct or indirect migratory experience were considered. The research, carried out in the school-year 2009/10, involved school directors as well as 5th grade teachers, pupils (10 year-olds) and their parents, as shown in Tab. 1:

Table 1

SURVEY COUNTRY	N OF PUPILS	N OF PUPILS WITH FOREIGN BACKGROUND ¹¹	N OF PARENTS	N OF FOREIGN-BORN PARENTS
Italy	697	242	613	186
Spain	429	122	284	70
Portugal	316	115	316	88
Malta	164	43	164	33
Slovenia	156	52	137	25
Romania	305	37	292	97
TOTAL	2067	611	1806	499

School directors and teachers were interviewed, while pupils and parents were given questionnaires to fill in. In the first place, it must be observed that no schools, among those involved in the research, kept any database or archive concerning languages spoken by pupils and no teachers took any systematic measure in order to collect information on language biographies of pupils and their families, with the exception of newly-arrived children of immigrant origin. Such a lack of attention for the linguistic background of pupils is already particularly significant, as it means that the linguistic resources of the school population are

dg4/linguistic/; Beacco Jean-Claude et al. *Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural Education*. Strasbourg: Language Policy Division, Council of Europe, 2010. Web. 14 Nov. 2013. <<http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/>>.

¹¹ As far as Romanian informants are concerned, numbers refer to subjects with direct migratory experience.

“invisibilised” from the outset, particularly as far as so-called “second generation” immigrant pupils are concerned.

Linguistic repertoires and language use of pupils were therefore investigated by means of the MERIDIUM questionnaire, in order to assess from a qualitative and a quantitative point of view the linguistic diversity among the school population involved in the research. To this end, we distinguished between the use of “autochthonous languages”, namely those languages which have a historical presence in the geographical area where data were collected and of “allochthonous languages”, namely those which do not have a historical presence or tradition in the states that we included in our research.

In the first place, the use of allochthonous languages has been investigated within the family context here, 445 subjects out of 1,984 who gave valid answers (22.4% of the sample) use allochthonous languages with their parents. The use of these languages alternates frequently with autochthonous ones (243 cases), but in the case of 202 subjects allochthonous languages are exclusively used. Within each national sub-sample, the most extensive use of allochthonous languages was registered in Italy (33.1%), followed by Portugal and Spain (19.1%), Romania (14.7%), Malta (14.6%) and Slovenia (12.5%).

The use of these allochthonous languages is obviously more widespread among children who are born outside of the country from where data were collected (foreign-born) in comparison with that registered among children born ‘locally’ (native-born); however, even in the case of this group, the percentages registered cannot be ignored as they tally to 15% of the valid responses.

Children’s language use was investigated within the school domain, both from the point of view of ‘institutional’ interactions with their teachers, and from that of personal relationships with their classmates. If we consider the pupils whose responses we analysed above, as far as language use at home is concerned (1,984 subjects), we observe that 1.8% (36 cases) and 1.5% (27 cases) of them state that they use allochthonous languages (i.e. languages that are different from those taught at school) with their classmates and with their teachers respectively.¹²

The clear picture that emerges here is that schools only seem to encourage students to conform to the countries’ official (mainly monolingual) language use, anything but encouraging plurilingualism. What, therefore, is not working? The following are some critical issues, which emerge from the interviews held with teachers: first of all, teachers rarely encourage activities based on the presentation of the “languages of the class/school”, even if these activities could be carried out quite easily by taking advantage of the reading and writing skills which many pupils with foreign background possess and by involving foreign-born parents.

¹² Of course, the possibility of having two or more children in the same class who potentially could use the same allochthonous language to communicate varies according to the state in which data were collected: while this possibility is frequent in Italy (29 classes out of 36) and Slovenia (5 out of 6), it is much less frequent in Romania (7 out of 13), and more so in Spain (8 out of 21), Portugal (6 out of 17) and Malta (4 out of 10). Nonetheless, in each one of the countries involved in the research the tendency to *shift* towards the language of schooling is very clear, also when interacting with classmates.

Secondly, didactic activities directed toward the stimulation of metalinguistic reflection by means of languages other than those included in the curriculum are very rare: in fact, forms of cooperative learning exploiting the linguistic resources of pupils with a foreign background were not registered in the schools under study. This difficulty is particularly pronounced as there is a lack of practical teaching materials which encourage the use of different languages and which foster linguistic and cultural diversity. Thirdly, there is an emphasis, by ‘immigration-receiving’ countries, on the fact that migrants are to gain competence in the country’s official language/s. While acknowledging the importance of the above, such an outlook may narrow the teachers’ perspective, as they encourage these students solely to acquire the language used in schools.

In most cases, all of these aspects are related to a diffuse lack of in-service training for teachers, who generally do not possess an adequate theoretical preparation to deal with linguistic diversity from a psycho- and sociolinguistic point of view. Besides seriously prejudicing the efficacy of their teaching strategies, this lack of adequate preparation may perpetuate negative attitudes and convictions about bilingualism and/or multilingualism (e.g. that an allochthonous pupil may be hindered by his/her L1 while learning the L2).

The super-diversity that characterises school population is therefore concealed in everyday activities, with two main consequences: increasing negative perceptions (and self-perceptions) towards alloglossia (the so-called “deficit theory”) and favouring a “schizophrenic” and partial approach towards intercultural education: schools promote the knowledge of “other cultures”, but it ignores the linguistic aspects of them.

Moreover, the two negative aspects outlined above are transmitted as implicit messages not only to children, but also to their families, thereby legitimising, in adults, any prejudices and reservations towards linguistic diversity. The considerations raised above clearly warrant the need for activities serving to assist teachers to confront themselves with the linguistic diversity of pupils and to learn how to exploit it as a resource to improve their teaching practice both from an affective and a methodological point of view.

4. Initiatives to promote awareness about plurilingualism and linguistic diversity

4.1. The MERIDIUM booklet: *Babel and languages*

With the aim to give teachers some concrete suggestions on how to promote awareness about plurilingualism and linguistic diversity among pupils, MERIDIUM researchers have created a booklet (*Babel and languages*) conceived as a tool to stimulate children’s curiosity on language diversity around them.¹³ The

¹³ The booklet is available on the official MERIDIUM website: <<http://meridium.unistrapg.it/>>.

booklet is designed as a sort of travel diary written by an alien, Babel, landing on Earth from his planet Multilingua, where languages of the universe are studied in order to communicate with the inhabitants of other planets. Babel relates what he has learned during his trip, writing in six languages (the ones examined by the MERIDIUM project: Italian, English, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovenian and Spanish); he also asks pupils to help him in order to collect new information. The text is composed of six sections, concerning respectively linguistic diversity in the world; individual bilingualism; official vs. non-official languages and collective bilingualism; language families; writing systems and language learning.

The sequence of arguments is organised on the basis of increasing complexity and aims to create a discourse-space where plurilingualism and linguistic diversity are “naturalized” at a discourse level, that is represented as “normal” and taken for granted, and not conceived - as usually happens in Southern-European countries - either as a by-product of migration, or as an extraordinary phenomenon. Through the materials pupils are encouraged to talk about their experiences and feelings concerning the languages they speak and hear around them, reflecting on the socializing function of languages. They are also called to reflect consciously on the way in which they learn a language, focusing on the different language abilities, on transfer phenomena, lexical cognates etc. Occasions are offered to observe and compare the structure of different languages, starting from those which are spoken within the classroom.

Each section begins with information about a specific language-related topic and is completed, on the next page, by three simple exercises. On these grounds, teachers may further elaborate the topic and organise students’ work, depending on the composition of the classroom and on the experiences and interests of the pupils. The booklet has been evaluated positively not only by the European Commission, but also by teachers and school directors who took part in some seminars organized by the partner universities of MERIDIUM in their respective countries¹⁴; in many cases, further initiatives have arisen, in order to design complete teaching modules. In particular, we will account for a 20-hour training course for primary and lower-secondary school teachers held during the school-year 2011/12 by the research unit of the University for Foreigners of Perugia, Italy.

4.2. “MERIDIUM experimentation” in Italian primary schools

Assuming as a starting point the booklet *Babel and languages*, researchers and teachers have collaborated in order to plan six teaching modules concerning plurilingualism and linguistic diversity. These modules have been subsequently tested in 12 classes of 7 primary (5th grade) and lower-secondary (6th grade) schools (10 to 12 year-old children), where a 25-hour slot on the class schedule had been reserved to the “MERIDIUM experimentation”. It is worth noting that both

¹⁴ Cfr. Čok, Lucija, and Zadel, Maja. *Slovenska Istra med politico sožitja in priseljeništvom / Slovenian Istria between coexistence policy and immigration*. Koper: Univerzitetna Založba Annales. 2012. Print.

Italian language and literature teachers and foreign language teachers took part in this experimentation.

Although limitations of space render it impossible to provide a detailed report of the activities carried out in each school, it suffices to say that pupils, parents and teachers welcomed the initiative with interest and participated actively in it: they were also eager to enrich the learning contents by accounting for their own personal experiences. The extracts quoted below are drawn from the “MERIDIUM register” of a fifth grade teacher after the end of the project. The class where this teacher works is composed of 19 pupils: 10 of them (8 foreign-born and 2 born in Italy) have foreign-born parents, representing 7 different nationalities, while 9 pupils were born in Italy from Italian parents:

«Children have spontaneously inferred that bilingualism is an asset. At this age, they are perfectly capable of understanding its importance, and they feel admiration for a class mate who can speak, read and write in two languages. They also became aware of the fact that knowing a language means much more than simply attending curricular classes of a foreign or second language. [...]

Conclusions which pupils have come to at the end of the project reveal a deep enrichment, not so much on the cognitive side, as on the emotional side, especially for children who can speak two languages and who sometimes, during their schooling, experience difficulties. Becoming aware of their ability to do something that others are not able to do, such as speaking two languages, has increased their self-confidence. On the other hand, this project has provided children born in Italy from foreign-born parents the occasion to better appreciate the value of the different cultures with which they are in contact.»

The following are some of the remarks made by pupils:

- «Thanks to this project, I understood the meaning of “bilingual”. “Bilingual” means that a child can speak more than one language, and I am one of them, as I can speak two languages: Italian and Romanian.» (Iulian, born in Romania of Romanian parents, arrived in Italy in 2004)
- «This project has allowed me to discover that, in the school I attend, bilingual children are more numerous than children who speak just one language.» (Filippo, born in Italy of Italian parents)
- «Thanks to this project, I have discovered languages I did not know and I found out that all languages are valuable.» (Leonardo, born in Italy of Italian parents)

These few remarks are but an example of the positive feedback received, which shows that this MERIDIUM didactic activity was indeed useful in a multilingual classroom, such as the one we have taken as an example. Feedback indicates that teachers have found a new way to discuss bilingualism and multilingualism, without being somehow “forced” to frame it within the discourse about “immigrant children’s problems”. Moreover, in a vast number of cases they proved capable of overcoming their fear to show their “ignorance” about the languages spoken by the pupils: they assumed a more open stance towards the possibility of learning from children and integrating their own knowledge by using web-resources. Children of bilingual families, and the families themselves, clearly

perceived their languages of origin as resources and assets, regardless of whether or not they are used within the schooling context. They were proud to show how similar (Romanian) or different (Chinese) their language of origin is compared to Italian, and have become aware that their language knowledge, far from being an obstacle, can be exploited as a tool for learning Italian as well as other languages. Monolingual national children gained awareness, not only of the unimagined abilities of their “foreign” classmates, but also of their own abilities to speak, understand and reflect on foreign languages and Italian dialects. Moreover, they learned several interesting facts about important international languages (e.g. Arabic) that in Italy are viewed with suspicion and sometimes even looked down upon.

Before we formulate our conclusions, a clarification is in order: this MERIDIUM didactic experimentation was not intended to be an alternative to other more systematic educational approaches fostering language awareness and bilingualism that have been successfully promoted and implemented by European organizations and academic institutions over the years (e.g. CARAP, CLIL). On the contrary, one of the goals of our research was to inquire whether these approaches were known, and possibly assumed as models, by teachers. Unfortunately, this was not the case, and we may safely say that, in spite of the resources available on the Internet, school personnel is still largely not aware of the proposals put forth by the Council of Europe concerning plurilingual and intercultural education. This happens because central educational authorities have publicized insufficiently, if ever, these initiatives, and because scarce resources have been devoted to in-service teacher training. However, one must admit that, beyond these factors, a role is also played by an ideological background, largely shared by the society at large, geared to assimilate immigrant children as quickly as possible and conceiving of the school system as the instrument of assimilation *par excellence* even though it may dismiss their language and culture of origin.

5. Conclusion

Before adopting plurilingual and intercultural education as a practice in schools, its core values - equal opportunities for all, social cohesion, enhancement of individual linguistic and intercultural resources - have to be incorporated in everyday discourse practices, uncovering and recognizing the linguistic and cultural background of pupils and, in so doing, “de-naturalizing” the (assimilationist) assumption that at school pupils have to “function” in one and the same language (the language of instruction). Such a goal can be obviously reached by means of various strategies, and the MERIDIUM project has been a worthy occasion to become aware of other initiatives which have been taken in MERIDIUM countries by other researchers.¹⁵

¹⁵ Amongst these, it is worth mentioning a project conducted by Antoinette Camilleri Grima in a Maltese school: see Camilleri Grima, Antoinette. “Fostering Plurilingualism and Intercultural Competence: Affective and Cognitive Dimensions”. In: Caruana, Sandro;

Dissemination of MERIDIUM results has been met favourably both in local schools and in the wider community. During the discussions held as part of the dissemination it emerged clearly that educators view schools and classrooms as places which offer opportunities to students with different backgrounds to reflect on linguistic and cultural diversity. The presence of foreign students is considered to be enriching, despite the challenges it creates. Although the body of research in the field has increased recently, head-teachers, teachers and school staff still complain about the lack of practical resources necessary to address students' needs, especially when faced with newcomers who start attending school throughout the course of the year and with students who have difficulty understanding the language of schooling. A question which features regularly is whether didactic tools are readily available for the needs of today's multicultural classrooms. Such queries clearly spell out the urgency of devising educational policies and teaching materials which address these needs and take into consideration practical experiences in different settings (as outlined in Kenner and Hickey, 2008) and an "adjusted" curriculum (Olshtain and Nissim-Amitai, 2004).¹⁶

In conclusion, the results show that, in the six countries involved in the MERIDIUM Project, at present, educational institutions seem to dismiss the issue of linguistic diversity brought about by migration: they are often silent about it, as if language were not a fundamental component of culture, or an indispensable instrument for living and learning.

Within society at large, on the other hand, the strong relation between intercultural education and plurilingual education is not sufficiently perceived, and, especially in countries such as Spain, Italy, Slovenia and Malta, it is not unusual to hear people affirming that "allowing" immigrants and their children to maintain their languages could hinder their integration or that the languages "of others" are not "our business". The fact remains that the enthusiasm and promptness with which schoolchildren, in particular, participated in the educational initiatives referred to in this paper, irrespective of their nationality, is an undeniable indication of their eagerness to express themselves and their willingness to learn more about languages. In this sense, it becomes obvious that understanding more fully linguistic diversity and multiculturalism in schools is indeed necessary in order to address issues that are encountered in these institutions in Southern Europe today, thereby moving towards more inclusive systems which are vital to create reflection, acceptance and involvement while putting aside prejudice and fear.

Coposescu, Liliana; Scaglione, Stefania (eds.). *Migration, Multilingualism and Schooling in Southern Europe*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013: 74-94. Print.

¹⁶ Kenner, Charmian, and Hickey, Tina. (eds.). *Multilingual Europe: diversity and learning*, Staffordshire: Trentham Books Limited, 2008. Print; Olshtain, Elite., and Nissim-Amitai, Frieda. "Curriculum decision-making in a multilingual context". *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 1/1, 2004: 53-64. Print.

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