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THE OTHER OF MYSELF: REPRESENTATIONS OF PORTUGUESE TEACHERS ABOUT INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION RELATED CONCEPTS

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Having into consideration that we live in a multicultural society, it is important to analyse how far people view and accept each other. Therefore, one should reflect upon concepts such as: representations and stereotypes, because they are interpersonal constructs which are (re)built during the interaction of different sociocultural groups.

In this study, we focus our attention on the representations a sociocultural group – Portuguese teachers – has of intercultural education and the role of teachers and educators in the promotion of an intercultural approach at school. We believe that teachers have the responsibility to: find out the representations students have of the Other; reconfigure stereotyped representations; and create representations which favor dialogue and relationship with the Other flourish.

Following a sociolinguistic approach (Müller, 1998; Vasseur, 2001; Vasseur & Hudelot, 1998), which is related to the construction and diffusion of representations in discourse, we analyse the discourse of teachers during a workshop called 'The Other and Myself', in which they build and discuss about a didactic mask that portrays their own vision of both themselves and their ideas of intercultural education.

Keywords: intercultural education; representations; Portuguese teachers; mask; the other of myself.

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'Escolher a própria máscara é o primeiro gesto voluntário, humano. E solitário.'
'To choose one's own mask is the first voluntarian human gesture. And solitarian'
 (Clarice Lispector in Gotlib, 1995)

INTRODUCTION: INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION (CONCEPT AND APPROACHES)

Multicultural society has developed in Portugal. Social and cultural diversity is a fact among students and teachers in Portuguese schools. After decades of emigration, Portugal nowadays became also the destination of considerable groups of immigrants [http://www.sef.pt/documentos/56/DADOS_2007.pdf (provisional data)]¹.

So, the acquisition of intercultural competences within this society is a necessity. In order to have success with the implementation of intercultural education and formation approaches in multicultural schools we need to understand how professors perceive their representations about culture, racism, diversity, minority, etc. This is the unavoidable condition to create the right materials, resources and intercultural education strategies, which we propose to implement at schools.

In this paper we, InterGroup at Escola Superior de Educação de Paula Frassinetti, intend to analyse the representations of teachers about intercultural related concepts.

THE CONCEPT OF REPRESENTATION

Therefore, it is of utmost importance that we focus on the concept of representation, as it is a very complex concept itself. According to many authors, one has to distinguish between the concepts of attitude and representation. The first is 'an acquired latent psychological (pre)-disposition to react to an object in a certain way' (cf. Kolde, 1981). It can be defined as a predisposition to react in favor or against a certain object or topic. The information one has of a specific object entails a group of beliefs about it, including objective information or stereotypes. In this way, representations are that very beliefs which lead someone to have a certain attitude in relation to an object.

In 1961, Moscovici focused on the interdependence of behavioral and representing patterns, fostering varied studies related to the nature and structure of 'social representations (cf. Bonardi & Roussiau, 1999). Jodelet (1997:53) mentions that the concept of representation is not only a manifestation of attitudes. In fact, it is also 'une forme de connaissance, socialement élaborée et partagée, ayant une visée pratique et concourant à la construction d'une réalité commune à un ensemble social'. When one analyses a social representation, one tries to understand and explain the nature of social ties which are constituted between different subjects, their social practices and group relations (cf. Bonardi & Roussiau, 1999:25). In the following diagram we get to know the study field of social representations, including its emergence conditions, processes, states and epistemological status.

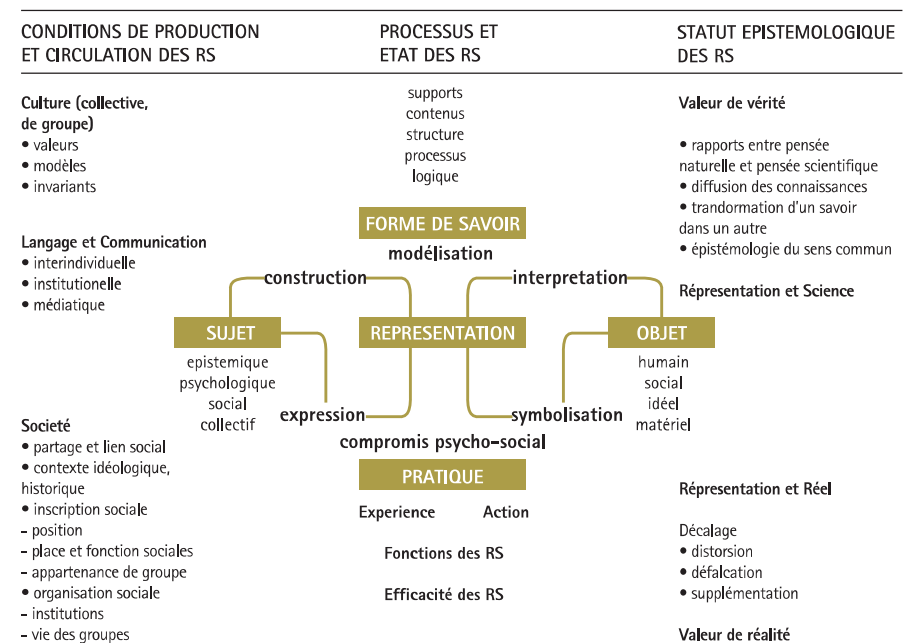


Diagram 1: Study Field of Social Representations (Jodelet, 1997:59)

Having this diagram into account, a social representation is 'une forme de savoir pratique reliant un sujet à un objet' (Jodelet, 1997:59). It is 'une forme de savoir' (idem) because it is a construct of the object which can be

directly observed by language, behavioral and material supports. However, it implies action towards the world and the Other too.

According to Moscovici (1976), there are two processes which are responsible for the formation and operation of social representations. Firstly, we have *objectivation* which can be understood as the way one selects pertinent information, changing it to representations which considers significant and will lead one to have certain attitudes towards something. This process implies a ‘résorber un excès de significations en les matérialisant’ (Moscovici, 1976). Secondly, there is the anchoring process. According to Guimelli (1994), it is a way to tie something to another thing which is socially established and shared by some members of a group.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF PORTUGUESE TEACHERS: (RE)DISCOVERING THEIR PERCEPTIONS ON INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

Methodological procedures

According to these orientating lines, we have made a workshop with teachers who are Postgraduate students at Escola Superior de Educação de Paula Frassinetti (in two fields – Special Education (PE) and Early English Teaching (PI)). This group of teachers includes 30 and 16 teachers respectively. The majority of teacher work directly with children and teenagers in primary and secondary schools in the northern area of Portugal. This workshop is part of the activities which we have been developing in the scope of *INTERNetwork. Intercultural Education. Teacher Education and School Practice* (<http://internetnetwork.up.pt>). The sessions, which we carried through, with these teachers had as main aims: to promote interpersonal reflection about some of their life experiences, interpersonal relationships and possible knowledge on intercultural affairs; to promote self-reflection on the way each one locates in the interior of these very relations; to induce narratives that in a voluntary attitude of the very citizens, would result in such a way of self-observation, as of a negotiation of ways of behaving, attitudes, gestures or meanings associated to the different interpretations on the phenomena or cited situations.

On the one hand, the observation and recording of different narratives does not constitute the core of this article; on the other hand, our approach to the investigation-action model was motivated by the importance of inducing the reflection upon actions and stories lived by the teachers and the understanding of deeper differences in the varied social and cultural contexts. There is also the need to provoke the contact with those differences, having into account the future patterns for a change in the level of practices and relations in those contexts.

On a first stage, we stated the aims of the project, asking for the collaboration of the teachers in this investigation for a common self-reflection. Recording of all the activities was authorized by all. During these a mask was used as a methodological instrument for provoking teachers’ reflection and revealing their own narratives, due to the symbolism which one associates it with.

After the selection of a set of subjects and strategies of work - and, above all, on the basis of the intervention potentialities and narratives of the masks - the sessions had been initiated with the question that would lead to the first moment of introspection: “Who am I”.

Teachers had to write in the inner part of the mask words, images or any other kind of registry, according to their own thinking, which could better illustrate the ideas which define themselves. Some paths were proposed so that an inner dialogue with oneself could be established, namely through the presentation of the following keywords: language, world, contexts, family, nature, job, groups, place, friends, time(s), death.

We would like to refer that during this stage teachers showed a certain resistance, which could be easily understood as associated to the difficulty in writing diverse feelings to happenings of their own personal but also academic lives.

However, quickly they surpassed these problems when they were asked to answer the following question: “What do others think that I am?”. Sharing of feelings and an open dialogue spread throughout the classroom. After discussing all this, teachers were asked to fill in a questionnaire whose questions were presented in association with pictures and categories, which we would use in this analysis.

The mask as a methodological teaser

Throughout the sessions teachers were asked to write on the mask as a methodological instrument for provoking teachers' narratives, due to its strong symbolism. In fact, the mask, used in the Greek theatre to make the voice of the actor heard, allows oneself to overpass one's own body towards the crowd, as a way to project oneself through an artifact, which is a construct – one's own "persona". Moreover, there is a phantom place where a lot of life episodes are trained. This is the place of fantasy which is inhabited by our other self-beings. Therefore, each one of us is inhabited by a multiplicity of voices which are revealed in this full hollow place.

These characters, which we assume, also change and are rebuilt, so that one uses them in the social arena if they are needed. Behind the mask there is a crowd of people. Each one of them represent a part of oneself, of the other and of the world. This fantastic place is intended to fill in the vacuum – the hollow place. In this way, all of us are the reflection of the other, i.e., the reflection that the other sees and retains in his own mirror.

Once we are born, we are named, marked and singularized. We gain a history. Therefore, the human being is a never-ending narrative which is built from social and cultural relation full of different textures, colors, smells and volumes.

If we are products of a personal and social fiction, the vision we have of ourselves always is filtered by a possibility of trueness which is never absolute, but can be represented and supported by the look of the "Other of Me". In fact, we do not content ourselves in being only one. Although we reject the idea of fragmentation of one own self, the idea of being only one is also not comfortable.

Languages and their diversity are the expression of our need to say what we are and tell more about our own fiction and to relate ourselves with what surrounds us.

Each one of us has got a history which is permanently being constructed and which is continuously influenced by the relation with the world. Human looking is like a towel of remnants made of a lot of lines, colours, smells, tones, flavours, sounds, touches and affects. Each remnant is different from the other but united, interlinked and articulated to borrow meaning to what we live. (Cavalcanti, 2006).

Telling our story is to walk on unknown paths, to revisit memories and to update learning. We tell our story to unveil who we are, where we live and where we would like to go to. We tell it to get to know the mask which we elected and others elected to us. This artifact works as a second skin which protects the quantity of people who inhabit a body underneath it. Uncovering one's own mask can lead to new elaborations about reality and representations we build upon others.

Data analysis

The analysis, which follows, results from an exploratory analysis of the questionnaires which teachers filled in during the workshop. Having done a qualitative procedure, we present our analysis having into account the sequence of the categories which can be found in that very questionnaire.

a) culture

The concept of culture, understood as being something perfectly defined, characterized by a stability structure is an idea that, nowadays, will have to be exiled from our own thinking. On contrary, the idea of culture must be based on an eminently dynamic and constructive character. Culture is made and remade, constructed and invented through our daily practices... If our practices are changed, our cultural context (the "conception of the world" or Dilthey's *Weltanschauung*) will be changed and re-invented too! The opposite is also a fact: if the socio-natural context changes, our concept of culture will not be the same as before.

The general analysis of the data related to the representations, which Portuguese teachers revealed during our workshop, drive us to a clear static vision of culture. The representation of this concept entails a closed perspective, which is completely build and not modifiable idea of culture. This can be observed in some of their answers, such as: culture is "set of specific characteristics of a group" (PI8); "something one acquires" (PE1) "throughout life" (PI2) and that "we must preserve (...) and contemplate" (PE2). Therefore, there is a more or less defined and immovable representation of culture (or determined culture).

We can say that this representation of the idea culture is also very close or connected to a more static perspective of itself; moreover, it would articulate itself with the present control mechanisms: the uses, customs, values, etc. represent here safety mechanisms which assure a sense of totality and cognoscibility of the world we live in... it makes world more “familiar” (cf. Ortega y Gasset, 1997). On the other hand, it is also perceptible that these “conceptions, habits and traditions that are predominant in a people, country or group, according to which life is based” (PI16) configure the values that characterize/represent what culture is: the values are “transmitted firstly by the family and then by school; and then by ourselves” (PI15) and represent “the soul of a country” (PI14).

There are also, however, some examples of teachers who understand the characteristics of “dynamism”/mutability which are intrinsic in the interior of their representation of culture. For them culture is “created by us, absorbed by us” (PI13); it is “everything man produces” (PE18) and that “we need to (...) enrich” (PE2) “throughout life” (PE1).

So, from this analysis of the representations of the concept of culture, we can conclude, generally, that teachers are not fully conscious of the deep dynamic meaning.

b) racism

The main statement of trainee teachers suggests the emergence of a negative valued/ideological speech towards the ideas in the concept of racism. A major part associates the presence of this phenomenon to attitudes that, present in the societies – “the hypocrisy of the world” (PE2) – are practiced by other individuals whose actions are, generally, characterized by the assumed marginalization of the other. This is justified by the pretense “superiority” of the place where the one who marginalizes or discriminates is or thinks one is.

Therefore, the ideas of “disrespect by others” (PE4), “intolerance” (PE12, PE15), narcissism or “lack of love” (PE7, PE8, PE14), “non-acceptance” ((PE4, PI10) on the one hand, and “ignorance” (PE9) or “poverty of mind” (PE1), “illness” (PE1) or “lack of education” (PE4), on the other hand, are understood by the teachers as the main reasons, more or less (un)guilty of the process of human sub-alternization.

One can also note rejection from expressions that denote a strong emotional charge, like the example of teachers that tell us this phenomenon is “horrible” (PE17), “inadmissible” (PE21), but nobody proposes a more enlightened or deep reflection upon the supposed historical, political and social unreason for racism. Only a reduced number of teachers refer the question of the “colour of the skin” (PE4). Anyway, the place of the other, that is, the “victim’s” place is not directly stated by the teachers that have taken part in this workshop. Merely two teachers have mentioned the idea of “suffering” (PE6) or “lack of freedom” (PE20). That makes us think that this is neither in most cases “the other of oneself”.

c) diversity

Cultural diversity is a concept which is perceived by many as differences that exist between people, such as language, dress and traditions, and the way societies organize themselves, their conception of morality and religion, and the way they interact with the environment. According to UNESCO (2001:13),

‘culture (...) diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies (...) it (...) should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations’.

In this statement, the keywords are ‘harmonious interaction’, ‘heritage of humanity’, ‘dynamic cultural identities’ and ‘cultural pluralism’.

According to some teachers, diversity implies ‘richness of knowledge’ and ‘differences in thinking, habits, customs and ways of acting’ (PI8; PI9). Some of the teachers relate it to the education field, referring that it implies ‘diverse features such as culture which are different from pupil to pupil (heterogeneity)’.

Others go further mention that homogeneity is something that does not exist in our culture. They portray our society as ‘a big European city in which racial diversity boils and melts’ (PI14). For these teachers there is no pleasure to live in a homogenous society at all. They refer that the ‘difference complete us’ (PI16) and at the same time we ‘are able to learn and enrich our own culture in a natural and free way’ (PI1). According to some

remarks, this society is fostered by pluralism and implies acceptance and discrimination (PI15).

d) minority

The representations these teachers have of minority present differences, but a common characteristic: its relation with power. Some answers point out minority as an underprivileged group when declaring “those who have no strength or courage to highlight themselves in society (...) there is someone who does not let them!” (PI3). They would, then, be “result of a selfish society” (PE20) that would lead them to “injustice and poverty, war, suffering” (PI14).

So, they defend attitudes that supposedly value minorities since that these “teach us tolerance, union and the richness of complicity” (PE15), so that there should “be an acceptance by all cultures and respect” (PE19). One can see here a certain exaltation of minorities as a synonym of something exotic that must be cared for so that “genuity” does not get lost, in a perspective that gets close to a “benign multiculturalism” (Stoer e Cortesão, 1999), translated by an attitude of mere contemplation of the differences.

Other answers focus on another conception of minority when they declare that “minorities are often the ones with power; it’s not fair; this happens when majorities abuse their power” (PI11) or “sometimes minorities are the ones who manipulate the dominant society” (PI2). This leads us, consequently, to the minority as owner of the power (economical, political and social). We can find, as examples, the domination of a white minority over the black majority (cases of “apartheid” in South Africa), like the economic domination of a capitalist minority (OPEP- oil exporting countries) over the majority of the world population. In these cases, the belonging to the minority group would not be a disadvantage or an inequality, but the result of a struggle and rise for the power and its maintenance.

e) fundamentalism

Associated to the word “fundamentalism” the observations of the teachers turn around two vectors. On the one hand, the human motivation of the

phenomenon, and on the other hand, its consequences in social terms but in human terms as well.

The ideas of absurdity and “irrationality” seem closely connected to the question of belief, to which the ideology of western modern rationality is opposed. In its turn, statements – “thoughtless act”, “lack of openness and power of understanding” or in a more explicit way “obsession by determined values, beliefs, etc” indicate a criticism to the dimension of religiosity. The dichotomy between belief and rationality seems to orientate what is understood as “fundamentalism”. More at a level of the consequences and, therefore, the actions of the phenomenon the words, more expressive in the statements of the teachers, than in others, are: violence, cruelty, destruction, “uncontrolled persecution” or “extremism”, images that in its majority are associated to the understanding about war, this also being a widely used word. We can also question ourselves about the things that were not said and their meaning. Aspects such as nationalism were not mentioned, for example. It is interesting to speculate about the fact that the wrong association between Islamism and fundamentalism, which is broadly broadcasted by the media, was never mentioned. It is not occasional, however, the idea of religious war that appears in the registrations, which allows us to think that the religious belief and violence are intimately connected in the speech.

f) discrimination

In the answers of the two groups of Portuguese teachers it is common a negative representation of discrimination, which is associated to “a different form of segregation” (PE6) that is fundamentally established as a “non-respect for the culture and customs of the others” (PI4) and an “incapacity to accept and experiment what is different” (PI9), to “discriminate others for their culture, race and philosophy of life” (PI14). Therefore, that “ego-centric attitude” (PI16) would be a “signal of prepotency and arrogance” (PE2) and should deserve “repudiation and not be acceptable” (PE3).

That would imply a “struggle for any of us” (PI8) in the sense that “every human being should have rights and duties and as such should be treated equally” (PI12). That “integration”(PE12) would lead to a situation where

we “can all learn and enrich with the others” (PE7), that is, the “experiences are there to be exchanged as a way of our own enrichment” (PE19).

However, to do that “it is necessary to be integrated” (PI5), because it would be necessary to question “who is pushing away? Who is setting himself apart? Who wants this? Who does not manage to fit in?” (PE14).

The causes for this situation would be “result of the society so-called neo-liberal” (PE5) and a “weapon of the weak” (PI2), but that would strongly make a root in the individuals because “we have already learned stereotypes” (PI9).

g) pre-concepts

Associated to the word “prejudice”, we proposed a picture of a supposed homosexual couple (two men dating). Several reactions were observed. Some overvalued the presented picture, assuming clearly a prejudicial attitude towards its content, while others tried to define the concept itself. It is interesting to note that only one participant thought about the origin of the word, by declaring that prejudice is a “pre-conceived idea”, so its analysis coincides in part with the theoretical definition of the concept, translated as “(...) rigid pre-conceived opinions, generally unfavorable, towards individuals or groups, formed without considering adequate facts, experience or information to a rational judgment, leading, generally, to indiscrimination, to the unequal treatment of those individuals or groups” (Cardoso, 1996: 18).

We have observed in some statements that these teachers suggest somehow crystallized representations and that sometimes seem to be part of a universal heritage, like it is referred to: “Something imposed by society and taken as universal” (PE1).

Some participants associate prejudice to difference when they say: “Not acceptance of difference”; “There must be respect for the individuality, acceptance of the difference”. It is possible to infer that the notion of difference is associated there to the need for acceptance, and although the word fear was not said, it is known that the origin of prejudice is in fear, in the fear of what is strange or different, in seeing in the other something that (im) presses the look.

From the nineteen statements which were analyzed, it seems that only one demonstrates a more interventional character towards prejudice by saying that: 1. “There must be respect towards individuality, acceptance of difference”, because the verb “must” shows something imperative, that is, that cannot be different... the respect towards individuality and difference must exist.

h) stereotypes

As we have seen before, stereotype is a concept which is related to the concept of attitude. It can be understood as a specific behavior pattern, which can be approved among member of a group and taken as a valid one. At the same time, stereotypes reveal how the groups perceive their identity and cohesion.

Stereotypes are considered by many as being impossible to end and occur in intercultural communication due to many reasons. Stereotypes occur in intercultural communication when we take some truths related to a social group as truths to a subject which belongs to that same group.

Portuguese teachers see it as ‘something that is inevitable’ and ‘grows inside our memory’ (PI1). They grow in the society mainstream and it is that very society that supposedly makes people wear ‘collective masks’ (PI5), i.e., some people are obliged to act in a certain way to cope with the society main ways of thinking. Stereotypes are also seen as ‘ideas which are conceived around some representations and general beliefs in order to try to define a certain group of people’ (PI16). It is very interesting to notice that some teachers mention that ‘stereotypes aren’t always wrong; there is a bit of truth in them’. In fact, stereotypes cannot always be negative. In some cases, they show reality as it is, revealing the true being of a people or social group. But at the same time some mention it is a way to simplify what we think about the culture and language of a people and it does not represent the infinity of traditions, customs and ways of thinking of micro-societies which that very people entail (PI2).

However, some teachers refer that they are inevitable but they are also dissolved in modern societies (PI7). In fact, some teachers conclude that stereotypes are a sort of model created by the media and society which may or may not be followed by every person.

i) tolerance

Here also seems that the standard of representations which are strongly marked by common sense continues to be predominant in the group of teachers that have taken part in the activity when they had to reflect upon the concept of tolerance. Generally, they show that the notion of tolerance they possess is mainly associated to the Christian feelings that lead to solidarity, benevolence, kindness, happiness, peace, condescendence...

Although the majority does not propose any question, a participant asks: “To whom? With whom? How?”, revealing a reflective attitude towards the concept of tolerance, assumed in big part by the group as something related to kindness and condescendence. We have also noted that one of the participants related all the concepts to movies, placing Philadelphia (the story of a homosexual) in prejudice and Big Fish (the story of a man that spends his life telling stories to his son that one day finds out that they are all a lie) to tolerance. This association is doubtlessly original, but it cannot be revealing since that in both movies we can have several dimensions as horizon of analysis.

In building up an identity not only the way is important, but also the path when walking, and the materials that are used in the building; so all the walkers as actors of the process have the responsibility in the process and have to do it with conscience and compromise. Therefore, a Multi/Intercultural Education is the way, the material, the possibility to an emergence of social actors that are more conscious of their participation in the world.

j) future society

In the questionnaire we have used the biblical image of Tower of Babel so that teachers could reflect upon the representation they have of a future society.

Despite the fact that this image of the most famous city of the Babylonian Empire leads us to a vision, in a chaotic, disorderly and anarchic way, of what has the world become after the introduction of the divine “confusion of languages”, around half of the teachers portrayed a future society in which order and calmness reign. The main characteristic is therefore the view the future as a (PI12) “stratified society without the” mix “of different classes.

The lower part of the tower will be the class in which there is a greater number of people; the upper part of the tower is occupied by a minority. There is also a representation of a demand by the desired order, “the ideal would be to speak the same language... but we move towards individualism, towards a block of ice that will never melt” (PE1).

Another substantial part of the teachers shared a vision of the future society that, in general, is characterized by being somewhat chaotic “mutant” (PI2) and where some confusion and disorder reigns. The more appropriate image for this constant (re)development would be an indefinite “boiling volcano” (PI12) It is important to understand that this image of chaos in a future society is not perceived as something negative and where a fight to death between order and chaos will be installed in a world marked by “the ambiguity and the subjective”. However, in this world man will have “freedom of thinking, acting and fluence”.

It is evident, therefore, the idea of a “coexistence of two worlds” (PI8) where exactly the chaos becomes the catalyst needed for the construction of a free society of the future “to be equal in rights and options (PE15), [but] diverse in their being and existence”. Several teachers even talk about a “plurilingual” society (PI1; PI3) where “the mixing of different cultures will be more evident, but it will not lose its own characteristics.

It is understood then that some teachers feel deeply committed to building this society of the future. This representation of the world clearly shows awareness towards the need for work and training for teachers. It shows us that teachers are open to the need for implementing strategies and practices that promote intercultural education of a society which could become fairer and more open and diverse.

CONCLUSIONS

Being an important space in contemporary social life, school is also the space for the change, for the (re)signification of realities, for the identity (re)construction, for the provocation of a creative production of several dimensions of mankind.

In the meantime, there will be an investment in the teacher/educator training as an important and fundamental part/actor in the educative process, because education is doubtlessly the door to open to build up new paradigms, new mentalities, new sensibilities, and new ways of seeing.

Meanwhile, how can school make changes if it cannot change itself?

In which way can the teachers make the “fill in the daily life with meaning” possible for the students, as well as the active respect towards the richness produced by diversity, if they cannot represent reality beyond the stereotypes and the perception of the world full of prejudice themselves?

Is it possible to contribute positively to the education of children who launch themselves in a future which is more and more weaved by the complexity and multiplicity, when one does not understand the reality and history in a dynamic, alive, and full of diversity way.

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AGREEMENTS AND DISAGREEMENTS ON INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION CONCEPTS. IS IT POSSIBLE TO REACH A CONSENSUS?

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This paper shows some of the preliminary results of the analysis of a questionnaire on Intercultural Education answered by the partners of a European Network³⁰. The questionnaire intended to gather the variety and richness of the partners' ideas on what Intercultural Education means, how it is being implemented in their contexts and the implications of these ideas on teachers' training and practices. The analysis shows that there are agreements but also some relevant disagreements that we are using in this paper to make explicit some of the implicit assumptions we use to build our ideas on Intercultural Education in particular and Education in general, and to open a discussion in order to make the concept more complex.

Key concepts: Intercultural Education, Teacher Training, Intercultural teacher competences

CONTEXTUALIZING

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