COMPETENCIES VS. INTERCULTURALITY. STUDENT EXCHANGES IN THE AGE OF PISA

THE FRAMEWORK

The research on which this paper is based was not originally intended to examine directly the PISA problématique – rather, in studying a different topic, it has, so to speak, met PISA on its way, and in the ensuing interaction of the themes it opened up a perspective which seemed worth a closer analysis.

The focus of research, carried out by SICESE (the Italian Society for Comparative Education) on behalf of the Fondazione Intercultura, was the complex question of teachers’ role and attitudes toward students’ exchanges at secondary school level, with special reference to long term individual exchanges – that is, those exchanges in which individual students spend a whole school year (usually the last but one year of secondary school) attending school in a different country.

These exchanges are to be considered as an important tool for intercultural education (formazione interculturale). Even if much of the current reflection on intercultural education is focused on issues linked to minority and immigrant groups, other different aspects of intercultural relations and educational paths connected with them should not be overlooked. Namely, the specific aspect of intercultural relations represented by youth exchanges, especially long term individual ones, has a peculiar interest. The student, moving for one whole school year to a different system, experiences personally the condition of “otherness”; moreover, in a situation where the most obvious socio-economic inequalities are usually absent, the problems and dynamics which come to the forefront are more clearly the ones specifically linked to the differences between cultures as such.

These are the features which make unique the exchanges – as a personal experience and as a field of study as well. It is therefore a theme of peculiar interest in intercultural research; and it may be added that it is also a theme of great interest for a comparative research in which both institutional and cultural aspects are considered.

However, in many cases the question remains open of the status and the formal recognition in one’s own educational system of the knowledge and the skills acquired attending a school in a different country. This is a crucial point, which varies significantly in the different countries, according to the different rules they adopt on the matter; but recognition is also strongly connected, in the classroom practice, with the attitudes adopted by the teachers.

In the framework of an overall engagement for the “internationalisation” of the school system, in Italy in the last years there has been an effort to give a new impulse...
to these experiences. Recent research has however confirmed that the teaching body
tend to be suspicious about the exchanges, especially long term ones; and this is due
mainly (though not only) to reasons related with the curriculum, which in Italy is
traditionally based on disciplinary knowledge.

In our analysis of teacher’s attitudes, one of the hypotheses we formulated was
that the diffusion of PISA surveys, officially supported by the Ministry, could
contribute to make these attitudes more positive, even in schools that do not
participate directly in the surveys. As far as there is a spreading of a cross-national
agreement on the definition of learning achievements, of knowledge and skills to be
acquired, of competencies to be mastered, and most of all of evaluation tools, with
their “wash-back” effect – this could result in a significant facilitation of the
recognition, by any individual school or system, of learning acquired in other schools
and countries. From this point of view, one possible hypothesis is that the impact of
PISA could have an indirect influence in promoting student mobility and exchanges.

Some of the indications coming from the first findings of the research seem to
support this hypothesis – but at the same time they highlight the core ambiguity of
the situation arising from such a dynamic. Actually, at exactly the same moment
when there is promotion and a support of students’ mobility – traditionally
intended as a vehicle for intercultural experiences and formation - the conditions
for the support of the mobility itself are defined according to the general criteria
and approaches established by organisations operating at trans-national level
(namely, in the case of PISA, with an emphasis on competencies as the desired
learning outcomes, and therefore as the object of the assessment); approaches
which do not necessarily respond to the different cultural traditions.

The case of the Italian school system is significant in this respect. Traditionally
quite far from the notion of “competency”, it is now, under the pressure of
international discourse about school efficiency and international competition,
trying to move, even if slowly and with many resistances, towards the acceptance
of the new, competency-based, international “discipline”. Not surprisingly, the
“discipline” is adopted with more conviction by the most successful PISA schools,
deemed the most “advanced” of the whole system, which also, usually, show a
positive attitude towards the exchanges.

In the “Competencies vs. Interculturality” encounter, therefore, the definition of
transnational criteria for defining school achievement, which tends to promote the
recognition of learning acquired during the exchanges, and consequently support
mobility, might have a negative impact on that same cultural diversity that should
represent the core meaning of the mobility experience, bringing even classroom
practice under a form of transnational governance which bears heavily on the
approach to teaching and to the definition of its goals and ends.

THE UNEXPECTED IMPACT OF PISA ON STUDENT MOBILITY IN SOME ITALIAN
SECONDARY SCHOOLS, IN THE AGE OF AUTONOMY

This section tries to show how the impact of PISA unexpectedly extends to fields
such as that of student mobility producing, inside an evolving school system such