

Introduction. Pluralism in education and implications for analysis

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Currently, one of the greatest challenges for the educational system is the rise of pluralism, caused by the *fragmentation of the cultural frame* upon which socialization has been founded since the dawn of late modernity (Featherstone *et al.*, 1995; Di Maggio 1997). As the socialization process becomes increasingly more polycentric, serious problems arise in the recognition and management of diversity at different levels: both at the level of the social agent (i.e., the student, teacher, parent and school manager) as well as that of policy makers and institutions (i.e., private and public services, local networks and government). Nowadays, it appears objectively and diffusely more difficult to deal with diversity, both at school and within the other places in which people grow up for two main reasons: a) a unitary cultural frame has disappeared, making way for a plurality of normative and identity references, and b) the differentiation between institutions originates from specific sub-cultures, each showing its own specificity, interpretational code, and mode of functioning.

Multiple types of diversity are at stake. In the classroom environment religious and linguistic differences increase because of the migration flows across Europe. Meanwhile, gender and age differences, along with the social-economic divides, still play a significant role in increasing difficulties in heterogeneity management.

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In the wider landscape of the education system diversity presents itself as a key issue related to the augmentation of *technicalities and specializations* that are being adopted by every sort of provider (state, municipalities, local communities and market providers) so as to match the multifaceted demand of the educational system. A risk of incoherence and fragmentation is rising among concurrent suppliers as the approaches to combat the erosion of social cohesion produced by heterogeneity are challenged (Kantzara, 2011). The plurality of socialization agents not only produces disorientation among those who benefit from education at any level, but also risks excluding or discriminating the less informed or those with fewer resources (i.e., one must choose from a range of education alternatives which appear to be of equal value although they may be discriminating). Further, it may lead to an unequal differentiation between social or collective actors (teachers' corporations, parents' associations – often holding antagonistic interests – and minority groups) not equally represented in the public sphere.

In a deep sense pluralism has much to do with the highest function assigned to education as such: in the light of the current “*era of identity*” (Taylor, 1992; Honnett, 1992) in which all social institutions appear to deserve respect just because they are offering entitlements and provisions in order to reinforce individual selves, schools and no-schooling education agents are invested with the task of cultivating individuals self-consciousness, and identity in general (Cerulo, 1997). The aim of creating social bonds, which in the past was the primary preoccupation for both Education and for educators, has currently become secondary. The question regarding how to give the current condition of heterogeneity a “shape” (that is, how to avoid disorder *in* education or *through* education) is thus at one and the same time a topical, urgent, and ethical issue.

If we look at the general meaning of the term, *pluralism* refers to the *existence of diverse and competing interests as the basis for a democratic equilibrium, which is crucial for the possibility of individuals to obtain goals*. Thus it represents not only a consequence of the complexity of our social systems, a “descriptive” principle to better understand modern institutions and agents, but also a “normative principle” of democracy in the sense of a “combination between diversities” (Dahl, 1989; Bobbio, 1991; Crespi and Segatori, 1996). It implies something more than a co-existence of pluralities; rather, it indicates a certain *choice towards integrating those pluralities*, which affirms that difference is better than

uniformity, that is, difference is a value in itself and the system (or the single actor) will profit more from the presence of variety than from homogeneity.

But what kind of pluralism are we talking about? It is no news to sociologists of education that the pluralism at stake in this field of study refers to the cultural dimension – beneath organizational and political processes there are always encounters or conflicts between cultures. School is the main prototype of an organization that is based on culture, made of culture and generates culture.

Therefore, what makes a *cultural frame pluralist* is that single groups not only co-exist side by side, but also consider the qualities of other groups as traits worth having in the dominant environment. That is, in a pluralistic social setting we don't find an expectation of assimilation but rather strong expectations on integration taking place between majority and minority groups. As a matter of fact, assimilation leads to neglecting diversity and the values of minority groups and implies a cultural hegemony by the dominant group over the others. Cultural hegemony, it's worth repeating, is the opposite of the pluralistic option; albeit the simplest solution to achieve an effective combination of differences. On the contrary, pluralism applied to diversity treatment amplifies the factors of unpredictability, and thus increases complexity.

The main social preoccupation facing a constantly *increasing numbers of identities and mixed cultural backgrounds* (at any level) is the rise in feelings and attitudes of hostility and intolerance, especially in those areas where the concentration of diversity is highest. Although schools are not, by and large, a breeding ground for racist ideologies, they may, nonetheless, be facing the more or less implicit negative effects of intolerance (Pilkington, 1999; Bonilla-Silva, 2006), both in terms of peer to peer ethnic relations and of discriminating attitudes towards students on the basis of ethnicity, nationality, social status and/or other combined differences. This is the case when multi-problematic school establishments seem to lose the capacity to bolster social safety, safeguard people's well-being and so on².

As many educational specialists know, the risk of an assimilative approach at school is substantial and widespread given the nature of schools as "ethnocentric" institutions: the transmission of a (supposedly

² See on this point the contribute by Sebastião et al. in this issue.

unique) cultural heritage as a core-task for school agents, the anxiety generated by heterogeneous school environments – which appear as less effective for learning, the fear for the separatist consequences of a weak cultural domain, are all intrinsic factors of a latent, and perseverant, ethnocentrism³. As a consequence, pluralism, even when assumed as a formal intention, seems to represent a mere counter-assimilative ideology rather than a practice, a real search for an effective combination between diversities.

But the problem of pluralism in education is multi-dimensional and not reducible in size to a matter of interactional disorders. Things go further because we must consider not only the education demand side but also the educational supply side. Given that pluralism is a core-value of education, the aim should be *to understand and translate a pluralized educational demand into an effective and equal supply*, involving both the public and the private sector⁴. This second – very important – issue is increasingly concerning more and more policy makers due to the risk of hyper-idealization (or ideologization) of the pluralistic approach as such. Before taking any sort of decision concerning educational governance one should ask: What is “equal”, case by case? And, secondly, what is “effective”? Who decides the “weight” of minority group representatives? From what and how must these groups be protected? Who is protecting whom? These are all issues that tend to become permanently controversial, especially in times of economical recession.

Nowadays, the level of complexity reached by current educational systems requires a renewed engagement towards pluralism. We are facing a strong, concrete emergency and schooling is questioned as it has never been in the past, given that it is not only a space for social reproduction and development, but also the basis for social change. As T. Hogg and M. McComb (1969, p. 237) suggested a few years ago: “not only must education itself adapt to cultural pluralism, it must educate the young for cultural pluralism. This necessarily involves a revision of not only of educational technology and organization, but of the ideology as well”.

³ For example, in the case of The United States, dominated by the melting pot ideology, “the schools taught the children of immigrants contempt for their culture and forced them to experience self-alienation and self-rejection” (Banks, 1974, p. 163).

⁴ See on this point the contributes by Pandolfini and by Abrantes and Quaresma in this issue.

In this light, schools experience the effects of not being neutral in the face of tensions, ambivalence, and multiple requests both from the bottom up and the top down⁵. I am firmly convinced that one thing is to announce formal intentions of tolerance and of positive consideration of diversity, quite another is to accept the real challenges imposed by a truly *democratic school*: that means recognizing that (in an education-for-all vision) social differences are not “background noise” but rather its constitutive and essential point, both in shape (educating *for* and *through* differences is needed) and in the content (educating *to* difference as such is also important). As J. Dewey said, “lack of the free and equitable intercourse which springs from a variety of shared interests makes intellectual stimulation unbalanced. Diversity of stimulation means novelty, and novelty means challenge to thought” (1916, p. 98). The task for school professionals is thus at one and the same time moral and cognitive in nature: preparing people for diversity must go beyond developing a multicultural sensitivity and ethno-relative awareness, rather it should generate “agents of change” within and outside the schools (Maitzegui *et al.*, 2012).

In the light of my premise, and in order to focus our object of analysis, three different levels for observation can be outlined in a sociological approach to pluralism in education:

1. at a basic level there is the *action of different subjects* (teachers, students, parents, other stakeholders), their experience, behaviour and daily routines in formal, informal and non-formal settings, which can be more or less variable/similar, autonomous/inter-dependent both in planning and in practice;

2. at another level there are the *different cognitive frames* (interpretative structures, languages, decoding and recoding rules) used by social actors, which can either be free to operate in different ways or they can be silenced or imposed by a certain cultural monopoly. A “frame analysis” can be carried out both on explicit and implicit materials (i.e., the hidden curriculum);

3. at the highest level of abstraction we can find the *different sets of value* (ideologies, ways of thinking, beliefs, religions) that determine actors’ languages and practices. Of course, a plurality of beliefs can co-

⁵ See on this point the contribute by Markou in this issue.

exist within a unitary social frame only if they are consistent (not incompatible) with a society's basic principles (openness, recognition of rights, justice and tolerance, authority of state regulation, etc.).

If we consider all three levels, pluralism can be seen, on the whole, like a *unifying trait* of the modern life experience, a *principle for structuring reality* (i.e., via identification, primary socialization, etc.), and a *normative guide* for moral conduct (duty). That is to say, there is an institutional pluralism (level 3), a cognitive pluralism (level 2) and, regarding the single actor, a biographical and identity-building pluralism (level 1).

Although the institutional level concerns the sociological approach more specifically, the analysis of pluralism should explore the existing dialectic between the units (conflictual or peaceful) and the efficacy of the solutions implemented to guarantee, at one and the same time, the sovereignty of the public sphere and that of single groups or citizens.

In other words, analyzing pluralism entails the search for the correct micro-macro balance within the democratic frame. For instance, between State intervention (both in the nationalistic and communitarian version) and individuals or groups claiming for identity and self-realization. Or between institutions (with their procedural rationality) and agents, gifted with non-rational, emotional, everyday energy. If the State expects to maximize, to generalize its interference in social life, pluralism will be compromised by a lack of difference; on the other hand, if individuals expect to escape from any form of social regulation, pluralism is compromised by a surplus of difference. In T. Eriksen's words (2005), we must deal with "a third way between the Scylla of fixed, authoritarian knowledge and the Charybdis of relativist confusion".

Thus, also according to F. Barbano, there is a "decreasing" pluralism and an "increasing" pluralism: both have to be recognized by social actors and social scientists. For the Italian sociologist, a scholar of one of the most prominent political scientists in Italy in the last century, N. Bobbio (1991), there are four practical implications of a democratic regime (wherever it is realized) through which political equality is implemented (Barbano, 1999):

- an equal distribution of power between units,
- free dynamics of competition and differentiation between identities,
- a space of *participation* open to all (all units must have some power over and access to information and decision-making processes),
- the "*fair play*" of democracy.

In the case of educational organizations, like elsewhere, all the characteristics mentioned above are visible in spaces, people, routines, and learning processes. They translate in new and more complicated trends of differentiation driven forward both by affirmative goals (“Here I am!”, shouts each subject within the education arena), and by the needs of multiple affiliations, of openness and reversibility of choices, of respect and localization of one’s own identity (“I am me because I am here”), as well as by claims for absolute autonomy. Managing diversity implies working (hard) to cater to all these demands, even if results may be unpredictable and discontinuous. And studying pluralism in education means exploring the way actors and organizations adapt to provide those answers; and this cannot occur without some form of dysfunctional consequences.

Once again, consider schools as public institutions: required to play the role of providers of universalistic protection, as State representatives, they embody the impossibility of being neutral (*super-partes*) in accomplishing this. Schools are holders of single, group and community interests, often facing reciprocal opposition, so that they cannot take sides on the basis of a supposed “authoritarian knowledge” and simultaneously behave using participatory approaches. Therefore they are managing plurality both *within* and *between* institutions, making the task even more ambitious.

In this monographic issue the reader will find the result of a cross-national reflection carried out by a group of European social scientists⁶ with the common goal of trying to interpret the current situation of educational contexts in a range of significant European countries (Italy, Ireland, Greece, Portugal, Estonia) through the lens of diversity management. The range of the sub-topic that we are dealing with appears wide and rich: democratic management of schooling; multicultural issues for teachers and principals; differentiation in school reputation and students’ background; pluralism and equity in the educational offer provided by public and non public sector; relations between pluralism and grassroots movements (violence treatment and prevention).

Almost all the essays report meaningful results generated from fieldwork and carried out with a variety of research methods and conceptual toolkits. Most of the studies rest on the combination of

⁶ All the authors belong to RN 10 – Sociology of education, a section of the European Sociological Association ESA. The call for articles was shared in September 2012 among regular members before choosing the essays to be hosted in this issue.

quantitative and qualitative data, mainly on a local or cross-regional scale. The large employment of qualitative and ethnographic techniques for gathering data also suggests there is a common effort to go beyond the study of formal and systemic processes and grasp the strength of cultural dispositions, unconscious attitudes and unconfessed behaviour, in relation to both personal and collective action. This is an invaluable result deriving from the multi-national approach.

Regarding the content of the essays, a great number of contributions focus on the *multicultural reality of education* due to migration inflows, the issue that best represents the challenge that pluralistic educational systems are currently facing. Many of the papers presented show how race, ethnicity, nationality, and social and cultural background interact in making educational environments more unpredictable than in the past.

In my own article (*Working in mixed classrooms: teachers' reactions and new challenges for pluralism*) I explore teachers' cultural attitudes towards immigrant pupils, underlining how, despite the institutional pluralism displayed, cultural/cognitive pluralism has yet to be recognized. By summarizing the main findings emerging from a set of field studies on teachers' reactions and the strategies adopted in every-day school life to manage the increase of diversity in schools, with the help of data drawn from a regional study in the most multi-ethnic region in Italy (Lombardy), I argue that there is a shared sense of uneasiness among school professionals, reinforced by an uncertain national policy of reception/regulation of foreigners' presence in schools. Fears concerning newly arrived students, on the one hand, and the dominance of certain ethnic groups within the classroom, on the other, increase teachers' sense of distance from the issue. At the same time, interestingly, in mixed classes pupils – both native and foreign-born – report a general sense of well-being, which suggests teachers do their best in order to maintain a satisfying degree of equalitarianism regarding ethnical differences. Teachers appear to engage in a pluralism of actions, which may collide with their cognitive frames and often they neglect to support their educational practice and discourses with a set of values that are coherent with the ideal of cultural pluralism.

In her essay (*Learning from religions. Post-secular schools and the challenge of pluralism*), Valeria Fabretti also draws on the international literature to discuss how pluralism is going to be implemented in public schools. The contribution focuses on the issue of how to combine different

religious identities, which are increasingly represented both among native and foreign-born students. She analyses different solutions adopted by several public education systems in Europe and states that a pluri-confessional approach (namely, education “into” religions or education “about” religions) is the dominant trend overall. She argues that the plurality of religious curricula, although welcome as a facet of late modernity, does not ensure the existence of a collective rationality in favour of pluralism, rather it puts in action an accommodation of religious beliefs at an inter-personal level. This model lacks in engaging organizational and institutional structures with cultural pluralism as such. Thus, she assumes the “post-secular” school as a normative frame of reference (Rosati and Stoekl, 2012), underpinned by a new image of de-secularized schools, as public places where both secular and religious cultures (whatever confessions are at stake) have the right to claim for a public acknowledgement and no one system of beliefs should have the monopoly over others. Discontinuities and commonalities between the *post-secular* and *intercultural* approach are shown in the paper, which comes to the conclusion that religion is one of the dimensions of an intercultural discourse, as it facilitates an interpersonal understanding of students and local communities. From a local Italian case (considered as emblematic) she draws the assumption that pluralism will increase in quantity and quality following an *education “from” religions* model, which entails the direct participation of different religious representatives (for those faiths mainly distributed in the school target) who offer learning modules on their religious culture and tradition for all students.

Following a similar approach, Evi Markou (*Reality-check: the possibilities and impossibilities for non-discriminatory principal practice in multiethnic schools*) focuses on the ambiguity of diversity management in different school situations in Greece through the analysis of school principals’ strategies in coping with the education-for-all imperatives. She compares three types of secondary schools, all considered as places of pluralism but also as arenas of conflict and of the expression of vested interests. Like Italy, Greece has also been affected by a wave of ethnocentric feelings, subtle discrimination and more evident racist reactions during the last decade, due to the rising economic downturn. And, as in other OCSE countries, the Greek educational system has become more sensitive to effectiveness and total quality management discourses (eg., the widespread application of the ADIPPE program for the evaluation

of students). As a result, along with the increase of a structural *disparity between* and *within* schools, principals are asked to account for their micro-politics because they make all the difference: inclusive or selective practices, high or low achievements, ultimately *good* or *bad* schools, it all depends on them. Exploring what kind of tools principals use in the “minutiae” of practice to overcome this complicated tasks, Markou tests Bourdieu’s notion of institutional habitus and shows how internalised dispositions and cultural capital are embodied in different principalships. Using ethnographic observations and interviews conducted in schools with different rates of foreigners (20%, 40%, 60%), she comes to the conclusion that a huge fragmentation is at stake, produced and reinforced by the national policy which stresses separatism and competition among schools. Principals behave slightly differently (some accept the dualism between mainstream and special/“intercultural” schools; others react with pessimistic visions, inner ethnocentrism or conflicts with teachers), although they feel a structural difficulty in offering successful prescriptions to manage diversity and to foster an inclusive education.

Many analogies with the previous cases can be found reading the essay by João Sebastião, Joana Campo, Sara Merlini and Mafalda Chambino (*Educational policies, territories and actors strategies*) who agree with the evidence which points towards an educational system that is becoming increasingly plural and inconsistent. The field they are referring to is composed of three clusters of Portuguese schools (seven establishments were studied in depth, all with high rates of foreigners, of poor, and of violent students), where a variety of measures are adopted to prevent violence and harmful behaviours. The topic recalls one of the main consequences of pluralism in the school environment: the loss of schools’ capacity to generate a sense of “ontological security” (Laing, 1990; Giddens, 1991) for users. This can threaten the legitimation of schooling as such and generate moral panic. Moreover, where schools become a sort of dangerous territory entailing personal risks, repressive actions, stigmatization and so on, this brings about an increase of disparity and a non-democratic social environment. This is what is happening in Portugal: the study highlights some worrying consequences of the current marketization and school differentiation policy. On the one hand, there are exclusive schools that pursue aims of a distinctive identity and an elitist brand, managing violence prevention through the “hierarchical control” option. On the other hand, there are “democratic” schools engaged in

contrasting the social selection of students (on the basis of their economic and cultural background) within the informal market of school choice, and whose regulatory strategy is based on the staff's convergent opinions and strict classroom control. In the third cluster, schools are called "networked" because the rules against violent behaviours are debated and then clearly manifested, students are trained and involved in communicating the state of violence to the exterior (i.e., to the public observatory on social safety). Finally, the authors remark that schools are not merely the representation of territorial dynamics but rather, looking at how they differ in giving priority to violence prevention and in adopting specific regulatory strategies, they contribute to the re-configuration of territorial differentiation through a sort of "interpretative autonomy".

Another a Portuguese contribution, by Pedro Abrantes and Maria Luisa Quaresma (*Schools for the elite, schools for the poor: the same educational system, contrasting socialization environments*), underlines the fragmentation of socialization environments through a comparative analysis of four different schools belonging to the same educational system, that of Lisbon and Oporto. The core topic of the essay is not the multicultural society but rather the segmentation of the social bases of schools into social economic classes (it's noticeable how social stratification has much to do with ethnical composition).

They report that a dual trend is now developing in Portugal as far as school management is concerned: school marketization (shared at a national level through the medium of student assessment and school ranking) goes along with inclusion policies at a local level, i.e. the creation of TIEP schools located in areas of priority intervention, where poor, disturbing and foreign students challenge the official democratic framework and threaten social cohesion. According to the authors' focus, the way plurality is looked at is through an increasing contrast between *high* and *low schools*, both instigated by the neoliberal criteria of public management in selecting a homogeneous target. This leads to a truly deteriorating cycle of upgrading (elite schools) and downgrading (poor schools), which fundamentally contrasts with the issue of pluralism. Using in-depth interviews, the authors analyse in detail the two school environments looking at underpinning ideologies (*school ethos*) and procedural strategies, naming the first "integral education" (reminiscent of the notion of total institutions coined by E. Goffman, 1961) and the second "partial education". Despite their distant ethos both seem to deal with the

imperative to compete within school markets by elevating students' learning scores. The elite schools accomplish this mission through an internal mobilization of human resources, while the poor schools are engaged in a permanent search for external (and mainly material) resources.

The interplay between students' social, economic and cultural background and the configuration of schools' identities within a pluralistic frame of educational services is the subject of the Valeria Pandolfini's essay (*Public or private education? Parents' choices between actual or apparent pluralism*), which engages in a public vs. private school comparison to focus on whether pluralism is actual or apparent. The field of analysis is based in Italy, where only 10% of schools are managed by private providers (and almost all are of Catholic inspiration). The author questions whether the recent Law n. 62 on school quality promulgated by the Ministry of Education in 2000 truly makes pluralism a reality or, rather, if it only recognizes the co-existence of a dual education system (as public and private schools have equal dignity and equivalent legal value), without facilitating a real pluralistic system of opportunities. The specific point under discussion is the economic support given to students of private schools who are in economical and socio-cultural deficit. At the moment, only few resources are offered (at a regional level, i.e. in Lombardy) to poor families to integrate the fee for private schooling. As a consequence, the target of private schools tends to be too homogeneous (more elitist, value-oriented, and ideologically consistent compared to public schools), as is testified by some data provided and drawn from a local study. This occurs in opposition to pluralism, if by pluralism we mean not only *diversity among schools* (well guaranteed by the Italian Law on school parity) but also *diversity within schools*. Indeed, the evidence suggests that families who decide for private schools are more directly involved in their children's school life (offering a high social capital for schools) than in public schools. What these parents share with public schools users is the preoccupation for teaching quality as a main factor of satisfaction/unsatisfaction. In conclusion, the author designs the coordinates of an ideal pluralistic frame for educational supply, in which school choice and the right to a high-quality education would be possible for all, regardless one's social background. We can say that this is as a basic attribute of pluralism as such.

One other contribution in this issue, by Triin Lauri (*School choice as the problem of educational governance in a pluralistic frame*), deals with

school choice. The author aims to illustrate the recent shift in educational governance from the classical pattern (“command and control” model) to the modern patterns of the “marketization” and “network based” models. Schools, like other public services, are concerned with such a complicated co-existence (overlapping) of logics, ideologies and procedural settings, which end up producing an unstable combination of institutional attributes. Moreover, public agencies have had to face an increasing variation of needs and preferences by users, for whom heterogeneity is both a threat (of segregation) and an opportunity (of responsiveness). The main challenge of pluralism for NPM (New Public Management) is therefore to attempt to strike the balance between the best capacity to mobilize civic participation – promoting social integration and avoiding segregation – and the best way to safeguard freedom of choice – via devolution of power to the individual, the user, or the single stakeholder. She argues that market-based solutions (although widely adopted across Europe) are not, as yet, adequate enough to reach this objective because they are excessively outcome-oriented and have failed to respond to equity problems, as is often the case in school enrolment under free-context and school-ranking criteria (Musset, 2012). Negative externalities of choice-based models of governance range from unequal access to the right information regarding school supply to the segregation of disadvantaged students, from the tendency for better teachers to converge in higher-ranking schools, to the “flight” of native, upper-class, white students from higher-risk schools. A new model of governance is thus needed by public managers, that Lauri denominates “centrally designed matching mechanism”: a system that matches the priorities of the community (with a central matching algorithm) with the parental preferences. The democratic nature of such a program is revealed by the construction of a permanent forum through which all the partners in the network (parents, teachers, school principals, community representatives and so forth) react reflexively to the challenges of such a distribution and access to public goods – in this case, school choice and equity preservation. This Ostrom-like solution (Ostrom, 2005), albeit rarely implemented, is strictly linked to a pluralistic framework.

So far in this issue many stimuli are provided for improving pluralism in real-life education systems, without ignoring the possible contradictions this plan could reserve. The Sociology of Education, more than other disciplinary approaches, deserves attention as a tool for looking simultaneously to structure-agent links and to cultural-material dimensions

of democratic governance. The recursive reference, present across the different contributions of the present issue, to *reflexivity as the milestone for a successful solution to the issue of heterogeneity in education*, leads us to question whether the actors implicated in the pluralistic reform of educational services are already trained for this task or – alternatively – if they need to be *specifically* prepared, guided, motivated, and so on, to behave in pluralistic ways.

This work ends, and not by chance, with a contribution remarking the absolute necessity for education agencies to set up solid programs of intercultural education right from the earliest stages of basic learning and pre-professional training. As the work by Mairéad McKiernan, Vicky Leahy and Bernadette Brereton (*Teaching Intercultural Competence: Challenges and Opportunities*) shows, intercultural competence has to be taught because, if institutions are developing towards a greater reflexivity, likewise, individuals can nurture (and be nurtured to develop) the same capacity (Bertelsmann Stiftung – Deardorff, 2006). Since the 1970s no one can deny the relevance reached by the intercultural discourse today (Unesco, 1974), despite certain arguments fostered by its critics (Coulby, 2006; Baroni, 2013). It is applied to all educational settings and many are the connections between intercultural education and mindfulness, cross-cultural adaptation, interpersonal communication and social mediation (Baraldi, 2006), which are all the basic elements of reflexive learning (Colombo, 2005). In the final essay, the Irish team reports on a significant experience carried out by the Dundalk Institute of Technology (Ireland) with Business Studies students. The students were given an elective module of Intercultural studies (over the course of a 3 years degree program), at the end of which they were asked about what they had achieved and whether they had any critical remarks. The major achievement they gained from the experience was an increased capacity for self-assessment (feeling more open-minded, able to separate observation from interpretation, sensitive to historical roots of social and economic events) and an understanding of their own culture. Such results are seminal for a stronger commitment to political and social issues, given also that these are to become future businessmen.

This case study helps us understand what methodological and substantive directions should be taken in order to avoid pluralism as an empty notion. As many of us remark, pluralism in education takes place where two conditions are satisfied simultaneously: that of a personal

education to diversity and that of the institutional treatment of heterogeneity.

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