A Research Agenda for a Multilingual Education Policy in Immigratory Contexts

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to introduce a new topic into the public policy debate: the policy implications of multicultural and multilingual education have been largely neglected by public policy and administration scholars, despite the multiple interesting research perspectives implied. Discussing the numerous aspects of multilingual education is all the more important in light of the superdiversity generated by migratory waves as well as of the role played by immigrants in the socioeconomic fabric of their host countries. After introducing the subject by framing it within the political and policy debate, the article presents the different angles from which the multilingual education issue should be tackled, starting with an overview of the social, economic, and human right/legal aspects involved and proceeding with a proposal of investigation of the implications for public policy and administration, with a focus on teachers as street-level bureaucrats delivering policies in close contact with target groups.

Keywords: public policy, education policy, language policy, immigration, public administration.

Abstract

L'obiettivo di questo articolo consiste nell'introduzione di un nuovo argomento nel dibattito sulle politiche pubbliche: il tema dell'educazione multiculturale e multilingue è infatti poco presente in tale dibattito, nonostante le molteplici e interessanti prospettive di ricerca che esso comporta. L'articolazione di una discussione sui numerosi aspetti dell'educazione multilingue è tanto più importante alla luce delle configurazioni di *super-diversity* generate dai processi migratori, nonché in ragione del ruolo svolto dagli immigrati nel tessuto socioeconomico dei paesi ospitanti. Dopo aver introdotto l'argomento, l'articolo presenta le diverse angolazioni da cui la questione dell'istruzione multilingue può essere affrontata, partendo da una panoramica degli aspetti sociali ed economici e di quelli relativi ai diritti umani, e procedendo con una proposta di indagine delle implicazioni per le politiche pubbliche e l'amministrazione, con un focus sugli insegnanti come pubblici ufficiali

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che attuano le politiche per l'istruzione a stretto contatto con i gruppi target.

Parole chiave: politiche pubbliche, istruzione, lingue, migranti, pubblica amministrazione.

Introduction

Education shapes societies of the future. It is crucial for the acquisition by individuals of fundamental skills, which in turn brings benefits to the firms, households, and society in which those individuals are involved (McMahon 1999). Therefore, countries enroll their citizens in schools to equip the available human resources with the required abilities for socioeconomic development (Arkorful *et al.* 2020). Alongside the attention paid to the content or pedagogy of the educational curriculum, states cannot be neutral with respect to such educational issues as language policy (Kymlicka 1995; Olssen et al. 2004, 223).

Language education policies are characterized by a multifaceted identity that needs examination from different angles. Languages are never the exclusive domain of linguistic sciences (cf. Lambert 1999; Zolberg 2001): the preservation, protection, or suppression of languages implies adherence to theories of political systems, always has social implications, and is linked to identity and power issues. The relationship between language and politics also develops in the opposite direction: political rhetoric and theories often imply consequences on the linguistic level, usually in the sense of reaffirming the superiority of the dominant language over minority languages (Blackledge 2009, 84). Within this framework, the preservation of minority languages is inter alia aimed at avoiding language loss, which is not only a linguistic issue, but primarily a question of power (Chomsky 1979, 191).

Despite the intimate connection between language, politics, and power, as well as the implications that multilingualism entails for the European Union construction, minority rights, and democracy, cultural diversity is a topic that is often overlooked in the elaboration of traditional political, sociological and legal theories (Kjær and Adamo 2011, 1), with language being often "examined in isolation from the social and political conditions in which it is used" (May 2009, 255).

In political science, a few significant contributions have been written on public policies involving language issues (cf. for instance Schmidt 2009; Bratt Paulston and Heidemann 2006). However, not only can language be ultimately framed as a study subject relevant to the field of social sciences (Ricento 2009c, 10), but

language education policies in particular represent a breeding ground to promote a synergy between scientific rigor and social advocacy (Ricento 2009a, x-xi).

In multicultural contexts, the language education services whose users are immigrants can be divided into two main categories, while keeping in mind that a variety of policy delivery modes are in place: policies for learning or using the dominant language of the host country and policies for the protection of linguistic diversity and the preservation of immigrants' languages of origin. While the former ones have been the subject of a multitude of studies (mostly of a sociolinguistic and linguistic nature), the latter ones have been largely neglected by social scientists. Given the subject's remarkable complexity, the introduction of immigrant languages into the school curriculum of immigratory countries should be investigated from several research perspectives. The goal of this research agenda is to present them.

2. Research Perspectives

In the following subsections, I will present the different perspectives according to which social science research concerning education policies and in particular language education services in immigratory contexts should be shaped, building on the assumption that the preservation of immigrant languages can be justified well beyond mere "moral and 'naturalness' arguments" (Ricento 2009c, 11).

2.1 Social Perspectives

On a societal level, assimilation and multiculturalism can be understood as two ends of a conceptual continuum:

> The concept of assimilation is based on the premise that cultural differences between IM (immigrant minority) groups and established majority groups should and will disappear over time in a society which is proclaimed to be culturally homogeneous from the majority point of view. At the other end of the spectrum, the concept of multiculturalism is based on the premise that such differences are an asset to a pluralistic society, which actually promotes cultural diversity in terms of new resources and opportunities. While the concept of assimilation focuses on unilateral tasks for newcomers, the concept of multiculturalism focuses on multilateral tasks for all inhabitants in changing societies. In actual practice, established majority groups often make strong demands on IM groups to assimilate and are commonly very reluctant to promote or even accept the notion of cultural diversity as a determining characteristic of increasingly multicultural societies (Extra *et al.* 2009, 11).

Multiculturalism is a framework within which we confront the presence of differences in society, with particular regard to those related to globalization and migratory

flows. It is based on principles of respect and tolerance, and its central idea is that the differences brought about by human groups of different origins must be preserved, promoted and safeguarded from the risk of dissolution, based on a view of difference as a resource, rather than a problem (Dei 2006, 40).

Assimilationism and language pluralism are therefore antithetical terms:

> In order to give individuals fair equality of opportunity to realize their own conception of a good life, the state must try to provide equally effective support for the structures of each component ethnolinguistic community making up the country. This would seem to provide powerful and reasoned support for a language policy in support of multiple languages in a multilingual country (Schmidt 2009, 106).

However, a distinction has been highlighted between multinational countries and multiethnic countries, where national groups who have been incorporated through conquests or annexations are more entitled to full cultural and linguistic protection than ethnic groups that have arrived voluntarily in a country as immigrants (Kymlicka 1995; Ricento 2009b, 8).

The dialectic between homogenization and diversification can be framed first of all in terms of the pressure that the host country and its communicative space exert on immigrant groups and new languages. The role that the education system can play in these processes is of great importance: the drive towards the formation of an identity pivoting on host country national values has its formal location at school, where the diversity of conditions and capabilities is also at stake. The degree of acceptance of immigrant languages at school, as well as having a symbolic value in relation to the motivation towards maintaining their original identity, has a direct implication on their effective maintenance in terms of competence and use (Vedovelli 2007, 367).

The preservation of the language of origin can also contribute to the mitigation of migrants' cultural shock which derives "from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (Oberg 1960, 177), as well as to the avoidance of language anxiety phenomena detected among immigrant populations due to a lack of proficiency in their language(s) of origin in contexts where the importance of relationships with the community of origin still endures (Sevinç 2017, 718; Sevinç and Backus 2019, 706-710; Sevinç and Dewaele 2016, 163). Mother tongue education in immigratory contexts is also believed to favor literacy and school success for children (Corson 1995), which are in turn functional to their socioeconomic development (Bratt Paulston 1998, 9).

Migrants' drive towards the acquisition of the host country language must also be identified and evaluated. Immigrants are bound to the need for mutual comprehension with host country natives both for instrumental reasons and to take

advantage of the symbolic function of language, as a way of acquiring social prestige. On the other hand, the motivation for identity conservation at the individual and immigrant group level must be considered, which is interrelated with religion, social position, and the ability to elaborate a migration project, including in terms of the intended duration of stay in the host country (Vedovelli 2007, 367). Therefore, immigrants' perceptions of language preservation and teaching must be surveyed. Few studies have been conducted on the subject, so far. In a survey conducted on the English community in Israel, for instance, the parents of immigrant children showed an overall positive attitude towards having their children learn English, with such attitude reflecting instrumental motivations rather than emotional features linked to the land of origin. On the other hand, according to the same study, the Russian community in Israel was found to support bilingual education in the destination country partly by virtue of greater attachment to their culture of origin (Kayam and Hirsh 2013, 323-324).

Migrants' perceptions can be hypothesized to partially depend on the values attached to specific immigrant languages as well as on the socioeconomic context in which those languages are used. Moreover, while assessing those perceptions, attention should be paid to the prominent reasons that have pushed individuals to move from their homeland, with one of the main differences existing between immigrants and refugees. While immigrants might almost freely have chosen to move to another country, although this occurs in circumstances normally considered negative, refugees have been somehow forced to emigrate from their countries of origin due to considerable adversity.

From the point of view of the host society, the acquisition, especially by young people, of intercultural skills able to transcend the local level and allowing them to communicate and think globally implies learning that people with different religions, languages, and values do not constitute a threat to their identity (Süssmuth 2007, 195-197, 202-203). Intercultural dialogue, moreover, is key to counter the diffusion of ill-informed discriminatory opinions (Bryers *et al.* 2014, 21-22), with its presupposition being precisely the overcoming of sterile ethnocentric and self-referential monologues, in view of the enrichment possibilities that the other can offer as a precious opportunity to develop a complex cultural identity, capable of incorporating and integrating diversity (Coppola 2012, 7).

A reluctant attitude towards immigrant groups is often caused by perceived or real threats to political and economic power, but also by symbolic threats to the worldview of a particular native group (Moldes-Anaya *et al.* 2018, 94-95). Economic outcomes affect values, thus "interacting with 'civic virtues' and helping to strengthen or deplete the moral fabric" (Becchetti *et al.* 2010, 81). These (real or perceived) threats as well as their interaction with the values of the host society should therefore be investigated, as well.

2.2 Policy Financing and Economic Perspectives

The resources flowing into compulsory education in Europe are typically managed by state or substate public authorities (European Commission 2014). In times of austerity, the introduction of multilingual education including immigrant languages into the school systems of immigratory countries raises important questions regarding the resources allowing governments to pay for their implementation.

So far, two main financing patterns have been identified: the user-pay model and the taxation model. However, the user-pay method is considered problematic to use for non-measurable goods, with substantial risks of free-riding. Furthermore, if the use of a service can generate benefits for the entire society, charging only users the entire price of a service might not be desirable. Taxation, on the other hand, is a contribution method which operates independently from the use or non-use of a service (Grin and Vaillancourt 2000, 105-106), therefore seeming more appropriate to finance language education policies.

Interestingly, the adoption of a taxation-based model to finance language policies would imply the assertion of a principle along the lines of "no taxation without representation," modified into "no taxation without language recognition." However, justifying the pursuit of policies of public support for multilingualism under a distributive perspective ("because it is right") might not be as effective as justifying it on allocative grounds ("because it is efficient"). The allocative justification for the implementation of multilingualism policies rests upon the recognition of each language as an asset and of a plurality of such assets as desirable (Grin and Vaillancourt 2000, 107-109). If we consider languages as economic assets, an individual who "owns" a plurality of those assets should be regarded as a resource to the nation, while at the same time his/her social position and economic opportunities would be enhanced by their possession of the linguistic assets (Clyne 2000). Migrants' maintenance of contact with their native language can, for instance, favor an increase in the number of bilingual workers and thus represent an important factor of economic and productive growth for the host country (Ruiz 1988; Vedovelli 2014, 72).

On the other hand, the distributive justification seems more appropriate where the danger of linguistic diversity loss to the detriment of linguistic minorities is the result of oppressive policies previously pursued by the majority community, which would for instance explain the protection of certain linguistic minorities in the United Kingdom (Grin and Vaillancourt 2000, 107-109).

Research should also assess whether immigrants are willing to finance their own immigrant language education, since their migrating is often caused by economic inequality (Della Posta 2017, 2), which means that, on the one hand, migrants might have fewer resources than the host country population, and on the other one, they

might not be willing to give up the perceived "integration" benefits stemming from privileging the host country language, especially for their children.

2.3 Human Right/Legal Perspectives

Language rights derive from individual human rights such as freedom of expression, the right to private life, and non-discrimination (de Varennes 2001, 15). In a context of increased diversity due to higher mobility and significant immigration waves, it is of interest to investigate the existence of a right to immigrant language education in international soft law as well as in the European Union and European nation-states' legal frameworks. Granting language rights does not only mean to allow individuals to use their first language in their private lives but implies that governments assume an obligation to take appropriate measures (Skorupa-Wulczyńska 2019, 96). However, the existence of a right to heritage language education enforceable by immigrants is highly uncertain at all levels. Few legal tools provide obligations for European states to provide the related learning opportunities, and even when doing so they present significant limitations. The prevalent orientation of both international and supranational organizations, on the one hand, and nation-states, on the other, is towards assimilation rather than integration and intercultural dialogue (Malandrino 2020).

The difference between new minorities and historical/national minorities in terms of entitlement to mother-tongue language education and preservation rights should also be investigated. In the Italian legislation, for instance, systematic protection is currently granted only to historical minorities (Italian Law No. 482/1999). The act is aimed at the preservation of the language and culture of the Albanian, Catalan, Germanic, Greek, Slovenian, and Croatian populations and of those speaking French, Franco-Provençal, Friulian, Ladin, Occitan, and Sardinian. Its scope of application therefore covers only historical minority languages and, notably, does not include immigrant languages, i.e. those languages that were brought by new immigration waves which do not possess the two basic requirements to be classified as historical minorities: historicity and territoriality (cf. Coluzzi 2006; Paciotto 2009; Vacca 2016).

2.4 Policy Formulation and Adoption Perspectives

Historically, European countries' public policies underlined a firm belief in the strong relationship between language and nation, thus building their own identity on the identification between language unity and national unity (Wright 2011, 46-47). On the other hand, the European identity is *de facto* largely determined by its cultural and linguistic diversity (Extra *et al.* 2009, 8), not only at a continental level, but also within each of its states. Such diversity was accentuated by the more recent migratory waves, to the point of generating what was labeled as super-diversity (Vertovec 2006, 4; Wiley 2014) or hyperdiversity (Suárez-Orozco *et al.* 2011, 314), whose main cause is a kind of migration that materializes on several levels, with

increased mobility as well as the intersection between exogenous and endogenous immigratory flows. To this heightened complexity, nation-states have mainly reacted by reinforcing entry barriers and by implementing policies to control this new type of immigration, not least in an attempt to control multiculturalism and plurilingualism (Hogan-Brun *et al.* 2009, 5). In the European Union, immigration from outside the EU borders represents a highly conflictual political issue, with the notion of outsiders of Europe developing faster than the new European identity itself, which is still being built (Della Porta 2000, 109).

The word "integration" is often used with reference to the need to incorporate immigrant minorities into the socioeconomic fabric of European nation-states. In theory, the very meaning of integration would imply an adjustment effort on the part of both immigrants and the host society (Eisikovits and Beck 1990, 178). In practice, the adoption of integration policies translates into the implementation of cultural assimilation policies. Assimilation can be defined as a process through which immigrants adopt the habits, language, customs, culture, and values of the host society. In most cases, the so-called integration policies force immigrants to choose between the imitation of the dominant culture and the acceptance of lower social and political status (Cainkar 2013, 141). Furthermore, the public opinion in favor of multiculturalism becomes subject to severe criticisms after the occurrence of violent episodes, which gives rise to generalizations and leads to the adoption of less tolerant policies (Rutter 2013, 22-23) in a declared attempt to satisfy bottom-up requests.

The arguments adduced in favor of host country language education measures are multiple. The idea is widespread that if migrants learn the local language, this will instill a sense of security and trust in the population (Shohamy 2009; Van Avermaet 2009). Moreover, as far as employment and gender are concerned, national language learning should bring about better job opportunities for migrants and more participation of women in the labor market (Villareal 2009, 21), although it has also been pointed out how access to better jobs and education and ultimately social mobility lead to language knowledge, rather than the opposite (Van Avermaet 2009).

The rationale underlying most integration policies considers migrants as a resource as long as they conform to the native community's language and customs (Ros i Sole 2014, 60). The tendency to evaluate the use of the dominant language as more desirable than the use of the language of origin is determined by extralinguistic factors that refer to theories of the social good, including the minimum criteria to facilitate equality and justice from a socioeconomic point of view (Ricento 2009a, 4).

Most European countries are oriented towards increasingly assimilationist policies (Extra et al. 2009; Hogan-Brun et al. 2009), thus focusing on the requirements that immigrants should fulfill to participate in the host country life, for instance in order to

obtain a residence permit. This orientation often translates into a type of integration obtained through measures for learning the language of the host country rather than through the promotion of multilingualism and intercultural dialogue (Extra and Yağmur 2012b, 20-21).

Despite this prevalent policy orientation, a few countries in Europe have established education policies aiming to promote immigrant languages either among immigrants only or for the benefit of all students, including Austria, Denmark, France, Spain, and Switzerland (Extra and Yağmur 2012a, 8-10). However, in some of the countries where immigrant language education is provided as a school subject, the perception of schools offering immigrant first language courses tends to be that of middle-to-lower status schools, while in the case of some specific minorities the provision of language courses has proven to be rather difficult to justify since these people often speak multiple varieties departing from the standard immigrant language, i.e. Arabic (Merry 2005, 11).

The reasons behind the adoption of specific education policy measures in immigratory contexts should also be investigated. In France, for instance, immigrant language education measures were mainly adopted in the light of an assumedly temporary migration phenomenon, with the expectation that the children of migrants would return to their respective countries of origin (Hélot 2003, 262-263).

Not least, the kinds of policies under examination should be analyzed through the lens of their transferability to other polities. Education policies are traditionally likely to be subject to policy transfer from one national context to another through policy learning, but such transfer also implies adaptation to the specific "destination" context in which the policy is to be adopted, not least through policy assemblages (Lippi and Tsekos 2019; McCann and Ward 2012; Radaelli 2000; Stone 2012).

2.5 Policy Implementation/Administrative Perspectives

The adoption of multilingual education policies in immigratory contexts should be studied from the point of view of the institutions delivering them, drawing upon the variety of epistemological approaches and methods that the public administration field allows for (Riccucci 2010, 1).

Teachers represent the main category of street-level bureaucrats delivering education policies (cf. Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). As street-level bureaucrats, they structure and transmit policy expectations (Lipsky 1980; Radin and Benton 1988, 15) and have to adapt their daily tasks to the policies to be delivered as well as to meet the multiple demands stemming from the environment (Thomann 2015, 179). The pedagogical foundations and implications of immigrant language education policy are likely to significantly affect the recruitment and professionalism of this key category of education policy deliverers. If governments

opted for multilingual education policies, this would require wise bilingualism management: while the absence of policies recognizing and preserving bilingualism can have disastrous effects on mental health and consequently on the social integration of migrants, the promotion of bilingualism in immigratory contexts must consider the personal and family circumstances of the child and imply educational as well as clinical and family efforts (Toppelberg and Collins, 2010).

The introduction of a new, more inclusive and multicultural approach to education would bring with it a degree of complexity that significantly implies change in the professionalism of the entire teaching staff, for instance in order to develop effective methods to enable teachers without immigrant language knowledge to exploit the potential of immigrant languages. The consequences of policy change should therefore be assessed with regards to teacher training, together with the issues regarding the recognition of qualifications possessed by teachers with foreign education, in an attempt to make teachers more responsive to the demands of their clients (Whitty 2002, 64).

For the purpose of observing and introducing best administrative practices, regard should also be had to the countries that have already adopted and implemented immigrant language education policies, including by drawing lessons from the evaluations carried out in those countries (Furubo 2003). The public accountability of educational bureaucracies in those countries should also be considered, since "public accountability mechanisms must provide the conditions for bureaucratic 'learning', encouraging best practice public administration for the future" (Grube 2014, 222). As learning organizations, schools should therefore deal with such aspects as personal mastery, mental models, creation of a common vision and team learning, as well as systemic thinking (Paraschiva and Draghici 2019, 257-258).

Conclusions

The article introduces a new subject into the public policy and administration field for further investigation, while starting from and integrating it with social, economic, and human right/legal questions equally needing additional research.

The adoption of a multilingual approach to education policies apt to take into account the background of immigrant students, which is a reality in a few European countries, is still considered a utopian idea in many other countries. However, it would not be forward-looking not to consider the premises and consequences of their introduction into more European countries' policy agendas. In contexts where immigrants are a vibrant part of the socioeconomic fabric, important as they are as labor force (cf. Esposito *et al.* 2019) and as a linguistic and cultural addition to the host country resource portfolio (cf. Clyne 2000), multicultural education policies

cannot be disregarded and deserve to be studied from a multitude of perspectives, as suggested in this research agenda.

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