



Students with a Migrant Background and Special Educational Needs: Discrimination and Specificities

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Abstract

In this work we discuss the Italian guidelines for Special Educational Needs (ministerial directive of 27 December 2012) taking into consideration their repercussions and implementations on the group of students with a migrant background. For the first time, through this directive, Italian education considers the linguistic and socio-cultural diversity as an educational disadvantage, to an equal extent to disadvantages such as disabilities and developmental disorders. In this work, after a short introduction on the Special Educational Needs typologies considered by the Italian guidelines, we will focus on the category of students with a migrant background. In details, we will highlight the relation between linguistic diversity, integration and discrimination, and the learning specificities of students with a migrant background.

Students with a migrant background are a particular typology of students that can potentially have various peculiarities, and suffer from difficulties due to their life path. Learning repercussions are hence not limited to their linguistic and cultural knowledge, but could affect different learning aspects. Nevertheless, when talking about this group of students, the attention habitually falls on their linguistic skills in the language of instruction. In this regard, we emphasize that considering their linguistic diversity as a disadvantage could be discriminatory, especially considering that linguistic diversity should be instead thought of as an enriching factor.

Keywords: *Special Educational Needs; Immigrants; Discrimination; Linguistic diversity.*

1. Special Educational Needs and students with a migrant background

The assimilation of migrant students to the category of students with special educational needs takes place through the appearance of the Ministerial Directive of 27 December 2012. According to this directive, there are students who need special attention in every class and for a variety of reasons, such as social and cultural disadvantage, specific learning disorders and/or specific developmental disorders, as well as difficulties due to the lack of knowledge of the Italian language and culture [1]. More in details, the Directive considers three main groups of students needing of Special Education:

- Disabled students (according to the Law 104/92, a certification is required in order to be entitled to a support teacher);
- Students with specific developmental disorders (Specific Learning Disorders - for which the diagnosis is required, according to the art.3, Law 170/2010 -, Language deficit, Non-verbal deficit, Motor deficit, Attention and hyperactivity deficit);
- Students with linguistic, cultural and social disadvantages.

This Directive introduces a substantial change regarding the definition of student with special educational needs, embracing students with learning difficulties due to socio-economic and linguistic-cultural disadvantages. The previous legislation on this matter concerned a more restricted category of students, namely the disabled students (law 104/92) and the students with specific learning disorders (Guidelines of the 12 July 2011).

Reflecting on the changes brought by the Directive of the 27 December 2012, it may be legitimate to ask whether the inclusion of the third category of students (the one with socio-economic, linguistic or cultural disadvantage) could act as a barrier to the homogenization of the class group, creating a further typicalization of the diversity, hence creating separation rather than inclusion.

2. Linguistic diversity: integration or discrimination?

According to the Directive of 27 December 2012, students with a migrant background are considered in need of specific educational attention. Accordingly, linguistic and cultural diversity appears to be an obstacle to the student's learning of the school subjects. In this regard, it is appropriate to recall the importance of a multilingual society, which has been promoted over and over again by the European Union and the Council of Europe. Linguistic diversity should not be understood as an obstacle to learning, but as an added value, an enriching factor to be promoted within the European space [2].



The Council of Europe encourages language knowledge and learning. More specifically, it promotes early language learning (resolution of 16 December 1997), and the learning of at least two languages of the European Union, in addition to the mother tongue [3] [4]. The promotion of plurilingualism is justified by the fact that the ability to speak multiple languages promotes communication – and, therefore, collaboration - between countries [5]. Furthermore, it facilitates the movement of people, inter-understanding and intercultural relations [6] [7].

Therefore, the linguistic diversity of the student cannot and must not be labeled as a "disadvantage", as this would generate a situation of inferiority for the student towards the other members of the class. In this regard, it should be remembered that the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union prescribes the equality of all people (art.20), prohibiting any form of discrimination (art.21) by race, color, ethnic origin, and social, genetic characteristics, language, religion, etc. [8]. In this respect, it is necessary to question the effects of the recognition of migrants as students with special educational needs. Through this Directive, is their integration promoted or are they actually discriminated against? To come, or to have origins, from another country, means bringing a cultural and linguistic baggage that adds up to the one that is acquired (or acquirable) in the country of residence. The "different" language and culture are, in this sense, an opportunity, and an enriching factor for the student. It is therefore necessary to consider that what it is thought as a disadvantage is actually an advantage. In this regard, it is necessary to remember that the mother tongue is an important vector in learning a second language, therefore it is necessary to be very careful in considering it an obstacle, or a disadvantage. At this respect, there are numerous works that testify the importance of the mother tongue in learning a second language, both for reasons related to the student's psychosocial well-being, and for reasons strictly related to language learning [9] [10] [11] [12] [13] [14] [15] [16].

3. Critical issues on the learning of students with a migrant background

When considering students with a migrant background, it is necessary to shed some light on the aspects that can influence their learning processes. Although educational attention towards these students are mainly limited to communication difficulties in the dominant language, there are other factors to take into consideration.

Living in an increasingly multicultural country, teachers need to have at least basic knowledge about the geographical and cultural origin of their students. In addition, if we think about the specific category of refugee students, the attention necessarily turns towards their particular migration path, as well as the reasons of the migration, which can have repercussions on learning [17].

Regarding the influence of migration (i.e. students from war countries), it should be noted that this type of students often interrupt their studies or lose entire school periods (even years). The repercussions that these events have on their education include difficulties in adapting to the new school system and school materials [18] [19]. Repercussions can be evident, as this type of situation can generate absenteeism and school dropout [20]. Furthermore, students who suffered traumas (having experienced or witnessed violence) and war can develop mental disorders. The most common is certainly post-traumatic stress disorder, but they could also have behavioral disorders, depression, anxiety, etc. These conditions can negatively influence learning, resulting in low school performance, absenteeism, school suspension, low IQ, reading deficit and low marks [21] [22] [23] [24].

A last remark must be made about migrant students with disabilities. In fact, the co-presence of these two factors can have an outcome in the school integration, due to the discrimination that they can cause.

4. Conclusion

Students with a migrant background are a particular type of students who can have different difficulties and specificities based on their life path. Repercussions on the learning are various and not limited just to linguistic and cultural difficulties. Nonetheless, when discussing this group of students, the attention often falls on those. Such presumed "difficulties" are also taken into consideration by the Directive on Special Educational Needs, in the section that addresses students with linguistic, cultural and social disadvantages. In this last regard, the Directive seems to excessively circumscribe the needs of these students, not taking into account their peculiarities and perpetuating the idea that the main difficulty of these students is linguistic integration. In this regard, it should be noted that, by carrying a "different" cultural and linguistic background, these students have a cultural advantage rather than a disadvantage. This diversity is also considered by the European Council as an element to protect from any type of discrimination. For this reason, finally, we highlight whether considering one's linguistic-cultural background as a disadvantage is, in reality, a form of discrimination.



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