

Bergische Universität Wuppertal

Institut für Romanistik

International Workshop « Heritage Languages : Language contact – change – maintenance and loss in the wave of new migration landscapes »

Wuppertal, 4-6 October 2012

Intercultural and Diversity Education, Equal Opportunities, and the Role of Multilingualism

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Abstract

Intercultural education, a concept used in Europe since the mid-1970s (but which was in use in the United States from the late 1920s to the 1950s, later changed into « multicultural education »), is currently defined by many scholars as a comprehensive educational approach. Firstly, intercultural education is meant to address all students, and not only those who are seen as different from a given cultural or ethnic or linguistic majority or social group. Secondly, intercultural education is concerned not only about acknowledging cultural or ethnic or linguistic differences and integrating minorities or migrants, but also and above all about recognizing, respecting and including all facets of cultural and more generally defined diversity. Thirdly, it is difficult to conceive of implementing an education which is intercultural and inclusive of all forms of diversity in school systems which are not comprehensive, but which practice early selection and tracking. Indeed, empirical comparative data reveal that in many countries, certain social and ethnic groups do not have equal opportunities in education, even if intercultural education (or a similar concept) is declared a policy goal and is included in curricular guidelines, while other countries succeed better in compensating social inequality although the concept of intercultural education is not in use. The question then remains: How can intercultural education (or an education committed to an inclusive treatment of diversity) contribute to improved educational opportunities and higher achievement for all? In pursuing possible responses to this question, this presentation analyzes some structural and curricular conditions conducive to effective forms of intercultural or diversity education and especially focusses the issue of cultivating multilingualism in different settings as an indispensable way towards better educational achievement for all.