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Grasping diversity in Italian multicultural school. An educational analysis

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Abstract

This work aims to delve into the issue of integration of pupils belonging to different cultures in the Italian school from an educational point of view. Statistical data reveal that the number of foreign students is still rising and will continue to grow. In particular, the so-called 'second-generation' of foreigners are increasing more and more in the Italian school. Therefore, it is important to study the presence of foreign students more carefully, to grasp the diversity that characterizes this evolving phenomenon and to understand these students' different needs to which the Italian school is obliged to respond adequately. In this perspective, it is interesting to describe, through the analysis of some of the main ministerial texts, the specific aspects of the educational model developed by the Italian school in order to promote the integration of foreign students. In the light of this analysis, I intend to outline the possible paths which the Italian school should carry out effectively to achieve interculturality.

Keywords: Second generation of immigrants, education, interculturalism, Italian school.

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1. Introduction

According to the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR, 2015), during the academic year 2014/15 the foreign students who attended Italian schools were 805,800, corresponding to 9.2% of the total school population. Compared to the previous academic year, there was an increase of 0.4%. This means that the presence of students who are not Italian citizens is becoming more stable (MIUR, 2015). Anyway, a wider analysis permits to learn that the enrollments of foreign students in Italian schools more than quadrupled from the AY 2001/02 to the AY 2014/15: in fact, these pupils were 196,414 in the first academic year and became 805,800 in the last year of the series (Besozzi, 2014).

Therefore, now non-Italian students are an important segment of the Italian school system. Above all, they represent a very heterogeneous component because of the variety that characterizes the life stories, the school experiences and the individual and familiar expectations of each of them (Besozzi, 2014). Thus, any general and indiscriminate considerations on these students may be senseless or inadequate (Ricucci, 2015).

This paper aims to analyze some results of recent statistical studies, in order to understand better the heterogeneity that characterizes non-Italian pupils and, then, to reflect on the different life's conditions and the various educational needs of these students (par. 2). In the light of this analysis, I will outline the intercultural model promoted by the Italian school system to respond to these needs and to foster the integration of foreign students. Subsequently, I will examine some significant aspects of the new *Guidelines for the welcome and integration of foreign students* [*Linee Guida per l'accoglienza e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri*] (par. 3), in order to draw some possible concrete paths that the Italian school could follow to really achieve interculturality (par. 4).

2. Foreign students in Italian schools: A dynamic and complex reality

In recent years, the ministerial surveys on the school population in Italy have stressed the importance to consider the students of foreign origin as a wide-ranging and diversified group due to their different experiences. In this perspective, an important distinction has been made between pupils born in Italy and those entered into the school system for the first time, because – as Besozzi (2014) explains – they represent “the two 'extremes' of the heterogeneity of these stories”.

On this front, it should be pointed out that in the AY 2014/15 more than half (namely 55.3%) of the students of foreign origin was born in Italy. More exactly these pupils, who are the so-called second generation foreigners, were 445,534 and increased by 7.3% compared to the previous academic year. On the other hand, foreign students who entered for the first time in the Italian school system in the same AY were 33,054 and represented only 5.2% of the foreign school population. Also, the number of these students grew by 7.2%, in contrast to the trend of the last years. However, there is no doubt that second generation students will continue to increase in the coming years, unlike the foreign-born students representing a group which is shrinking more and more.

The presence of second-generation students has caused a substantial transformation of the school insertion process of foreign students. In an early stage, in fact, immigrant pupils suddenly arrived in the classrooms and the Italian school faced the problems related to welcoming and language literacy for these students. In a second phase, there was a preponderant presence of students born in Italy who needed a full educational and social integration so that they didn't feel like foreigners in the country where they were born (Giannini, 2015). This means that the Italian school must foster their access to the school system and especially the continuation of their studies, in order to ensure them a good professional education to be able to get into the labor market and to integrate into society meanwhile respecting their different cultural origins (Author, 2015B).

Foreign students who have achieved good academic performance and have done successful educational programs are “the skills bearers’ that can become resources for the development of school-training institutions and the territories in which they live by virtuous paths of participation and active citizenship” (Cesareo, 2015). On the contrary, the failure of educational paths and integration strategies can lead these foreigners – who are now a significant part of our society – to be marginalized and to take on deviant and problematic behaviors (Author, 2015B).

It becomes clear, at this point, how important it is to build good policies for school and integration that are suitable to the educational needs of foreign children.

To better understand these educational needs of foreign students, it is necessary to consider that foreign minors are substantially different for life experiences, although they are all "children of immigration" because they "share the condition of being children of foreign parents" (Ricucci, 2010).

Children born abroad who have followed their parents in Italy have experienced migration that is a traumatic event¹. Therefore, they are in a condition of ambivalence and suspension between the culture of the country they have left behind them – and all that it represents in their memories and in their imagination – and the culture of the host country, which is totally alien and unknown. Instead, children who were born in Italy from foreign parents have not experienced this "shocking disorientation" (Giusti, 2004) because Italy is "their starting point" (Ricucci, 2010). Nevertheless, they face considerable difficulties related to the impact and the conflicts that often arise between the Italian culture in which they grow up - and which they sometimes feel even somehow part of themselves - and the culture of the native family to which they are educated by their parents.

Moreover, among the foreign children there are also those who have arrived in Italy through different routes thus making uncertain the picture and evaluation of their presence. These include the unaccompanied minors (Ricucci, 2010) that often run away from war situations and socio-political turmoils broken out in their native country and arrive in Italy completely alone, without any support or protection (Valtolina, 2011). Then, there are the Roma children that “escape statistical surveys” – in fact, we only know that in the AY 2014/15 they were 12,437 (MIUR, 2015) –. Most of all, they do not participate in the socio-educational integration processes, therefore they live in marginal situations and in environments where crime proliferates (Ricucci 2010). Instead there is more precise information about foreign children with disabilities who were 26,626 in the academic year 2013/14. Thus in recent years there has been a remarkable increase (Ongini, 2015) in this class of foreign students who have additional needs which must be considered carefully.

Besides all these types of foreign children, it is necessary also to add children of Italian-foreign couples who may have various difficulties concerning school integration despite the fact that they are not foreign children – as they have acquired Italian citizenship by either parents². Indeed, it seems that "growing up in a mixed familiar milieu does not lead to metissage phenomena and appreciated hybrid identities. Conversely, stigmatization and disorientation feelings prevail"(Ricucci 2010).

Therefore, the foreign children’s world takes the form of a very complex and variegated reality. As I have shown, the experiences and living conditions of foreign children can be very different. It is important to take into account these differences to better understand the foreign students’ needs and the dynamics of their presence in the Italian schools, in order to direct the educational policies of integration towards the building of scholastic paths capable of responding to the specific and particular needs of these students (Ricucci, 2010).

2. The 'Italian way' for the welcome and integration of foreign students

The increasing presence of foreign students has compelled Italian educational institutions to develop a model of integration based on the principle of universality of children's rights which should guarantee education also to foreign students. This model, "which is built over time, according to the law and the recognition of best school practice" (MIUR, 2014) has been clearly outlined in the

document The Italian way to an intercultural school and the foreign students' integration [La via italiana per la scuola interculturale e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri] (MIUR, 2007). It is a model which differs from the multicultural model adopted in the UK and also from the French assimilationist one, because it is based upon interculturalism: "The Italian school chooses the intercultural perspective – namely the promotion of dialogue between cultures – for all pupils and at all levels: teaching, curricula, didactic, subjects, relationships, class life. Choosing the intercultural outlook means [...] taking diversity as a paradigm of the school identity (in pluralism), as an opportunity to open the entire system towards all the differences (i.e. origin, gender, social, educational history)" (MIUR, 2007).

More precisely, the concept of 'inter-culturality' denotes a dynamic and equal relationship – which the prefix 'inter' significantly expresses – between cultures mutually acknowledged (Pinto Minerva, 2002; Sani, 2011). Therefore, the Italian school system aims to educate students to acquire an attitude of dialogic openness and respect towards individuals or cultures, in order to promote intercultural education (Albarea & Izzo, 2002).

The importance and validity of an intercultural approach have been recently reaffirmed in the *Guidelines for the welcome and integration of foreign students [Linee guida per l'accoglienza e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri]* (MIUR, 2014). This document is intended to be a vehicle for the transmission and sharing of best practices that were already in place to welcome and to accompany the children of foreign origin who are increasingly attending Italian schools. In 2006, similar *Guidelines* have already been indicated for the purpose of "presenting a set of shared orientations" and to provide some suggestions for promoting the integration and educational success (MIUR, 2006). After eight years from the first draft, a new document on the pupils of foreign origin was published taking into account "a deeply changed scenario that required updating the operational instructions for schools". Therefore, the new Guidelines are an updated "work tool" that school managers, teachers, parents and associations' operators can use and consult to face properly the complex and various educational situations of foreign students (MIUR, 2014).

By reading the first pages of these Guidelines, the attention – completely new compared to the previous Guidelines of 2006 – emerges in respect of the real migrants' world that is very complex today because of the variety of their origins and cultures (Ibidem). In fact, the document takes into account the so-called "pupils with non-Italian citizenship" (namely those students who have recently immigrated to Italy), the second-generation students and also other types of students who fall into the same group but are in special situations which must be considered from an educational point of view. This is the case of "students living in a non-Italian-speaking family environment", who often feel "linguistic insecurity", but also of unaccompanied minors, who come from "previous experience of deprivation and abandonment and therefore require the adoption of compensatory and personalized strategies" (MIUR, 2014).

This document also includes additional "types of students with cultural integration issues" who in some cases have Italian citizenship but may require specific and individualized learning paths. These are the pupils of mixed couples; the students arrived for international adoption; the Roma, Sinti and Traveller pupils and even college students with foreign citizenship (MIUR, 2014).

Moreover, for the first time the Guidelines of 2014 make explicit reference to foreign students with disabilities or other SEN (Special Educational Needs) who must be evaluated like the Italian students; but in order to do this, it is necessary to pay attention to their specific cultural and life situations and to make use of personalized and planned educational strategies" (MIUR, 2014).

In short, this new ministerial document seems to perceive the transformation of multicultural Italian school and, above all, recognizes the complexity and variety of the migrants' world (MIUR, 2014). In the light of this recognition, the Guidelines provide information for the welcome of foreign students in the Italian schools. They furnish the steps necessary to insert the foreign student in the Italian school system (MIUR, 2014) and the major operational instructions and educational activities

for the teaching of Italian as L2, which can also occur by making use of linguistic diversity and bilingualism (MIUR, 2014).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that in the same document small space is reserved to concrete actions that aim to achieve intercultural integration. In the document, there are specific considerations on the importance of encouraging foreign students to pursue their studies even at the highest school levels, by means of educational guidance and also by limiting the phenomenon of backwardness at school. Thus, these students will not end up being educationally segregated or, worse still, demotivated, renouncing appropriate training (MIUR, 2014). I believe that these considerations are useful for integration but they are not essential to the realization of a truly intercultural school.

For this purpose, I believe that it is necessary to promote intercultural education based on the mutual recognition and the enhancement of the cultural diversity and the several life experiences that characterize students of the Italian school. The ministerial document briefly relates to the intercultural education with regard to the initial training of teachers. With reference to the Decree n. 249 of 10 September 2010, the Guidelines stress that in the course of Primary Education there must be, among other educational goals of future teachers, "the knowledge of the Intercultural Education". Moreover, they point out that "in the same decree for the initial training of secondary school teachers, there is no reference to intercultural education, which, however, should be taken on methodologically by future teachers" (MIUR, 2014).

Therefore, it becomes clear that there are still many more steps to be taken, even if the Italian way to interculturality was already traced.

3. The 'Italian way' for the welcome and integration of foreign students

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4. Conclusion

At this point, it could be useful to consider some actions that the Italian school should concretely take to achieve interculturality. In this regard, it is worth reiterating that intercultural education consists in educating future generations of citizens to be open-minded and to respect all kinds of diversity. This means that students should acquire a new *forma mentis*, a new perspective through which to approach the knowledge and the world.

To this end, as specified by the Ministry in *The Italian way to an intercultural school and the foreign students' integration* (MIUR, 2007), we need to "redefine the knowledge, the contents and skills in a truly interdisciplinary perspective, enriching them with the integration of sources, cultural patterns and 'others' points of view" (MIUR, 2007, p. 18). Therefore, the Italian school must firstly promote the acquisition of transversal skills that concern the cognitive and social aspects rather than those strictly regarding the contents, avoiding the cultural essentialism and the risk of folklorization and exoticism in respect of other cultures (MIUR, 2007, p. 17).

Moreover, "even if the space for interculturalism cannot be found in a specific discipline, but can be considered a perspective to look through all the academic knowledge, it is necessary to rethink the placement of the intercultural perspective into the curricula". In order to do this, it is important to bear in mind both the objective of opening to the differences and the end of equality between pupils and social cohesion" (MIUR, 2007, p. 18). In other words, it is necessary, for example, to revisit the ministerial programs of history and overcome Eurocentrism. It is also important to consider geography as a privileged discipline "for the formation of a global awareness" and look at the teaching of religion as a chance "to broaden the pupils' vision in a multi-faith key" (Ibidem). This means considering all subjects as opportunities for educating to diversity that is not only of content, but also of cultures and ways of thinking.

For this purpose, the teaching of "citizenship education" can be an added value which may become a specific educational field to promote interculturality in all types of schools.

On this direction, it can be important to endorse and to foster specific projects of intercultural education.

Lastly, it is important to underline the relevance of teacher training in intercultural perspective. Teachers should also acquire a new intercultural *forma mentis*, which consists in the use of innovative mediation skills to value the different points of view belonging to different cultures and languages (MIUR, 2014, p. 21). Therefore, they should extend their knowledge to subject contents that historically are part of other cultures. At the same time, teachers need to handle with confidence the didactic techniques, which are appropriate to develop this intercultural educational approach (for example, role-playing, cooperative learning, peer tutoring and so on).

In this way, I think that the Italian school can manage to play fully the role of education agency in which the students – not only foreigners but also Italians – may become able to live adequately in the current multiethnic and multicultural Italian society.

³About the several didactic methodologies suitable to promote intercultural education see Author (2015A).

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