



7th International Conference on Intercultural Education “Education, Health and ICT for a Transcultural World”, EDUHEM 2016, 15-17 June 2016, Almeria, Spain

Teaching in our Society: Primary Teachers and Intercultural Competencies

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Abstract

Living in a context marked by pluralism and heterogeneity is never straightforward, even less so if you belong to a marginalised part of society, in terms of social status, culture and religion. The processes that lead to social exclusion take effect in the first years of a child's life and too often they are formalised in the school system. In Italy, research data and statistics reveal a deep-rooted disparity in the academic trajectories of students from a migrant background when compared with what we might term “native” students. Since the reduced level of attainment of such “non-Italian” students is already noticeable in primary school, where the formal process of acquiring the language skills required in education takes place, we decided to work with teachers from this level of schooling to discover if, and in what way, they have the skills and training required to teach such students. The teachers chosen had taught in multicultural classes for a total of at least five years. Hoping to ascertain whether these teachers employed intercultural competencies in their teaching practice – and if so, which ones – we selected a method based on the narration of a problem situation encountered during their time in teaching. To date, fifty teachers have been interviewed. Analysis of the interviews reveals a heterogeneous reality, with some teachers displaying new forms of sensitivity and cultural competence in response to a changing world and a changing school population, while others seem entrenched in an outdated mindset.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of EDUHEM 2016.

Keywords: Intercultural competencies, first, second, level.

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1. Introduction

If generating social inclusion and social cohesion in populations is a key objective for European countries, it is important that we pay attention – at different levels – to the integration of people in more fragile situations, whether this is at the level of the group, or individually. People from a migrant background often fall into this category. Migrants and their children, even when the latter are born in Europe, constitute two vulnerable social groups. Young people from a migrant background are faced with a difficult task, that of constructing their identity in the midst of two or more cultures, and often on the border between them; they are seen as outsiders both within and outside the home, to the point that wherever they are, part of their identity is rejected. Throughout this process of self-discovery and exploration of their place in the world, schools and the education system have a crucial role to play in supporting these children who are born at the crossroads between two worlds, and who represent, themselves, the crossroads between two cultures (Moro, 2002). In recent decades, education policy makers in Europe seem to have grasped the important role that school systems can play in this regard, introducing measures to promote integration and improve educational attainment among students from a migrant background and their families (see Perotti, 1994 and Eurydice, 2009). In Italy, the chosen path has been one of integration. The educational objective, as numerous state publications have asserted (MIUR, 2007; 2012; 2014), is what we might term an intercultural approach to teaching and learning. The data do indicate that progress has been made, to the point that we might talk of a “progressive capability to integrate among non-Italian young children and adolescents” (MIUR, 2014:4), yet the education system in Italy still bears a number of traits that belie such advances. As a group, students of non-Italian nationality (n.I.n.) continue to struggle academically in comparison to their “native” counterparts, and a higher proportion are still directed towards vocational training, rather than upper-secondary school, at the end of their lower-secondary education.

2. A deep-rooted disparity among students in Italy’s school system

In the 2014-2015 academic year, there were 814,187 students of non-Italian nationality in Italian schools, which accounted for 9.2% of the overall student population. This represented an increase of 20.9% in respect to the figures for 2009-2010 (meanwhile, the number of Italian students dropped by 2.7 % over the same period). Of these non-Italian students, some 55.3% were born in Italy, a figure that rises to 84.8% if we only consider Italian nursery schools. The data also point to a sharp drop in the number of new students of n.I.n. enrolling in Italian schools, a trend that began in the 2007-2008, coinciding with the start of the economic crisis that engulfed Italy in the following years. Historical analysis of the data reveals that the number of students from a migrant background who are behind the standard school stage for their age group has fallen. This improvement is due, in good part, to the fact that for those students of n.I.n. who were born in Italy, the effect of late entry to the education system is not present, since they follow the same regime as students from Italian families. This notwithstanding, the academic and educational trajectories of these students, when compared to those of native-Italian students, continue to be characterised by delays in their progress through school and other difficulties. At primary-school level, 13.4% of these students have been kept back a year, compared to just 1.8% of native Italians. At lower-secondary level, the figures are 39.1% for n.I.n. students, compared to 7% of native-Italian speakers. At upper-secondary level, 63% of students from a migrant background have had to repeat a year, compared to 22.4% of students of Italian parentage (ISMU-MIUR, 2016:9). Along with these figures, we should also factor in the early school leavers, a group that accounts for 13.6% of “native” Italians, 27.1% of non-Italian students of other E.U. nationalities, and 34.4% of students of other nationalities. The data reveal difficulties in integrating and learning among these students at every level of schooling, difficulties which increase discernibly as we move past primary education to more advanced levels where greater demands are placed on students’ abilities, especially on their command of “academic” language. All things considered, we can conclude that the data reveal the presence of a “deep-rooted disparity” in the academic progress of students from migrant backgrounds in Italian schools (ISMU-MIUR, 2016; MIUR, 2014).

3. Purpose of the study: what Intercultural Competencies primary teachers’ have?

The Italian education system has clearly opted for an educational model based on welcoming and integrating students from an immigrant background (MIUR, 2007). All the same, as studies by the Ministry of Education have

confirmed, students from migrant backgrounds still face significant disadvantages in education. On this basis, we decided to conduct a study investigating whether teachers at primary school level possess the intercultural competencies required to promote learning and integration among students with a migrant background. To this end, the study seeks to explicate the most widespread representations of diversity (the term “diversity” is employed in a denotative sense, while “difference” is used connotatively) present in the minds of teachers in Italy’s state schools, in contexts where the presence of pupils of non-Italian origin is well established. The aim is to understand whether teachers, consciously or subconsciously, associate children from a migrant background with diversity, and view them as “something distant”, and “other” in respect to other pupils. The second-level research seeks to identify and gather together the skills, qualities and areas of knowledge that are actually employed by teachers working with multicultural classes. We hope to establish whether these teachers’ competencies can also be considered “intercultural competencies”, which is to say, the competencies needed for teaching in today’s multicultural classrooms (Huber & Reynolds, 2014).

4. Research methods and questions

To identify what competencies the teachers working in Italy’s multicultural primary schools currently possess, we asked the participants to describe their working methods, focusing in particular on practices employed when faced with a situation/problem in which “diversity” played a central role (Desgagné, 2005). To assist these teachers in articulating their experience, we opted for a semi-structured interview technique, as this offers the possibility of exploring subjective experiences (Bichi, 2007). When analysing the interviews, we tried to identify the competencies that the teachers had actually employed in their work in multicultural primary classes. In short, this study focuses on primary teachers’ own descriptions of their working practices with a view to answering the following questions: a. In what ways will teachers most commonly understand the notion of “diversity”, and how do they perceive children from a migrant background? b. Do primary teachers possess intercultural competencies that enable them to assist integration and learning in students from migrant backgrounds? In this paper we direct our attention to the second question only.

Fifty primary teachers were interviewed. We selected participants based on the following criteria: 1. participants had to have taught at primary school level for at least five years; 2. they had to have had multiple experiences working with multicultural classes; 3. participation had to be entirely voluntary. Furthermore, to make the study as representative as possible, the 50 teachers interviewed came from 50 different schools, all with a high proportion of students from migrant backgrounds, and all located in 3 northern regions where the presence, or otherwise, of sizeable migrant populations is well established, specifically: Lombardy, Veneto and Trentino Alto Adige.

The fifty interviews were transcribed in their entirety. We adopted a phenomenological perspective. The coding methodology was derived from the grounded theory model (Glaser & Strauss, 1967): a process of open coding was used to identify the categories that emerged from the analysis of the accumulated data. Working separately, the three researchers involved conducted a provisional conceptualisation of the accounts – which had been transcribed in their entirety – cataloguing them with the use of “labels”. These individual analyses were compared with each other and the “units of meaning” that had emerged were cross-referenced. Once the researchers had reached an agreement, these “units of meaning” or “labels” were grouped into specific areas, thus forming categories, which were then grouped again into macro-categories.

The analysis examined both the representations of diversity “declared” by the teachers, and those that “emerged” from the description of practice. It also explored the competencies evident in the teachers’ accounts of their working practice (Le Boterf, 1994). The analysis of the situations described sought to identify any competencies demonstrated by these teachers in the actions they performed. What expertise, skills and capacities were employed in the context of the multicultural classroom? Among the competencies displayed by the teachers, might any of these be defined as “intercultural”?

5. Findings

This study investigated three distinct, yet inherently correlated, areas:

- i. the terms in which the primary teachers interviewed most commonly represented “diversity”;

- ii. the actions employed by these teachers when addressing situations/problems associated with the presence of children who are perceived as being “different” in some respect.
- iii. the extent to which the actions described might indicate the possession of intercultural competencies on the part of the teacher.

In this paper we focus on the results of our analysis concerning the third question.

5.1. Competencies traced in the teachers' accounts

Do the teachers interviewed possess intercultural competencies that enable them to assist integration and learning in students from migrant backgrounds (Santos Rego et al., 2014; Cushner, 2012; Leiva Olivencia, 2012; Perregaux, 2010)?

The responses of the 50 teachers involved in this study to classroom situations they perceived as problematic, demonstrate a number of relevant competencies, many of which are well ingrained in their teaching methodology. A good number of these, may be considered the sort of skills and attitudes that teachers have always required, such as respect, empathy, patience, flexibility, the ability to mediate and manage conflict (educational competencies). To some extent, these are also part of what we might term “intercultural competence”: “the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world” (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009:7).

Relational-communicative competencies were demonstrated in every one of the teachers' accounts. Generally speaking, we can assume that these competencies fall into the skill set traditionally expected of a professional teacher even in a ‘monocultural’ classroom (basic educational competencies. See Garmston, 1998; Dusi, 2006). For this reason, we decided to class these as “first level” intercultural competencies. The teachers' apparent ability to recognise diversity in others in a context of cultural inheritance varied from one case to the next. Some seemed to adopt an interactionist mindset, and focus on the dynamics at work – such as the meeting of two identities – rather than on the specifics of the other individual (Cohen Emerique, 2013). Other cases reveal an outlook that – unconsciously in many cases – echoed clichéd, ethnocentric stereotypes. Very few of the teachers seemed able to manage the complexity of the multicultural encounter in its entirety: the identity of the individual, his or her family history and cultural background, the socio-economic and political contexts in which relationships are formed and acted out, and the role of the mother tongue in identity construction.

For these reasons we have distinguished – among the competencies we find in the collected data – what we would term *relational-communicative* competencies from those that we might consider *inherently intercultural*, which is to say, those that have become necessary for teaching in a multicultural classroom and for preparing a new generation for life in today's global society. We categorised the *inherently intercultural*, or “second level” competencies that characterised the teaching practice of some of the participants as: a. *cognitive-educational intercultural competencies* or b. *intercultural competencies pertaining specifically to primary school teaching*. In the category of “*cognitive-educational intercultural competencies*” we find: i. cultural self-awareness (of one's own cultural positions, preconceptions, stereotypes, values etc.); ii. willingness to suspend judgement and to tolerate ambiguity; iii. curiosity about other cultures, and about cultural “otherness”; iv. a desire to learn more about different symbolic-cultural universes; v. the capacity to acquire new knowledge pertaining to cultural frameworks and the history, literature and religion of other cultures. The category of “intercultural competencies pertaining specifically to primary school teaching” includes: a. linguistic and socio-linguistic knowledge and skills; b. methodological and didactic competencies pertaining to the teaching of language to non-native speakers (Allemann-Ghionda et al. 1999).

In today's classrooms, teachers require both first-level and second-level competencies. While it appears that all of the teachers interviewed possess first-level competencies, *only a few of the teachers in the study can be said to have demonstrated second-level intercultural competencies*. The data analysis revealed that the majority of the teachers interviewed – who had all worked in multicultural classrooms for at least 5 years – did not have any intercultural training (around 60%) nor any training in teaching Italian as a second language (around 70%). On the basis of these findings – despite the small sample size – we can say that our analysis has helped us to make some sense of the data regarding the delays in academic progress and the language difficulties experienced by n.I.n students (ISMU-MIUR, 2016; MIUR, 2014).

Inadequate knowledge of the Italian language continues to be an obstacle for students from a migrant background,

as both the Minister of Education (“it appears to be the case that (...) foreign students are not being adequately supported in learning the sort of Italian required for study” - MIUR, 2014: 15) and the most recent report on students of non-Italian nationality have stated (ISMU- MIUR, 2016). In addition, results from a study carried out by the Ministry of Education in 2015 involving 1,400 upper and lower secondary schools, and 13,615 teachers (of Italian and mathematics), reveal the significant impact of difficulties in the teaching and learning of Italian as a second language. In the view of the teachers interviewed, language constitutes the cornerstone of any process of integration and education of students of n.I.n., with 62% in agreement that the teaching of Italian as a second language needs to be improved (ISMU-MIUR, 2016: 175 -179).

As it turns out, there are multiple factors that contribute concurrently in either a negative or positive fashion to the learning of a second language and have a bearing on the outcome and methodology of a child’s education: the age at which a child arrives in the host country, his/her cognitive profile and level of motivation, the social-linguistic capacities of other family members, parental expectations, the context in his or her “native” country, the loyalty/obligations felt towards each culture (or the preference for one at the expense of the other), the educational strategies employed by his/her teachers. The very complexity of the processes involved in teaching language to non-native speakers requires teachers who are professionally equipped to deal with such situations.

The fact that only 13 of the 50 teachers interviewed for the present study – all of whom had at least 5 years’ experience with multicultural classes – had acquired linguistic and sociolinguistic competencies leads to the conclusion that much work remains to be done in regard to the intercultural competencies involved in L2 teaching. We have seen from interviews with first-generation migrant pupils in primary education that this is a key factor in promoting learning, integration and self-confidence among students of n.I.n. (Dusi et al., 2014). It is therefore essential, today, for teachers “to be acquainted with basic insights from cultural anthropology, culture learning theory and intercultural communication” (Sercu, 2002:152). However, the extent to which teachers possess the necessary *second level intercultural competencies* does not give us particular cause for optimism at present.

6. Discussions and Conclusions

On more than one occasion, the Council of Europe has suggested that “educators and education authorities in all member states should aim to develop intercultural competence as a core element of school curricula” (Huber & Reynolds, 2014: 11). If teachers working today are to effectively teach students whose cultural backgrounds are different from their own, intercultural competencies must form a basic element of their professional skillset (McNeal, 2005; Hammer & Bennett, 2001; Bennett 1986; Gay 2000).

This study was primarily designed to generate information regarding the behaviour, expertise and operational skills that a randomly selected group of in-service primary teachers employs in teaching multicultural classes, and to determine whether the practices they describe indicate the possession (or otherwise) of intercultural competencies. The picture that emerges from our analysis of the teachers’ accounts suggests that less than a third of the subjects interviewed can be said to have shown such competencies, and that when they have done so, it is the result of being able to reinterpret their role and approach as a teacher within a new educational situation, namely that of being faced with the school population of a multicultural society. The practices these “competent” teachers describe are woven together from their own investigations, studies and reflections. Of the remaining group, many seem overwhelmed by limiting factors, which we grouped into four categories: a. *structural factors* (class sizes, the lack of resources such as mediators, linguists, time dedicated to supporting language apprehension, etc.); b. *social-political factors* (the specific role/tasks demanded of them, budget cuts that have affected schools in recent years); c. *cultural factors* (social-cultural changes, lack of cultural awareness); d. *professional factors* (inadequate intercultural competence).

Teachers seem to be facing increasingly complex situations against a backdrop of cuts to resources, in terms of funding and personnel. It seems fair, however, to suggest that many teachers simply lack adequate training, with most not having received any form of dedicated intercultural development. In-service training, which allows teachers to bring their skills and knowledge up to date and develops their ability to reflect on their own teaching, is not compulsory, meaning that many teachers do not benefit from it. Some teachers appear ill-equipped to cultivate their own cultural awareness, revealing themselves to be prone to indulging in stereotypes and struggling to manage their own prejudices. Nor do they display an approach to learning and research that would facilitate the acquisition of what

we have defined here as “second-level” intercultural competencies. As a result, a large portion of these teachers seem to lack the intercultural competencies needed to manage classrooms of an increasingly heterogeneous nature in situations in which they are faced with a range of tasks for which they feel inadequately prepared.

In the case of these particular primary teachers, the greatest problem that this research brings to light is a lack of intercultural competencies relating to cultural awareness and awareness of their own prejudices, to social-linguistic issues and to the teaching of Italian language to non-native speakers. A sizeable number, it seems, have yet to “develop an understanding of the learners’ investment in the target language and their changing identities” (Norton, 2000:137), appreciate the central role that can be played by the preservation of the child’s first language in a learning context (Moro, 2010), or acquire specific teaching competencies for teaching Italian as a second language (Sidoli, 2002). It is these teachers, more than any others, who need to bring about “changes in their self-concept, in their professional qualifications, in their attitudes and skills” (Sercu, 1998:256). What we find, instead, is a sort of “conceptual vulnerability” among primary teachers, by which we mean that they appear to be unable to reformulate their professional approach, as though they were ‘slaves’ to the professional culture they inherited (Fernandez-Sierra, 2016). That – in Italy – the practical implementation of an intercultural approach to education and teaching has thus far been patchwork in nature has already been spotlighted in the academic literature (Alleman-Ghionda, 2008; Santerini, 2010). We know that alongside situations in which language support is embedded at a systematic level and teachers have acquired intercultural competencies, there are other contexts, above all in small institutions, in which fewer resources are available and many teachers (even when they do not perceive a child of n.l.n. as a problem) still do not possess adequate intercultural competencies. This lack of *second level I.C.* among the majority of the teachers interviewed could – in part, despite of the limits of this sample – explain why, in our country, the academic trajectories of students from migrant backgrounds betray a situation of disadvantage and stunted progress, in spite of the already well-engrained multicultural character of Italy and its school system (MIUR, 2014). It is vital, although not a straightforward matter, that teachers become aware of the complexity of their role in contemporary society.

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