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What Intercultural Competencies do Italian Primary Teachers Need?

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Abstract

193 different nationalities are represented among the pupils in Italy's state schools. 9% of school pupils in Italy (802,844) come from a migrant background. The data reveal a deep-rooted disparity in these pupils' academic trajectory compared to that of indigenous students. With a view to gathering data that might assist in understanding which factors contribute to the disadvantages faced by students of n.I.n., this research has sought to reveal the terms in which teachers who have taught in multicultural, primary-level classes for at least five years, most commonly represent diversity, albeit, in terms of the number of participants (thirty), the sample used is non-representative. The investigation was also designed to generate information regarding the behaviours, expertise and operational skills that the same group of teachers employs in teaching multicultural classes, and to determine whether the practices they describe indicate the possession of intercultural competencies.
What representations of diversity are most familiar to teachers? Do teachers possess intercultural competencies that enable them to assist integration and learning in students from migrant backgrounds? The data analysis methodology was based on grounded theory. "Diversity", the analysis revealed, is understood in various ways: the expression of each person's uniqueness; cultural difference; the prevalence of problems (special needs, learning difficulties, hyperactivity). The stories told revealed various competencies, which were grouped into two types: first-level intercultural competencies (already inherent to good teaching practice), and second-level intercultural competence required/acquired in multicultural classes.
Based on these data, the study paints a varied portrait of Italian primary teachers' professional competence. This admittedly limited set of interviews suggests a heterogeneous reality, with some teachers having responded to a changing school population by acquiring new intercultural competences, and others seemingly stuck with an outdated outlook.

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1. Introduction

There are many factors that have a bearing on the process of integration as it relates to school students from migrant families. Among these factors, the following can be identified as playing a fundamental role: the support provided to these young people by their families and the community from which they come; their religion; the area in which they live; policies enacted at a local level; the standards of the school they attend; the accessibility of educational paths. The involuntary processes of segregation that lead to social exclusion are, for the most part, a result of socio-economic factors (Mehan et al., 2008), separate housing (McAndrew, 2007) and inadequate education provision: "*Immigrant youth's life chances and future careers are shaped not only by family and community resources but by the opportunities offered by the educational institutions they attend*" (Crul, 2007: 213).

Over recent decades, education policies in Europe have recognised the central role played by education systems, introducing measures designed to promote learning and integration among students from a migrant background and their families (Perotti, 1994; Eurydice, 2009). Each country, however, has opted for its own, specific approach. As such, we have school systems that offer students of migrant parentage a real chance of academic success (Sweden, France), while others are characterised by high percentages of early school leavers (Germany, Austria, Belgium). The former group is successful "not only in producing high shares of well-educated young people [from a migrant background], but also in preventing dropout in lower and upper secondary education" (Crul & Schneider, 2012).

The Italian school system has chosen the path of integration, aspiring, as government publications have emphasised on more than one occasion (MIUR, 2007; 2012; 2014) to an intercultural pedagogical approach. However, for all that the data suggest things are moving in the right direction, to the point that we might talk of the "progressive capability to integrate among non-Italian young children and adolescents" (MIUR, 2014:4), the Italian school system evinces a number of characteristics that place it at an intermediate level where students of non-Italian nationality (n.I.n.), as a group, continue to lag academically, while a high proportion continue to be directed towards vocational options after lower-secondary level rather than upper-secondary school education.

2. Problem Statement

193 different nationalities are represented among the pupils in Italy's state schools. The number of students of n.I.n. attending during the 2014/2015 academic year was 802,844. Over the last 15 years, the proportion of such students has quadrupled, from 2.2% of the total school population in 2001/2002 (196,414), to the current figure of 9%. Of these students from a migrant background, over half were born in Italy (415,283, or 51.7%).

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 of native-Italian background. 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. During the academic year 2013/2014, 14.7% of the pupils in this group in primary education were behind the expected stage for their age, compared to 1.9% of pupils of Italian parentage. At lower secondary level, the respective figures are 41.5% and 7.4%, at upper secondary level, 65.1% and 23.3% (ISMU –MIUR, 2015:9).

In part, this disparity is due to the widespread practice of placing first-generation migrant children in the year below that of their direct contemporaries. However, as the data reveal, the difficulties faced by these students and the disparity in their progress increase as we look past primary education to more advanced levels of schooling where greater demands are placed on students' abilities (especially their command of "academic" language). These percentages are substantial enough to be considered evidence of a "deep-rooted disparity" in the academic progress of students from migrant backgrounds in Italian schools (ISMU-MIUR, 2015: 9; MIUR, 2014).

3. Purpose of the study

Faced with an increasingly multicultural country, and the inevitable reflection of this transformation in its schools, 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, the educational disadvantages faced by students from migrant backgrounds have been confirmed by the Ministry of Education, who declared, in a report from 2014: "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)

Given these premises, and the view that:

i. primary school – as the place where the foundation is laid for the acquisition of Italian – represents, we might say for the totality of students of n.I.n., the gateway to the Italian school system;
ii. in current socio-cultural contexts, the delivery of effective teaching requires a re-evaluation of best teaching practice and the acquisition of new competencies;
iii. we can include, among the competencies that the multicultural composition of today's society and the heterogeneous nature of the school population have rendered indispensable, those identified as multicultural competencies "for effective practice in diverse, multicultural, inclusive learning environments" (Council of Europe, 2013:10);

it is opportune to conduct exploratory research into 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[1] 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 second-level research seeks to gather together competencies that are actually employed by teachers working with multicultural classes and to determine whether these include what might be defined as multicultural competencies.

4. Research methods and questions

Consistent with the epistemology that would have that professional expertise is action based, and formed in the field, the practical expertise of teachers frequently remains tacit and implicit. As such, it is neither reanalysed, nor made available to others. This seems especially to be the case in educational contexts in which, as the teachers themselves point out, neither times nor spaces have been allotted, nor have practices been established, to capitalise on the expertise acquired through experience (Shulman 1987). This practical, action-based knowledge is not taught; rather, it is acquired through "reflective conversation" with or about the situation (Schön, 1983; 1996), particularly with problematic situations in which practices used in the past no longer prove to be adequate. Two approaches were adopted with a view to accessing, first, the terms in which these teachers represent "diversity" and, second, the competencies that they have actually employed in their work in multicultural contexts. The teachers were asked to explicate the former, while to identify the latter, they were asked 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 et al., 2001; Desgagné, 2005).

In short, this study focuses on primary teachers' own descriptions of their working practices with a view to establishing: a. In what ways will teachers most commonly represent the notion of "diversity"?; b. Do primary teachers possess intercultural competencies that enable them to assist integration and learning in students from migrant backgrounds?

Thirty primary teachers were interviewed. They were selected according to the following criteria: 1. participants had

[1] In this paper, the term "diversity" is employed in a denotative sense, while "difference" is used connotatively.

to have taught at primary school level for at least five years in total. 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 it was necessary to avoid selecting teachers from too circumscribed a context. For this reason, the 30 teachers interviewed came from 30 different schools, all with a high proportion of students from migrant backgrounds, and all located in regions where the presence of sizeable migrant populations is well established (Lombardia, Veneto and Trentino). Lombardia has an especially large population of students of n.I.n., the highest in Italy with 197,202. Veneto has the third largest.

The thirty interviews were transcribed in their entirety. The data analysis methodology was based on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

The use of "progressive qualitative data analysis" (Paillé, 1994), does not entail the codification of the available material according to a pre-existing corpus. Rather, these data are analysed to identify what those involved with the phenomenon under investigation have to say (open coding). Descriptions of practice offer access to the meaning that the teacher attributes to the situation and to his/her actions, the episteme of the practice rather than the practice itself. The researcher has access to words, not actions – a narrative that implies a conception of reality, reality represented by the person narrating. This makes it possible to see how the speaker reads the world, "his/her world" (Demazière, Dubar, 1997) and how he/she addresses the situations/problems he/she has to deal with (Legendre et al., 2000).

The analysis examined both the representations of diversity "declared" by the teachers, and those that "emerged" from the description of practice (for instance, in this respect, it is itself significant which situations were identified as "problems"). The analysis of the situations described also sought to identify any competencies demonstrated by these teachers in the actions they performed. What expertise, skills and capacities were employed, and among these, were there any that might be defined as intercultural competencies? Or rather, among the competencies displayed by the teachers, did any of the competencies pertaining to processes of teaching/learning have a role to play in multicultural education contexts?

5. Findings

The questions that guided this research investigated three distinct, though correlated aspects:

a. the terms in which the primary teachers interviewed most commonly represented "diversity";
b. 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.
c. the extent to which the actions described might indicate the possession of intercultural competencies on the part of the teacher.

The following sections report the results of our analysis in relation to the first and to the third of these aspects. The third and last aspect is an area of particular focus in this paper.

5.1.The representation of "diversity"

How is "diversity" most commonly presented by teachers? Diversity, the analysis revealed, is understood in various ways: the expression of each person's uniqueness; cultural differences; the prevalence of problems (disability, learning difficulties, hyperactivity).

Each teacher understands "diversity" in a different way, depending on his/her professional experiences, training and cultural framework. Where some teachers focus on cultural difference, or children with additional needs, others limit themselves to underlining that "diversity" is a "normal" thing in teaching. One encounters "diversity" whenever one encounters other people. All children display some form of "diversity".

> *I discover what it is to be a teacher, and I discover it anew every day! Each day I learn something new, since every child is different, different in the sense that each one has some variable, just as every class has its own*

overall character. (...) and with each one you need to handle yourself differently; there are 19 children and 19 different worlds! 1P-6/34

Diversity – inasmuch as it demands "work" and constitutes a professional challenge – can be seen as an onerous commitment or as an opportunity. It depends on the outlook of the teacher in question:

For example, what motivates me is that I find "diversity" interesting. For me, to have a number of different foreign students is a blessing, really interesting. It all depends what your approach is to diversity! 19P-6

Furthermore, all of the accounts underline the fact that while, in recent years, there are fewer resources available, the frequency with which teachers are faced with challenging situations (from disabled pupils to those with learning difficulties) has risen steadily. This makes the job of teaching more challenging, especially for those teachers who still struggle to accept the diversity of today's classrooms as something "normal".

Because cases of children with special needs are easy to notice, but there are a great number of differences. Now, in a class of 19, there is such variety among the children, there are so many different demands, behaviours, ways of being. 2P-6.

Overall, the teachers' descriptions paint a very heterogeneous picture in terms of how "diversity" is conceived. It seems plausible to suggest that the reason diversity is represented in a more varied manner than in the past is due to the very fact that the composition of the classroom has changed, that families, and the socio-economic context, are radically different.

5.2. Competencies employed by the teachers

Do teachers possess intercultural competencies that enable them to assist integration and learning in students from migrant backgrounds?

Analysing the actions described by the teachers, it has been possible to identify the presence of a number of examples in which they displayed expertise, skills and attitudes in the course of their work. *These cases were re-examined with a view to identifying those competencies that might be categorised as "intercultural*". Of the examples of expertise, skills and attitudes identified, a good number may be considered the sort of competencies that teachers have always required. The descriptions reveal that the teachers do employ certain relational-communicative skills such as *respect, recognition of the other person's diversity, empathy, patience, the ability to mediate – to manage conflict, and flexibility*. Being prepared to make oneself the subject of play and discussion plays a prominent role, in both a relational and a didactic sense.

These attitudes and abilities are also part of what we might term "intercultural competence"[2]: "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).

Examples of this very sort of relational-communicative competence are found in every one of the teachers' accounts. All the same, as described earlier, *they fall into the skill set traditionally expected of a professional teacher* (Garmston, 1998; Mariani, 2014), and for this reason, it has been decided that they be classed as ***"first level" intercultural competencies***.

The analysis has also made it possible to identify other competencies that might be considered ***"inherently"***

[2] "Competence" – a term that can be understood in various ways, and which has long been the subject of discussion – is understood here as the capacity to employ one's resources (knowledge, attitudes, skills) to suit the relevant context (Le Boterf, 1994). Competence is "practical knowledge in action" (Scribner, 1984). It arises from reflection on actions in context. Competence is situated, enacted expertise, comprising attitudes, knowledge and skills. Intercultural competencies are enriched with other elements, inasmuch as "difference", in its various permutations (cultural, social, linguistic, religious), is brought into play. The intercultural competence (I.C.) of primary teachers is especially complex. They are asked to employ their I.C. to understand the symbolic, cultural and linguistic world of their students to promote learning and social integration.

intercultural, insofar as they are indispensable in the multicultural social contexts and teaching/learning situations of today. These inherently intercultural, or ***"second level"*** professional competencies that characterise the teaching practice of some of the interview subjects can be further subdivided into: a. ***cognitive-educational intercultural competencies***, and b. ***intercultural competencies pertaining specifically to primary school teaching***.

In the former category are:

- cultural self-awareness (of one's own cultural positions, preconceptions, stereotypes, values etc.);
- willingness to suspend judgement and to tolerate ambiguity;
- curiosity about other cultures, and about cultural "otherness";
- a desire to learn more about different symbolic-cultural universes;
- 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:

- linguistic and socio-linguistic knowledge and skills;
- methodological and didactic competencies pertaining to the teaching of Italian as a second language.

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, particularly those in the category of "intercultural competencies pertaining specifically to primary school teaching".

The findings of this research make some sense of the data regarding the delays in academic progress and the language difficulties experienced by students from a migrant background (ISMU-MIUR, 2015; MIUR, 2014). As the Ministry of Education has stated, inadequate knowledge of the Italian language continues to be an obstacle for students from a migrant background. "[F]or a variety of reasons [our educational system] does not guarantee the automatic development of the linguistic abilities required to make progress in secondary-level education" (MIUR, 2014: 5). The fact that only 7 of the 30 teachers interviewed – all of whom have years of experience with multicultural classes – had acquired linguistic and sociolinguistic competencies, is surely one of these "reasons". Consider that there persists among a number of the teachers interviewed – who, we repeat, have taught multicultural classes for years – the notion that migrant parents should speak Italian with their children to reinforce their learning of this second language (28P-18; 13P-23; 8P-8).
Acquiring I.C. relating to L2 teaching turns out to be a key factor in promoting learning and integration among students of n.I.n., a point that has been made by a number of primary school children themselves (Dusi et al., 2014).

The Ministry itself is well aware of these shortcomings, since it states: "It is possible that [in the Italian school system], despite the common practice of placing foreign students in lower years than their direct contemporaries, and the many examples of foreign students taking longer to complete school due to having to repeat years, they are still not adequately supported in learning the sort of Italian required in an academic context. As such, the difficulties they face also accumulate in other disciplines, becoming more acute as time progresses. It is quite evident that hopes of limiting these delays in academic progress are closely linked to the efficacy of language teaching" (MIUR, 2014:15-16). Furthermore, the level to which teachers possess *cognitive-educational intercultural competencies* is not any more encouraging, despite the fact that it is crucial, today, for teachers "to be acquainted with basic insights from cultural anthropology, culture learning theory and intercultural communication" (Sercu, 2002:152).

6. Discussions and Conclusions

The inclusion of people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds has become one of the main

challenges of pluralistic and democratic societies. School is one of the most important places where this diversity is visible, and where this challenge can be addressed and managed efficiently. However, it is also one of the most opportune environments in which to project a country's culture. Showing an awareness of this dual function, European educational policies have, since 1984, recognised that providing teachers with "intercultural" training is a key intervention in the pursuit of integration and social cohesion (Council of Europe, 1984).

In Italy, for all that the multicultural character of the country and its school system is already well engrained, the academic trajectories of students from migrant backgrounds betray a situation of disadvantage and stunted progress (MIUR, 2014; ISMU-MIUR, 2015). That 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 small institutions, in which fewer resources are available (in terms both of personnel and funding) and many teachers still perceive a child of non-Italian nationality as a problem.

With a view to gathering data that might assist in understanding which factors contribute to the disadvantages faced by students of n.I.n., this research has sought to reveal the terms in which teachers who have taught in multicultural, primary-level classes for a number of years most commonly represent diversity, albeit, in terms of the number of participants, the sample used is non-representative. The investigation was also designed to generate information regarding the behaviours, expertise and operational skills that the same group of teachers employs in teaching multicultural classes, and to determine whether the practices they describe indicate the possession of intercultural competencies.

In terms of how the teachers represented "diversity" and their possession, or otherwise, of intercultural competencies, the study paints a heterogeneous picture, with some responding to a changing school population by acquiring new intercultural competencies, others seemingly stuck with an outdated outlook.

When it comes to representations of diversity, some teachers consider it a "normal" aspect of every student and every class. Others refer to the presence of some form of difficulty in learning. With others still, diversity is represented in cultural-ethnic terms. A number of diverse representations were widespread among the teachers, an indication of the presence among them of a heterogeneous way of relating to others and their worlds (with a greater of lesser degree of intercultural sensitivity – Bennett, 1986; Olson & Kroeger, 2001) and a varying capacity to handle stereotypes and differing points of view (Wilson, 1996)

The analysis of the teachers' accounts paints a composite picture in which a third of the teachers interviewed demonstrated competence in their use of professional expertise – the result of rereading their role and approach as a teacher in dialogue with a new educational situation, that being the school population of a multicultural society. These teachers describe a practice woven together from investigation, study and reflection. Furthermore, they use the "transformative capacity" that they derive from their competence to operate more freely in the school system in which they work, and to attempt to overcome the limitations imposed by institutional structures (Giddens, 1987). Many others seem overwhelmed by limitations, which might be categorised thus: a. *structural limitations* (class sizes, the lack of resources such as mediators, linguistic experts, time devoted to language support, etc.); b. *social-political limitations* (the tasks requested of them, the cuts that schools have been subject to for years); c. *cultural limitations* (social-cultural changes, lack of cultural awareness); d. *professional limitations* (insufficient or inadequate intercultural competence). Indeed, teachers find themselves, today, working in ever more complex situations, in a context in which resources – in terms of both personnel and funding – have been cut.

All the same, many teachers lack adequate training. Most teachers have not received specific intercultural training. What is more, in-service training, by which teachers are able to bring their development up to date and equip themselves to reflect on their own practices, is not obligatory. Thus, there is a significant proportion of teachers who are not investing in in-service training. Some of these demonstrate an inability to manage stereotypes and prejudices, and are ill-equipped to develop their own cultural self-awareness. Nor do they appear to have adopted a research stance that would allow them to acquire the intercultural competencies defined here as "second level". As a result, a significant number of these teachers appear to lack the intercultural competencies required to manage increasingly heterogeneous classes, in the context of situations in which they are required to address a variety of tasks for which may feel inadequately prepared.

In terms of these primary teachers' intercultural competencies, the greatest problem that this research brings to light is the issue of social-linguistic competencies and those associated with teaching Italian as a second language. A sizeable portion of the teachers, 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 for learning (Moro, 2010), and to 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).

However, the onus is on the institutions in which these individuals work, and national education policies, to engage and motivate them. In the academic literature, a large number of scholars (Aguado, 2003; DeJaegherea & Zhanga, 2008; Cushner, 2012; Leiva, 2011, 2012; Gómez, Medina & Gil, 2011; Marx & Moss, 2011; Huber & Reynolds, 2014; Portera & Dusi, 2010; Santos-Rego, Cernadas-Ríos & Lorenzo-Moledo, 2014;), when discussing teachers' intercultural competencies, affirm that the acquisition of such competencies should be among the principal goals pursued in teacher-training (pre-service and in-service alike), since they form an indispensable element of the teacher's professional skill set in multicultural contexts.

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