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Part 2: Pupils, parents and teachers in a multicultural context


**Immigrant Parent Perceptions About School:**
**An Italian-Spanish Comparative Study.**

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**Abstract**

In order to offer an adequate educational program to foreign children, it is necessary to understand the world which they and their families come from, and to create a dialogue with the latter, the responsibility for which lies with the school. It was with this perspective that an exploratory survey with selected immigrant families in Italy (6) and Spain (6) was carried out, in order to gather descriptions concerning expectations, lived experiences and representations regarding the world of school. The reason for carrying out an initial exploratory survey that begins with immigrant parents was twofold: knowledge-gathering and political-transformational. As per knowledge-gathering, the intent was to investigate from within, to give parents a voice regarding their representations, lived experiences and expectations of school. From a political-transformational point of view, interviews were used as a generative space for reflection, where it was made possible for them to recover certain implicit elements which are at work in a family’s actions, and for the gathering of further knowledge and its diffusion. Analysis highlighted recurring and transversal elements within the statements of the 12 families interviewed, and offered ideas for further research aimed at rethinking teachers’ and institutions’ ways of acting.

**Presentation of the Study**

Besides the traditional developmental tasks characteristic to the family context, foreign families are also called upon to enter upon processes that develop family ties – *filiation* – along with those of belonging to the larger society – *affiliation*; they are forced to acquire awareness of those aspects that remain implicit in situations of symbolic-cultural sharing, to reflect on what is the best possible way of acting for these children who grow up in a mixed culture, pressed as they are to construct a network out of a tangle. Affiliation is of crucial importance in the life of every family nucleus and for each member, which explains, at least partially, the often difficult role of emigration.

Among parents’ competencies singled out by Pourtois et al. (Pourtois, Desmet, and Nimal, 2000) as protection indicators (affective and structural competencies for positive self-development), those which are most exposed to immigration erosion processes are, in fact, those competencies linked to social integration. This type of family competency (presenting
oneself as an adult with positive socialization; having a sense of competency; keeping up
harmonic family communications; developing a network of social relationships and fostering
within the child a sense of social control) includes connecting up with the outer world.
Indeed, good treatment by teachers means having the ability to foresee, perceive and fulfill
fundamental needs of children in relation to customs and traditions of the community one
belongs to (Pourtois, Desmet and Lahaye, 2006). However, successful integration into this
community by the family is a lengthy process, one that requires dignified social-economic
conditions, and above all, mutual recognition between the new country and its new members.
School represents the first institution to confront the context of arrival and, as such, the school
is called upon to meet the immigrant families and follow along together on the important path
of growth of their children. It has the task of offering an educational programme over time
that is adequate for children from here and from outside of the country. In order to do this it is
necessary to understand the world where they and their families come from and seek out a
dialogue with the latter; whose responsibility lies with the school. “Growing up in exile is a
challenge. We don’t mean exile as lived out by children, but above all that experience which
parents give to their children” (Moro, 2002, p. 177). Taking care of the parents mean taking
care of the children (Pourtois and Desmet, 2007).

In the context of this knowledge, research activity was carried out during 2006-2007
(and continues at present) both in Spain and Italy. An exploratory survey with selected
immigrant families in Italy (6) and Spain (6) was carried out, in order to gather descriptions
concerning expectations, lived experiences and representations regarding the world of school.
The underlying impetus of this research was to give a voice to families from elsewhere, with
the intent of gathering data which would provide information on expectations, representations, problems, and unexpressed needs which characterize immigrant family
relationships with schools. Moreover, it was felt necessary that the research should be
structured in such a way that would permit a comparative analysis of the data gathered in
order to get at the essence of the phenomenon: the relationship with primary schools from the
point of view of selected immigrant families. In substance, this primarily means conducting
an exploratory survey that aims at singling out any recurring, similar and particular events,
along with new themes for research that would permit structuring of further qualitative
research on a larger scale (for numbers of families countries involved).

Structure of Research

A phenomenological approach claims to go out into the field “without” pre-existing theories.
This activates the principle of contextualization: to create a theory that starts from the context
that pays specific attention to the quality with which things appear. The regulatory criteria of
this research consists of going towards an “interpretative description” (Van Manen, 1990,
p.17). The aim is to single out and delineate what is essential in the investigated object
(Cohen and Omery, 1994) and to discern the world of meanings that the object-experience
takes on for the subjects involved in the study. The objective is that of acquiring an in-depth
understanding of phenomena through a penetrating description of the way in which they are
perceived by the subject who experiences it (Van Manen, 1990).

Eliciting points of view from the main subjects (who become research participants),
their way of living through a given experience and the meaning they attach to this, along with
their related expectations, casts a light on the object of research (Cohen, Kahan and Steeves,
2000). This is why it is necessary to encounter the men and women where they carry out their
daily lives (Van Manen, 1990). From this perspective, the interviews constitute “the sources
of evidence” as to the experience of the participants (Giorgi, 1985). Through this
methodological structure, the subjects are able to express their opinions, expectations and
feelings, and transform them into one of the fundamental means that “accesses knowledge, beliefs, rituals, the life of that society or culture and to obtain data in their very language of the individuals” (Rodriguez et al. 1996, p. 168).

The type of interview that we chose to use was a “semi-structured” one, which uses open-ended and partially open-ended questions that not only allow for freedom of expression on behalf of the subjects, but also for the exploration of the research objective in all its fundamental aspects. One of the risks of this type of interview is that researchers may miss out on some of the basic objectives of the research (Flick, 2004; Stake, 1998). In order to avoid this, we worked out an interview outline where the questions addressed, in a concrete way, three essential themes: school, teachers and the role of immigrant parents in schools.

In order to investigate the first category, we used questions concerning expectations that immigrant parents have towards schools in their new country, the differences and similarities which they notice compared to their original country, their evaluations of school, and expectations they have with regards to their children’s academic success. As per the image that immigrant parents have of teachers, we tried to understand how they described teachers in their countries of origin, what they meant by their relationship with them, and what type of evaluation they give to this relationship when they run into problems of communications with teachers... Parents’ participation within schools was studied by analyzing the role that they themselves declared to have in the education of their children, the differences they find in this task between men and women, and concepts of scholastic participation ...

In the elaboration, realization and analysis of the interviews, orientations and advice of various experts (Vázquez and Angolo, 2003; Goetz and LeCompte, 1988; Stake, 1998) were considered regarding the various themes, and took into account the environmental conditions in which the interviews took place, the writing out of the taped interviews as quickly as possible and confronting the information with the interviewees.

The interviews were carried out with families of different nationalities from different foreign countries who have at least one child attending primary school. We decided to focus our attention on Primary Schools because in both countries (Italy, Spain) most of the immigrant students attend these types of schools, and they are similar to the schools available in their countries of origin; this made it easier to compare concepts immigrant parents have as to the relationship with schools. By doing this, we tried to avoid the pitfalls that normally occur when putting together data from nursery schools of different countries; for example, in Morocco, these schools are not always available in all regions.

The families who were interviewed were selected by the schools using previously identified criteria: the ability of parents to communicate in the language of their new country in order to guarantee full comprehension of the questions posed, along with an ability to communicate. The nationalities are different in the first exploratory phase of the research, because it was considered important to gather data that would lead to the essence of the phenomena.

The interviews in Spain were carried out with one family from each of the following countries: Morocco, Algeria, Poland, Ecuador, Lithuania and Romania. Interviews in Italy were conducted with two Moroccan families, and one from each of the following: Egypt, Nigeria, Romania and India. Interviews were carried out in areas that had a significant presence of foreign students in both Italy and Spain.

Analysis Phases

Analysis of family descriptions were carried out according to the following steps, in accordance with Giorgi’s phenomenological approach (1985):
- reading the texts in order to get the sense of the whole
- finding significant statements about the experience, focused on how the individual experiences the topic
- working out a label that corresponds to each significant statement
- grouping them into meaningful units

Analysis was carried out through a series of progressive and heuristic actions which repeat themselves over the course of the process (Mortari, 2007, p. 194). In order to remain faithful to the phenomenological approach, it is essential that the research reports the words of the participants as recorded, in order to support elaborated theorization, and so as to testify to the effort – by the researchers – to respect the phenomena in the evidence itself. In other words, it starts from the awareness that evidence is to be obtained from a community of speakers. From this perspective, the protocol elaborated for the structure of the interviews with immigrant parents was applied in a flexible way, by always listening to the interests and contributions the participants give. These contributions were considered also in the data analysis phases, by restructuring the initial system of analysis categories. As a consequence, new categories were created, such as that concerning the necessity felt by parents to interact with the school environment.

Main Results

The phenomenological approach is that which pays close attention to human experience and to systems of meanings that interviewees elaborate, to underlying convictions in their ways of acting, to expectations which influence their evaluations of others’ ways of acting; as a result, this approach brought out certain basic perspectives. Through the process of analysing descriptions from parents of other countries, and whose children attend Italian or Spanish primary schools, it was possible to highlight certain categories which provide useful information that furthers knowledge on the complex relationship between teachers and foreign parents. These are categories that are pertinent to the themes under study in the interviews: school, teachers, the role of parents in school and their needs.

School As Seen By Immigrant Families

In both Italy and Spain, parents build up large expectations towards school, which they perceive as an institution that is going to allow their children to integrate fully in the new country. A recurring element in the descriptions gathered from the Italian and Spanish interviews was the attributing of great value to education and the desire to help with their children’s educational process – in some cases up to university (especially in Spain) (Aparicio, Veredas, 2003) – even by making big sacrifices. School was perceived as place where effort pays off, where they will have their expectations of recognition and social integration realized. Their children’s success at school also represented validation of their choice to immigrate (Terrén and Carrasco, 2007).

All families interviewed hold out great hope regarding the educational future of their children and subsequent integration into the work world. School is recognized as a functional instrument for the most part, even if some parents did underline its formative and cultural roles.

Opinions About Teachers

In both Spain and Italy, parents, in general, said they were satisfied with their children’s teachings, and they recognized teachers’ willingness to make themselves available in helping children through the slow process of the latter’s integration. In this sense, parents have a positive image of their children’s teachers, and they underline the interest that the teachers show for the children. Knowing how to gain teachers’ acceptance facilitated their children’s integration, and made them able to establish trusting relationships and mutual recognition.

“Anyway, I like it here ... because it’s different, ... I like everything ... they talk to the children and can ... and can keep the children very close, which makes them love school, they go voluntarily, let’s say they play with the teachers, they don’t do it like that in our country”. (Italian interview).

Analysis of the interviews highlighted the wide-spread point of reference for immigrant parents which indicates that they are used to a different concept of adult authority as expressed by a different educational model. They do not seem to share the marginal role assigned to adult authority in the educational model adopted at school and they retain that correct adult authority (respect and discipline) in school is to be attributed for the most part to the parental model adopted by Italian and Spanish parents.

“Yes, yes a lot of difference! What is school? It is a place where children go to ... how do you say it ... to get an education ... education of studying to be able to read, right? To be able to write, to express oneself, but it’s also that of behaviour, ... am I making myself clear? This is what school is, not only to learn how to study, read, write, to do everything. Also for behaviour (...). But they, school cannot, they can’t, why? Because a lot of parents don’t see it that way! You teach them to write and I’ll teach them how to behave, because parents do not want teachers yelling at their child or punishing them which they don’t agree” (Italian interview).

Moreover, along with the positive judgement of teachers, who they say have helped them a lot, in Italy some parents speak of discriminatory experiences and of unfair handling of the class by some teachers, because school

“doesn’t always give foreigners what they deserve” (Italian interview).

In Spain, unfair treatment does not regard teaching, but instead that aspect of school that deals with services concerning social education, in particular, what the school has to offer students, in terms of cafeterias and extracurricular activities. Muslim parents do not believe that all their religious principles will be adequately covered; others nurture doubts about whether information regarding extracurricular activities organized by the school is passed onto all families: the very same activities that they declare inadequate for true fostering of their children’s integration.

“I don’t trust the cafeteria and those things and not even Mother wants us to eat here. I don’t trust the food.” (Spanish interview).

“For example, in Lithuania there are dances for the children. (...) Here there are only gym sports” (Spanish interview).
One critical aspect of the relationship with Italian schools is seen again in the difficulty of meeting with teachers in a such short time, beyond the traditional encounters which are required. Some foreign parents feel the need to be able to contact Italian teachers in very short times whenever they feel it is necessary, as they were able to do in their country of origin.

"When something happened in Rumania, they called the parents to school and the parents could go to the school when they wanted to and ask "I want to speak with the teacher" and that was all. Here you have to make an appointment for that. Something happens now today, they give me an appointment for the day after tomorrow" (Italian interview).

In many cases, the perception of critical elements or those that should be improved at school seem to be mediated with the comparison of their country of origin's school. Indeed, those parents who experienced a more rigid school system judge Italian teachers to be overly available, and they attribute responsibility for the school-family relationship to parents.

"Well ... the foreign parent must never wait for teachers to come to them and to say to you: "on day X there is a meeting" Ok? And it can happen that they don’t show up on that day ... do you understand? A foreign parent must be more involved than the child .... To go to the teachers and ask ... (...) My people who says I can’t speak Italian with the school is because they don’t care ... it’s not because the school hasn’t made itself available ... The school has always made itself available for me" (Italian Interview).

Instead, immigrant parents living in Spain judge and recognize positively the different opportunities teachers offer, where they can exchange experiences and information on the educational process of their children. However, it is necessary to specify that the Spanish schools where interviews took place were known for their organizational flexibility. On the other hand, some immigrant parents in Spain accuse teachers of being excessively distant in their relationships with parents. Some families from Northern Africa experienced cold and distant behaviour by Spanish teachers, when compared to the behaviour of teachers in their own countries of origin.

"Here I will never make friends with a teacher. The teachers there are normal people, it’s not like they believe they are better. It’s not like people in Spain, that way, but like the people of the country, there there’s the teacher and that’s it” (Spanish interview).

Explanations by immigrant parents concerning these episodes were not specifically expressed in terms of discrimination, but a similar interpretation was discernible.

"Like the first day when we arrived and they stopped me at the door of the school ... / They stopped me because they didn’t let me go in and I was bringing some things for the child and I say we are ... / I felt ... it was obvious I didn’t like it” (Spanish interview).

**Foreign Parents At School**

All parents declare that they regularly take part in teacher-parent conferences because they see them as important moments where they can accompany their children in the success of their scholastic careers. Participating in formal occasions of speaking with teachers is not just the exclusive task of only one of the two parents. Although the choice is mostly influenced by
their working lives; however, it is usually made—when conditions permit—by the parent with the higher educational level. In fact, what emerges is that it is necessary that the more educated parent be the one who has the relationship with teachers. However, when both teachers have a similar educational level, it is usually the mother who takes care of her children’s education and instruction.

Parents are most interested in the specific information teachers can give them as to their children’s educational progress (problems, difficulties, needs ...). In fact, in most cases the information received from teachers regarding their children’s progress is deemed essential for exercising a form of control over their children (whether requested homework is being completed).

Some families, especially those from Northern Africa, think of their presence in school in negative terms. They think it would express a situation of difficulty with their children-students. In fact, in their countries of origin, they are required to show up at their children’s school only when their children have done something bad.

“Teachers have to notify us when they need to. If there’s no need, why would they call us? For nothing. That way, you feel calmer, right? / For example, if a child has behaved badly to the need to notify the father to tell him” (Spanish interview).

Immigrant parents do not seem to think that it is necessary to have other forms of participation in the school life of their children. This seems to reflect an instrumental type of concept of participation at school that focuses on the process of children’s instruction. Parents seem to attribute a central role to school concerning their children’s education, whereas for the instruction of their children, they see themselves in the role of executor or controlling force for indications and requests coming from school.

“Always in agreement with what the school says. Something goes wrong teacher wrote on school notebook look that Paola did something today like this so it isn’t good, under it says to sign, so signed, under I to write that next time not to do like that excuse me, she signs under that it is okay. When she says to me warning, I to give one for her too!” (Italian interview).

However, a question emerges from the analysis; whether, during parent-teacher conferences, parents are to be considered an active part of a dialogue, or as beneficiaries of what the teachers have to say. Most parents seem to think that they have the role of controlling and confirming requests from the school. In both Spain and Italy, parents rarely take the initiative of contacting the school.

Parents And School: Requests And Needs

Foreign parents are aware of their primary role for the educational aspect of their children, while they attribute to schools the role of instruction as its fundamental aspect. They think that it is the parents’ task to teach discipline and respect for others. For this reason, they believe that much of the school’s climate depends on the type of education they receive from their families, more so than from teachers. The prevailing concept of the parent’s role is rooted in ideas of control, respect, and discipline that are required if a child is to be educated correctly. In this sense, in both Spain and Italy, immigrant families think that it is necessary to pay much more attention to issues of respect for adults, and that teachers should exercise greater authority in class and respect for the rules of living together.
"My son is very nervous and the teacher also rebuking him. The teacher asks my son to sit down but he does not pay attention to her in Algeria he must sit down, I have already told the teacher many times, you must punish him" (Spanish interview).

"Listen teachers, I do not send my child to school just to learn to read and write, ok? If you have a little time, while they are playing, see how they behave... if my child behaves badly, you must punish him!" (Italian interview).

Conferences with teachers are considered important and they must not be missed, but they also represent a tangible moment of unease. During the course of interviews, it is rare that parents take it upon themselves to express their own points of view, to make requests or proposals (difficulty with children, perplexities, etc.). Parents claim their reasons for silence are: difficulty in understanding the topics spoken of; an insufficient grasp of their new country's language; a fear of rejection and the related worry that this might affect their children. A passive attitude is prevalent.

"You feel ashamed but you think that people think “this person doesn’t know how to talk and he comes here to …” (Spanish interview).

"Sometimes I think that if I state my opinion on something that is not good and I wouldn't want to hear them say to me “this no”, so for this reason I prefer not to talk and I keep my mouth shut” (Spanish interview).

We are always that maybe language problem, all the people does not know what they spoken, a little. Fear too ... in that way. We to do only but went, only this. (...) Only listened. That's all. (Italian interview).

Don't talk to teachers about D.'s problems because I was scared that they would react badly after... (Italian interview).

Many foreign parents feel the need to receive more information on the workings and organization of the school system and on student grants their children can apply for. In both cases, information must be given clearly and in a precise manner (better orally than written).

Conclusions

The analysis brought out recurring and transversal elements from what the 12 interviewed families had to say, and offered new ideas for further research and ways on how to reconsider teachers' and institutional actions. Accordingly, the evidence first seems to highlight the need for teachers to reflect on the investment that foreign families generally make with school. This awareness should induce educational institutions to foster activity which allows these parents to transform and enrich their vision of school. It lies with the school to show these parents the educational value of school, especially within the context of a complex society. From the stories of the immigrant families emerges the image of teachers who are scrupulous in carrying out the tasks assigned to them by schools (literacy of younger generations, diffusion of knowledge and acquisition of competencies). In most cases they are seen as
competent, including in those areas that concern relational aspects of school life, even if some discrimination was felt.

Other evidence which comes out of the analysis of the interviews concerns the influence that experiences and representations that each participant has on expectations that are harboured with regards to school and on the evaluation of the institution and its teachers, so much so that similar behaviour can even be the cause of contrasting opinions.

Teacher-parent conferences are retained important by foreign parents. However, the interviews tell of conferences that did not seem to make room for dialogue. These stories highlight the necessity, on the part of the school, to "Come to recognize and respect a family's subjective world as it affects the behaviour and development of a particular child. Rather than to fit that world into what the assessor's professional community identifies as 'objective' and 'valid' reality" (Mc Dermott, p. 129).

In a pluralistic society, it seems necessary that a teacher must look for a model of good parenting that is based on understanding diverse social contexts and parental goals.

In order to achieve these aims, it is essential that intercultural training is given to teachers, to the point that they have acquired capacities for reaching out to others, in a climate based on mutual recognition and on trust, so that parents can express their points of view without fear of reprisal.

Organization of educational institutions, and their management both on the political and normative levels and on practical and scholastic levels, influences the real relationship that occurs between school and family. This variable seems to indicate that another Italian and Spanish study would be opportune, one in which normative and structural organizations of the two school systems and the type of participation fostered by parents are compared. It should not be forgotten that teachers and parents have a determining role in shaping the relationship between family and school. In this sense, we would like to underline the value and incidence of micro political actions of each school context, which can help transform and improve the family/school relationship. Beyond being able to continue analyzing the variables already indicated in this study, we would also like to be able to initiate new phenomenological research which would allow us to identify actions that would make it possible to improve models of communications, coordination and participation between family and school.

References


