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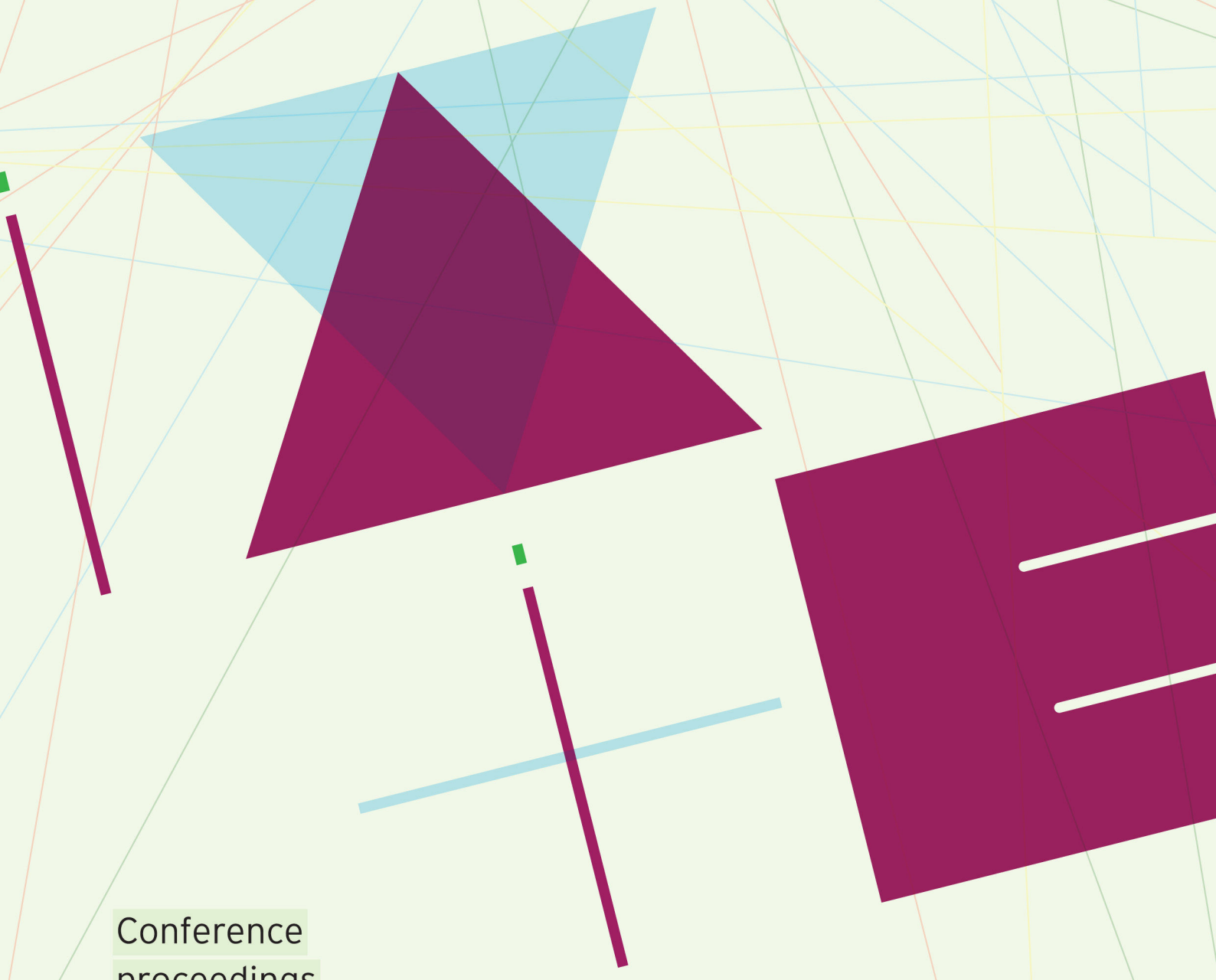
Unity and disunity, connections and separations: intercultural education as a movement for promoting multiple identities, social inclusion and transformation



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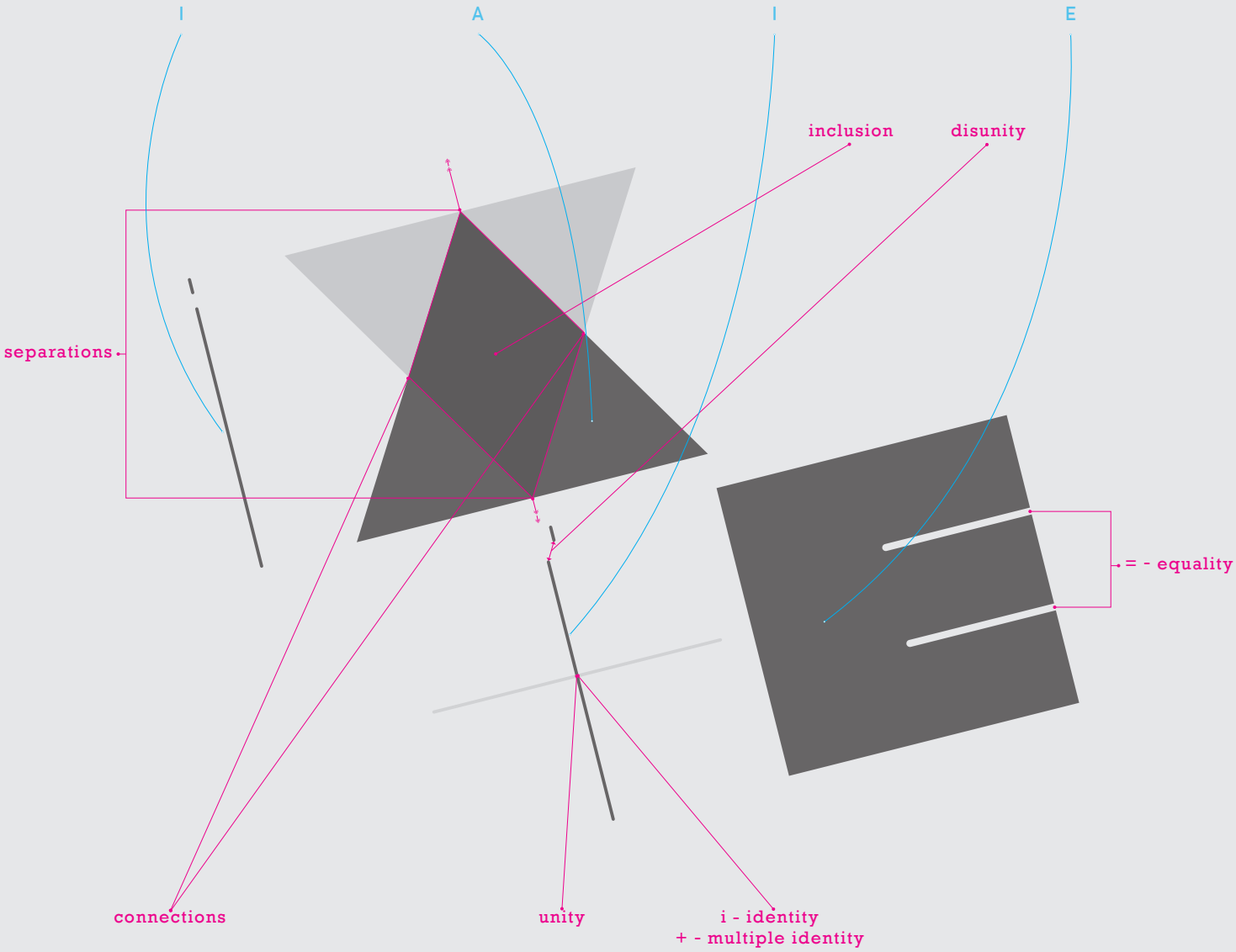

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Transforming schools through teacher-child relationship

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Abstract

Nowadays one of the greatest educational challenges European school has to face is to ensure to foreign pupils the same educational opportunities granted to native peers. This is an essential first step to achieve a real, tangible social inclusion of these children and promote the richness they bring along with their cultural identities and their peculiar histories.

Italian school has moved just few steps in this direction, as the emerging issue concerning with the academic success of foreign students dramatically suggests. In fact, these children appear more vulnerable than native peers and encounter more failures in their educational path. Recent studies have pointed out the key role that relationship between teacher and foreign pupils can play in preserving these children from negative outcomes. According to these evidences, in order to support the relationship and improve its protective effect, the researchers have to focus their attention on the representations that teachers have of these students and their learning difficulties.

However, so far only few researches have investigated this subject. Therefore this paper aims to examine the teachers' peculiar point of view through the analysis of a case study conducted in a primary school in the province of Como, in the North of Italy. This qualitative research contributes to increase our knowledge about this valuable, although disregarded subject. It also provides school educators and psychologists with useful advices that can guide their action in support of teacher-child relationship.

Introduction

After being a country of emigration for more than a century, Italy has recently become a country of immigration.

At the first of January 2012, in Italy the number of legal immigrants (non-EU) is 3.673.724 (7% of general population in 2011) [Istat, 2012]. 23,9% of them are less than 18 years old and 60% of these children with an immigrant background was born in Italy.

In the light of these trends, schools accurately reflect demographic changes experienced by Italian society [Tramma, 2008]. In fact, the presence of students who have migrated directly or indirectly is constantly increasing. In the academic year 2010/2011, students with foreign parents were 711.064, equal to 7,9% of the entire school population (in 1997 they only accounted for 0,7%). Their presence is greatest in primary school, were they are 9% of those who attend, although in some schools more than 40% of the students comes from immigrant families [Ismu, 2012].

These data show a steady increase in the number of students with an immigrant background in the Italian school system. The proportions and the unexpected rapidity that characterize this change have raised many concerns among public opinion [Gavazzi & Zampella, 2009].

However, the aspect that should mostly worry concerns the academic success of these children [Favaro, 2002]. According to data provided by the Ministry of Education, University and Research [Miur, 2009], the rate of students that successfully passed is more than 1 percentage point lower for foreign pupils in primary school. The gap is exacerbated in higher educational levels, reaching 10% in secondary school and 16% in high school.

Equally dramatic are data about grade retention [Ismu, 2012]: in primary school 17,4% of foreign children attend a class lower in regard of their age. The rate is also higher in secondary (46,0%) and high school (68,9%).

Theoretical framework

Against this background, many Authors, trying to analyse the reasons behind the difficulties shown by foreign pupils, have pointed out the socio-cultural and especially linguistic disadvantage that these children have to confront [Cornoldi, 1999; Folgheraiter & Tressoldi, 2003; Murineddu, Duca & Cornoldi, 2006; Cornoldi and Tressoldi, 2007].

However, as Gavazzi and Zampella [2009] argue, it would be reductive to attribute all the responsibility to an imperfect linguistic competence. Therefore, many researchers have tried to look beyond the linguistic disadvantage, considering another element, often surprisingly overlooked, that could contribute to explain the difficulties that foreign students encounter in their learning path: the migration [Moro, 2001; Selleri, 2005; De La Noë, Sharara & Moro, 2009; Moro, Rezzoug & Baubet, 2009; Pastori, 2010]. Migration may represent a potentially traumatic event1, not only for immigrant pupils, but also for those children (the second generation) that live this experience through their families' ideas, words and emotions (a condition described as a "transmitted trauma") [De La Noë, Sharara & Moro, 2009].

In fact, these children live on the border between two worlds, two cultures and often cannot find a support even in their parents, disoriented themselves by the cross-cultural situation [Moro, 2001; Di Pentima, 2006; Jabbar, 2009; Moro, Rezzoug & Baubet, 2009]. Therefore, migration – and all the challenges that it implies – may represent a factor of psychological vulnerability, which can interfere with the learning process and the academic success.

Therefore, as De La Noë, Sharara and Moro [2009] suggest, this vulnerability doesn't necessarily lead to learning difficulties and failures. In fact, vulnerability shouldn't be considered in a deterministic sense, since it refers to risk domain [Pianta, 2001; Favaro, 2002; Pastori, 2010]: "everything is precarious, but everything remains possible" [Moro, 2001, p. 101]. Therefore, despite their possible fragility, some children can achieve positive outcomes and become successful, showing their resilience2.

Moreover, Moro suggest that resilience lies in the dynamic interaction between children and their context and that is crucial for these pupils to find in their social environment figures capable to support them [Moro, 2001; De La Noë, Sharara & Moro, 2009]. Teachers may play an important role in this supporting process [Moro, 2001; Pianta, 2001].

Recently, many studies have pointed out the key role that a positive relationship (characterized by intimacy, warmth and mutual trust) between teacher and children can play in preserving pupils, especially more vulnerable ones, from negative outcomes [Pianta et al., 1995; Bombi & Scittarelli, 1998; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta, 2001, Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Decker et al., 2007; Baker et al., 2008; Renati & Zanetti, 2008].

Furthermore, many authors underline that the protective effect of this relationship has a deeper value for foreign students. In fact, teachers could not only support the emotional needs of these children, but could also help them face the complex and peculiar challenges that the migratory experience makes them deal with [Conchas, 2001; Honora, 2003; Green et al., 2008; Suárez-Orozco, Rhodes & Milburn, 2009; Suárez-Orozco, Pimentel & Martin, 2009].

According to these evidences, it's crucial to support teacher-child relationship and, in order to reach this aim, the researchers have to focus their attention on the representations that teachers have of these students and their learning difficulties.

In fact, as the American psychologist Robert Pianta [2001] suggest – referring to the theoretical framework provided by the Developmental System Theory and by the Attachment Theory – relationships

[1] The term "trauma" has to be considered in its psychoanalytic meaning: an event that induces necessary adaptive reorganizations and, therefore, may be a source of new opportunities or greater difficulties as well [Moro, 2001]

[2] The psychological concept of "resilience" refers to an individual's tendency to cope with stress and adversity [Moro, 2001; Pastori, 2010].

are complex and multifaceted systems involving two individuals and, in order to enhance the positive effect of teacher-student relationship and treasure its benefits, it's worth to focus on the representations that the teacher has about the student and their relationship. In fact, programs aimed to change the representational level have proved to be more effective in producing positive interactional patterns between teachers and pupils than programs focused only on teachers' behavior [Pianta, 2001]. Specifically, it's important to help teachers to gain a more flexible, detailed and balanced representation of the child.

Therefore, as Pianta emphasizes [2001], understanding what kind of representation teachers have about foreign pupils is the first step to change their behavior and to promote a more supportive and protective relationship.

However, so far only few researches have investigated this subject [Bettinelli & Demetrio, 1992; Moscati & Volonterio, 1998; Bastianoni & Melotti, 2001; Selleri, 2005; Bettinelli, 2007; Ortiz Cobo, 2008].

The research was thought as a contribution to increase our knowledge about this valuable, although disregarded subject.

Methodology

This qualitative research aims to examine the teachers' peculiar point of view through the analysis of an ethnographic case study. A phenomenological approach is adopted, taking the complexity of the real world into account and finding adequate tools to get closer to subjects' experience. Phenomenological research is oriented to answer questions of meaning and can be useful when research aims at understanding an experience as it is lived and perceived by the participants.

Data were gathered from 20 teachers who worked in a primary school in the province of Como, in the North of Italy. The investigation aimed to understand what kind of representations teachers have of students with an immigrant background and of their learning difficulties.

Individual interviews were accompanied by a focus group interview in order to see if the discussion among participants could stimulate new reflections and considerations.

In addition, an anonymous open-question questionnaire was proposed to 8 teachers that could take part neither in interviews nor in focus group interview. This device was adopted not only to get an overall view of the culture of the school, but also to avoid undue selection on materials collected.

In fact, it was possible that more collaborative teachers, showing a greater interest in the topics discussed, also had the opportunity to develop richer and more integrated representations about foreign children. Conversely, teachers who were more reluctant to participate in research could have different points of view and experiences. In this perspective, guarantee for anonymity was thought to allow maximum freedom of expression, dispelling any resistance to express even negative attitudes towards students with an immigrant background.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data obtained from interviews and questionnaires were analyzed through a thematic content analysis.

Results

Representational profiles

Analysis of the data led to identification of three main representational profiles.

The subtractive view

Three teachers seem to see foreign students mainly as a problem. This representation is deeply linked to the difficulties they encounter in their interaction with these children:

> Sometimes a high presence of foreign students really slows down the didactic program. When a foreign pupil is introduced [into the class] in the middle of the academic year and he doesn't know a word in Italian either, it's really difficult to communicate both with the child and with his family. [Questionnaire 8]

> In my opinion, when you have a foreign student in your class, well, you are alone and you have to hold this hot potato. (...) It's a problem [M., interview]

The feeling of not counting on adequate support from the school system and of not having a proper training increases this perception:

> [School] lacks staff in order to support class teachers, which are often in big trouble. [Questionnaire 3]

Moreover, foreign families seem uncooperative and not really interested in their children achievement:

> Oftentimes the parents delegate everything to the school. They don't think that they also have an important role at home in helping their children in their homework. I think that they don't attach the proper importance to school [Questionnaire 8]

Feeling abandoned and helpless ("[I feel] a sense of abandonment" [Questionnaire 3]), these teachers cannot see the opportunities that children from elsewhere offer to them and to the class:

> The idea I've developed is that so far foreign students haven't been a source of enrichment for the school. [Questionnaire 8]

Furthermore, this subtractive perspective affects their representation of foreign pupils' learning difficulties, that they consider as a result of the children's shortcomings:

> The greatest difficulties, in my opinion, come from the language, even for those who were born in Italy and lives here. [...] I've never met a foreign child who shone on others. [...] In fact, in my experience, foreign children have a harder time than others, well, I notice more learning difficulties [...]. Other pupils have a gear over them, definitely. [M., interview]

Overall, these words reflect a rigid, partial and subtractive view of foreign students, that, stressing the negative dimension, not only prevents these teachers to seize the opportunities that children from elsewhere carry into school, but even to feel empathy for them and their families.

Teachers, indeed, appear confused and overwhelmed by a situation that seems to go well beyond the resources available to them. They seem so much absorbed in their own problems to be able to notice how much for these children can be difficult to grow up between two cultures [Moro, 2001].

At the same time, ascribing the possible learning difficulties these children may face only to supposed students' shortcomings, they fail to understand how the teachers themselves could be important in supporting these pupils in their learning path.

The balanced view

While the first group of teachers described so far, referring to their foreign students, exclusively emphasizes the negative dimension; a second, larger group has a more balanced view. These teachers don't uncritically deny the problems connected with the presence of these pupils, imputing them essentially to two factors.

First, they consider that the poor or lacking knowledge of the Italian language represents a serious obstacle to the interaction between children and teachers. Then, the relationship with the families of these students is recognized as a further difficulty. In fact, sometimes immigrant families have a different idea of the school and of the roles that parents and teachers should play in children education.

However, what differentiates this second profile from the one shown above is the ability to "look beyond" these problems and to see the presence of foreign students as an enriching opportunity. In

particular, these teachers believe that children with immigrant background offer their classmates a valuable occasion to learn about different cultures and worldviews:

> Each culture carries priceless treasures waiting to be released. [Questionnaire 1]

They have also a more balanced view of foreign students' skills. In fact, these teachers are well aware of the difficulties that these pupils may encounter in their scholastic path, often attributed to lower language proficiency.

They recognize that these difficulties may regard also students who were born in Italy and speak Italian fluently. In fact, the acquisition of a language is a complex and long process and even students with good skills in informal, spoken language may encounter obstacles at school, where an academic language is required.

The recognition of these difficulties, therefore, allows teachers to exceed the generalized subtractive vision emerged in the first profile, embracing a more realistic representation of the foreign students and their achievement. In fact, differently from their colleagues, they don't think that Italian students "have a gear over them" and don't consider successful and brilliant pupils just as sporadic exceptions:

> It depends from child to child, there is a little girl who is very smart, some children have a hard time instead. [C., focus group interview]

Furthermore, this perspective lets them understand the role they can play helping these students overcome their academic difficulties, acting primarily on the language barrier.

Overall, these teachers, far from being overwhelmed by the problems which the presence of foreign students may involve, have developed a more balanced representation of children from elsewhere.

However, also this richer representation presents some limits. In fact, perhaps assigning too much importance to the linguistic component, they tend to reduce to it all the obstacles that foreign children may face and don't understand the psychological and emotional challenges that the cross-cultural situation presents. Similarly, they fail in understanding the complexity of their own educational role, seeing themselves as linguistic facilitator but not as source of relational support.

The comprehensive vision

The last profile is represented by three teachers and, at first sight, seem very similar to the group described above. In fact, they are well aware of the complexity of the educational challenge they have to face and reveal a balanced and integrated vision of the foreign pupils. However, these teachers seem to take a further step towards children from elsewhere.

First, they recognize that students with immigrant background are an enrichment not only for their classmates, but represent also a valuable opportunity for teachers' personal and professional development:

> First of all, I consider them as an enrichment for other pupils [...]. From the teacher's point of view, they represent an occasion to revise your teaching method, because in front of children who come from other countries you realize even some of the challenges regarding Italian students [...].[This is an opportunity] to develop myself, of course, to review my way of teaching. [G., interview]

Then, this third group is characterized by a more comprehensive vision of academic difficulties that the foreign students may encounter. In fact, although they recognize the role that the linguistic disadvantage may play, these teachers are aware that it's only one of the possible factors that can explain foreign students learning difficulties:

> One of the greatest difficulties regards the language [...] and then there's big psychological distress [...]. Combining the novelty of the school to the novelty of the external environment, at this time we are seeing a lot of psychological distress and [school] rejection. [G., interview]

> From the psychological point of view it is not easy for a child. [E., interview]

These words reveal a more complex, comprehensive vision of students with immigrant background that characterizes this profile.

However, the peculiarities of this third group of teachers aren't confined to a richer representation of the child. In fact, they have a comprehensive conception of the teachers themself, who are thought as a "secure base" for the children, a guide that can accompany pupils in their journey on the border between two cultures:

> I try to pay closer attention to the relationship. Well, if you create a good climate, a serene relationship, everything is better. [A., focus group interview]

> One thing is certain [...], they need a figure of security, more than anything else: "I met you, you hold my hand" [G., focus group interview]

> They need relationship; they need to feel you, to make you become a reference point [for them]: "I'm here for you". [E., interview]

Cross-profile emerging themes

Moreover, data analysis reveals some cross-profile themes that emerged from teachers' words: the relationship with immigrant families and the need for more training.

The relationship with immigrant families

The first core theme concerns the relationship with foreign families. In fact, almost all teachers recognize that it may be difficult to build a fruitful collaboration with these families.

A first, obvious barrier is represented by linguistic diversity, which can hinder communication and lead to reciprocal misunderstandings.

A more significant obstacle concerns a different conception of the school that immigrant families sometimes have. Italian school, in fact, gives an important role to the family and requires parents to collaborate with teachers [Ravn, 2003], but this idea is not always present in other cultures. Thus, foreign families are not always aware that they have to cooperate actively with teachers.

Though this theme recourse in the three profiles, it's important to point out the different shades it assumes. In fact, while teachers belonging to the first group see in immigrant families a further problematic element; the second and especially the third group are able to take into account the migrants' point of view. They don't consider foreign families' lack of participation in school life as a symptom of disinterest in their children and in school, but as an index of diverse pedagogical minds that can characterize different cultures:

> We have to understand their difficulties and the efforts they make to adapt to our requests. [Questionnaire 4]

This perspective and the idea that not only teachers have to face a new and unknown challenge help these teachers to cope with renewed motivation the undeniable difficulties that relationship between different cultures involves:

> They are willing and we're willing, too. We just need time, [...] we'll get there in the end. [L., interview]

The need for more training

The awareness of the complex challenge that characterizes multicultural school makes teachers feel they need more training.

This theme appears in every profile, but is particularly clear from the first group's words. In fact, as argued above, the perception of lacking sufficient knowledge and preparation to hold this "hot potato" [M., interview] exacerbates these teachers' sense of helplessness and abandonment.

However, it is interesting to note that even other teachers, while accepting the presence of foreign students with greater confidence and without being overwhelmed by the difficulties it may involve, agree with their colleagues' opinion:

> It's a very complex reality. Teachers often aren't prepared, and saying "prepared" I mean "trained" [E., interview]

Discussion and conclusion

A single case study cannot be taken as representing the wider situation. However it can stimulate some reflections and provides school educators and psychologists with useful advices that can guide their action in support of teacher-child relationship.

The research reveals the existence of diverse views among teachers, essentially ascribable to the three distinct profiles. Specifically, although a small group is characterized by a rich and comprehensive vision, the majority of teachers (17 of the 20 teachers participating in the study) has an overly simplified representation of foreign students and their learning difficulties, which could obstacle the creation of a supportive relationship with the child.

The action of school educators and psychologists should focus on these teachers, trying to help them to become aware of their representations and to gain a more flexible and balanced view. In fact, as Pianta suggests [2001], this is the first step to change their behavior and to promote a more supportive and protective relationship.

Moreover, in order to respond to the need for training they expressed, it would be useful to provide teachers with more information about the migratory process and the peculiar challenges it implies. In fact, this intervention could help teachers to reorganize their representational models, develop an empathetic attitude towards immigrant families and understand how foreign students' learning difficulties may involve also an emotional and psychological component.

Furthermore, it could be fruitful to encourage the creation of informal advisory group among teachers. In these groups teachers could discuss about their experience with foreign pupils and share successful strategies they adopted to respond to challenges emerged in their multicultural classes. These occasions could be extremely valuable especially for teachers belonging to the first profile. In fact, through the testimonies of their colleagues, they could discover that it's possible to face the intercultural situation without being overwhelmed by the problems it may bring and to see it as an enriching opportunity both for children and teachers.

These are just some possible suggestions and more studies have to be conducted to deepen our knowledge about this subject. However, this research, despite its limitation, hopes to point out the value that teacher-child relationship has for immigrant students, underlining how would be crucial to treasure this precious resource already present in every school.

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