

CONTRIBUTO TEORICO

Intercultural Teacher Training for an inclusive and open-minded school: some considerations.

La formazione interculturale degli insegnanti per una scuola inclusiva e aperta: alcune considerazioni.

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ABSTRACT ITALIANO

La formazione interculturale degli insegnanti si nutre oggi di nuove consapevolezze teoriche, che si allontanano da approcci "oggettivanti", protesi a definire l'alterità e la differenza, e che propongono, invece, una "revisione" dello sguardo che chi fa educazione è abituato ad utilizzare con chi viene percepito come "altro". A partire dalle suggestioni di Lévinas in tema di "volto dell'altro" e in accordo con una visione post-coloniale, si propone la prospettiva della decostruzione come una delle possibili strade per la formazione iniziale e continua degli insegnanti, considerata in chiave interculturale.

ENGLISH ABSTRACT

Intercultural teacher training feeds nowadays on new theoretical awarenesses, which move away from "objectifying" approaches, aimed at defining otherness and difference, and which propose, instead, a "revision" of the gaze that educators use with those who are perceived as "other". Starting from the suggestions of Lévinas on the theme of the "face of the other" and in accordance with a post-colonial vision, the perspective of deconstruction is proposed as one of the possible ways for the initial and continuous training of teachers, considered in an intercultural key.

Intercultural teacher training

«People today have a dizzying feeling of being torn between a globalization whose manifestations they can see and sometimes have to endure, and their search for roots, reference points and a sense of belonging. Education has to face up to this problem now more than ever as a world society struggles painfully to be born: education is at the heart of both personal and community development; its mission is to enable each of us, without exception, to develop all our talents to the full and to realize our creative potential, including responsibility for our own lives and achievement of our personal aims. This aim transcends all others. Its achievement, though long and difficult, will be an essential contribution to the search for a more just world, a better world to live in » (Delors, 1997, pp. 16-17).

Before discussing teacher training it is perhaps important to take a step back and consider, first of all, what type of school we want to promote and what type of world we want to live in; and then the type of education that can develop through these ideas and support them.

Although we will clearly not come across this type of response, it is equally clear that these are the key issues to start from in order to reflect on the meaning of teacher training.

While the Italian Ministry's 2030 Agenda with its sustainability objectives seems to define fundamental horizons and goals for education, and great intellectuals of our time invite us to lean towards the idea of planetary citizenship (consider Edgar Morin, for example or Jacques Delors cited at the beginning of this paper), our training systems often struggle to reach set objectives, even intermediate ones, that could make us stand out in terms of equality and full inclusion.

In terms of an intercultural perspective, which is inevitably linked to the sustainability perspective previously mentioned, it can be said that the Italian school system has a reference model, designed through academic theories, legislation, and ministerial guidelines, which is on the same level as those of other European countries (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2022).

This format for an ideal school with full and pervasive inclusivity, which takes on the function of a beacon for action, often clashes with the reality of schools which are often struggling to implement principles and best practices.

The gap between "ideal school" and "real school" raises questions about the extent to which pedagogical-intercultural principles and guidelines have actually become part of the professional culture of teachers and principals. Furthermore, we ask to what extent they can actually be implemented within an environment that has been depleted throughout the years, not only in reference to human and financial resources, but also of time spent in schools (Nanni & Vaccarelli, 2019).

Within this "unsystematic model" (Stillo, 2020), teacher training is a central issue which can be considered both in terms of pre-job training and on-the-job training. While in reference to pre-job training, we find that substantially all modern degree courses in Primary Education include an Intercultural Pedagogy course, it is important to point out that a large part of present-day teaching staffs are made up of nursery school and primary school teachers that have different qualifications and often lack university degrees.

On the other hand, the situation in secondary schools is strongly conditioned by policy changes and a progressive deterioration of training programs that allow graduates access into the education system (from SSIS, to TFA, to 24 CFU training courses) which has progressively resulted in fewer opportunities for trainees to acquire both general and intercultural pedagogical skills.

It should, however, be highlighted that the Ministry's attention to this issue, underlined in comprehensive documents and publications (i.a. Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2022), in important systemic actions together with the pedagogical research sector, show that there is a serious and coherent intention to transform the school system from an intercultural perspective, and to do so precisely through training. In this context, on-the-job teacher-training, which until a few years ago had been left up to sporadic and local initiatives (albeit often of great value), has become a topic of great concern thanks to important system actions that have allowed for a productive dialogue between educational research, institutions (MIUR), and schools.

The FAMI 740 Project "Multi-year training plan for principals, teachers and ATA staff in schools with a high percentage of foreign students" (Specific Objective 2 Integration/Legal Migration - National Objective 3 Capacity building), for example, with the objective of

training approximately 1,000 principals, 10,000 teachers and 2,000 administrative staff, became a driving force, in regional territories, for the implementation of solid intercultural educational practices and enhancement of competences. Thanks to this project, 35 post-bachelor courses in "Organization and management of educational institutions in multicultural contexts" were activated in 2017 (and reissued in 2021), together with specialization courses in teaching Italian as a second language held at certified universities and research-action throughout the territory with a strong scholastic presence (Fiorucci, Tomarchio, Pillera, Stillo, 2021). Hopefully, such actions and initiatives will become structural.

Ideas for Intercultural Teacher Training

The intercultural educational approach was mainly derived from the presence of students with migrant backgrounds attending Italian schools and was initially focused on issues concerning language-learning and cultural identity. The transition from a "foreigner-centered" focus, which essentially concentrated on the concept of "diversity", to a wider-ranging approach addressing intercultural education in a broader sense (thus including everyone and drawing attention to conflicts and intercultural communication) has often been referenced and highlighted by the most important scholars in intercultural pedagogy (Fiorucci, 2020).

This change in direction was initiated by Francesco Susi, one of the most authoritative Italian scholars in intercultural pedagogy, who, back in 1988, started directing his work towards the need for an intercultural approach that not only addressed the *so-called* migrants but also the *so-called* native Italians.

This "need" represents the fundamental prerequisite for the concept of inclusion which can be promoted, above all, through a pedagogy able to manage the challenges of a multicultural society successfully. A number of educational and teaching approaches have developed along these lines, focusing on contrasting stereotypes and prejudices, promoting the acceptance of diversity, and working towards provincializing the majority mindset: historical and sociological insights on immigration and emigration, narrative models and autobiographical practices, deconstruction pedagogy, intercultural discipline teaching (Catarci & Macinai, 2015), etc.

Along these lines, among other proposals, we could consider promoting through training, the idea of an intercultural teacher who is a (Vaccarelli, 2019):

1. *Researcher*: capable of analyzing the situation, capable of interpreting the educational needs and the dynamics of intercultural schools, of promoting actions consistent with such needs oriented towards appropriate and scientifically verified goals and objectives.
2. *Deconstructor*: this means first of all being able to deconstruct one's own beliefs, common sense concepts and sometimes one's own prejudices, to then extend the perspective and practice of deconstruction to daily educational and teaching activities.
3. *Conscious constructor of approaches and practices*: a teacher, i.e., not only capable of implementing practices and teaching on issues generally considered as urgent (L2

Italian, academic success), but also capable of re-orienting students towards the *formae mentis* of intercultural citizenship.

4. *Intercultural skills multiplier*: capable of spreading knowledge and skills acquired, both through a role that generates organizational learning, and the possibility of training fellow colleagues.

Changing the Point of View/Changing the Outlook

The topic of intercultural teacher training leads us to reflect, within the field of pedagogy, on the depth of educational relationships and bring to light the hidden, aspects, left in the shadows, which actually tells us a great deal in terms of interpreting results. In an intercultural context, we have seen clearly that every attempt to "objectify" the actors of the educational system, so full of symbolic meanings, carries the threat of obtaining results that are not in line with the aims and objectives we have set. Therefore, instead of asking: "who is the student/is the student a migrant?" or "what is culture?", perhaps we (teachers, educators) should ask ourselves how we perceive these "subjects/objects" and how, based on these perceptions, we carry out our educational actions. Intercultural training, both initial and ongoing, is thus considered a process of approaching one's own perceptions, representations, imagination, in order to first gain awareness, and then proceed to deconstruct, where necessary, those inevitable "deforming" views that can hinder the processes of inclusion.

What has been discussed so far, underlines the need for a theoretical consideration, in terms of the idea of "inclusive education" which is firstly aimed at avoiding the "contours" of the subjects or recipients of the educational process which would consequently lead to their essentialization.

Given that education, as provided by Freire, is always a form of co-education between educator and student (cf. Fiorucci & Vaccarelli, 2022), it has become necessary within the most recent educational approaches to avoid dichotomous forms of thought defined as *them focused* (cf. Zoleto, 2022).

With this mind-set, research and actions focus only on the *other*, on *their* presumed characteristics, or *their* fragility.

This means there is the assumption that *me*, and *us*, are the strong and solid parties. Then again, this type of approach is still tied to ideas that are not entirely free of colonial logics, preserving the asymmetry in a relationship that necessarily implies an underlying power relationship. Interculture, therefore, also means post-colonial de-colonial thought, in line with the concept of decolonizing education and the mind, which represents a vital objective today in the frontiers of the most up-to-date intercultural pedagogical research (cf. Agostinetto, 2022; Burgio, 2022; Zoleto, 2022).

How can we forget the words of the great philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas who in *Totality and Infinity* invites us to reflect on the relationship with the *Other* and on revelation through the *Other's face*. Lévinas concentrates on the need to consider the *Other* by looking at their face. The face is therefore the means by which the *Other* is presented. However, the true nature of the face, its secret, lies elsewhere: in the question the face asks, a question that is at the same time a request for help, but also a threat according to Lévinas. (Levinas,

1990). The *face* conceived by Lévinas is a face with a secret that must be accepted without disrupting the mystery it holds by trying to understand it through one's own categories of reference. This would in fact mean reducing it to a predetermined essence and thus imposing a dominion-based relationship. Hence, the need is to embark in a fertile, problematic departure (which forewarn dialogue, fusion of various elements) from a multicultural approach based on strong identity and cultural concepts which could result in reinforcing individualism and culturalism and thus threatening the building of a world with an open-minded and pluralistic concept of citizenship.

The construction therefore of an intercultural and sometimes transcultural perspective that seeks in biographies, in emotions, and in cultural references, the person, the human subject; favoring that *species identity* which is essential in order to consider ourselves part of the community. As the anthropologist Marco Aime (2004) recalls, it is not cultures that meet or collide, but individuals, people.

Welcoming the *face of the other* therefore means giving up any form of supposed and predetermined knowledge, the temptation to ethnicize attitudes or behaviors that more often than not belong to personal traits rather than cultural references. This avoids getting trapped in the quicksand of a relationship of prejudice and stereotypes, of logics that always favor those forms of *reductio ad unum* that are particularly dangerous within the educational processes. In teacher training, therefore, it is not a matter of working only towards competencies (whose value and necessity are never questioned) but also in the perspective of testing our ability to question our assumptions, representations and prejudices, which all individuals inevitably bear.

In this context, the ability to decentralize, which anticipates any chance for deconstruction, is essential. (Vaccarelli, 2009, 2017). As Fiorucci (2020) states: «it is not possible to imagine an intercultural training course without the ability to understand different points of view by putting oneself in another person's shoes.

In this perspective, we may recall the contribution offered by contemporary psychology (from J. Piaget to C.R. Rogers). It is a matter of encouraging the students' ability to decentralize themselves, but this is only possible if the teachers also question themselves, their representations and their emotions.

The teacher should therefore be able to carry out a "cognitive decentralization" which is based on the subject's ability to get out of their own existential and value-based frame of reference; cognitive decentralization is a flexible way of acquiring relativity (cognitive flexibility and emotional solidarity)».

Conclusions

Let us recall Emmanuel Lévinas and his reflection on the concept of the *face of the other*, which generates all his thoughts on ethics and *otherness* (1990). We have mentioned that for Lévinas the encounter with the *other* takes place through the *other's face*; a face that questions and concerns us; a face that we can never fully know or understand. This impossibility of knowing the *other* also becomes, if we are willing to accept it as such, the condition for recognition which is not possible unless we accept the mystery of the *other*, unless we renounce the possibility of knowing them completely (which is, moreover,

impossible), of wanting to “possess” them and establish a power relationship. The *other* therefore transcends any possibility of objectification. This is an invitation to cultivate doubts rather than certainties, to ask ourselves “how” we see others, even before talking about who they are, to include the concept of the “mirror” in the background, in which every image reflected refers to an often restless and unaware ego, as Kristeva (1990, p. 1), also wanted to remind us in her fundamental work *Strangers to Ourselves*.

Intercultural training, imbued with these reflections, sets the task of deconstructing, of fostering the culture of doubt rather than certainty, as well as the problematization of every social and educational matter, of eschewing the temptations of objectification, to build, on the contrary, a *forma-mentis* of hermeneutical postures upon which educational choices and practices can be based. This type of culture, entering schools, could help to build, from an intercultural point of view, authentic relationships, distant from the risks of ethnicization but sensitive, at the same time, to the theme of diversity between individuals. This means the possibility of having a context within which learning and forms of academic success can also be fostered.

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