

## INTEGRATION IN ITALIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: IMMIGRANT CHILDREN'S VOICES

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### Abstract

In Italy, the presence of immigrant children is constantly increasing. During their school attendance they met significant academic and educational difficulties. This study tried to find some answers in order to support their integration. To consider their points of view could be helpful in order to develop some useful reflections on their experiences and needs, and to design educational interventions to support their integration, based on their point of view as "sophisticated thinkers and communicators". We conducted a qualitative research. The main questions were: "How was your experience in Italian schools? What difficulties did you encounter? Who helped you? What would you suggest to help the integration of a new immigrant child in class?". Research participants were 15 children, aged 10 to 11. These children were born outside of Italy and primary school was their first encounter with the Italian educational system. We used: a. focus group in order to identify the most important areas of investigation; b. conversational interview. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. During the focus group and interviews, the children's teacher helped to create a reassuring atmosphere for the children. In the process of their socio-academic integration, the children we interviewed emphasized: the role of personal relationships with classmates and teachers in order to promote a sense of belonging in class, in school and in the host society; the importance of mastering the second language to be able to enter into the new world. Because of the limited size of our sample, these findings shouldn't be viewed as representative, yet they seem to confirm the results of previous research. There are still unanswered questions and a need for further research in the study of the successful long-term integration process of migrant children.

*Keywords:* Immigrant children, primary school, sense of belonging, integration

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## **1. Introduction**

In Italy, in the last 20 years, the presence of students who have migrated directly (immigrant children) or indirectly (children with immigrant backgrounds) is constantly increasing. During the school year 2011/2012, there were 755.939 pupils with non-Italian citizenship attending school, accounting for almost 8.4% of the overall school population (in 1997 they only accounted for 0.7%). Their presence is greatest in primary school, where they are 9.5% of those who attend. Among the many nationalities represented, Romanian, Albanian, and Moroccan are the largest groups (Ismu-Miur, 2013).

For migrant children and their families, school is a whole new world, and represents the ability of the host society to accept or reject them. School is the gateway to the host society, and the key to a new future. Actually, institutional education can be a two-edged sword. Special programs (e.g. language instruction and intercultural programs) can facilitate learning and foster the integration process by building bridges between communities and individuals from diverse backgrounds (European Commission, 2008). On the other hand, education reproduces inequalities if discriminatory practices, such as exclusion and segregation (Chomentowski, 2009) lead to lower educational attainments of disadvantaged minority groups (EUMC, 2004, p. 3). The relationship with school is complex, weaving personal goals, family expectations, and social pressures. Upon school entrance, one's self perception and the place one can occupy in this new world becomes clearer.

Although there are some studies (Canino, 2010; Colombo, 2010; Dusi, 2011; Luciano, Demartini, & Ricucci, 2009; Ongini, 2011) examining the relationship between immigrant families, their children and schools, the data regarding the process of integration of immigrant children in Italian schools require further investigation (EUMC, 2004). Since the widespread tendency is to attribute the responsibility of school and socio-educational integration difficulties to the families of immigrant students (Perregaux et al., 2006; Lenoir et al., 2008), and to their different culture, we thought it would be useful to hear the voices of children from elsewhere (MacNaughton, Smith, & Davis, 2007). Considering their points of view could be helpful in order to develop some useful reflections (Rorty, 1991) on their experiences and needs, and to design educational interventions to support their integration, based on their point of view as "sophisticated thinkers and communicators" (Harcourt & Conroy, 2005, p. 567) and fully recognized social actors.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The need of belongingness is a human basic psychological need. In contemporary, multicultural Western societies this need is difficult to satisfy, especially for those who

undergo a sense of loss from the very beginning of their lives, such as children who experience migration (Moro, 2010).

In literature, it has been defined in a number of ways (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993; Maslow, 1954; Vallerand, 1997). In Educational environments, the need of belonging is one of the most important needs of all students to function well (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1991; Finn, 1998; Osterman, 2010). According to Goodenow and Grady (1993), the sense of belonging defines the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported in the class and in the school social environment. "Students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 25). The quality of education, stated Dewey, "is realized in the degree in which individuals form a group" (1958, p. 65).

School is central to immigrant children's daily life and represents the most important chance for their integration in the host society (Steinbach, 2010). In most of the Western Societies, administrators and teachers continue to struggle to have the resources and preparation necessary to work with the ethnic and linguistic diversity in schools (Vatz-Laaroussi & Steinbach, 2010), to foster the success of students of immigrant origins (Vatz-Laaroussi, 2011), their integration in school, and to combat discrimination in schools and society (Legault & Fronteau, 2008; Han, 2008; Council of Europe, 2008; Glick, 2007).

"The issue of adequately and justly schooling pupils and students and of integrating those who have migrant origins and/or belong to an ethnic minority, whether they be citizens of the origin country or of the receiving country or both, is an important part of this scenario of social transformations and of this theoretical framework that defines the aims of education" (Alleman-Ghionda, 2008, p. 2).

### **3. Research Questions**

For participants, interviews represent an opportunity to retrace their own lives and turn them into experiences, and a possibility to take part in the process of identifying strategies to resolve situations that are problematic or that lead to an improvement in quality of life (Maxcy, 2003).

The main research questions for children were: "How was your experience in Italian schools? What difficulties did you encounter? Who helped you? What would you suggest to help the integration of a new immigrant child in class?".

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

In an attempt to carry out useful research, our fundamental criterion was faithfulness to participants' descriptions, in order to understand their experiences. Children are considered agents of transformational processes of real life contexts (Mayall, 2002). We try to reconstruct their processes of integration through their stories. The investigation aimed to understand what factors support them in their encounter with school and what factors create obstacles.

#### **5. Research Methods**

This qualitative research combines grounded theory with a phenomenological approach. We adopt an ecological research paradigm, proposing a vision of knowledge as rooted in natural life contexts, thus giving great value to subjectivity and subjects' encounters with learning processes. From this perspective, research takes the complexity of the real world into account and is stimulated to find adequate tools to get closer to subjects' experiences, keeping faithful to all their nuances and contradictions.

Data were gathered from 15 children, aged 10 to 11 (4 from Morocco, 3 from Moldova, 2 from Romania, 2 from Brazil, 2 from Senegal, 1 from Pakistan, and 1 from Argentina), who were attending their last year of primary school. These children were born outside of Italy and primary school was their first encounter with the Italian educational system. Some of them attended primary school from the beginning, some others from the third or fourth years, one of them only for the last (fifth) year.

We used the conversational interview (Dockett & Perry, 2005), in which the researcher introduces the theme of the discussion, and does not propose a rigid sequence of questions, but rather listens to the child, following his thoughts. Individual interviews were preceded by a focus group interview in order to identify the most important areas of investigation concerning these students' encounters with Italian primary schools (Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell, & Britten, 2002). All interviews were recorded and transcribed. During the focus group and interviews, the children's teachers helped to create a calm and reassuring atmosphere for the children (Lahman, 2008). We analyzed the descriptions using these steps which combine phenomenological and grounded theory approaches (Mortari, 2007): reading the texts in order to get the sense of the whole; finding significant statements about the experience; working out a synthetic description corresponding to each significant statement; attributing a conceptual label to each synthetic description; and grouping them into meaningful units. The last phase of the process consists of synthesizing and integrating the

meanings identified, in order to build a general description, which should give a clear, accurate description of the experience (Polkinghorne, 1989).

## **6. Findings**

Analysis of the data led to identification of core categories concerning the children's points of views in their school experience and their process of integration in their new world. The cognitive abilities of humans are deeply intertwined with the social dynamics to which they belong, as Vygotskij (1974) and many teachers (Dusi, 2010b) point out. For children of mixed heritages, the links between primary and secondary socialization are not necessarily obvious and natural. Their microsystem (family) is not one of the circles of belonging of their macro-system (host society) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and they must overcome the divide between their private world (home), and the public world (school), creating links between culturally distant worlds. In adjusting to a new culture and context of life, they have to face culture chock (Bennett, 2002) and acculturative stress (Berry, 1998) on a personal level.

### *6.1. Children's voices*

The focus group and children's interview data clearly indicate the important role of friendships with schoolmates and relationships with teachers. This fosters a sense of belonging to school and to the new society. The obstacles of feeling lost, nostalgia, fear, non-belonging and the lack of knowledge of the Italian language, which is an obstacle encapsulating the former obstacles, are often overcome through the encounter with a schoolmate who acts as a mediator-tutor in the new context, through the development of bonds of friendship where one feels understood and accepted, and by being supported by a teacher who welcomes, provides trust, and fosters the student's learning within the necessary educational timeframes.

### *6.2. Primary school: Entering a new world*

Coming to school means entering a new world, seeing new faces, meeting new challenges: excitement and fear mark these children's entrance to school. Happiness as well as anger and fear are part of this new experience. Emotion is profound and has to do with the way we perceive reality; perception that brings on a change (e-motion) in our body, in our way of being in the world (Damasio, 2000) and among others (Bateson, 1997). For these children, one of the main challenges of entering primary school is mastering the language - a

universe of meanings, representations and concepts to name oneself and the new world and to find one's own place in it.

*I was scared...it was the first time I set foot in a school, I didn't know the language, I had a hard time... I felt happy and excited because I didn't know my classmates, I kept repeating their names...I felt great happiness because I wanted to be in school but also scared because I wanted to talk with others...". (MC13/7)<sup>1</sup>*

A new world opens up in the school and host society; the future with its uncertainties and promises, its risks and challenges. Relationships are like invisible threads that weave webs around students' desks and create the emotional tone that accompanies the educational experience of every student.

### 6.3. The language of others: fear

Entering public school magnifies the loneliness of these children. At school, at a physical distance from the world of one's origins, a striking symbolical cultural distance is added. The experience of isolation is intensified by not sharing the same language as one's peers. The language spoken in the classroom is a language of others. It manifests itself in all its deafening inarticulateness, a strangeness that makes one anxious and fearful, and one's lack of the codes of conduct of relationships becomes explicit. One's diversity becomes more obvious as one cannot belong to that world.

*I felt...I don't know... afraid, I was ashamed because I didn't understand the language and everyone was looking at me. (MC6/24-26)*

*When I knew we were coming to Italy I was so afraid, because I didn't know how to speak, I didn't know how the people were, I didn't know if they would respect me. (MC1/32)*

Mastering the language can give us power over the world and others. Encountering the linguistic codes of others enforces an unwanted silence, a silence that leaves us at the mercy of the other, revealing our own impotence in the world of humans and of things, an impossibility to affirm our own power over signs and meanings that permit us to respond to those who challenge us:

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes have been translated into English by the authors in order to lighten the text. MC means migrant child. The first number indicates the number assigned to the child, and the second number indicates the turn of speech.

*At the beginning I was afraid, after a bit of time I had learned the language, but I was afraid to speak, I said "But if I make a mistake! If I make a mistake!". I knew (the language) but I said "and if I say something wrong?". (MC13/82)*

The language of the other, at the beginning, is an uncomfortable place; depressing, causing fear and insecurity, a place in which you feel exposed to the look, the judgment, and the power of the other. Linguistic incompetence reveals the fragility of its power and its exercise in the world of humans, things and ideas, reveals the fragility of a being who finds himself incomplete, and nonexistent in the absence of recognition of others (Ricoeur, 2004).

### *6.3.1. Classmates: between rejection and friendship*

Friends play a central role in the growth and formation of a human being; they have a determining influence on the quality of a child's life (Rubin et al., 1998). Entering primary school is a transition that is always a source of stress for children. Anxieties related to school are amplified when this world does not speak your language or share your symbolic and cultural universe. One needs to enter into the culture (Bruner, 1996) of the other. The isolation, loneliness, and not being part of the context in which you spend most of your days, in which you can look into their eyes as among equals, leads to a weak social identity, something missing that undermines a peaceful development of one's personality:

*I sometimes feel pushed aside, all the girls in my class always play together and I'm only with Valeria. There's a guy who always says things, he makes fun of me in front of the girls, so they all look at me and I feel alone. (MC2/96)*

*One thing I wish is that your classmates wouldn't speak badly of you, that's it. (MC15/120)*

The experience of rejection by classmates plays an important role not only in determining the quality of the educational experiences of a child, but also for his social inclusion, and the development of his capacities (Sen, 1992) and his identity (Côté, 1996). Identity capital has been defined as "the principal defense against exclusion" (Evans, Bronheim, Bynner, Klasen, Magrab, & Ranson, 2000, p. 7), and the ability to fully exercise one's own capacity to act in a world where one feels accepted.

Language and friendship to be able to belong and share a world; these are the two dimensions of existence that color the experience of migrant children entering a new world. Fear, trepidation, anxiety, as well as opportunities, hopes, and joys are linked to the knowledge of the language of the other. Language is reciprocal, comprehension, a symbolic

and relational need; it allows access to the human world, whose membership is also about identity. Learning the language of the other allows you to enter a new world, and feeds the desire to reside there. But learning the language of the other is made possible by the presence of hospitality:

*My friend started to understand me, I don't know why, she didn't even know Portuguese and she always managed to understand me, in moments of sadness, in moments of happiness, when I needed something she could always understand me. (MC1/46)*

Within mutual recognition, and acceptance, we acquire the possibility to speak and to hear yourself speak. Language is a gift from people with whom we have entered into a relationship. Friendship means that sentences are no longer mere syntactic patterns, but deep linguistic exchanges in which each being reveals himself to the other, and which open new possible worlds:

*The people who helped me most were two classmates, one Moldavian and one African, the closest was one in my neighbourhood, I was always with her, the Moldavian. She played with me, she helped me learn the language. Friends helped me with games... (MC8/52)*

Friendship is a special form of recognition, being together emotionally and in solidarity. Communication that takes place in the peer group is also one of the most effective mediators to learn a new language (Sidoli, 2002). How do you learn a new language and become a part of a new world? These children speak of friendships with peers. Relationships and language are the "home of being" (Heidegger, 1971).

*At first I was always with my friend. She had some friends that I knew after I started to know a little of the language, I started to be together with those girls and we became friends. (MC14/30)*

*The relationship with classmates is sometimes a bit difficult, because he can't understand us, he can't understand a game, he doesn't know for example what is hide and seek. We know, because we are playing it, but he doesn't know, he asks: "can I play?" "Yes but you have to count" and he doesn't understand what he has to do, so it's very difficult for everyone. (MC5/75). Then some friends had to take him by the hand, take him to hide in some place, and then say: "Go!" and run together with him, then say: "now do it for yourself!". Always try to help because the more we help, the more it goes well and the more friendship you find. (MC5/77)*

Friendship is an essential dimension of the human being and friendship between children is an important place for the well-being of newborns, where they experience being-for, being-with, being-against, outside of the family circle. In relationships with classmates one can confront peers, testing each one's power of being, their capacity to act, the possibility of becoming oneself. The power of being is real "only in the making, that is, in meetings with other centers of power and the ever-changing balance resulting from those meetings" (Tillich, 1994, p. 46, author's translation). A feeling of belonging is an indispensable element to be able to put into play, to act in the world, exploring places and relationships, to take part in the construction of a common world, in which we share the adventure of growing up:

*Since the beginning of the last year of school I feel so uncomfortable because I was not accepted by the person who first liked me, one of my friends: Alice, (...) Alice doesn't want to be my friend, because, maybe, I'm a foreigner. She always leaves me alone...Every day I feel confused because I don't know who to make friends with. I feel like a drop falling from the sky alone and I feel like crying. (MC14/77)*

The presence of significant ties is a crucial dimension for one's power to be, to overcome difficult times that, in isolation, seem like chasms in which we get lost. Since the first years of life, friendship plays an important role in the life of a child, and the presence of friends becomes crucial especially in times of transition, when they can provide emotional support. "The capacity of children to face the demands of the new school world is directly related to the type of relations that he has with friends at the time when he starts school" (Dunn, 2004, p. 6, author's translation).

Children's being together is the glimmer of light that illuminates the desert of isolation, the warmth that dries the anxiety generated by perceiving oneself outside of a world and deprived of that world, because our world is a human world. To be accepted as members of a group is a basic need of human beings. Man comes into himself through the dense presence of the recognition of others. Hegel writes: "such a being must become recognized. Must become for himself what he is within himself. Their being the one for the other is the beginning of what" (Hegel, 1984, pp. 102- 103).

*When I arrived they all helped! The whole class! Everyone said: "Do you want to play with me?" Everyone, but everyone! They all said: "Do you want to play with me? Do you? Do you?" (...) Yes, because everyone spoke with me: my class, the janitor, the teacher. All the teachers! I was overjoyed! (MC4/ 54)*

The school and classmates are the gateway to a newcomer's affiliation with his new world. For children from here and from elsewhere, to be accepted at school, to feel part of

the school world, means to be able to know oneself and to be known as a member of the society in which one is growing up. Being is always being-with and "in being-with is the with to do the being" (Nancy, 2001, p. 45, author's translation).

*There is no future without school. You have to learn to understand your classmates, new people, and they teach you a lot at school. (MC2/110)*

To become human it is essential to be part of a human *communitas*, entering into *communio* with others, to communicate with others. This implies the understanding that every human being is a world with its own emotions, thoughts, and desires. It is therefore essential to grow within oneself as a human being to discover and know the world of others. To become a person, a member of this complex world, the child "must develop the ability to recognize and share emotional states and to understand the relationships among others, to understand the appreciations, prohibitions and customs accepted in his own world" (Dunn, 1995, p. 5, author's translation). A world in which even the being-alone is always a being-alone-among-others.

### 6.3.2. Teachers

The presence of an adult who is able to welcome a migrant child is a bulwark against their lack of references, in the impossibility to be supported by their parents in this encounter with the new world. Migrant children, more than others, depend on the teacher "to be able to invest academic knowledge" (Moro, 2010, p. 70): the subject matter is not in itself meaningful enough to be the object of investment (Moro, 2007; Charlot, 2000).

*I feel welcomed by the teacher, very much, by my classmates I don't know, maybe not so much, and it's not that I'm with them a lot. (BM11/128)*

*The teachers have helped me, for example, the Italian teacher did everything possible to make me work, to make me understand Italian. (BM2/54)*

The migrant child is looking for meaningful connections with the new world, which the teacher represents. The words of these children bring to mind those of Martin Buber. "The child feeds the desire that the world will become for us this person, that we are meeting as us and him, that we choose and recognize as we do with him, that he acknowledges us as we acknowledge him" (Buber, 2009, pp. 39-40, author's translation). This adult, the teacher who is guardian of the new world, has the role of the ferryman to introduce these children, newly arrived not by birth but by family choice.

When asked: "Based on your experience, what should be done, according to you, to facilitate a newly arrived child's process of integration into the class?", the students interviewed stressed the importance of relationships and learning the language of the country. The children expect the teacher to be able to weave meaningful relationships with them and to support them in the process of language learning. Learning the language means fitting into a world of social relations, governed by rules, values and codes of communication, in which they desire to belong.

*To integrate at school Italian courses are useful. I've had three...I learned a lot, in the end knowing Italian is very important otherwise you can't speak or understand and you can't even make friends. (MC7/149)*

*The teacher, in my opinion, must respect you (...) that is to learn to listen, learn to make friends, learn to know a person, to teach without yelling, to learn to explain with easy words... many things. (MC1/83-85)*

Feeling welcomed and listened to by the teacher, recognized and accompanied in the world of knowledge which is always a world of relationships: this is what the children ask/expect. They feel the need to feel emotionally connected to the teacher, to be able to access the knowledge of which the teacher is the mediator. The competence of the teacher is revealed in his capacity to facilitate learning in a language that is not mastered, which contains difficult words but that you want to appropriate. The words of the children remind us that "all higher functions originate from authentic relationships between human beings" (Vygotskij, 1992, p. 57, author's translation).

## **7. Conclusions**

Although there are many studies examining the relationship between immigrant families and schools and the processes of educating their children, the data regarding educational failures of immigrant children in Italian schools require further investigation. Since the widespread tendency is to attribute the responsibility of school difficulties to the families of immigrant students (Eacea, 2009; Perregaux et al., 2006), we thought it would be useful to hear from these children (MacNaughton et al., 2007) in order to understand the processes of socio-educational integration from their points of view. Because of the limited size of our sample (fifteen children), these findings shouldn't be viewed as representative, yet they seem to confirm the results of previous research (Dusi, 2010a; Moro, 2010; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

We focused on the children and their first encounter with school because "if the school doesn't become familiar to them, but remains foreign, then the pain and delusion are strong, as well as resentment toward the external world that definitely does not recognize them and forces them to live on the margins, like their parents" (Moro, 2010, p. 79, author's translation). There are several factors which play an important role in successful integration (Crosnoe et al., 2011).

The children we interviewed had the experience of living at the juncture of two worlds and two cultures, and they told us the great importance of feeling recognized by their peers and feeling supported by their teachers to be able to integrate into their new reality. Growing up at the border between two different symbolic horizons is a difficult undertaking but these children show us their great ability to manage with the new world and its language. But it has a cost: fight, fear and loneliness that can compromise their learning process (Osterman, 2010; 2012). Besides, their parents cannot help them because of their low levels of education (especially mothers from North Africa and the Middle East), in an encounter with an educational system which they don't understand and which does not welcome them (Dusi, 2011), while they are living one of the most stressful events that a family can undergo (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). In Italy, the law doesn't recognize immigrants or their children, whether born inside or outside the country, as Italian citizens. For these children the path of integration is truly difficult. Within the context of Italian schools, fostering a sense of belonging remains an important challenge for teachers.

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