



7th International Conference on Intercultural Education “Education, Health and ICT for a Transcultural World”, EDUHEM 2016, 15-17 June 2016, Almeria, Spain

Teaching in our Society: Primary Teachers and Intercultural Competencies

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Abstract

Living in a context marked by pluralism and heterogeneity is never straightforward, even less so if you belong to a marginalised part of society, in terms of social status, culture and religion. The processes that lead to social exclusion take effect in the first years of a child's life and too often they are formalised in the school system. In Italy, research data and statistics reveal a deep-rooted disparity in the academic trajectories of students from a migrant background when compared with what we might term “native” students. Since the reduced level of attainment of such “non-Italian” students is already noticeable in primary school, where the formal process of acquiring the language skills required in education takes place, we decided to work with teachers from this level of schooling to discover if, and in what way, they have the skills and training required to teach such students. The teachers chosen had taught in multicultural classes for a total of at least five years. Hoping to ascertain whether these teachers employed intercultural competencies in their teaching practice – and if so, which ones – we selected a method based on the narration of a problem situation encountered during their time in teaching. To date, fifty teachers have been interviewed. Analysis of the interviews reveals a heterogeneous reality, with some teachers displaying new forms of sensitivity and cultural competence in response to a changing world and a changing school population, while others seem entrenched in an outdated mindset.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of EDUHEM 2016.

Keywords: Intercultural competencies, first, second, level.

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1. Introduction

If generating social inclusion and social cohesion in populations is a key objective for European countries, it is important that we pay attention – at different levels – to the integration of people in more fragile situations, whether this is at the level of the group, or individually. People from a migrant background often fall into this category. Migrants and their children, even when the latter are born in Europe, constitute two vulnerable social groups. Young people from a migrant background are faced with a difficult task, that of constructing their identity in the midst of two or more cultures, and often on the border between them; they are seen as outsiders both within and outside the home, to the point that wherever they are, part of their identity is rejected. Throughout this process of self-discovery and exploration of their place in the world, schools and the education system have a crucial role to play in supporting these children who are born at the crossroads between two worlds, and who represent, themselves, the crossroads between two cultures (Moro, 2002). In recent decades, education policy makers in Europe seem to have grasped the important role that school systems can play in this regard, introducing measures to promote integration and improve educational attainment among students from a migrant background and their families (see Perotti, 1994 and Eurydice, 2009). In Italy, the chosen path has been one of integration. The educational objective, as numerous state publications have asserted (MIUR, 2007; 2012; 2014), is what we might term an intercultural approach to teaching and learning. The data do indicate that progress has been made, to the point that we might talk of a “progressive capability to integrate among non-Italian young children and adolescents” (MIUR, 2014:4), yet the education system in Italy still bears a number of traits that belie such advances. As a group, students of non-Italian nationality (n.I.n.) continue to struggle academically in comparison to their “native” counterparts, and a higher proportion are still directed towards vocational training, rather than upper-secondary school, at the end of their lower-secondary education.

2. A deep-rooted disparity among students in Italy’s school system

In the 2014-2015 academic year, there were 814,187 students of non-Italian nationality in Italian schools, which accounted for 9.2% of the overall student population. This represented an increase of 20.9% in respect to the figures for 2009-2010 (meanwhile, the number of Italian students dropped by 2.7 % over the same period). Of these non-Italian students, some 55.3% were born in Italy, a figure that rises to 84.8% if we only consider Italian nursery schools. The data also point to a sharp drop in the number of new students of n.I.n. enrolling in Italian schools, a trend that began in the 2007-2008, coinciding with the start of the economic crisis that engulfed Italy in the following years. Historical analysis of the data reveals that the number of students from a migrant background who are behind the standard school stage for their age group has fallen. This improvement is due, in good part, to the fact that for those students of n.I.n. who were born in Italy, the effect of late entry to the education system is not present, since they follow the same regime as students from Italian families. This notwithstanding, the academic and educational trajectories of these students, when compared to those of native-Italian students, continue to be characterised by delays in their progress through school and other difficulties. At primary-school level, 13.4% of these students have been kept back a year, compared to just 1.8% of native Italians. At lower-secondary level, the figures are 39.1% for n.I.n. students, compared to 7% of native-Italian speakers. At upper-secondary level, 63% of students from a migrant background have had to repeat a year, compared to 22.4% of students of Italian parentage (ISMU-MIUR, 2016:9). Along with these figures, we should also factor in the early school leavers, a group that accounts for 13.6% of “native” Italians, 27.1% of non-Italian students of other E.U. nationalities, and 34.4% of students of other nationalities. The data reveal difficulties in integrating and learning among these students at every level of schooling, difficulties which increase discernibly as we move past primary education to more advanced levels where greater demands are placed on students’ abilities, especially on their command of “academic” language. All things considered, we can conclude that the data reveal the presence of a “deep-rooted disparity” in the academic progress of students from migrant backgrounds in Italian schools (ISMU-MIUR, 2016; MIUR, 2014).

3. Purpose of the study: what Intercultural Competencies primary teachers’ have?

The Italian education system has clearly opted for an educational model based on welcoming and integrating students from an immigrant background (MIUR, 2007). All the same, as studies by the Ministry of Education have

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