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A Deconstructive Reading of Intercultural Education of Teachers' and School Leaders' Narrative in Italy

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Abstract

As a result of the recent influx of immigrant students, intercultural education has become a significant field of interest in Italy. Despite the fact that many educational projects have a well-established rhetorical and ideological approach, the term “intercultural” has become a generic term that has been loosely defined and poorly implemented. On that basis, this article offers a deconstructive reading of a qualitative study conducted in Sicilian schools as part of a European intercultural education project. The study sought to learn more about how cultural diversity representations influence teachers' educational and ethical actions when working with migrant students. We used the deconstruction perspective as a model of analysis to interpret the narrations of teachers and school leaders on intercultural education. The deconstructive analysis revealed a wealth of content, both in terms of the breadth and richness of the answers and the complexity and intertwining of the emerging intercultural issues. Cultural models of teachers influence not only their students but most importantly, their own teaching and professional profiles. Indeed, the ultimate goal is to deconstruct dominant representations of difference and diversity, as well as the implicit pedagogical culture that influences teachers' educational and teaching practices.

Keywords: inclusion, deconstruction, intercultural education, Italy

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An Inclusive School From a Cross-Cultural Perspective

With its long historical heritage of pluralism and cultural exchange, Italy is, indisputably, a multicultural society. A particularly large migratory flow has been recorded in recent decades in the country, which has made it necessary to reflect not only on social and political issues, but also on the cultural policies of inclusion and integration in the field of education. For many years now, a large body of pedagogical research has aimed at investigating the educational processes of school inclusion and analyzing the challenges for teachers, school heads and educational institutions. The varied range of experiences and good practices in intercultural education, moving from a ‘compensatory’ school to an ‘inclusive’ one, is testimony to the dedication of Italian schools to intercultural matters. Today, the intercultural approach to education is at the center of a conceptual and cultural shift which has had a huge impact on education studies both nationally and internationally (Coulby, 2006; Guilherme, & Dietz, 2015; Grant & Portera 2017; Santerini 2017; Woodrow et al., 2019). This radical transformation of thought also regards a new way for different cultures to live side-by-side, which has created a challenge for pedagogy (Ulivieri, 2018). Intercultural education is much more than a field of study, since it deals with the competences

required for different cultures to live side-by-side in a complex and pluralistic society. In this scenario, the school is fundamental for the promotion of democracy and citizenship, and so it becomes a place where cultural models and images of diversity are established.

All teachers and school heads have attitudes, opinions, prejudices and stereotypes; therefore, their behavior may be inclusive or rejecting (Ogay & Edelmann, 2016; Perry & Southwell, 2011). This issue inevitably implies the importance of an intercultural ethos for all educational professionals involved in the school world. In this perspective, educational institutions can represent a ‘laboratory’ at the forefront of welcoming processes and intercultural dialogue, which has the task of rethinking, in the interplay of active relationships between educational and cultural processes, new ways of living together and social inclusion, and better reception and integration measures of migrant students in the local context (Miravet & García, 2013; Sorkos & Hajisoteriou, 2020).

With reference to the Italian situation, in the last thirty years, detailed sets of school regulations have given clear indications regarding the promotion of paths to school success of students in the most fragile groups, such as *La via italiana per la scuola interculturale e per l'integrazione degli studenti stranieri* (The Italian path for intercultural school and the integration of foreign students) (MIUR, 2007), the *Linee guida per l'accoglienza e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri* (Guidelines for the reception and integration of foreign students) (MIUR, 2014), or the *Le Linee guida per il diritto allo studio delle alunne e degli alunni fuori dalla famiglia di origine* (MIUR, 2017). But is effective ministerial legislation on inclusion and integration enough to promote an intercultural school? A project of authentic reception can certainly not be achieved in terms of mere ministerial obligations and protocols. A change of cultural paradigm must be initiated to re-establish the educational axis of the school. In this way, the perception and attitudes of school heads and teachers towards cultural diversity is crucial to the definition and design of learning/teaching paths in an intercultural sense.

In this paper we present some findings from the international research project project *Hostis-Hospes. Connecting People for a Europe of Diversities*, which was funded by the European Union within the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme (the measure Justice Programme, Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme). The project, which lasted two years (2018-2020), was the result of the scientific collaboration of three Sicilian universities – Catania, Palermo and Kore in Enna, (project leader) – and the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB). It also made use of the partnership between the cities of Siracusa and Palermo and the CISS (Cooperazione Internazionale Sud Sud of Palermo.). Its aim was to detect and analyze intercultural practices in formal and non-formal educational contexts in the Sicilian region, with a particular look at the dynamics implemented in schools of different types and levels with a large number of pupils with a migration background, beyond a ‘compensatory’ and ‘emergency’ response.

Due to its intrinsically multicultural nature and the porosity of its maritime borders, Sicily is a landing place, a land of transit, and a country of refuge and hope for a new life for men, women, and many (often unaccompanied) minors. Precisely because it is the frontier of Mediterranean Europe, a link between Western and Eastern culture, Sicily has assumed the role of bridge island between different cultures, ethnicities and religions, within a complex scenario that today, more than in the past, must respond to the necessary task of change, promote a culture of accepting difference, and design initiatives and experiments to facilitate an inclusive culture (D’Aprile, 2017).

The project *Hostis-Hospes. Connecting People for a Europe of Diversities* has therefore been proposed to promote a 'Sicilian model' for intercultural dialogue and social and educational inclusion in formal contexts, with particular reference to the identification, definition and mapping of good practices in terms of reception, accompaniment, and inclusion of foreign minors.

It is evident how a close circular relationship holds together educational practices and processes of social transformation in a democratic and participatory sense. These connections have been emphasized in the research project several times, both on the level of reflective thinking and on the level of operational and planning power, in order to concretely pursue a militant commitment (Gorski, 2008; Tomarchio & Ulivieri, 2015) and relaunch a model of active and committed pedagogy on a democratic and social level.

In this perspective, the research unit proposed to develop an investigation aimed at enhancing the intercultural question as a radical educational issue in a transformative sense. The intercultural phenomenon—which should not be just rhetoric—is essentially a political task, as it is intertwined with crucial issues that refer to human rights, democratic development and the promotion of civil and social equality (Dervin, Gajardo & Lavanchy, 2011).

The pedagogical studies carried out at a national level and in the perspective of international comparison have made it possible to build a solid frame of reference as regards the dynamics of inclusion and the characteristics of institutional responses, in particular regarding the school system (Allemann-Ghionda, 2009; Bleszynska, 2008; Gundara, 2000; Shannon-Baker, 2018). A rich body of academic literature is committed to subjecting to scrutiny and critical analysis the main educational and methodological actions and strategies implemented by school heads and teachers in order to promote educational processes based on the principles of inclusion, integration and participation, as stated in the Salamanca Declaration (Catarci & Fiorucci, 2015; Tarozzi, 2014).

Moreover, studies of a theoretical and empirical nature on the national and international front have highlighted how the dimensions of the migratory phenomenon (both quantitative and qualitative) have led minors and adolescents to be considered as a real migratory category, to be framed within the themes of democratic citizenship, rights, social inclusion, educational policies and planning in educational services.

If, on the one hand, the field of school integration of foreign students has been explored extensively (Banks, 2004; Banks & Banks, 2019; Gundara, 2000; Read et al, 2015), formal and non-formal education practices called on to manage complex intercultural situations, in which the educational relationship is a central factor for intercultural and intergenerational dialogue, have still to be investigated. In this field, education professionals have often not received specific training in intercultural education accredited by the various university and governmental institutions. Consequently, they do not have the skills to deal with problems related to the emergency nature of the interventions implemented by schools. Despite the growing demand for intercultural teacher training, on both formal and non-formal levels, training institutions have been slow to offer solutions (Bufalino & D'Aprile, 2019).

In this context, the study carried out by the research unit of the University of Catania specifically concerns the school system in the province of Catania together with the complex and diverse

educational interventions put in place with particular reference to migratory phenomena. With specific reference to the selected school contexts, the study was aimed at collecting and analyzing elements useful for:

- mapping and documenting good intercultural educational and teaching practices implemented by schools with a high number of pupils with migrant backgrounds, in order to identify the most important aspects related to the issues of reception and integration of foreign pupils, as well as the potential and problems of intercultural education at the school;
- identifying which pedagogical models of reference and teaching practices are being implemented by the teachers and the heads of these schools;
- understanding the representations and images of cultural diversity that come into play and that have an influence on the teacher's educational-ethical action during his or her experience with pupils with a migration background.

The research aimed at achieving a preliminary understanding of the dynamics of the multicultural educational phenomenon where the intercultural encounter is experienced in a cogent, sometimes magmatic way, and sometimes in quiescent expectation, assuming various configurations. The understanding of these dynamics took place through listening directly to the voices of teachers and school heads directly involved in heterogeneous school contexts (Zinant & Zoletto, 2018). Therefore, in line with the objectives of the project, the research group of the University of Catania was involved in a theoretical-exploratory study in eight educational institutions in the province of Catania. In addition to the scientific literature on the subject, reference was made to the direct testimonies and narratives of those who experience daily life at school in an intercultural perspective. The aim was to understand and analyze—through the methodology of deconstruction—the most silent and hidden aspects, such as the experiences, representations, and images of the teachers, together with their specific educational-didactic experiences, within each school. Here, due to lack of space, only a few aspects of the deconstructive work will be presented.

Educational Deconstruction Paths

In our work of critical-hermeneutical analysis, we adopted the perspective of deconstruction as a methodology capable of developing a series of possible pedagogical strategies on three levels: theoretical, theoretical-practical and practical-strategic (Bai et al., 2015; Biesta 2010; Mariani, 2008). This choice made it possible to identify a theoretical framework of analysis through which to read and re-read the main meanings of the narratives of the interviewed teachers and school heads (Isidori, 2005). In fact, the perspective of deconstruction represents one of the possible answers to the important questions related to the intercultural training of education professionals, as it opens states of tension and the possibility of negotiation within the dominant—and sometimes toxic (Fiorucci, 2019)—narratives on intercultural discourse. As Vaccarelli (2017) points out, “any behavior depends to a large extent on what we know (or rather what we believe we know) and the meanings we build around a specific target” (p. 26). It is this assumption that, in the post-truth era, has become the breeding ground for uninformed educational action influenced by specific categorizations that become obstacles to an authentic reading of multicultural society. Deconstruction exists because there is an invisible world (Bonetta, 2017), because one is aware that there is always something that escapes the manifest phenomenon. It is in this direction that the deconstructionist component works to identify the contradictions, paradoxes, and aporias of

logic within the narrative, and explores the assumptions that are often assumed to be “truths” or go unnoticed by more “traditional” readings. Thus, deconstruction makes it possible to think of educational discourse in broader terms (Mortari, 2008; Wagener, 2012) and to identify antinomies, implicit attitudes, deforming images, ethnocentric linguistic categories and mystifications of reality. It therefore allows us to ‘draw back the veil’ and emancipate ourselves from those deeper and more unconscious forms of cultural conditioning. Deconstruction is therefore a process of the historicization and relativization of knowledge that allows us to understand and encounter “the face of the other” through the culture of doubt (Nanni, 2001). The characteristic of deconstruction goes beyond a descriptive approach and tries to understand the current situation in a profound and critical way (Cambi, 2015). Thus, starting from the lectio of deconstructionism, the force of prejudice is reduced to give “space to a more relativistic, more dynamic vision of cultures” (Cambi, 2001, p. 35).

In the light of the evidence that emerged during the qualitative research, we decided to examine the narratives of the interviewed teachers and heads of schools and their prevailing intercultural discourse. We tried to further develop these reflections, taking them not individually but articulating them within “narrative thematic categories” through a methodological-deconstructive approach. Deconstruction became both a model of analysis to “read” the texts (the narrations of teachers and heads) and a training strategy that enabled the development (construction) of reflective and hermeneutical skills on which to base educational choices and practices.

Deconstructing Intercultural Education: Intercultural Education as Deconstruction

The analysis of the teachers' narratives revealed different, inconsistent conceptions that were sometimes contradictory to the current Althusian “truth regimes” and the rhetorical slogans and definitions of the current ministerial regulations. The existence of a “ghost” intercultural model was noted and, therefore, a contradiction between the official intercultural model and school practice (Tarozzi, 2015, p. 56). Deconstructing the intercultural narratives of teachers allowed us to highlight the complexity, ambivalence and plurality of many conceptions of the intercultural phenomenon which is difficult to define in an exact, certain and objective way. The intercultural phenomenon is dynamic: “it is a liquid concept”, says one teacher, “which, like the image of a blurred photograph, struggles to capture the moment that does not want to be caught.” What emerged was a certain intercultural dynamism that took on various forms, contours, levels of intensity and configurations. For example, the considerable number of pupils coming from the C.A.R.A. located in the territory of Mineo initially caused the middle school there to assume an emergency character, but then it became a “normal” phenomenon, since the paths and practices for the school reception have been consolidated over time.

The deconstruction of the answers of the interviewed teachers seemed to significantly bring out the more “cultural” aspect. The teachers appeared to promote a rather unified notion of culture which, as suggested by many theorists of intercultural studies (Dasli, 2019), finds its strongest expression in an essentialist vision. According to this view, culture is abstracted from the discourse context of interaction, and instead consists of one or more defining characteristics that shape and penetrate the members of a national or ethnic group, as if they were all the same (Holliday, 1999). In this sense, the conception of intercultural education is still very much linked to cultural diversity and risks taking on a folkloristic aspect, which has been identified in the literature as a “cous cous” form of the intercultural phenomenon (Santarone, 2012), i.e. a sort of melting pot of different

ethnic cultures. One consequence of this perspective is the adhesion to a compensatory conception of education in which the recognition of the learning disorder and the teaching of the Italian language becomes the center of every educational intervention.

However, as one teacher suggests, “if we have to talk about the intercultural phenomenon, we have to do it within our own region”. Therefore, the intercultural phenomenon requires a precise project aimed at the acquisition and development of an open, flexible, critical thought; a thought capable of “migrating” (Pinto Minerva, 2004) towards other cultures, understood in a broad sense, to recognize and understand differences and/or analogies. Intercultural education is not the pedagogy for or the pedagogy of foreigners, but the common educational requirement of anyone living in heterogeneous and complex contexts. The intercultural project at school should characterize the normal being and doing of school today (Agostinetto, 2016).

Deconstructing Teaching: Teaching as Deconstruction

The intercultural approach involves redefining and restructuring the curriculum and teaching practices. It inevitably brings knowledge, methodologies, forms of communication and attitudes within the group back into play in an intercultural perspective. In other words, it is a question of de-constructing teaching to show its changing and constantly evolving character. This perspective is certainly painful and full of tension. It is the perspective of a changing form of teaching—it could be defined as chameleon-like—which must continuously adapt to the presence and specificity of new educational needs. For example, this implies a certain difficulty in facing and navigating the communicative complexity, here understood not only as the teaching of the Italian language, but also the transmission of meanings, concepts and elements that characterize culture. An Art History teacher says: “When I find myself talking to a Chinese boy about resurrection—not because I teach religion, but because the works of art represent these concepts—obviously the distance is considerable”.

The deconstructive approach allowed us to overturn the logic and the causal and instrumental relationships between “input” and “output” which dominate a normative logic linked to the curriculum. It also enabled us to identify two different levels of teacher authority: the formal, institutional authority of the teacher and the pedagogical authority that develops within the relational process of teaching. If we ask students to rethink their identities, our own sense of self cannot be privileged either. The aporia between teachers’ authority and students’ agency invites teachers to approach their responsibility as educators by daring to challenge students’ limits, while at the same time being willing to seriously consider the students’ own thoughts: “Not putting closure to the pedagogical gap, teachers and students call upon each other to move beyond the familiar toward new landscapes of subjectivity (Wang, 2005, p.35).

Deconstruction also became a strategy and a training methodology that teachers adopted to revolutionize teaching. The outcome was original. For example, some teachers claimed to use—albeit with variable frequency—different technological devices, including interactive projectors, tablets, interactive whiteboards, smartphones and overhead projectors, in order to complete, enrich and support learning experiences and create innovative lessons. These teaching methods were developed without any kind of specific training, through trial and error, and with a spirit of creativity and service. However, they were patchy episodes that arose from the initiative of some of the teachers; no specific model had been adopted in the selected schools.

Despite precise regulatory indications at European and Italian levels (Fiorucci, 2015), the teachers interviewed said they often felt alone in facing problems and difficulties without effective support in terms of adequate resources and training (Tarozzi, 2015). Many teachers were left alone in this deconstruction process. In fact, many complained that they did not have the intercultural competences to promote inclusive processes and to face the critical issues in multicultural classes. Moreover, a large number of the current staff were trained at a time when developments in intercultural pedagogy were just beginning. These teachers did not have specific scientific training or recognition by validated specialization routes.

Deconstructing Professional Ethics: Professional Ethics as Eeconstruction

From a pedagogical point of view, the aporia between self and the other and between identity and non-identity in a multicultural class underlines the need to deconstruct the very concepts of “I”, “the other” and “we” and to question any essential definition of the “I” and one’s professional identity (Tarozzi, 2014). Deconstruction highlights the conflict between having to be and wanting to be, between reason and emotion and between rationality and affectivity, as can be seen in this quotation. “...if you have 25 pupils in class, how can you do it? I have some pupils with Specific Learning Disorders, some foreigners... on paper, it says that the teacher has to make as many programs as there are different situations... right... quite right... but how hard is it to do this? We don’t have classes with six students... and it’s even harder when you have kids who don’t speak the same language. And Italian kids have a right to be taught the right way.” It is an ethical responsibility that has become a real pedagogical dilemma. Should we educate one student or educate all of them? Deconstructing ethical action means highlighting all the deepest contradictions that guide the visions of cultural diversity and bring out an invisible or implicit reality that we must be consciously aware of or question. Two categories of teachers can be identified in this way: “those who believe that their task is to welcome the student just as he or she is and lead him or her to educational success, and those who instead go to school to transfer their subject. If they follow me, all well and good, otherwise nothing doing”. The “sense of the task” to which the teacher refers, and which can be called—to refer to Derida’s thought—the ethics of hospitality (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000) requires absolute unconditional welcome and hospitality. Hospitality is not subject to laws of any kind. You either welcome the students or you do not. In the schools we analyzed, there were teachers who, in a completely free and selfless manner, made altruistic gestures and were committed to doing good deeds for the students in a material sense (for example, they paid for bus tickets, donated clothes or gave the students rides in the host community). These are teachers with a strong sense of ethics and profession or, as one school head teacher calls them, “social missionaries” (certainly in cases of greater hardship). However, as a school head teacher suggests, the skill of a teacher “does not depend on the presence of foreigners”. “Those who are good are always good with everyone,” as another head teacher says. Not all teachers succeed or choose to accept the risk of self-transformation that comes from the encounter with interculturality.

These feelings turn into anger, guilt or depressive attitudes that need to be addressed sensitively and explicitly. Western culture tends to associate emotions with the private realm, and rationality with the public realm; building a bridge between the two realms is often a daunting pedagogical task. Feelings, desires and affections are not likely to play an important role in traditional multicultural education that forces teachers to live with rhetoric, goodness, respectability or with

rejection, or non-acceptance. Living in aporia must be felt as a poetic process, as Derrida (1993) teaches us.

Conclusions

Despite its limited territorial reference, the research carried out by the group of the University of Catania, represents a sound example of investigation, able to offer a valid, though certainly not exhaustive representation, of the situation taken into consideration. The project *Hostis-Hospes. Connecting People for a Europe of Diversities* focused on the analysis of educational and intercultural practices from the point of view of the “cultural actors” at stake. Our intent was not a priori statistical generalizations of data, which are fundamental in providing complete and accurate frameworks of understanding, but rather to identify some meaningful insights that emerged in order to propose—according to processes of analogy—theoretical models of transferability to other multicultural school contexts. The deconstructive analysis highlighted a wealth of content that can be seen both in terms of the breadth and richness of the answers and the complexity and intertwining of the issues that have emerged. Teachers’ cultural models not only greatly influence the learners, but also and above all, the teaching and professional profile of the teachers themselves. Our work was not aimed at a critical evaluation of teachers’ work, but rather at a study of the action models and pedagogical practices implemented by teachers in a contextualized way, investigating the motivations, intentions, experiences, representations and images of cultural diversity.

Regarding the scientific impact, the research unit aimed to promote a reflection on the intercultural educational practices implemented, which are often not visible. This was in order to detect and analyze in a deconstructive key the training requirements of school staff regarding interculturality in order to spread a culture of intercultural dialogue, in a virtuous circle of theory and practices. In addition, a network for the sharing of experiences has been set up with the schools involved, in order to develop effective and replicable models of action and intervention in the field of interculturality and pedagogical-educational inclusion.

It is along these lines that the University has fixed its main role regarding its collaboration with the world of school. This partnership must serve to question the consolidating teaching practices, as well as the school organization as a whole. It is difficult to draw up a single model. Nevertheless, the research reveals the systematic nature of a “model” in Sicily that sees schools as laboratories for autonomous experimentation and critical processing of the demands that come from their context and from the network of territorial relationships that they manage to create. In fact, in the relationship with the local region, the school has become one of the most significant educational agencies (sometimes the only one!) in which, despite the actual problems encountered, it would seem to operate educational qualities inspired by the values of inclusion.

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