

## Prejudice in School: A Research among Primary School Teachers

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The number of immigrants has been continuously rising, in Italy as well as all around Europe: in Piedmont, the quota of underage immigrants has almost doubled within the last four years, bringing about the issue of educating pupils belonging to different cultures. This research will take into account the opinion of primary school's teachers on the possible existence of stereotyped or prejudicial opinions about the presence of foreign children in school and in society, and it will try to understand if it may influence the relationship between teacher and pupil. The 79 teachers and 396 children who took part in this project have been given a questionnaire investigating the occurrence of prejudicial behaviours, and the quality of the relationship created by the teacher with pupils. The data collected show how prejudice appears to influence the relationship teacher-pupil especially in moments of tension, which are worsened by prejudice itself, and how the evaluation of the child may consequently change.

*Key words:* Prejudice, foreign children, teacher-pupil relationship.

*Prejuicio en la escuela: una investigación con profesores de educación primaria.* El número de inmigrantes en Italia, así como en el resto de Europa, crece continuamente y en los últimos cuatro años, el número de menores extranjeros ha aumentado alrededor de un 50%, concerniendo cada vez más a las instituciones educativas y a los docentes destinatarios de la petición de escolarización de los niños inmigrantes. Los objetivos de la investigación son indagar, si existen opiniones de naturaleza estereotípica o prejudicial en las representaciones de los docentes respecto a la presencia de menores extranjeros en la escuela primaria y si la presencia de tal prejuicio, influye en la relación entre el docente y el niño extranjero. La muestra de la investigación se compone de 79 maestros y de 396 niños, se ha utilizado un cuestionario y a través de las respuestas ha sido posible atribuir a cada docente una puntuación que indica el grado de prejuicio. De lo que emerge la influencia del prejuicio, surge en los momentos en que el equilibrio de la relación entra en crisis. El prejuicio no facilitaría la resolución de estos momentos, es más, parecería determinar el agravamiento. Como consecuencia de esto, haciendo más frecuentes y difícilmente solucionables los momentos de crisis de la relación, la presencia de prejuicio también influye, de manera evidente, en la valoración cualitativa total que el docente da a la relación con el niño extranjero.

*Palabras clave:* Prejuicio, niños extranjeros, relación maestro-alumno.

As a result of globalization, all countries present multicultural features; dissimilar languages and cultures, problems of comprehension and communication cohabit with ideological, religious and class conflicts, and with racial preconceptions, of which any individual may be more or less aware (Moscatò, 1994). Immigrants risk that their possibly permanent sojourn may concretize into a status of inequality with autochthonous populations (Perotti, 1996). The number of immigrants in Italy, just like in the rest of Europe, is constantly rising and it is more and more characterized by the creation of mixed familiar nuclei: Piedmont, the territory taken into scrutiny in this research, follows the same tendency. The data provided by Istat on foreign population in the region demonstrate the number of residing underage foreigners rose from 30.296 unities in 2003 to 59.292 unities in 2007, and had increased yearly, a situation which interested educational institutions and teachers accordingly.

The presence of foreign children is felt at times as a problem, at times as a resource: national literature on the matter dedicated numerous publications to issues related to multiculturalism (Iannacone, Di Donato, 2004; Inguglia, Lo Coco, 2004; Coltella, Grassi, 2008), as the insertion of foreign children creates the necessity of developing strategies regulating their welcoming within the class, and its relational dimension (Valtolina, Marazzi, 2006; Gobbo, 2008). Furthermore, teachers as well as school institutions begun to reassess their role and position in reference to such social phenomenon.

Prejudice can be defined as an a-critical anticipation of a judgement (Galimberti, 2002); whereas the concepts of prejudice and stereotype cannot be seen as interchangeable, they are connected, as the first is the cognitive core of the second. A stereotype is the mental representation every individual has of various social groups; it can be either positive or negative and it has the very precise function of helping to create coherence and order in the social world. A prejudice, on the other hand, is generally considered as a negative behavior towards a group or its members and it is founded on a negative stereotype. It is an integral part of the historical authenticity and finite nature of human beings, as well as a useful means of prediction and control of reality; but it can become an obstacle to mutual understanding if transformed into negative attitude, that is, into the lack of ability to appreciate and deal with the endless variety of nuances and complexity of the world. In other words, a prejudice may become a predisposition to perceive, judge and act unfavorably towards those who belong to different cultural traditions or ethnicity, and it can be analyzed from various points of view: that of one's emotional history, that of the opinions strengthening one's vision of the world or that of individual motivations, shared with one's social or ethnic group.

The thematic of prejudice has been approached theoretically with many, diverse approaches. Freud (1929), for instance, considered prejudice against an external group as a cohesive element for the group the individual belongs to: whereas frustration is present, it appears simpler, according to psychoanalysis, to divert aggressivity, or project such

feeling towards the frustrating object, or towards weaker objects which are used as scapegoats. If envisaged this way, prejudice is a defence mechanism against frustration. The individual (or a group of people with a particularly fragile psyche) may conform to ideas fossilizing onto rigid and a-critical mental positions, and may seek protection in the idea of power, which he or she would acquire by submitting to dominant ideologies; the individual would eventually harvest ideas about his or her group's superiority and the possible dangerousness of the other (Fromm, 1963).

Dollard (1939), within the behavioral approach, reaches identical conclusions: prejudice is associated with frustration, and when the aggressivity arisen by it cannot be released by inhibition or obstacle, it diverges its focus on a substitutive objective, taking the form of prejudice.

Social psychology, Allport in particular, recognizes in prejudice a form of cognitive simplification; it is used as a means of orientation and explanation for the events of life. The origin of prejudice, thus, would be linked to the normal process of formation of thought, which tends to simplify reality and organize ambiental stimuli by grouping them in homogeneous categories. The processes of categorization and generalization brings to consider the objects included in the same category as more similar among themselves than they are to objects belonging to other groups, and to apply the conclusions reached by the observation of a limited amount of events to a wider picture. The system of categorization is kept in place for stereotypes, which is marked by a visual connotation, and by the presence of personal evaluation and fixed expectancies (Allport, 1973); prejudice is the result of a highly dogmatic and close mind, which tends to classify information and knowledge rigidly and schematically and that does not tolerate uncertainty, doubts and systems of belief in contradiction with each other. Therefore, prejudice would permit to maintain one's opinions and set of values, which may lead associated a determined group only to the pieces of information the individual already know.

Stereotypes can be defined as mental maps used to create and keep a given group's ideology: such maps explain and justify the group's social interactions with other groups (Tajfel, 1969). Prejudices, on the other hand, can be described as a mental image with a negative emotional connotation towards an external group. It could be maintained the stereotype is the cognitive aspect of such an image, and the prejudice the emotional or motivational one, which leads to determined actions.

Some authors (Campbell, 1965; Sherif, 1967) advanced the hypothesis that prejudices bloomed from competitive processes among groups because of the scarcity of resources. Such theories rely heavily on the concept of threat, perceived as originating from the external group with which another is in competition, and that potentiate solidarity within the group threatened.

Some experiments have shown, on the contrary, that discriminating processes can arise also on the sole premise of the identification with a given group, hence in

complete absence of conflict (Tajfel, 1970). According to the social identity theory (Tajfel and Fraser, 1978; Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel and Turner, 1979, 1986), one group's social status is fundamental for maintaining such identity; because of this, certain groups may try to separate themselves from those with a lower status and create favoritisms of such a nature to eventually bring to differentiations from external clusters. This theory does not envisage conflict as exclusively originating from lack of physical resources, but also of social ones, like prestige and status; in this case, prejudice and stereotype could become powerful weapons either to conquer or to keep these resources.

A common ideology within a group of identification may give the possibility to employ stereotypes and prejudices in order to reinforce one's own identity, justify aggression and violence to an external group and set oneself apart from it. According to Tajfel (1981), the relationship between the individual and the group exists in three different dimensions: cognitive, evaluative and emotional. The cognitive dimension concerns the awareness of belonging to a group and, at the same time, not belonging to any other. The evaluative dimension intervenes when the very notion of group and/or of one individual belonging to it acquires a positive or negative connotation. The emotive dimension, to conclude, associates the cognitive and the evaluative to emotions (love or hate, pleasure or pain) directed to one's own group, or to those which have direct relationship with it (Tajfel, 1981). Hence the problem is the comparison between groups, by which not only social identities, but mutual relationships between groups or individuals – including the possible hierarchies within a group itself- are established.

According to integrative theories on learning as initially envisaged by Rousseau and Parsons, stereotypes and prejudices may be the result of influences such as mass-medias, school, parents and peers, therefore linking themselves with the process of socializing.

Emotions are a fundamental part of prejudicial behavior. In the field of psycho-social studies which especially focused on the emotional component of prejudice, the model created by Smith, Murphy and Coats (1999), seems to have particular relevance: it is based on two assumptions, the first that belonging to a group can become part of the personal self of an individual. The second, that people feel specific emotions associated to their own interpretations and perceptions of social objects, situations and events. Emotions are, therefore, complex phenomena which incorporate feelings, cognitions, psychological reactions and tendencies towards given behaviors. Smith's model defines prejudice as an affective manifestation towards the other, founded on one's own belonging to a precise group. Emotions felt in presence of external groups or their members are expressed in two ways by the individual: as part of a determined group or as a person, that is as a single subject, whose relation with others is based on his or her personal ideals. Smith is convinced that prejudice, when viewed as the emotional reaction of a group (first instance above), is dependent on how the *out-group* is valued by the *in-group*; emotions describing the relationships among groups

will be, therefore, different. If an *out-group* is perceived as threatening or more powerful, fear may be the most outstanding of the feelings; if the members of an external group are seen as violating the norms and the values of the *in-group*, negative emotions such as spite may emerge. The expression of unconstructive emotions is not always caused by a negative stereotype.

Smith's interpretation of prejudice as emotion may help in to understand the emotional fluctuations that happen at times in prejudicial manifestations. Indeed, those prejudices active in inter-group relationships may originate discriminating behaviors, characterized by coldness and calmness, as well as violent emotional involvement.

School as a means of socialization becomes a privileged and critical place of exchange and confrontation both for cultures and stereotypes (Longobardi, Pasta and Sclavo, 2008). For this reason, schooling years are considered crucial for the elaboration of concepts such as culture, cultural and ethnic identity, integration, assimilation, cultural democracy and ethnic minority (Perotti, 1996). The position of school is paramount for the realization and diffusion of an authentic cultural democracy, hence for the very future of European society. But in order to achieve such a role it is fundamental to analyze in depth the attitude, the opinions and expectations of those teachers involved directly in a multicultural schooling context.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Teachers. 79 teachers of piedmontese primary schools, 77 of which are female, form the sample. For what concerns the age, 8 belong to the 18-30 bracket, 23 to the 31-40, 32 to the 41-50 and 15 to the 51-60; one subject refused to answer the question.

The teachers have been asked to explain freely why they choose their profession. All the answers have been collected in various categories (Fig.1).

Fig. 1. Motivations that influenced teachers to embrace a teaching career

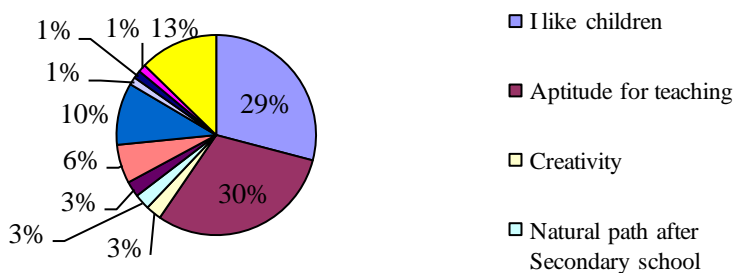
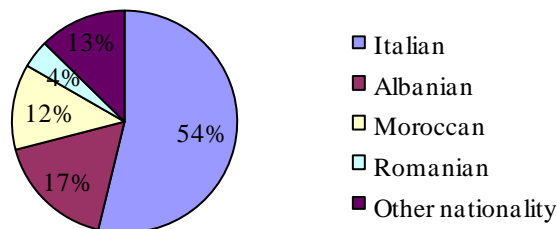


Fig. 2. Nationality of the children participating in the research



Children. The sample is formed by 396 subjects aged between 5 and 12 (M=8.42, DT=1.28), 46% is male (182 children), 42.7% is female (169); in the 11.3% of the cases analyzed the sex of the child is not specified. The nationality of the pupil has not been specified in 11 cases, of the remnants 213 are Italians, 68 are Albanians, 49 Moroccans, 16 Romanians. The remaining 13% is divided among various nationalities (Chinese, Russian, Moldavian, Cuban, Senegalese, Peruvian, Polish, etc.), which are numerically less relevant (Fig.2).

#### *Instruments*

We chose a questionnaire divided in three parts. Firstly, the teacher is asked some basic personal and social data; then the focus shifts on opinions, behaviors and ideas about multicultural society (this part of the questionnaire is adapted from Fondazione Cariplo per le iniziative e lo studio della multiethnicita', 1996). The last part is concerned with the teacher's relationship with pupils: each teacher has compiled this section of the questionnaire on 6 of his or hers pupils, 3 Italian, 3 foreign, all belonging to the same class.

#### *Procedure*

This research is based on the study of how teachers deem the presence of foreign underage pupils in the Italian primary school system and, generally, on their opinion about multiculturalism in Italy.

Its objectives are chiefly the discovery of possible stereotypes or prejudices in the representation teachers have of foreign pupils, and if the presence of such stereotypes and prejudices can influence the relation between teacher and child.

## **RESULTS**

When asked what is important in a multicultural society, 53% of teachers (41 of them) answered it is essential to maintain one's own cultural identity, but tolerating the others; 44.2% (34) is convinced one's own culture has to be put into discussion in

order to fully appreciate and accept other people's; 2.6% (2) believe it is one's duty to protect his or her own cultural roots.

The 16.9% of the interviewees (13 teachers) does not regard foreign children's integration in school as an issue; 72.7% (56) does, but also believes it is not such relevant a problem as many think; for 10.4% (8), on the contrary, integration is one of the gravest problems modern school has to face.

Teachers, then, have been asked to evaluate several ethnic groups according to a 5 points Likert scale. Table 1 presents the results of this part of the questionnaire, which shows the presence of relevantly different perceptions, among teachers, of given ethnic groups; some are judged negatively or extremely negatively, Travelers above all, followed by Slavic, Albanians and North-Africans. Others are viewed positively, like people coming from South America.

*Table 1. Social Evaluation of Ethnic groups*

Nationality	Evaluation				
	1	2	3	4	5
Travelers	49.4%	26.6%	8.9%		2.5%
Slavic	22.8%	35.4%	27.8%	3.8%	1.3%
Albanians	8.9%	27.9%	53.2%	5.1%	
North-africans	6.3%	38%	31.6%	7.6%	
Eastern European	2.5%	17.7%	39.2%	21.5%	1.3%
Middle Eastern	3.8%	24%	41.8%	5.1%	
Central and South Africa		22.8%	40.5%	25.3%	
China	1.3%	13.9%	40.5%	21.5%	3.8%
Philippines	1.3%	5.1%	26.6%	40.5%	7.6%
SouthAmerica		3.8%	22.8%	43%	10.1%

44 of the teachers interviewed declared they have witnessed prejudicial attitudes in their school; when asked what made them embrace such an opinion, the majority of them answered that the lack of mutual awareness may be the major culprit. Other significant answers are the generalization of negative past experiences and the child's family background. It appears that fear of terrorist attacks, political ideals and competition at work are not particularly influential. All the alternative answers offered to the teachers and the relative ratios are illustrated in table 2.

Successively, all teachers have been given a series of 22 items related to behaviors and opinions about the presence of foreigners, to be evaluated with a 5 points Likert's scale of agreement; the results have allowed to attribute to each teacher a score indicating his or her own level of prejudice, or prejudicial attitudes. All the items concern the relationship among cultures, the positive and negative consequences such relationships may cause in schooling and working background. All the scores have been elaborated in categories associated with 3 "levels of prejudice" (absence of prejudice, low prejudice, high prejudice). 60,8% of the teachers forming our sample (48 subjects) is

within the first level, 29.1% (23) within the second, and 10.1% (8 teachers over 79) belongs to the level of high prejudice.

Table 2. Motivations of prejudicial behaviors according to the teachers

Motivation	Frequency	Ratio on the total of the subjects	Ratio on the total of the answers
Generic fear of the "different"	17	38.6%	15.7%
Fear of being hurt by them	11	25%	10.2%
Competition at work	5	11.4%	4.6%
Lack of mutual cultural awareness	25	56.8%	23.1%
Generalization of negative past experiences	20	45.5%	18.5%
The Mass Media's opinion	7	16%	6.5%
Familiar background	20	45.5%	18.5%
Political Ideals	3	6.8	2.8%

Significant differences have not been recorded on the association among variables, especially in reference to the age of the teachers and the reason they chose a teaching career.

The children participating in the study have been assessed by their teachers according to a 5 points scale, 1 coinciding to very low school performance and 5 to very high.

The answers given by Italian and foreign children are statistically different (U of Mann-Whitney= 15.248,  $p < .001$ ). Teachers have been asked to show, on a 5 points scale, the commitments of their pupils, independently to their performances: the differences between Italian and foreign children are not, in this case, significant.

In reference to the quality of their relationship with the child, teachers have been asked to specify, on a 5 points Likert's scale, the frequency of the following situations: *the child shares anecdotes of his or her life with me, we share moments of disagreement or tension, the child seeks confrontation when he or she feels uncomfortable, the child asks for my help when he or she feels the need*. The U of Mann-Whitney's test shows relevant discrepancies in the perception of relationships created with Italian and foreign children only for what concerns sharing (U=15.350,  $p < .01$ ) and comforting (U=15.290,  $p < .01$ ).

Before interpreting these data as sign of a difficult relationship between foreign children and their teachers, it should be decided if these children's cultures might be the source of such results.

Finally, teachers have been asked to give a qualitative evaluation of their relationship with pupils: when Italian children are concerned, only 1.4% (3 cases) of the relationships have been evaluated negatively, 10.3% (22) are considered neutral, and the blatant majority, 63.4%, are seen as positive. 24.9 % is seen as extremely positive.



When referring to foreign children, 2.9% of relationships has been defined negative, 12.2% neutral, 60.5% positive and 24.9% extremely positive. The difference in ratio between the results related to Italian and foreign children is very slight and statistically not relevant.

The data related to pupils' school performance appear not to be influenced by the presence or lack of prejudice in the teacher. The same can be said for the presence of moments of sharing and for the tendency of the child to seek comfort in the teacher.

On the other hand, when moments of tension or disagreement are analyzed, it is germane how the association between a teacher's level of prejudice and that of tension and disagreement themselves are statistically associated ( $X^2 = 17.550$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The higher the level of prejudice, the stronger the tension between teacher and pupil. If the teachers' qualitative evaluation is taken into account, it emerges that there is, also, a statistically significant association with the level of prejudice ( $X^2 = 12.931$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The data analyzed seemed to highlight that nationality, Italian or foreign, does not influence a child's school performance, while it seems to influence the teachers' perception of it.

The teacher-pupil relationship as felt by the teacher is strongly influenced by his or hers prejudices: our study demonstrated how teachers feel, on average, closer on a personal level to Italian pupils rather than foreign, and that such a predisposition does not only influence their opinion of a child's school performance, but also the view of their entire relationship with the pupil.

To conclude, teachers' prejudice does not influence his or her opinion of a pupil from a didactical point of view, neither appear to be weighty during moments of serene and positive sharing between teachers and children. It emerges, nevertheless, that prejudices takes a heavy toll on the teacher-pupil relationship when moments of disagreement or incomprehension arise. Thus prejudice would not help in solving such conflict, but would rather cause its heightening. With these premises, it seems adamant that prejudice tends to enhance issues between foreign child and teacher, in case they arise, and may also become highly influential on the overall qualitative evaluation of the relationship itself.

In order to avoid or limit the negative consequences of stereotyped social representations, it is essential to become aware of such representations and of the influence they can have on a teacher-pupil relationship. Only with this awareness, the teacher can become a real model of harmonious coexistence in which two or more cultures can communicate, each culture maintaining its identity and independence. The differences among groups will be an element of comparison, not of prejudice.

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