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Fecha de recepción: 30 de septiembre de 2015

Fecha de revisión: 10 de octubre de 2015

Fecha de aceptación: 15 de diciembre de 2015

Catarci, M. (2016). Intercultural Mediation as a strategy to facilitate relations between the School and Immigrant Families. *Revista Electrónica Interuniversitaria de Formación del Profesorado*, 19(1), 127-140.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6018/reifop.19.1.244161>

Intercultural Mediation as a strategy to facilitate relations between the School and Immigrant Families

Marco Catarci

Associate Professor, “Roma Tre” University (Italy)

Abstract

The contribution focuses on the role of intercultural mediator as a facilitator of relationships between the school and immigrant families.

The perspective of interculturalism in schools represents the political and educational response to the challenges of the multicultural society. In this task, strategies of intercultural mediation have been adopted in the schools in order to develop links and promote effective¹ relationships between people from different cultures.

In particular, an intercultural mediator (also called a ‘community interpreter’ or a ‘cultural linguistic’ or ‘cross-cultural mediator’ in certain contexts) is an operator in charge of facilitating communication between individuals, families, and community as part of measures to promote and facilitate the social inclusion of immigrants. As a mediator between immigrants and the society of reception, he/she promotes the removal of cultural and language barriers, the development of a culture of openness, inclusion and the advocacy of rights, and observance of the duties of citizenship. Moreover he/she facilitates the expression of immigrants’ needs on the one hand, and the characteristics, resources, and constraints of the welfare system on the other.

Finally some key results of quantitative research in Italy are presented with regard to biographical and professional experience of intercultural mediators active in the Italian school system.

Keywords

Interculturalism, intercultural mediator, immigrant, family, school.

Contacto:

Marco Catarci. E-mail: marco.catarci@uniroma3.it. Università degli Studi Roma Tre. Dipartimento di Scienze della Formazione. Via del Castro Pretorio, 20 00185 Roma.

Mediación intercultural como estrategia para facilitar las relaciones entre la escuela y las familias inmigrantes

Resumen

Este artículo se centra en el rol del mediador intercultural como un facilitador de las relaciones entre la escuela y las familias inmigrantes.

La perspectiva de interculturalismo en las escuelas representa las respuestas política y educativa a los retos de una sociedad multicultural. En esta tarea, las estrategias de la mediación intercultural han sido adoptadas en las escuelas con el fin de desarrollar vínculos y promover relaciones efectivas entre las personas de diferentes culturas.

En particular, un mediador intercultural (también conocido como 'intérprete comunitario', o 'lingüístico cultural' o 'mediador intercultural' en contextos concretos) es un operador cuya función es facilitar la comunicación entre los individuos, las familias y la comunidad como parte de las medidas para promover y facilitar la inclusión social de los inmigrantes. Como mediador entre inmigrantes y la sociedad de recepción, él o ella promueve la eliminación de barreras culturales y lingüísticas, el desarrollo de una cultura abierta, la inclusión y la defensa de los derechos, así como la observación de los deberes de los ciudadanos. Además, él o ella facilita, por un lado, la expresión de las necesidades de los inmigrantes y, por otro lado, la expresión de las características, recursos y limitaciones del estado de bienestar.

Para finalizar, algunos resultados clave de esta investigación cuantitativa desarrollada en Italia son expuestos en relación a la experiencia biográfica y profesional de los mediadores interculturales activos en el sistema educativo italiano.

Palabras clave

Interculturalismo, mediador intercultural, inmigrante, familia, escuela.

1. Introduction

The cultural shift in population produced by immigration flows in several societies today has undoubtedly affected cultural, health and social services, which have progressively changed their characteristics according to the needs of their new audience. In this task, strategies of intercultural mediation have been adopted in many European contexts in order to develop links and promote effective relationships between people from different cultures. In particular, intercultural mediators have been used in the welfare service, as third parties among immigrant users and operators to facilitate their communication and mutual understanding.

In general, an intercultural mediator (also called a 'community interpreter' or a 'cultural linguistic' or 'cross-cultural mediator' in certain contexts) is an operator in charge of facilitating communication between individuals, families and community as part of measures to promote and facilitate the social inclusion of immigrants. As a mediator between immigrants and the society of reception, he/she promotes the removal of cultural and language barriers, the development of a culture of openness, inclusion and the advocacy of the rights and observance of the duties of citizenship. Moreover he/she facilitates the expression of immigrants' needs, on the one hand, and the characteristics,

resources and constraints of the welfare system, on the other, collaborating with the operators of public and private services, supporting them in carrying out their activities and participating in the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of social interventions (Tarozzi 1998; Fiorucci, 2000; Conference of Regions and Autonomous Provinces, 2009; Luatti, 2011).

From this perspective, the intercultural mediator also plays an educational role: promoting an awareness in immigrants and service operators of the semantic and value codes associated with different cultures, pursuing an intercultural perspective, and pushing services to change culturally; in fact he/she plays an educational role.

It must be underlined that, in the field of intercultural education, the prefix 'inter' in the term 'intercultural mediator' highlights the intention of programmes, policies and practices to promote processes of interaction among people of different cultural backgrounds (Gundara, 2003: 5; Allemann-Ghionda, 2009: 135; Portera, 2011: 12-32).

Although the term 'mediation' has specific meanings in many sectors of the humanities and social sciences (e.g. in education, philosophy, psychology, theology, and civil and international law), all these different meanings convey the idea that the actions and the thoughts of human beings are expressed through a dialectic between different factors, reaching points of synthesis, points of partial compromise, and new conflicts. Thus, a strategy of mediation does not suppose 'neutrality' or 'freedom from conflicts': on the contrary, it acts in a space of conflict, between, for example, different cultural, moral, political, or economic traditions or codes.

Margalit Cohen-Emerique (1994) describes three different types of intervention, related to the different meanings of the term 'mediation':

- The first meaning concerns the action of an 'intermediary', in contexts with communication problems. The type of mediation that takes place in this situation is aimed at the facilitation of communication and understanding between people of different cultural backgrounds;
- The second meaning refers to the area of 'conflict resolution' for values, between immigrant families, communities and the host society;
- The last meaning is connected to the process of 'creation', implying social transformation and the construction of new rules based on the active collaboration between the different parties, and ending with problem-solving.

In this sense, the role of the intercultural mediator oscillates between the perspectives of 'advocacy' and those of 'empowerment'. In the first case, he/she speaks on behalf of and represents immigrant citizens who are exposed to forms of 'institutional racism' and to difficulties in defending their rights; in the latter case, he/she helps immigrants to identify how best to use the information at their disposal and what are the most effective strategies to solve their own problems, helping them to achieve the greatest possible independence (Sirna Terranova, 1996: 103).

In Italy, intercultural mediators began to be needed at the end of the 1980s to promote better access for immigrant users, particularly women, to health services, through a better interaction between medical staff and patients with regard to the conceptions of personal well-being, discomfort, illness, sexuality, birth, death, etc.

In Italy today there are around 4,500 intercultural mediators (Casadei and Franceschetti, 2009: 17) employed in the following areas: education (e.g. in schools, non-formal education, etc.); health (e.g. in hospitals or local health services); social support (e.g. in social services);

public offices (e.g. in municipalities); immigration (e.g. in reception centres for asylum seekers, immigrants, separated children, etc.); and the judiciary (e.g. in penitentiary institutions, police stations, etc.).

The main functions of intercultural mediators in these areas are the following:

- Linguistic and cultural interpretation: decoding the cultural codes of the two partners in the relationship (usually the immigrant and the native service operator), as well as their verbal and nonverbal communication;
- Information on the rights and duties of immigrant users of the service: promoting the knowledge and appropriate use of the service, in order to allow equal access to it;
- Information for service operators on the cultural codes of immigrant users of the service, and accompaniment of immigrant citizens in their access to the service;
- Support to the service, through the analysis of immigrants' needs and the identification of the most appropriate responses to these needs (Belpiede, 2002: 29-31).

Traditionally, the role of intercultural mediator is played by an immigrant who has lived in the host country for long enough to acquire a good knowledge of the language and the cultural codes and to have worked through his/her own experience of migration, although in recent years some Italian and second-generation subjects have begun to operate as intercultural mediators.

The essential requirements for an intercultural mediator are a good knowledge of the two languages and cultural codes between which the mediation is carried out, and adequate communication, relationship and conflict management skills.

In this sense, flexibility, tolerance, hope, respect and inquisitiveness are the basic intercultural principles to create an operational third culture, to build the collaborative structures for this culture and to distinguish between culturally appropriate and inappropriate behaviours (Townsend, 2002).

Today, intercultural mediators are common in many European countries. A comparative analysis of the areas of intervention, access paths and essential skills of intercultural mediators in six European countries (Italy, France, Germany, Greece, Spain and the UK) showed that in these contexts intercultural mediation is considered to be a strategic tool for the integration process, in order to facilitate:

- Communication and social cohesion between different groups (between ethnic minorities and majorities or immigrants and natives);
- Access to public services and citizenship rights of minorities and immigrants; and
- The management (identification, prevention and resolution) of conflicts that arise in multicultural contexts (Casadei and Franceschetti, 2009: 99).

In some countries (e.g. Spain, France, Italy and Germany), intercultural mediation is carried out by individuals who work alongside service operators, providing specific advice. In other countries (e.g. the UK), the device comes closely under the jurisdiction of the specific service, and is inherent to its actions. In the first case, the mediation is the action of a third figure inserted between the two polarities (the immigrant and the native operator), while in the second case the mediation is carried out by structures operating within the system (Casadei and Franceschetti, 2009: 101).

2. An intercultural framework in education

An essential requirement for a strategy of intercultural mediation is a perspective of interculturalism, involving educational inequality to be addressed, the various forms of exclusion and marginalization to be faced, and policies that include the disadvantaged from all communities to be developed (Gundara, 2003: 9).

In the context of the European Union, the main types of intercultural approaches in education have been grouped as follows:

- *Guidance measures*, including written information about the school, intercultural mediators, human resources and equipment, and specific initiatives for migrant families;
- *Strategies aimed at strengthening the interaction between schools and migrant families* through the publication of written information on the school system in the languages of origin of immigrant students and the use of intercultural mediators or contact teachers to promote better interaction between immigrant students, their families and the school;
- *Teaching in the mother tongue* which is usually carried out in extracurricular activities on the basis of bilateral agreements and the availability of specific resources;
- *The promotion of processes through which relations between people of different cultural backgrounds are analysed and made explicit in the school curricula*, with an intercultural strategy configured at three levels: a) learning regarding the values of respect and, in some cases, anti-racism, as part of the context of cultural diversity; b) the international dimension, with an analysis of cultural diversity within the contemporary historical and social contexts; and c) the European dimension (Eurydice, 2004, 2009).

Intercultural education arose in Italy after the appearance of immigration in the mid-1970s, later than in Northern European countries: indeed, a “pedagogy for foreigners” in Germany and a “pedagogy of reception” in France had developed throughout the twentieth century (Grant & Portera, 2011). In Italy, since its first appearance, intercultural education has taken a broader perspective, as it addressed not only the inclusion of foreign students, but an overall rethinking of education for all (native and foreigners) in the belief that, in an interdependent world, the intercultural skills that are necessary to form proper relationships with others and understand cultural differences are essential prerequisites to act as informed citizens.

In the Italian context, intercultural education is characterised by an interdisciplinary approach that moves substantially along two main axes: on the one hand, the inclusion of students with an immigrant background, whose presence in the Italian education system has increased rapidly since the 1980s; on the other hand, an overall intercultural approach addressed to all, in order to rethink the practices of learning and building knowledge in an intercultural sense.

The first approach, which is aimed at assuring equal access and quality education to immigrants in comparison with native students, has been explained in the Italian Ministry of Education’s “Guidelines for the integration of foreign students” (2014).

Specifying that the broad category of “students with non-Italian citizenship” includes various groups with different needs (non-Italian students, pupils who live in a non-Italian speaking context, adopted students, unaccompanied minors, foreign university students, etc.), these guidelines provide important recommendations for the effective inclusion of foreign students through a number of strategies in schools and in the territories: reception procedures (registration, documentation, enrolment), the involvement and participation of foreign families, evaluation and educational guidance for immigrant students, teaching Italian as a second language, particular approaches in schools with a high concentration of immigrant students, continuing education for school personnel and networking with the lifelong learning system (Ministry of Education, 2014).

The second dimension, which is addressed to the whole scholastic population for an overall rethinking of education, is well expressed in a document by the Italian Ministry of Education entitled “The Italian Way to Intercultural Education and the Integration of Foreign Pupils” (2007), highlighting the circumstances, choices and actions that are distinctive of the Italian intercultural model.

First, it must be noted that a strong link between the intercultural approach and inclusive citizenship is underlined in the document, which specifies that the Italian method of intercultural education combines the ability to recognise diversities with the search for social cohesion, thus moving towards a vision of citizenship that is in line with the current pluralism, in which special emphasis is put on achieving convergence towards common values (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 9).

Furthermore, the fundamental principles that have guided the development of intercultural education in the Italian context are the following:

- *Universalism*. Universal criteria for the recognition of children's rights were introduced very early in the Italian context, through measures for the inclusion of students with special needs (in particular, the disabled) which have been implemented since the 1970s and the ratification (1991) of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).
- *Common school*. The Italian school system includes foreign and native students in a common context of learning, avoiding separate classes, in continuity with the historical tradition of the reception of various forms (gender, disabilities, social background) of diversities.
- *Importance of the individual in relationship to the other*. An intercultural effort is aimed at the enhancement of the subject and the development of educational experiences based on the uniqueness of each student's biography and relational background. The focus on the relational dimension offsets the risk of exacerbating an individualistic approach and cultural differences, and it also helps schools to recognise students' family backgrounds.
- *Interculturalism*. The Italian school system adopts the intercultural perspective through the promotion of dialogue and confrontation between cultures for all students at all levels (teaching, curricula, pedagogy, subjects, relationships, school climate). Such an approach is not limited to mere strategies for the inclusion of immigrant students or at compensatory measures for them: it entails taking diversity as a paradigm of the identity of the school, as an opportunity to open up the entire education system to all of the differences (of origin, gender, social, biography). This perspective arises from a dynamic conception of culture,

preventing students from being held captive by “cultural prisons” caused by stereotypes or folklorisation (Ministry of Education, 2007, pp. 7-9).

Based on these guiding principles, ten essential lines of action are identified, which are distributed in three main areas:

- *Actions for integration.* These strategies are addressed mainly to students with immigrant backgrounds and their families to ensure their right to education, the equality of their school curricula and their effective participation in school life. They include practices for their reception and inclusion into the school, the teaching of Italian as a second language, the enhancement of multilingualism, relationships with foreign families and educational guidance.
- *Actions for intercultural interaction.* These practices pertain to the necessary changes taking place in society and in schools, in particular, in educational and teaching management, thereby promoting the conditions needed for intercultural exchange and relationships. They include practices aimed at facilitating relationships inside and outside of school, preventing discrimination and prejudice, and promoting the intercultural dimension of knowledge.
- *Actors and resources.* Specific strategies are proposed with regard to the organisational aspects, the actors and resources inside and outside of the school, and the forms of cooperation between the school and civil society, in order to promote a broad approach toward interculturalism, both inside and outside of school. They include practices of educational leadership, autonomy and networking between educational institutions, civil society and the territories, and continuing education on behalf of teachers and non-teaching staff (Ministry of Education, 2007, pp. 11-21).

Although they are in a patchwork in relation to the various territories and the different levels of the school system, many of these practices have also been implemented over the years within the Italian context. In this sense, without doubt, the higher concentration of foreign students in some territories has been a tangible incentive to rethink education in an intercultural sense; moreover, the primary school, in particular, has played a prominent role in the field of intercultural innovation due to its traditional tendency toward experimentation and its wider incidence of students with an immigrant background in comparison with other levels in the education system.

Among the approaches aimed at improving the inclusion of immigrant students, the following tools have been developed over the years in the Italian school system: reception protocols (documents that plan the reception of immigrant students in the school), interventions of intercultural mediators (aimed both at improving the initial inclusion of students with linguistic needs and the participation of foreign families in school life), continuing education programmes for school (both teacher and administrative) staff, peer education on behalf of foreign students, and educational, vocational and social guidance for immigrant students and their families.

Furthermore, among the strategies aimed at entirely rethinking education in an intercultural sense, the following have been developed: interdisciplinary programmes on other cultures that focus on immigration and are aimed at the decentralisation of points of view and at analysing stereotypes, on intercultural citizenship, on the management of conflicts and on human rights defence (Demetrio & Favaro, 2002; Fiorucci, 2008; Gobbo, 2000; Portera, 2006).

3. A quantitative research on intercultural mediators in Italy

This paragraph presents the results of quantitative research (IWIM, 2014: 42-54) that was part of a project funded by the European Fund for the Integration of Third-country Nationals carried out by the NGO CIES (the Centre for Information and Development Education) and the Institutional Working party on Intercultural Mediation (IWIM), coordinated by the Italian Ministry of the Interior and made up of several institutional stakeholders (ministries, regions, public institutions, etc.).¹ The main objective of the project was to draw up useful guidelines for establishing a national profile of the profession of intercultural mediators (defining, at a national level, the requirements and functions of this role and the features of vocational education for the role), which was still absent in the Italian context even many years after these professionals had started to be employed in the welfare system. It must be highlighted that such an issue is very significant for both the professional identity and the effectiveness of the interventions of intercultural mediators in the welfare system.

In 2011 ‘intercultural mediator’ was included in the national job classification of the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), in the professional class called ‘technicians of rehabilitation and social integration’, and anchored to the category ‘social work associate professional’ of the ILO (International Labour Organization) International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO08).

Moreover, in recent years three different bills on intercultural mediators (Chamber of Deputies of the Italian Parliament, 2009a, 2009b, 2013) have been presented at the Chamber of Deputies of the Italian Parliament, but none of these has actually become law.

After the ‘Guidelines for the recognition of the profession of cultural mediator’ (IWIM, 2009) had been drawn up in 2009, the Institutional Working party on Intercultural Mediation drew up a new document at the end of this project entitled ‘Status of intercultural mediator. Submissions for its inclusion in the future national system certification of competence’ (IWIM, 2014). Placing the intercultural mediator at the fifth level of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), this document states that an intercultural mediator can carry out interventions through linguistic and cultural mediation, interpreting and informal translation, and social mediation; promote intercultural mediation as a device in policies of integration; optimize the network and improve service organization and delivery; and transfer professional knowledge to junior colleagues and service operators (IWIM, 2014: 14).

In order to provide IWIM with useful empirical data for its task, research on intercultural mediators active in Italy was conducted by Marco Catarci and Massimiliano Fiorucci.

¹ We acknowledge the support for this research given by Prof. Massimiliano Fiorucci, who carried out the field research along with the author, Dr. Elisabetta Melandri, President of the NGO CIES, and Dr. Maria Assunta Rosa, Vice Prefect, Ministry of Interior. The Italian Institutional Working party on Intercultural Mediation was composed of the following Italian institutions: Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Health – National Institute for Health, Migration and Poverty, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Education, Universities and Research, Ministry of Economic Development, National Office against Racial Discrimination, National Association of Italian Municipalities – System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees, Union of Italian Provinces, Institute for the Development of Vocational Training for Workers, Conference of the Regions and Autonomous Provinces of Italy, Tecnostruttura of Regions, State-Regions Conference, Region of Lazio, Region of Calabria, Region of Veneto, Region of Piedmont, and Region of Emilia Romagna.

The general objective of the research was to investigate the role of the intercultural mediator in Italy. In particular, the research questions were the following:

- RQ1. What are the main features of the biographical experience of intercultural mediators who are active in Italy?
- RQ2. What are the main features of their educational experience?
- RQ3. What are the main features of their professional experience?
- RQ4. What is their view on the possible establishment of a national profile of the profession of intercultural mediators?

The data were collected between April and June 2014 using a quantitative approach: an anonymous self-completed questionnaire comprising 24 questions (on the issues of biographical and educational experience, professional practice and the possible establishment of a national profile of the profession), and 123 variables was given to a statistically representative sample of intercultural mediators active throughout Italy.

The interviews were carried out using the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) method and the Limesurvey platform.

As neither national lists nor data on the general population of mediators are available in Italy, the sampling plan was formulated on the basis of an accredited estimation of the number of mediators active in Italy, which counts 4,500 mediators active in the country (Casadei and Franceschetti, 2009: 17).

Fixing the confidence level at 99% and a confidence interval of 5%, the stratified sample included 579 subjects. Intercultural mediators were interviewed in proportion to the distribution of resident foreigners by ISTAT region, with the cooperation of representative mediation agencies: 204 (35.2% of the sample) mediators in Northwest Italy; 154 (26.6%) in Northeast Italy; 140 (24.2%) in Central Italy; and 81 (14.0%) in Southern Italy (Table 1).

Table 1.

Research sampling plan.

Area	Foreign resident population		Responses	
	n.	%	n. Interviews	%
Northwest (Liguria, Lombardy, Piedmont, Aosta Valley)	1,542,753	35.2	204	35.2
Northeast (Emilia-Romagna, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto)	1,169,134	26.6	154	26.6
Centre (Lazio, Marche, Umbria and Tuscany)	1,060,899	24.2	140	24.2
Southern (Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Molise, Puglia, Sardinia and Sicily)	614,935	14.0	81	14.0
Total	4,387,721	100.0	579	100.0

The substitution rate for the sample was 8.2%. At the end of the data collection period, the number of valid respondents was 579. The data collected were then analysed through SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software.

Key Results

Three-quarters of the respondents were female (76.8%). This confirms a well-known aspect related to the high prevalence of female mediators (Carbone, 2004: 133). The average age of the respondents is about 41 years. It should be noted that, in comparison with a previous research (carried out ten years earlier) (Carbone, 2004: 137), the average age of respondents has increased (from 37 to 41 years), highlighting that mediators are an ageing population.

The nationalities of origin of the respondents are extremely heterogeneous, as is the case for the overall immigrant population in Italy. The most frequent countries of origin are Romania (14.3%), Morocco (8.4%), Albania (7.1%), Peru (3.7%) and Tunisia (3.3%). It should be underlined that among the respondents were Italian mediators (14.6%), who were probably mostly second-generation subjects with an immigrant background who had been born in Italy.

The most frequent mother tongues of the respondents are Arabic (17.3%), Romanian (15.7%), Spanish (7.9%) and Albanian (7.3%). Beyond the mother tongue, vehicular languages spoken by the respondents have also been investigated, as these represent a further instrument of mediation; among these are English (75.5%), French (45.5%) and Arabic (12.3%).

With regard to educational qualifications (acquired both in the country of origin and in Italy), a very high profile emerges for the respondents, as more than half of them claim to have a university qualification (e.g. first tertiary degree) (54.5%), corresponding to the sixth level in the 2011 UNESCO International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), while one-sixth of them (16.3%) hold a postgraduate title (e.g., Master's or PhD) corresponding to the seventh and eighth levels in the ISCED system. This high level of qualifications is confirmed by the respondents' answers to a question about the number of years of education attended in total – the average here is 15.5. This corroborates the empirical data of the previous research, which showed an analogous high educational profile for intercultural mediators (Carbone, 2004: 143). It must be underlined that this high educational profile of the respondents often appears to be in contrast with their working conditions – low salaries and little social recognition.

Foreign-born respondents have been resident in Italy for a long time. A little less than half (47%) of the respondents said they had resided in Italy for more than 15 years, while about three-quarters (73.9%) of the respondents stated they had been residents for over 8 years. This leads one to expect that the respondents would have a good knowledge of Italian society, which is an essential requirement for effective intervention on behalf of immigrant citizens.

With regard to education in the field of mediation, most (86%) respondents had attended specific vocational courses for intercultural mediators, while over half (54.7%) of them had attended more than one programme. These courses were mostly provided by local authorities (municipalities, provinces and regions) (33.5%) and by organizations, associations and NGOs in the field of immigration (28.9%), and were of a considerable length, mainly between 501 and 1,000 hours (39.6%) and between 151 and 500 hours (24.7%).

It must be underlined that, while the previous research highlighted NGOs in the field of immigration (75.1%) as the most common organizers of courses for intercultural mediators

(Carbone, 2004: 186), today these providers seem much less relevant in this field, while local authorities (rising from 20.5% in 2004 to 28.9% in 2014), vocational training centres (absent in 2004 and accounting for 21.4% in 2014) and universities (rising from 2.9% in 2004 to 13.8% in 2014) have greatly increased their role as providers of education on intercultural mediation.

The aim of a further section of the questionnaire was to investigate the respondents' professional experience. First of all, with regard to the area of employment, the respondents stated that they work mainly in education (e.g. schools, community centres, etc.) (69.6%), health care (e.g. hospitals, counselling centres, etc.) (63.7%), social services (56.6%) and public administration (e.g. public relations, municipalities, etc.) (51.9%). Three-quarters of them worked on fixed-term contracts (78%) and fewer than half (43.4%) on full-time or part-time contracts.

Regarding length of service, half of the respondents (51.2%) said they had been employed as an intercultural mediator for more than seven years, while, respectively, 65.6% and 80.6% of the respondents had held the job for more than five and more than three years. The fact that, in the previous research findings, only 17.7% of intercultural mediators had worked for a long period (more than seven years) and only 37% a medium length of service (more than five years) (Carbone, 2004: 136) leads to the observation that, from the first appearance of intercultural mediators in the Italian welfare system, a 'historical' core of them has probably been maintained over time, accumulating professional experience over the years.

A specific section of the questionnaire was aimed at investigating problems perceived by the respondents in their activities, at both personal and organizational levels. Among the personal problems, about half of the respondents claimed low job satisfaction (due to low salary, lack of incentives, etc.) (56.6%) and an insufficient recognition of the role of intercultural mediator by institutions and services (50.4%), while 43.7% indicated insufficient supervision and personal reflection on their role. Among the problems relating to the organization of their employment, 66.5% of the respondents claimed a low and/or discontinuous salary, 51.6% of them indicated an indeterminacy of functions and a lack of recognition of the role of the mediator in the service, while 49.3% of them pointed to incomplete and/or distorted information about the role of the mediator in the service.

Among the aspects considered most relevant to being a good mediator, the great majority of the respondents stated that it was important to be able to interact properly with service users and operators (86.3%) and to have an appropriate knowledge of the Italian socio-cultural context and the background of immigrants (82.4%). To a lesser extent, a good knowledge of the Italian language (69.6%) and of the language and culture of origin of immigrants (69.2%) are considered relevant by respondents, along with having been specifically qualified in the field of service (66.8%) and an overall high educational level (acquired in a foreign country or in Italy) (66.1%).

4. Concluding remarks

From the research findings some concluding remarks with regard to crucial aspects relating to the effectiveness of the intercultural mediator in the Italian welfare system can be presented.

First of all, it must be highlighted that the question of intercultural mediators concerns the whole of society: taking into account the needs and potential of this role implies an overall reflection on the work for society as a whole, as well as an intercultural perspective for the welfare system. In fact, even if someone who is formally empowered to encourage a

relationship between nationals and immigrants is active in the current welfare system, the need for intercultural mediation has always been present in society (in the form of 'natural' mediators), and is extremely widespread in society, in every social space in which people from different cultural backgrounds are in relationship.

Moreover, it must be underlined that the need for a wider recognition of the role of the intercultural mediator, as emphasized by the respondents in reference to the problems they have experienced, requires both the establishment of a national profile of their profession (determining the functions, roles and characteristics of vocational education), and an increasing awareness among the service staff cooperating with the intercultural mediator of the potential of such a figure for overall change in the welfare system from an intercultural perspective.

The first recommendation is aimed at recognizing the high educational and professional status of the population of intercultural mediators, ensuring appropriate work conditions and avoiding the risk of 'ethnicizing' the profession (namely, making the profession 'only for immigrants'). The second is aimed at avoiding the adoption of the view that intercultural mediation is only needed for emergencies (e.g. to solve problems that are just to do with interpretation), which could hinder the potential of intercultural mediation for consultation and for a global rethinking of the access of immigrants to the service, from the perspective of increasing equal access to the welfare system.

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Autor

Marco Catarci

Associate Professor at Department of Education, Roma Tre University, where he teaches Social and Intercultural Education. His major research interests include intercultural education, cultural mediation and inclusion of refugees and is the author of books, articles and research reports on these topics.