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New trends in teacher's education.

Educational placement of the adopted child.

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Abstract

In Italy, the number of adopted school-age children is increasing. According to the Commission of Intercountry Adoption (2013), 3106 children were adopted, 47.5% of them are between 5 and 9 years old. The present action-research aims at exploring the spread of good approaches in schools in terms of welcoming of adopted children. For this purpose, 268 teachers of primary schools were involved in analyzing the social representation about adopted children and their family. The results show a simplified vision of the adoptive family, which is described as heroic family or, on the contrary, as a family with difficulty.

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1. Introduction

Children Adoption is the legal institution ensuring the foundling the right to live peacefully in a family. Intercountry adoption – type of adoption among countries – was regulated internationally by the Hague Convention of 29 May 1993 on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (Fadiga, 2002). The Convention underlines the need to establish standards and safeguards to protect the child's primary interest and his or her fundamental right.

In Italy, as already highlighted worldwide (Brodzinsky and Palacios, 2005), intercountry adoption has undergone a strong growth in the last few years; according to statistical data by the Commission for Intercountry Adoption, only in 2012 about 3106 children whose average age was 5 years old and 11 months arrived in Italy to be adopted (CIA, 2013).

Intercountry adoption is rather complex in the cultural and social field (Chistolini, 2010). The children's integration into the new context may cause disorientation, discomfort so that they sometimes refuse their new adoptive educational models in favour of those of provenience. All that makes difficult the success of adoption.

In particular, school is the first place where adoptive children have the possibility to meet their new context allowing to the good achievement of the integration process (Bomber, 2011).

It's important to underline that the educational placement could be compared to an "educational journey" because it represents a crucial phase for the child in being part of his new context – with its idioms, regulations and customs – and sometimes also with the prejudices and the distorted representations of its members (Garro, Novara and Di Rienzo, 2013). Merely through specific and detailed educational strategies, this "journey" comes to be a fundamental step in the integration process rather than a further traumatic experience.

According to this, school becomes an important element to support the adoptive child's learning and socialization.

The school insertion in the scholastic system could produce a critical state in the adoptive child because of his particular past and origins, especially in the adoptive child of foreign origins; in fact, the educational placement of this child could intensify cognitive and relational problems connected with adoption itself (Rosnati Palandri, 2009), due to the eradication from the country of origin, to injuries suffered, to the interaction with parents, to learning a new language and to the adaptation to unusual rules and habits.

A good school placement of the adopted child must therefore be able to rely on a social and cultural climate well-grounded on a positive representation of adoption, that is based on some particular fundamental conditions; these are a hearty and effective reception, an accompanying device support on its way through critical issues, a strong educational agreement between school and family and the collaboration among well-trained operators.

It is necessary that the educational roles of these figures can be combined to help the child to his/her own behavior by promoting successfully the strength, the hopes, the resilience and the pleasure deriving from his/her world (Schofield and Beek, 2006).

2. The Research

The aim of the study was to explore the knowledge and representations that guide the educational work of teachers in responding to the adopted children's needs. For this purpose, we have studied the teachers' representation of the foreign/not foreign origin adopted child and his family.

2.1. Metodology

The contribution is based on Grounded Theory (GT) methodology, in the conviction that it is one of the most interesting qualitative approaches in research.

GT is a research methodology that aims at exploring the meanings given to the phenomena, which are the object of the research.

The theoretic framework of reference is symbolic interactionism (Glaser and Tarozzi, 2007) from which the focus of methodology on the processes of attribution of meaning derives and they are seen as the fruit of interaction among subjects.

What is required of the researcher who uses this methodology is commitment to an interpretative activity able to shed light on the meanings attributed to the realities of the participants in the research. In order to do this, the researcher enters the field of investigation unequipped with rigid pre-existent theories, so that the research can be guided by the emerging reality from the interaction with the structural, social and temporal field of investigation itself (Mills, Bonner and Francis, 2006).

2.2. Participants

268 Sicilian primary school teachers (Italy) – of whom 253 (94.4%) female and 15 (5.6%) male – between the ages of 26 and 65 years old (M =47.7; sd= 8.4) were involved.

The proportion, although disproportionate in relation to the female gender, reflects the demographics of Italian primary school teachers, and a prevalence of women in performing teaching activities.

Their average teaching years are 20.7 (sd=8.4); in fact, 10.1% of them has been teaching from 0 to 10 years, 43.3% from 11 to 20 and the 46.6% more than 20 years. Of these participants, 58% say they do not have adopted children experience in the classroom.

2.3. Procedure

The administration of research tools took place during the educational planning upon agreement with head teachers, and in accordance with a collective administration, that ensures full anonymity to all individuals involved.

2.4. Instruments

A self-report questionnaire constructed ad hoc for this study, focuses on the collection of knowledge and social representation about the phenomenon of country/intercountry adoption by teachers. Through the use of open-ended questions the tool allows us to see:
- the images that teachers associate with the adoptive family;
- the adjectives used by the same to describe better the adopted child.

2.5. Data Analysis

The collected textual data were analysed using the software packages for qualitative data analysis ATLAS.ti 5.0.

A *Hermeneutic Unit* (file that includes the texts to be analysed) that contains 553 *Primary Documents* (textual material consisting of answers to open-ended questions) was created.

An inductive approach (bottom-up) organized into three sequential stages – open, axial and selective coding – has been used in order to code the data presented in text form.

The process of coding foresaw that, in the first phase (*code in vivo*) were isolated text strings (*quotations*), subject to interpretation in order to proceed to the attribution of a code[1].

Starting with the first 242 codes to emerge, we proceeded with the creation of codes of more general dimensions which define the meaning of categories which are conceptually wider (*codes families*); finally, selective coding consists in a high level conceptualisation, through which, it is possible to identify central categories – core categories or *super codes families* (CF) – to which all the others codes are somehow linked (Chiarolanza and De Gregorio, 2007).

To test the reliability of coding, two independent judges were involved; they, with the help of *memos* (notes taken about the research process, explaining the passages of contextualisation), confirmed such reliability during the different steps of encoding (Milesi and Catellanni, 2002).

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[1] For clarity, the codes are shown in italics.

2.6. Results

In the Hermeneutic Unit, three super code families (*foster couple*; *foster family* and *child representation adopted*) were created in order to aggregate the 93 codes that remained after several processes of recoding, renaming and deleting.

Through the coding of collected material, ATLAS.ti was used to elaborate two maps (*Network Views*) to make analysis results more intuitive.

Network views are composed of codes and present code-to-code relations (see Figures 1 and 2).

In these networks are located core categories which were traced through the concept of "adoptive family" and "adopted child".

In particular, from the very first findings, it became immediately obvious that the participants in the research were referring to a double meaning of adoptive family:

- "adoptive couple" that take up an adoption process;
- "adoptive family" as household that is formed after a child's adoption.
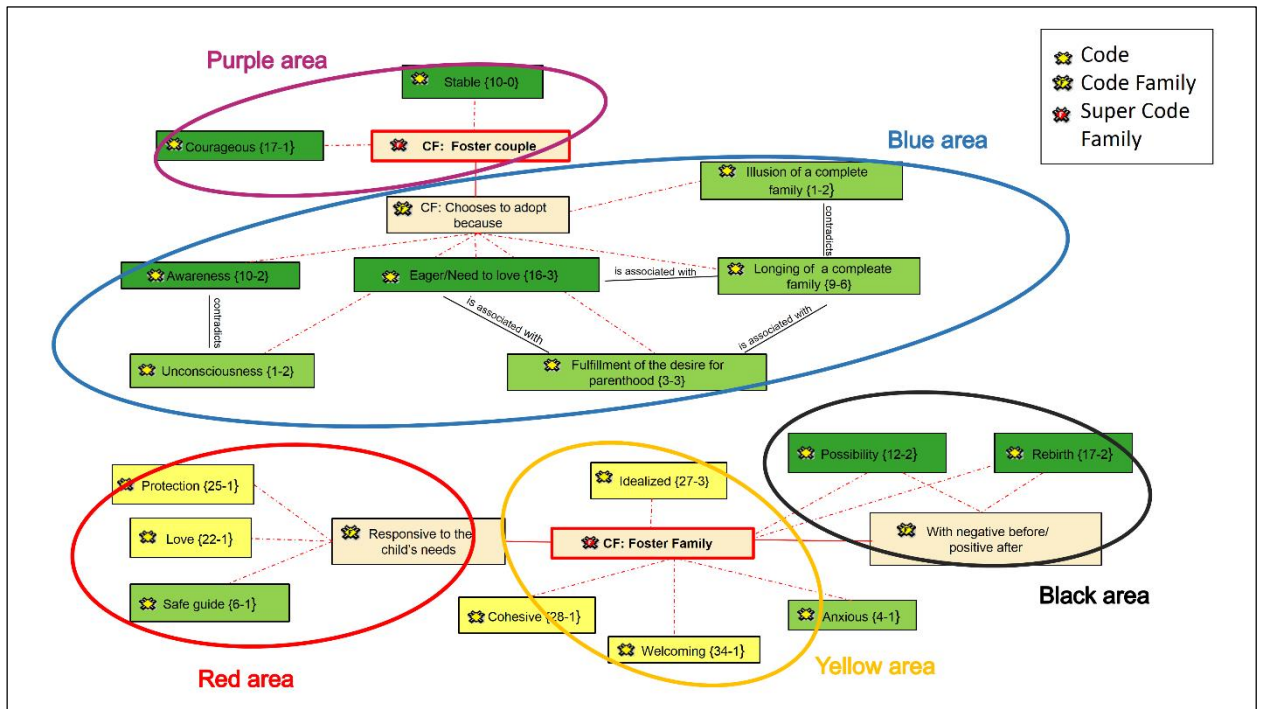

Fig. 1. Social representation of the adoptive family

In the first case, the couple (Figure 1: super code family "foster couple"; blue area) is represented by people who have the desire to establish a *family completion* and especially emerges the *need to give love* and the *desire for parenthood*. The adoptive couple, therefore, choose to adopt to provide care and protection to the child and, thus, pass from the marital dyad to a family configuration. It is a couple who acquired *awareness* both in terms of ability to procreate their own children and as appropriate maturity to welcome a foundling, creating with the latter relationship of belonging and not of possession, where in belonging there is awareness to receive a different creature from him, with his/her specific characteristics. Awareness is in contradiction with the *unconsciousness* of the couple; for teachers, the adoptive couple may decide to adopt because they are not actually aware of the difficulties that the adoptive process implies.

The adoptive couple is considered (Figure 1: purple area) to be *courageous* to make a difficult and delicate choice, that breaks the social schemes and plans to deal with the narcissistic injury of denied biological parenthood; it's a couple ready to face the uncertainties and difficulties of the whole adoption process. For this reason it is associated with the idea of stability because they share values and solidity in their marital relationship.

The adoptive couple is considered *stable* even from an economic point of view, and this is certainly linked with the idea that the adoptive process is very expensive.

As regards the second macro-area, the adoptive family (Figure 1: super code family "foster family") appears *cohesive*, *accepting*, a family that at times, therefore, appears *idealized* (yellow area); "responsive to the needs of the child" (code family) of *protection*, *love* and *safe guide* (red area) narrated as reassuring and soothing, ready to encourage, strengthen and sustain the relationship with their children, and their growth.

Furthermore, the passage of the foster family from "a negative before to a positive after" (black area) is recognized by teachers because adoption enables a *rebirth* and a *chance* for all involved, sanctioned by the chance to become family.

Little space, however, is devoted to the possible fragility and difficulties with which the adoptive family must grapple with the only meaning of anxiety (code *anxious*; yellow area) linked with the fear that their expectations are not fully met, and also linked with the doubts and concerns about the success of adoption. No reference to the extra family context which has the same responsibilities in welcoming.
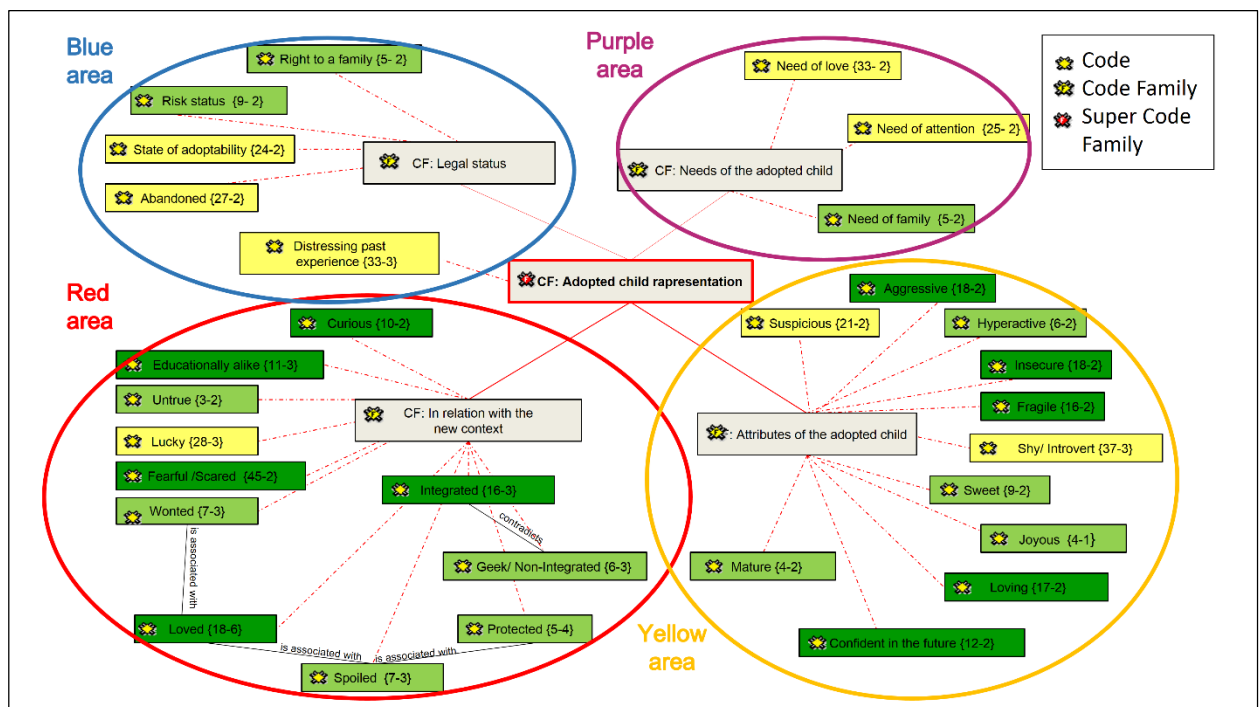

Fig. 2. Social representation of the adopted child

Figure two offers 4 levels of social representation of the adopted child:

- relevant to the past (pre-adoption; blue area), which stress the "legal status" (code family), *risk*, *abandoned*, *state of adoptability* and *distressing past experience* often painful due to mistreatment or carelessness, affective and material deprivation.

- in "relation with the new context" (code family; red area). The child is depicted in a negative sense, as *untrue*, *fearful/scared*, *spoiled*, *geek/non-integrated* but, in opposition, also as *curious*, *loved*, *wanted*, *protected* and *integrated*, *lucky* than those who have not had a similar chance of ransom on life.
- "attributes of the adopted child" (code family; yellow area). In this code family are included all those adjectives that teachers have used to describe the characteristics of the adopted child with negative connotations (*suspicious*, *aggressive, hyperactive*, *insecure*, *fragile*) and positive ones (*shy/withdrawn*, *sweet*, *joyous*, *loving*, *confident in the future* and *mature*).
- "needs of the adopted child" (code family; purple area). Finally, teachers qualify the adopted child on the basis of his/her needs: *attention*, *love* and *need of family*.

3. Discussion and concluding remarks

The results here presented are rather eloquent and underline a social representation of the adoption phenomen that is quite ambivalence. In fact, it is important to focus attention on this particular gap: on one side, the idealised vision of the "actors" in the adoptive steps and on the other, an excessive portrait of the same, so that, everything is too easy or too difficult. It should be pointed out the teachers' difficulty of understanding the complexity of adoption as a whole, taking all its aspects into consideration rather that exemplify it according to their percepitions.

These data researches are an essential help to know the simplified vision of the adoptive family by teachers whose main aim is to plan lifelong learning courses.

The first step is based on the adoptive family comprehension in its psychological aspects to downsize its idealised vision as perfect and heroic; instead, the second one focuses its attention on pedagogical, psychological, sociological and juridical matters that belong to foreign adopted children.

All this, the aim is to give professional qualities to redefine the educational intervention strategies in favour of foreign adoptive children's welfare in school. Therefore, it is necessary that teachers apply and carefully address the experience of adoption in order not to trivialize what these children are carriers in terms of experiences and fragilities (Chistolini, 2010).

Adopted children are constantly engaged in many efforts linked with the new context and their past history: the increased vulnerability of adopted children to educational difficulties, as confirmed by international studies (Wadsworth, 1993; Oullette, Bellau and Patenaude, 2001; Lorenzini, 2004; Davies, 2005; Palacios, Román and Camacho, 2010) are often due to their emotional weariness, to the "exhaustion in thinking" (Bowlby, 1979), and especially to the interior difficulties of the disturbed child. It is only a question linked with the difficulties due to the absence of cares but, moreover, it is important to lay stress on the traumatic experiences suffered by these children that caused them cognitive and emotional privations reflected in their linguistic and learning sphere (Guerreri and Odorisio, 2007).

It is fundamental that the educational institution and teachers recognize these efforts and don't underestimate them. On the other hand, the complexity of the school can't be excluded or denied but it is important to try organising starting from any social actor's skills.

The hardships of adopted children may, indeed, arise, continue or expand also due either to a teaching staff, or a single teacher, who leaves to spontaneity and improvisation – or even worse – common sense, answers that require indeed specific skills.

The school must be able to accept, hold and dissolve critical moments and events. In order to guide effectively the "learning journey" of the adopted child and support it in its specific development tasks common to peers, teachers must become "guardians of resilience" (Cyrulnik, 2005), so they should be able to listen, reassure, propose appropriate tasks which are always a little further, but not too much, compared to the current level of development of the child, too.

According to this, precise information, training and awareness programs for all school operators should ensure that the educational and scholastic insertion of sponsored children arrive at its ultimate goal: full integration. In fact, train and educate oneself to reception in an intercultural perspective, is an essential requirement and constitutes the only possible and more effective response to the complexity and the plurality of experiences with which each person is called to confront.

The pedagogical orientation of welcome focuses on the individual, on his learning and his needs, overcoming the concept of centrality of school and its educational path which only students have to adapt to (Bandini, 2007).

Ultimately, it appears crucial to create a territorial network of support for the school integration of adopted children, by developing the dialogue between educational services, families and community (Chistolini, 2013).

A dialogue founded on the elimination of all taboos regarding the topic "adoption" at school knowing that an increasing familiarity with diversity constitutes a *chance* for all territorial communities which – acquiring greater intercultural competence and recognizing the interdependence of all citizens' needs – will experience a growth of social cohesion and empowerment furthermore activating processes developing a sense of community.

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