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Towards A New Model Of Intercultural Education Into Italian School

Gianna Pasquale

Abstract

This work aims to illustrate the necessity in Italian school of a new model of education focused on interculturalism. In light of the Italian school situation emerging from recent statistical research, this work tries to explain why it is significant that in Italy a model of intercultural education should be promoted and which are the theoretical assumptions and the main characteristics it is based upon. This work will be particularly focused on the most important features of this model which are the capacity to develop an open mind to dialogue and empathy towards others.

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1. Introduction

Globalization represents a constitutive feature of the contemporary world. This means that the economic, political and social interdependence on the one hand, and the considerable migratory movements on the other hand underlie the profound transformations of the current society, that is becoming more and more multiethnic and multicultural (Silva 2008, pp. 13-30). Within this international scenario, in Italy a radical change in migratory dynamics has been witnessed: indeed, in the second half of the 19th Century and for about a century Italy has been one of the major emigration countries, until at the beginning of the 1970es, it changed into an important destination of migration flows coming from developing countries and from Eastern Europe (Pugliese, 2008, p. 209). Today, more than forty years from the first massive incomings, Italy appears as a firmly plural society (Nanni & Curci, 2005, p. 5).

* Gianna Pasquale: Tel.: +393201862842
E-mail address: giannapasquale@yahoo.it
Regarding these significant and rapid changes, Italian school is completely transformed. After a first phase, marked by the sudden irruption of immigrant pupils to be welcomed and included in classrooms, a second phase came, characterized by the stabilization of those foreign elements in the school and by the increase of foreign students born in Italy (Nanni & Curci, 2005, pp. 27-28). In light of these changes, it is necessary and urgent that Italian school plans new educational strategies in order to promote integration and exchange between students with different cultural origins. Namely, Italian school must propose a new educational model suitable for the social changes, which is a model based on interculturalism (Sani, 2011, p. 89).

2. The integration of foreign students: the role of multicultural school

The Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) provides every year the data concerning foreign students attending public and non-public schools in Italy. In the latest report the considerable and increasing presence of students which are not Italian citizens is explicitly confirmed (MIUR, 2012, p. 3). During academic year 2011/2012 foreign students were 755,935, 8.4% of the total school population. Comparing this incident percentage to the relative one in AY 1999/2000, when foreigners were 1.5% of the total attending students (MIUR, 2012, p. 8), it is possible to establish how, in just over ten years, non-Italian students have become now an important segment of Italian school system. Moreover, foreign students have increased of 6.4% in comparison to the previous AY. According to the Ministry report, this increase is due basically to non-Italian students born in Italy (44.2% of total foreign students) rather than to the migration flows (4.8%) (MIUR, 2012, p. 9). Ultimately, the presence of students with non-Italian citizenship is already a structural phenomenon constantly moving, because of the annual increase and of the variables which determine it. During the first years the increase of foreigners in Italian schools was basically due to immigration. Later the evolution of this phenomenon determined an increase of second generation foreigners compared to new entrances. However, these dynamics made an adaptation of the school to a new reality of cultural pluralism, through interventions that can promote integration and interculturalism (MIUR, 2012, p. 3).

Regarding this, it must be considered that in Italy, during the last decades, several legislations have been issued, aimed at welcoming and integrating foreign students into the classes (Sani, 2012, pp. 126-136). Nevertheless, Italian legislation in this field, even though it is effective and potentially rather advanced, has not yet a systematic and programmatic implementation in ‘real’ school, due to not only economic problems (Sani, 2012, p. 134). It is to consider that from the 1990es various activities defined as ‘intercultural and probationary’ have been achieved in all Italian regions, so that school is viewed as a real intercultural ‘work in progress’ (Nanni & Curci, 2005, p. 13), but these experiences have not always been effective and well structured. Anyway, after about twenty years of tests, Italian school has improved in including students which do not have Italian citizenship. However, an accurate planning of educational and didactic strategies without improvisation is needed (Sani, 2012, p. 135). As mentioned before, it is more important that these educational strategies are appropriate to the evolution of the presence of foreign students in our school system. It has been highlighted that the number of foreign students born in Italy is rising. We are in fact already in the ‘second phase’. Italian school must now face problems that are no longer related only to welcoming foreign students and on the learning of Italian language as a second language (L2), because children who are born and raised in Italy already speak Italian. The school must face all difficulties related to integration between different cultures and it must oppose to discriminatory or racist behavior that can appear and that can originate serious social conflicts (Wallnofer, 2000, pp. 54-58). In addition, school must take on the ‘challenge’ (Trani & Pierno, 2009, p. 171) from the second generations of immigrants, that is to promote their access to the school system and to pursue their studies in order to grant them professional education and the possibility to find a job in Italian society, avoiding to get involved in what sociologists call ‘downward assimilation’, or moving towards deviant behaviors (Trani & Pierno, 2009, p. 166). In light of what stated above it is clear why it is an urgent need that Italian school fulfills its task to promote an educational model focused on interculturalism, on which it should set up new effective educational strategies, appropriate to students’ new needs. Many scholars wondered about the meaning and value of interculturalism, but there is yet confusion among educators on the core of intercultural education (Nanni & Curci, 2005, p. 34). It is not possible to give a complete report on this debate. Indeed, in the next paragraph, it is necessary to clarify from a theoretical point of view what intercultural educational model should be carried on in Italian school and which are the main elements that should portray this model.
3. Intercultural education as new educational model

The main aim of an intercultural educational model is to promote a real interaction between different cultures (Sani, 2011, p. 91), that is a connection between cultures, expressed by the word ‘interculturalism’. The main idea of this educational model is the dynamic relation enclosed in the prefix ‘inter’: that means an equal connection between reciprocally acknowledged cultures (Pinto Minerva, 2002, pp. 13-17). In other words, intercultural education intends to guide students to the awareness of the variety of identities and cultures, in order to put into effect consciousness and respect behaviors and dialogic openness to otherness (Albarea & Izzo, 2002, p. 9). This new educational model implicate that the whole concept of ‘identity’ must be redefined, deconstructing the idea that personal and cultural identity is strict, static and determinable, whereas identity is unstable, complex and multiple (it is composed by various belongings which have roots in history and that improve in everyday experience) (Giusti, 2004, pp. 27-28, 67; Albarea & Izzo, 2002, pp. 103-106). It is necessary also to carefully think about the meaning of the word ‘otherness’. In order to exist and improve, identity needs constitutively the recognition and comparison with the other (person or culture) (Giusti, 2004, pp. 79-89). This comparison, proceeding through communication, must be fulfilled as intercultural relation. The multiple identity (personal or cultural) opens up to equal dialogue with the other, recognizing and accepting its diversity (also multiple) as an element to be appreciated since it enriches its identity. These are the fundamentals on which intercultural pedagogy is based, to build and to offer a ‘global education’ model, which is an education model for all men worldwide that must lead to human and society conscious changing (Silva, 2008, pp. 22-26). This is the educational and political task of intercultural pedagogic reflection, which coincides with the school role – and hence legitimizes its resort to intercultural pedagogy –. After giving some educational concepts in support of the educational model the school should promote and put into effect, it is needed to define some features that contribute to better portray this model. Educating students with the intercultural model means to realize a ‘Copernican Revolution’, a modification in their way of being and thinking (Albarea & Izzo, 2002, pp. 109-125). It is necessary to admit men’s existential complexity and complication, because with his many dimensions (physical, emotional, cognitive, ethic and cultural) he lives in an equally complex world, with its contradictions. Starting from this awareness, it becomes essential to change the way in which the man thinks and lives. It is required to teach students how to develop a forma mentis that can make them able to catch dynamic connections in the world and to accept and manage contradictions and existence paradoxes. This is the only way in which man, though living the contradictory existence, succeeds in making life plans and in taking crucial decisions for his projects (Albarea & Izzo, 2002, pp. 131-136). In other words, it means to educate and think in a complex way (Pinto Minerva, 2002, p. 21). About this aspect, it is necessary to develop a ‘migrant thought’ in response to the multiculturalism and the ‘physis, intellectual and cultural nomadism’ more and more marked, a thought that must be dynamic and erratic, capable of overcome its point of view to know and meet the one of the others, and then coming back into itself enriched by the confrontation experience and the exchange with divergent thoughts and points of view (Pinto Minerva, 2002, p. 24). For this purpose it is first necessary to deconstruct and break down thoughts structured by a long ethnocentric tradition (Pinto Minerva, 2002, p. 19). Only after having ‘desettled one’s mind’ (Albarea & Izzo, 2002, p. 109) it is possible to implement a ‘intercultural mind’, a mind capable of transitivity, able to switch from a knowledge mode to another, from a point of view to another, a mind that can ‘decentralize’ (Nanni & Curci, 2005, p. 53). Decentralization is a cognitive and affective-relational process that allows to overcome one’s way to look at and interpret the world. It makes possible understanding and listening, openness and solidarity and makes truly operative respect and communication, confrontation and exchange with otherness, equally (Pinto Minerva, 2002, p. 24). It must be underlined that what stated does not lead to cultural assimilation risk because in intercultural experience a cognitive disorientation in regard to a divergent thought can occur, so far from one’s thought that it becomes difficult to understand it. When we get this divergence in other’s thoughts, we have reached the ‘core of interculturalism’, hence intercultural experience is alike only if every person’s ‘ego’ moves towards the one of the ‘other’, that means it create room for the other’s world (Nanni & Curci, 2005, p. 53). Definitely one’s disposition to open to the other is essential for intercultural education. It must be added that this openness behavior does not concern only the cognitive field, but also the ‘emotional intelligence’ field. Relate to others necessitate with any doubt an emotional investment. Though, this investment must not be limited to a mere peculiar curiosity towards people with different cultural origins, instead it must be done an empathic experience of the other. Empathy is an
‘essential educational habitus’ which allows gathering ‘life experience of the others’ as ‘one’s native life experience’ (Nanni & Curci, 2005, pp. 50-51). In this way empathic experience seems to be of great relevance in order to build up deeper relations with otherness. Going beyond theoretical knowledge, these relations are based upon human and existential comprehension. It is now clear that educate people to ‘common feeling’ (Silva, 2008, p. 29) represents a purpose for intercultural education. Globalized world has resulted in ‘interdependence’ between men, so it is now necessary to recognize and give value to this interdependence. Educate to ‘mutual dependence’ (economic, emotional, cultural, environmental, etc.) means educate to recognize oneself not as an isolated entity, nor as part of a limited group of people, but as mankind (Silva, 2008, pp. 29-30).

Now the latest pedagogic thought is focusing on the awareness of ‘belonging to common mankind and common mother earth’ (Pinto Minerva, 2002, p. 14) and on the research of universal elements which combine and cross different cultures, looking for the formulation of a ‘universal citizenship project’, sustained by ‘cosmic ethic values’ (Pinto Minerva, 2002, pp. 14-15). Therefore, adopting an intercultural perspective, the school must promote educational programs that can develop this new forma mentis. Students should be guided on how to learn critical thinking, to better understand their history and other cultures history, to find dynamic connections between the fields of knowledge through inter-disciplinary paths. They should be also encouraged to open to the other. Teachers – formed through intercultural thought – should adopt methods which can promote dialogue, cohabitation and cooperation in classrooms. There should be activated projects involving families and other non-scholastic institutions, and so on.

References