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Politics, Citizenship, Diversity and Inclusion

ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"

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CONTENTS

BILDUNG AND DEMOCRACY IN CONTEMPORARY WORLD 7
COSIMO DI BARI 7

THE MISSING ELEMENT OF 'ORGANIC RELATION' IN CURRENT DEFINITIONS OF ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP. EVIDENCE FROM THE FIELD 13
KONIDARI VICTORIA 13

«IT INTERFERES WRONGLY, AND IN THE WRONG PLACE» (J. S. MILL, *ON LIBERTY*). HUMAN FREEDOM AND THE CONUNDRUM OF SCHOOLING IN LIBERALISM AND LITERARY REPRESENTATION 19
LAURA MADELLA 19

«INDÉPENDANTS QUE POSSIBLE DE TOUTE AUTORITÉ POLITIQUE»? THE PARADOXES OF CONDORCET'S REPORT ON PUBLIC EDUCATION 24
LUANA SALVARANI 24

POLITICAL SKILLS AND POLITICAL INCOMPETENCE. PIERRE BOURDIEU AND THE LINK BETWEEN EDUCATION AND POLITICS 29
EMANUELA SUSCA 29

ITALIAN SCHOOLS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT. A NETWORK APPROACH: THE ITALIAN CASE STUDY 35
CHIARA DI GERIO 35
GLORIA FIORANI 35

GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP AND EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS A STUMBLING BLOCK IN ITALIAN TEACHER TRAINING 41
ISABEL DE MAURISSENS 41
MARIA CHIARA PETTENATI 41

LEARNING TO LEARN ASSESSMENT: THE KC-ARCA MODEL 46
DAVIDE CAPPERUCCI 46
ILARIA SALVADORI 46

CIVIC AND CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN ITALY: RESULTS FROM THE IEA-ICCS 2016 ON CONCEPTUALIZATION AND DELIVERY AT 8TH GRADE 52
VALERIA DAMIANI 52

TEACHING FOR TOMORROW: TEACHER EDUCATION FOR AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE 58
SIMON N. LEONARD 58
DENISE MACGREGOR 58
BRUCE WHITE 58

EDUCATION IN THE CITY: YOUNG CHILDREN, PUBLIC SPACES AND PARTICIPATION 63
ANDREA PINTUS 63
MAJA ANTONIETTI 63
ROBERTA CARDARELLO 63

HOW TO TEACH TO THINK CRITICALLY: THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN PROMOTING DIALOGICAL CRITICAL SKILLS. 69
CLAUDIA FREDELLA 69
LUISA ZECCA 69

'SEE IT, SAY IT, SORTED' THE 'PREVENT DUTY' AND ITS IMPACT ON ENGLISH SECONDARY SCHOOLS: IN 'AN AGE OF ANGER'. 76
ADAM PETER LANG 76

LEARNING TO LEARN. A QUALI-QUANTITATIVE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CURRICULA AND EDUCATION SYSTEMS FOR MANDATORY EDUCATION IN ITALY, SPAIN AND LATIN AMERICA. 82
SALVATORE PATERA 82

BUILDING A SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW AIMED TO APPROACH TEACHER REPRESENTATIONS ON LEARNING TO LEARN IN DIFFERENT CULTURAL CONTEXTS 90
DANIELA TORTI 90

DO THE CPIA'S EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AND TEACHING REPRODUCE SOCIAL INEQUALITY? 94
IGOR DEIANA 94

OBSERVING AND ACTING ON INEQUALITY IN AN AFTER-SCHOOL SERVICE 101
GIADA GENTILE 101

SCHOOL GUIDANCE AND SCHOOL CHOICE OF STUDENTS AGED 11 TO 14. RESEARCH DESIGN 107
GIULIANA PARENTE 107

DIVIDED WE STAND? IMMIGRANTS' AND NATIVES' DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES AT FIRST TRACKING IN ITALY 114
CAMILLA BORGNA 114
DALIT CONTINI 114

TERRITORIAL DIFFERENCES: WHAT ROLE DOES SCHOOL PLAY? 121
GIANLUCA DE ANGELIS 121
BARBARA GIULLARI 121

LIKE WITH LIKE OR TAKE A HIKE? FRIENDSHIP NETWORKS IN ITALIAN SCHOOLS 128
JONATHAN PRATSCHKE 128
GIOVANNI ABBIATI 128

HOME-SCHOOL PROXIMITY, SCHOOL APPEAL, IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN YOUTHS: A CASE STUDY IN BOLOGNA 135
FEDERICA SANTANGELO 135
GIANCARLO GASPERONI 135
DEBORA MANTOVANI 135

SEGREGATED BY CHOICE. SPECIAL SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES 142
ALESSANDRA M. STRANIERO 142

HOSTIS - HOSPES, CONNECTING PEOPLE FOR A EUROPE OF DIVERSITY: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY APPROACH ON SCHOOL LEADERS' AND TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION 147
GIAMBATTISTA BUFALINO 147
GABRIELLA D'APRILE 147
MARIA TOMARCHIO 147

TEACHING GENDER: A CHALLENGE FOR EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS? 153
LISA BRAMBILLA 153
GIULIA MARIA CAVALETTO 153

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL REPRODUCTION 158
MARIA GIOVANNA MUSSO 158

GENDER (IN)EQUALITY AND MIGRATION: THE NEW PARADIGM OF CIVIC INTEGRATION 164
ANGELA TARABORRELLI 164

THE GENDER ISSUE IN MIGRANT REPRESENTATION: A CASE STUDY ON ITALIAN SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS AND ONLINE NEWSPAPERS. 169
VALENTINA TUDISCA 169

EDUCATION ON THE FRINGE OF SOCIETY 176
CAMILLA BELLATALLA 176
MARCO MANCA 176

BEING-OTHER-TOGETHER: NOTES FOR A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY OF THE PRESENT 182
STEFANO CASULLI 182

CHALLENGING INTERCULTURAL DIA-LOGUE 186
ROSITA DELUIGI 186
FLAVIA STARA 186

THE EDUCATIONAL ACTION OF TRANSCULTURALITY TO DECOLONIZE MINDS, DETERRITORIALIZE CULTURE AND DEMOCRACY, CREOLIZE THE WORLD. 191
RAFFAELE TUMINO 191

PROMOTING COMMUNICATION, CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND SOLIDARITY INSIDE ORGANIZATIONS. THE EDUCATIONAL EUROPEAN PROJECT CODES 197
GAIA PERUZZI 197
RAFFAELE LOMBARDI 197

INTERCULTURAL FOR LIFE, ANTIRACISM FOR SAFETY 202
ANNA ALUFFI PENTINI 202

WHEN ADOPTION BECOMES A COMPLICATION: FIRST EVIDENCE REGARDING THE DISCRIMINATION SUFFERED BY YOUNG ADOPTEES IN ITALY DUE TO PHENOTYPIC DIFFERENCES AND/OR BECAUSE OF THEIR ADOPTIVE IDENTITY 208
MONYA FERRITTI 208
ANNA GUERRIERI 208

FEMICIDE: A CULTURAL HERITAGE 215
CLAUDIA GINA HASSAN 215

INTERCULTURAL TEACHERS TRAINING: PROCESS, PRODUCT AND IMPACT ASSESSMENTS OF THE MASTER *ORGANIZZAZIONE E GESTIONE DELLE ISTITUZIONI SCOLASTICHE IN CONTESTI MULTICULTURALI* AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CATANIA 220
GIUSEPPE PILLERA 220
MARIA TOMARCHI 220

RECEPTION AND INTEGRATION OF MODERN ACTION: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE 228
FABIOLA BALESTRIERI 228

SOCIAL ISOLATION AND BULLYING AMONG ITALIAN STUDENT WITH IMMIGRANT BACKGROUND: IMPROVING PROTECTIVE FACTORS THROUGH ART-BASED METHODOLOGY 233
CRISTIANA CARDINALI 233
FRANCESCO MARIA MELCHIORI 233

'I'M ITALIAN AND I'M OTHER'. CITIZENSHIP IN THE MAKING AMONG SECOND GENERATION HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN ROME 238
MARIA GRAZIA GALANTINO 238

Francesca Farruggia 238
REFUGEE INTEGRATION IN THE SWISS AND ITALIAN LABOUR MARKETS: CHALLENGES, GOVERNANCE AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES 244
Silvia Zanazzi 244
Antje Barabasch 244
WHAT COMPETENCES ARE WE TALKING ABOUT? 252
Micaela Castiglioni 252
SOLEDAD: COMÙN 256
Jole Orsenigo 256
THE USEFULNESS OF LEARNING AS A CATEGORY FOR RETHINKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOL AND THE WORLD OF WORK 261
Manuela Palma 261
ADULTS AND NEW FORMS OF JOB: BETWEEN INCLUSION, EXCLUSION AND AGENCY 266
Laura Selmo 266
LEARNING FROM EMPATHY: VIOLENCE AND VULNERABILITY IN SUSAN SONTAG'S PHOTOGRAPHIC RESEARCHES 271
Daniele Garritano 271
BETWEEN GRADE RETENTION AND SOCIAL PROMOTION: INCLUSIVE STRATEGIES, CARING ATTITUDE AND A GIFT OF TIME 276
Maria Guida 276
THE AID RELATIONSHIP: THE PLACE OF EMOTIONS 282
Rosa Iaquinta 282
EDUCATION, PERSON, SUFFERING: THE POSSIBILITIES OF EDUCATION 287
Tiziana Iaquinta 287
GENDER AND EDUCATION, SLOW PROGRESS: PARADOXES, CONTROVERSIES AND MISSED SOLUTIONS 292
Domenico Carbone 292
Fatima Farina 292
SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER STEREOTYPES IN SPORT EDUCATION 297
Sara Rozenwajn Acheroy 297
PROMOTING ACTIVE CITIZENS IN SCHOOL COMMUNITIES: THE IMPORTANCE OF WELL-TRAINED TEACHERS ON SERVICE-LEARNING 302
Cristina Cecchini 302
Elisa Guidi 302
SERVICE LEARNING AS EDUCATION FOR SOLIDARITY. AN EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVE; AN EXPERIENCE AT SOME HIGH SCHOOLS 309
Gabriele Marini 309
SERVICE-LEARNING APPROACH TO CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: THE ROMUNICARE PROJECT 314
Sandro Turcio 314
Marialuisa Villani 314
SERVICE LEARNING AT THE SECONDARY SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY 319
Stefania Chipa 319
Chiara Giunti 319

LORENZA ORLANDINI 319

SMALL SCHOOLS AS PIONEERS OF INNOVATIVE DIDACTIC SOLUTION: A LITERATURE REVIEW OF THE FEATURES OF MULTIGRADE TEACHING 326

ANNA FRIZZARIN 326

DISTRIBUTION, EFFICIENCY AND CHOICE: SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SMALL SCHOOLS IN RURAL AREAS IN MARKET ORIENTED EDUCATION SYSTEMS 331

SILVIE RITA KUČEROVÁ 331

CATH GRISTY 331

JAN ŠMÍD 331

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF MIXED-AGE CLASSROOMS FOR SMALL SCHOOLS: THE MONTESSORI APPROACH TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION 334

ILARIA NAVARRA 334

FREE FOR ALL SCHOOL. THE PATH IS MADE BY WALKING. 339
A STORY OF A LONG LIFE SCHOOL LEARNING CURRICULUM 339

ALFINA BERTÈ 339

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP IN SMALLER SCHOOLS TO PROMOTE INNOVATION AND INCLUSION 344

STEFANIA RUSSO 344

‘I’m Italian and I’m other’. Citizenship in the Making among Second Generation High School Students in Rome

Maria Grazia Galantino, *Sapienza, Università di Roma*
mariagrazia.galantino@uniroma1.it
Francesca Farruggia, *Unitelma Sapienza*
francesca.farruggia@unitelmasapienza.it

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Introduction

The current debate on citizenship acknowledges the importance to adopt a micro-sociological perspective for understanding the transformation of citizenship in a context of international migration and mobility. Without dismissing the crucial role of legal citizenship as a set of rights and privileges, obligations and allegiance, this perspective focuses on «lived citizenship», i.e. the ways in which social actors live, act and practice citizenship in their everyday lives (Lister, 2007).

As subjects that particularly experience the mismatch between different dimensions of citizenship, second generation youth represent a fruitful empirical ground for studying citizenship in its making, enabling us to observe change in a society rapidly becoming more diverse and multicultural (Ambrosini, Molina, 2004; Besozzi et al., 2009; Dalla Zuanna et al., 2009). Many contributions rely on Rumbaut’s typology (1997) of children of migrants, built according to the place of birth and/or the length of staying in the host country. In this paper, the terms ‘second generation students’ and ‘young people/students with a migration background' are used interchangeably, with an extensive connotation comprising students born in Italy or abroad from at least one parent of foreign origin.

The crucial role of school education in promoting inclusion and social citizenship of younger generations is well acknowledged in social research. In the Italian context, the universal school system offers second generation children and their families the first and most significant connection with the local community, becoming a physical and symbolic place for experimenting new practices of integration and intercultural dialogue, even in the absence of adequate normative instruments (Colombo, Santagati, 2014). Nonetheless, schools can also render intercultural conflicts more evident as inequalities linked to a migration background may create «unequal diversities» (Portes, Zhou, 1993) and «subaltern integration» (Ambrosini, 2001),

Triggered by the fast-growing number of students with a migration background in Italian schools, sociological research on second generation students in Italy has steadily developed in the last twenty years, mainly devoting attention to explain the large gap between Italian and non-Italian students in terms of educational outcomes (Azzolini, Barone, 2012; Istat, 2016; Giannetti, Dasi Mariani, 2015; Ravecca, 2009) and occupational attainment (Giancola, Salmieri, 2018). According to the latest data collected by the Ministry of Education in 2017-18, 9,7% of the overall students were non-Italians, two thirds of whom born in the country (MIUR, 2019)

More recently, a new stream of research focusing on the relational dimension of second-generation experiences in and outside school (Besozzi *et al*., 2009;

Besozzi and Colombo, 2012; Cannavò et al., 2018; Casacchia et al., 2008; Cvajner, 2015; Colombo, Santagati, 2014), reveals a complex picture in which positive practices of relation and integration coexist with relational disadvantages, interethnic conflicts and discrimination (Azzolini et al., 2019). Our paper engages in this debate by exploring social relations and practices of identification and belonging of students with a migration background in Rome's high schools.

1. Method of study and participants

Data for this study come from 5 focus groups organised in secondary schools in Rome (4 general schools/*licei* and 1 technical school). Participants were selected through a non-probabilistic sampling method, combining considerations about field accessibility (convenience sampling) with the purpose (purposive sampling) of exploring practices of relations and belonging among students enrolled in more academic-oriented education tracks.

A total of 44 students, between 15 and 21 years old, have been involved in the study (25 female and 19 male). Most of them are born in Italy (27) but their national background is very heterogeneous: their parents come from 20 different countries and 9 of them are children of mixed couples. Most of their parents have a regular job and a secondary education level. Our respondents are thus not statistically representative of the second-generation population in Italy, but as 'vanguards' of a low-middle class of immigrant origin attending a high-quality school track, they may offer useful insights about trends of integration and positive engagement in society (Bosisio et al., 2005; Frisina, 2007),

2. Main research findings

2.1. Relationships in and outside schools

A first field of inquiry of our research has been the relationship between school friends and teachers, with a specific focus on obstacles met in the process of integration in the Italian school system. Confirming previous findings (Elia, 2014; Azzolini et al., 2019), the knowledge of the Italian language is the main critical issue for our respondents. Those who are born abroad or arrived in Italy after the first cycle of education, consider initial poor language competences as an obstacle for both learning and establishing and maintaining social relations with their class peers.

Interestingly, no issues other than language were reported as obstacles for positive relations at school. As observed by other scholars, it is likely that the strong value attributed by our respondents to school as an instrument for to the acquisition of knowledge (hence for upward mobility), leads them to dismiss the relevance of relational problems within the class group (Mantovani 2008; Besozzi et al.,2009)

The role of teachers in overcoming the initial language gap is widely acknowledged among our interviewees, who always offer a positive portrait of their teachers' relational and professional competences. Some also refer to the role of peers of their same country of origin, born in Italy or living in the country since a long time, as important mediators in the learning and socialization processes at school.

Outside the school context, students' relations with peers and adults are multifaceted. On the one hand, it is in the extended context of Italian society that youth of foreign origin sometimes experience prejudice and discrimination. This is particularly true for those whose otherness is more visible, as revealed by the

experiences of students of colour or girls wearing a veil. On the other hand, cases of discrimination remain confined to the 'outer world' and they do not seem to play a decisive role in the construction of positive friendship connections.

While past research, mainly based in the US, has demonstrated the presence of homophily with respect to ethnic traits in school settings, many Italian studies highlight how the number and intensity of relationships with Italian peers increase with the length of staying because of a gradual hybridization of their culture of origin with Italian values and life style (Mantovani, 2015; Perino, 2013). Our study confirms such findings and displays networks of relationships which do not follow a pattern of ethnic homophily, i.e. the tendency of agents to be linked to people of their same nationality or ethnic group. On the contrary, most respondents are part of networks of all-Italian or, to a lesser extent, multinational peers. Students with a migration background thus show a tendency to engage in open and permeable networks (Cannavò et al., 2018) where ties are built on the basis of attributes other than ethnicity, e.g. gender, age, preferences and life style.

Second generation youth also maintain intra-group ties within the national/ethnic community, not least because they keep some knowledge of their parents' native language and do some travelling back and forth to their parents' country of origin. However, in the observed context, the main ethnically homophilial relationships they engage in are with relatives or family friends, whom they occasionally meet for specific events, like birthday parties, weddings or religious ceremonies. In-group and out-group differences and boundaries thus seem to be modelled more on social settings, friendships and youth culture than on origin (Perini, 2013),

2.3. Identification and belonging

A further aim of our research is the understanding of how students with a migration background identify themselves and others and their changing modes of belonging and exclusion. As shown by other research (Besozzi e Colombo, 2012; Colombo, 2004; Perino, 2013; Mantovani, 2015), non-ethnically homophilial social ties usually correspond to multiple forms of identification and belonging.

In this regard, we have to signal that our interview protocol did not include direct questions on national identity or belonging (i.e. feeling Italian/country of origin national) in order to avoid the risk of skewing the interviewees' answers within a system of classification constructed ex-ante by the researchers (Eve, 2013). Nevertheless, categories based on nationality or ethnicity sometimes spontaneously emerge in group conversations. It mostly happens when some participants want to affirm their inclusion within the Italian in-group (i.e. *I'm Italian, I'm almost one hundred %Italian*). Statements of this sort, often prompted responses in a similar fashion (i.e. *I'm half and half; I'm Italian-nationality; I'm first Italian and then…*) revealing that the majority defined themselves as being both Italian and other or, using Portes' label (1999: 470), «hyphenated Italians».

More frequently though, ethnic/national categorization arise in students' discourses not so much because it figures saliently in second generation students sense of self, but rather because they reject its relevance for their everyday practices and experience. Other axes of difference like the way of life, gender, education, and socio-economic status appear to be more relevant to define in-groups and outgroups. One example is offered by the words of a teenager stressing the distance between herself and the national group she is supposed to be part of:

> They have a way of life which makes me uncomfortable […] When I go to their parties - as we don't see each other often – they have a sort of music that I don't like to dance. I'm not at ease with them, they are noisy (caciaroni], they drink a lot, I also do a bit, but I don't like it the way they do. […] Also… they live in the suburbs. They have different habits not because they are Peruvians, simply because they are like that. They are boors [coatti]. I feel that I don't really fit in (Focus 4, Participant 4),

Therefore, our interviewees actively negotiate their identities within a social space that may include a sense of belonging to both parents' country of origin and country of settlement, but boundaries of the ingroup to which they identify are variable, multiple and do not run along ethnic or national fault lines.

In forming identities, young people also take into account the way they are perceived by others. The children of migrants are highly aware of being classified according to their parents' country of origin, or simply for them being different, for being immigrants. As pointed out by Ambrosini (2017:11) though, such a collective category, which is broadly used in pejorative terms in Italy, only includes those coming from poor countries. Some of our interviewees who happened to meet visiting students from the US spontaneously voice their anger over this bias:

> - It happened to me to meet a child coming – according to her - from New York. And everybody went to her saying: Wow! Cool! You come from New York! You are American! I never saw the same reaction with one coming from… Bolivia!
> - Those coming from countries in need are treated badly. Those coming from countries richer than this one, they are always the best! (Focus 4, Participants 1 and 4)

Moreover, some students also denounce a racial classification system that categorizes them as black, in a collective macro-category which includes Indians, Bengalis, Libyans, Peruvians and all those visibly non-white without any further distinction.

Concluding remarks

Our study reveals a complex picture of second-generation students quite well integrated in the educational system, who developed strong and extended ties with their Italian peers in and outside school. In accordance with previous studies, this does not suggest the decline of boundaries among social groups based on ethnicity or nationalities, neither does it indicate a linear and smooth process of inclusion of a new generation of people with migrant background.

Rather, our findings shift attention to new boundaries for defining ingroups and outgroups in a society where the heterogeneity of (and within) ethnic minorities is becoming more and more visible. The proliferation of identities and the contestation of their meanings demand a research perspective which sheds more light on the ways in which second generation youth actively negotiate experiences of inclusion and exclusion and the dynamic interplay between ethnicity, generation, education, and socio-economic status.

Furthermore, in opposition and contestation to the external labelling in the wider Italian society, students with a migration background offered the researchers images of themselves that were rather unanchored from their origin and firmly embedded in the texture of everyday relational experiences with their Italian peers and friends.

In the encounter with Italian society children of immigrants can, within certain limits, shape the classificatory system at use, questioning and contesting the

categories we position them in. They are not helpless vis-à-vis external labelling and their ambivalent identities, not necessarily choose between two cultures but actively hybridise them, renders them agents of change for themselves and for society as a whole.

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