



ITALIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Editor-in-Chief: Silvio Scanagatta | ISSN 2035-4983

Immigrant Youth in Education. From Models to Processes

*Diego Mesa**

Author information

* Department of Sociology, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano, Italy.

Contact author's email address

* diego.mesa@unicatt.it

Article first published online

February 2017

HOW TO CITE

Mesa, D. (2017). Immigrant Youth in Education. From Models to Processes [Review of the book: *Youth in Education. The necessity of valuating ethno-cultural diversity*, by C. Timmerman, N. Clycq, M. Mc Andrew, A. Balde, L. Braeckmans & S. Mels]. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 9(1), 199-208. doi: 10.14658/pupj-ijse-2017-1-10



PADOVA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Immigrant Youth in Education. From Models to Processes

*Diego Mesa**

[Review of the book: *Youth in Education. The necessity of valuating ethno-cultural diversity*, by Christiane Timmerman, Noel Clycq, Marie Mc Andrew, Alhassane Balde, Luc Braeckmans & Sara Mels. Routledge, 2016. ISBN: 9781138999602]

Education is at the center of a vast debate about not only what happens in schools, but also about the model of society that we want to promote, and the type of preparation to be given to young people to face life in an increasingly globalized world (Giddens & Sutton, 2013). In societies that are constantly changing education systems are perceived as social institutions that build up and reproduce social cohesion, but the democratization of these systems has only partially succeeded. The social background still has a significant weight in school careers of youngsters and their life chances.

Nowadays one of the most debated issues concerns the way in which education should deal with diversity, in particular the cultural and ethnic diversity. In many democratic countries, sociological studies on education show the persistence of inequalities between young people belonging to the ethno-cultural majority and those from cultural minorities in being successful (Banks & Park, 2010; Dronkers, 2010, Santagati, 2015). Which values should schools promote in increasingly multicultural societies? Which are the factors and mechanisms reducing the chances of educational success of minority groups students?

* Department of Sociology, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano, Italy. E-mail: diego.mesa@unicatt.it

These issues have received special attention from research both at national and international level and are the content of *Youth in Education. The necessity of valuating ethnocultural diversity*. The book drew inspiration from an international academic workshop on the issue of “Youth, Education & Value Change” that took place at the University of Antwerp (Belgium). It is a collection of twelve conference papers based on different subjects (education sciences, demography, psychology, sociology, city planning, anthropology) referred mainly to four western societies (Belgium, Canada, Germany and Great Britain) and to some international comparisons.

Introducing the book, the editors express the need to adopt a variety of subjects and methodological approaches to understand the complexity of relationships and situations concerning youth and education in a context of diversity. Despite the differences, there are some common assumptions on the topic. The first one is that the social and cultural capital of young immigrants, as well as their belonging to a cultural minority and the working class, are often associated with lower performance in formal education courses, but the extent of the disadvantage depends on multiple factors. It is necessary to take into account the social context, in which young people live in order to understand how they develop their skills.

Furthermore the politics and the *modus operandi* of school education and integration can both reduce or amplify inequalities in education. In this respect, there is a consensus to consider the assimilation approach to education and social integration as problematic and ineffective (Gordon, 1964). Focusing on the lack of knowledge of native culture and language, this model doesn't sufficiently stimulate young immigrants and students from minority groups to use all their resources to achieve school success and does not help teachers to bring into question their teaching vision and method. Instead, many studies show that the success of students coming from minority groups is higher if they feel that their culture is accepted in the school (Gibson, 1988; Colombo & Santagati, 2017; Mc Andrew, 2015). With the aim at enhancing the ethno-cultural diversity in educational settings most studies try to recognize the mechanisms and factors that lead to the reproduction of inequalities and the conditions that promote integration and school achieving. Some studies consider the impact of specific educational projects and the policies on education of minority groups and immigrants.

The book is divided into four parts containing three chapters each. However, this division sounds a bit forced because of the heterogeneous nature of the studies. The first part discusses on “values, relationships and

institutions in a context of diversity". Two chapters deal with two complementary issues: the intergenerational transmission of values and the horizontal transmission.

In Chapter 1, Trommsdorff deals with the quality of intergenerational relationship in different cultural contexts. The results of a cross-cultural study on the value of young people and intergenerational relationships, which involved twenty countries, shows that adolescents in traditional collectivistic cultures tend to have better relationships with their parents than adolescents in individualistic cultures. The sense of intergenerational solidarity is stronger in the first case where, for example, helping elderly parents is seen as a duty by the young generations. Vice versa, in western countries, the intention to help one's elderly parents is seen as an individual decision.

In chapter 2, Boehnke and Schiefer explore mechanisms of horizontal transmission of values between migrants and students with migrant background in Germany.

The study starts assuming that peer-to-peer transmission of values between adolescents needs a common space of personal interaction and the effect of transmission is the similarity of value preferences among members. This mechanism has been tested in one of the main areas for peer interaction: the school class. After measuring the set of students' values through a standardized questionnaire, the authors evidenced that the level of homogeneity in the values varies according to the school class, while it is less related to the school and the school type. This result is consistent with the hypothesis of the relevance of face-to-face transmission of values. Considering the value configuration of German population obtained from the European Social Survey data, they showed that the level of homogeneity of the school class covaried linearly with the extent of the discrepancy between the value preferences of the class and the preferences that represent Germany. In other words, the horizontal socialization occurs more easily in classes in which the immigrants and the students with a migrant background converge on the values of the dominant culture.

In the last Chapter of the session, Mc Andrew discusses the issue of the impact of educational facilities themselves on the configuration of ethnic boundaries in the school. With a constructivist perspective (Jenkins, 2008), the author explores the role played by the school in the preservation or the fluctuation of distinct identities through mechanisms of cultural reproduction, socialization or selection. The author critically analyzes the two opposing

stances in the field of education policies for integration: the pluralistic integration approach versus radical pluralism approach (Kymlicka, 1995; Gagnon-Tessier, 2011). The first stance claims the right of various minorities to control specific educational institutions with the purpose of preserving their culture but, in this way, it promotes cultural segregation and a hypostatized and monolithic vision of cultures. The second approach promotes the importance of co-existence of youth coming from different countries and backgrounds, but it risks of not enhancing cultural minorities adequately. Making different examples on American and European contexts, Mc Andrew concludes that there is no simple solution in the pluralistic dilemma between recognition of pluralism and the promotion of common values. Every different political response and every configuration of educational facilities may provoke perverse effects of stigmatization, segregation or assimilation.

The second part is entitled “educational pathways of young immigrant” and discusses about the processes that involve school, family and community networks together.

In Chapter 4, Timmerman, Clycq, Hemmerechts and Wets show the results of a research conducted in Flanders/Belgium about the significance of socioeconomic and ethnocultural background in predicting school success. In this context, compared with the dominant group, families with an immigrant background often have a lower socioeconomic status. Through a multilevel analysis of the data of a survey, the authors demonstrated that immigrant background has a separate and independent effect on school failure, without considering the effect of gender and socioeconomic status. For this reason, it is important that there is a concurrence of intentions between the different environments (school, home and peers) in order to reduce the risk of suspending studies.

In Chapter 5, Ledent and Mc Andrew analyze the performance of immigrant students in Quebec. On this aspect, data show a difference between the first and the second generation of Canadian people, on the one hand, and the third generation of recently immigrated young people, on the other hand. Further differences are also in migrants’ groups, some of whom have a higher graduation rate (South-East Asia, Eastern Europe, East Asia, North Africa and Middle East). Other groups have a lower graduation rate (Central and South America, the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia). The authors conclude that educational programmes and integration

policies for immigrant have not been equally effective for all ethnic and cultural minorities.

In Chapter 6, Legewie introduces a qualitative study about promotive narratives of second-generation students and non-immigrants whose parents and grandparents were born in Germany. Promotive narratives are defined as “interactive constructions that students and members of their personal networks produce through recurrent acts of storytelling and that foster high educational attainment” (p. 119). Analyzing the stories of success in education of young people with migrant background, Legewie found two recurring narratives: education as path to success and education as part of family project of mobility. Promotive narratives are a vehicle for the children’s internalization of school-oriented norms and values, are guidelines for selection of friends, connect family members across generations. Second generation and non-immigrant students construct similar and functionally equivalent promotive narratives, with the parents life story as the major plot element.

The third part continues the reflection about the role of “peers, family and community” in defining educational career of ethnocultural minority students.

In Chapter 7, basing his remarks on the UK context, Crozier focuses on the importance of engaging parents’ and families’ relationships with schools to support children’s educational progress, especially in the case of students from ethnocultural minorities. From school and teachers’ perspective, parental involvement is often pursued according to assimilation approach that does not care about share values. In this way, the parents of minority ethnic groups may not be fully respected and may be discouraged from collaboration with school institution. In particular, Crozier stresses the importance of parent-school involvement to help other children and not just one’s own, for a democratic change and for the common good. The author's idea is that collective subjectivity may allow to overcome structural obstacles.

The influence of minority parents’ subjectivity on schooling of children is also covered in Chapter 8 by Çolak. The author examines aspirations, expectations and dreams of Turkish-Belgian parents in relation to their children’s education in Brussels. Interviews conducted with some parents whose children attend a multiethnic primary school, show two kinds of long-term aspirations about the future of their children. The first kind is focused on the moral (religious) cultivation associated with a well-formed education.

In this case, educational or occupational success comes in the second place. The second type of aspiration is about adaptation to a multicultural open society and concerns parents with higher degree of education. Different expectations bring families and students to invest differently in school and formal learning.

In Chapter 9, Piqueray, Clycq and Timmerman addressed the issue of Polish community school in Flanders as an area that offers alternative social, cultural and linguistic resources. Like many other minority groups, Polish parents and pupils experience several obstacles in mainstream education. In fact, the Flemish educational system, which is an international leading system in learning mathematics reading and science, is at the top also in terms of socio-ethnic stratification between highest and lowest performing students. Polish community school tries to be a link between the Polish community and the Flemish educational system. In this regard, the authors suggest to hire teachers in Polish schools who have a strong mainstream education so that they may be effective mediators between the Polish community and the Flemish educational system.

The fourth and last part, entitled “social, systemic and school dynamics”, includes some topics discussed in previous sections.

In Chapter 10, Clycq, Nouwen and Braspenningx continue to reflect on how teachers and school staff in Flanders can affect the schooling of young people with immigrant background. In this case, the study concerns Flanders mainstream schools, characterized by an approach defined as “subtractive” because removes relevance to minority culture of minority groups and is focused on adaptation to the dominant culture and to the Dutch language. The results of an ethnographic research carried out on the educational trajectories of students attending secondary school, show that specific dominant narratives come out, mainly in school staff discourses. School success is often defined in individualistic and meritocratic terms. For students who are not successful, a second narrative trend about the shortcomings in their home environment come out. The third narrative is about the differences between the majority versus minority groups that are considered more problematic, especially the Turkish and Moroccans. Polish and Italian families are seen as more similar to the dominant group in terms of motivation, school ethos and culture (probably due to the common European identity). Following the cultural reproduction theory, the authors affirm that schools are not neutral spaces, but reproduce stereotype and stigmatization processes directed to specific minority groups that can have

negative effects on the school opinion and the educational performance of students.

In Chapter 11, Audet, Mc Andrew and Vatz Laaroussi discuss about partnership between schools, immigrant families and communities in Quebec. Research shows that there are many models of collaborations. The most prevalent one in Quebec is the “mandatory involvement model”, in which the school takes on the responsibility for integrating immigrant families. There are other more symmetrical forms of collaboration between school and families, where the community plays an active role as well. Examples of collaborations are homework assistance in primary schools, dropout prevention and integration into job market programmes at a high level. Extracurricular programmes and activities aim at developing positive attitudes and self-esteem. The community may support school staff to communicate with immigrant families and to find strategies to increase their participation. The authors talk about several innovative activities carried on in Quebec in the last few years. One of the most significant initiatives is a project involving intercultural-community-school workers (ISCW), which was carried out in underprivileged and multiethnic neighborhoods and towns. These social workers developed a network of school and community organizations to promote children’s social and education success by supporting parents’ integration with continuous activities, temporary activities, activities at school and summer activities. These actions involve all stakeholders and need reciprocity and mutual recognition. Different student strategies configure different relationships with family and the community. This is the reason why educators need to understand the complexity and variety on immigrant families’ situation if they want to carry out an effective action of collaboration.

In the last Chapter, Lupton examines the problem of low engagement of white working-class children in England in schooling, especially in the North. There is a conflict of values between the school system and a part of the majority ethnic group. Field research shows that young working class culture is often characterized by low aspirations and low expectations from school, not acceptance of school values of qualification and conformity to “professional” appearance. To explain this situation, Lupton proposes to change interpretative key: this is not the anguish of the working class, but the effect of specific processes in specific places. In his case study, dissonance is between narrative of contemporary education and the reality of economic life in a deindustrialized neighbourhood of Northern England.

Focusing on an historical, spatial and economic understanding of the origins of students' values, Lupton emphasizes the need for school institutions to rethink their action in relation to and at the service of concrete local communities and neighbourhoods.

The conclusions of the book reflect qualities and limitations of a heterogeneous work. Balde and Mc Andrew highlight the richness and complementarity of the contributions and try to take stock of three important aspects for the comprehension and improvement of the correlation between cultural diversity and schooling: multilevel approach of analysis; diversity of social and political contexts; identification of best practices. As regards the first, authors affirm that a large part of contributions focuses on the combination of two or three levels of analysis: i) micro-level, concerning personal attributes, characteristics and attitudes of the students; ii) meso-level, which consists in interactions between families, communities and other institutions and spaces; iii) macro-level related to structural or systemic factors concerning the organizational and the decision making-sphere. Variety and breadth of analysis is one of the strengths of this book. However these studies do not result in an overall and organic outlook; rather a rich set of in-school dimensions whose relations and underlying mechanisms need to be explored more deeply. For instance, other out-of-school dimensions should be added to complete the conceptual framework, as the circle of friends and associations, old and new media, opportunities of participation, self-expression and civic engagement, links between minorities' integration levels and organization of school system.

This work certainly gives an idea how different are the social and political contexts where school careers of minorities and migrant young people take place in western societies. However most studies revealed some challenges concerning specific groups in a single country, which make difficult the comparison among nations. For this reason the statements about difference of integration and school success between the Canadian and European contexts, are more highlighted in the international literature (Pellerin, 2011; OECD, 2016) rather than through data presented and discussed in the book. If it is true that in Europe, where the process of constructing national identities has begun much earlier, politics tends to facilitate assimilation approach in education more than in Canada, we should consider that the situation in the three European countries analyzed is quite different one other, and it would be even more different if we consider Mediterranean and Eastern European countries as well. The case of Great Britain, where

working-class white students have school performance similar to the performance of young immigrants and minority groups, shows how the problem of educational integration cannot be approached with generalizations. Research in this field, on either side of the Atlantic, shows that there are no simple and universal solutions to reduce risks of schooling segregation and social marginalization of minority groups.

While noting the limitations of current models of integration and education, the book does not come to formulate an alternative organic proposal; rather, it offers examples of policies, practices and interventions that, under certain conditions and for some groups, may enhance the integration processes. If there is a common thread that seems to hold together the different contributions, it is a reflective attitude of dialogue between natives, minorities and those who have just arrived, aiming at finding a balance between democratic inclusion and continuity and preservation of minority's cultures (Benhabib, 2002).

In the school this attitude starts from the teachers' awareness of the cultural, relational and personal situation of students in specific contexts. It continues with the adoption of an "additional" approach to education that considers the linguistic, migration, cultural and religious capital of the students, which differs from the mainstream culture, as a resource and not as an obstacle. This involves the effort of "cultural decentralization" by teachers and school organization, rethinking educational practices, improving communication and collaboration support between school, families and minority community networks. It also seems necessary that upstream there are policy measures designed to support these processes inside and outside the school.

Ultimately, this book is an invitation to go beyond the sterile opposition between educational models of integration, paying attention to and taking action on the concrete processes that are put in place in educational contexts by maximizing all opportunities and resources offered by these contexts.

References

- Benhabib, S. (2002). *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Banks, J. A., & Park, C. (2010). Ethnicity and education: The search for explanations. In P. H. Collins & J. Solomos (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of race and ethnic studies* (pp. 383-414). London: Sage.
- Colombo, M., Santagati, M. G. (2017). School integration as a sociological construct: measuring multi-ethnic classrooms' integration in Italy. In M. Herold, M. R., Contini, (Eds.), *Living in two homes. Integration, identity and education of transnational migrants in a globalized world*, (pp. 253-292). Bingley (UK), Emerald Books.
- Dronkers, J. (Ed.). (2010). *Quality and inequality of education: Cross-national perspectives*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Gagnon-Tessier, L. C. (2011). *La philosophie du pluralisme radical chez Chantal Mouffe: Théorie, critique et enjeux*. Sarrebruck: Éditions universitaires européennes.
- Gibson, M. (1988). *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikh Immigrants in an American High school*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Giddens, A., & Sutton, P., W. (2013). *Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Gordon, M. M. (1964). *Assimilation in American life: the Role of Race, Religion and National Origins*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jenkins, R. (2008). *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Exploration* (2nd edition). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Kymlicka, W. (1995). *Multicultural Citizenship*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mc Andrew, M. (2015). *La réussite éducative des élèves issus de l'immigration*. Montréal, Presses de l'Université de Montréal.
- OECD (2016). *Low-Performing Students: Why They Fall Behind and How To Help Them Succeed*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Pellerin, H. (2011). De la migration à la mobilité: changement de paradigme dans la gestion migratoire. Le cas du Canada. *Revue européenne des migrations internationales*, 27(2), 57-75.
- Santagati, M. (2015). Researching integration in multi-ethnic Italian schools: A sociological review on educational inequalities. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 7(3), 294-334. doi:10.14658/pupj-ijse-2015-3-13