Interculturalism in the classroom. The strengths and limitations of teachers in managing relations with children and parents of foreign origin.

Elena Caneva[1]

_____

Abstract. The article addresses the issue of interculturalism in Italian schools. Intercultural education has become a fundamental principle of the Italian school system since the '80s, when students of foreign origin began to considerably increase   in   number.
Based on qualitative interviews and a focus group with educational staff, I will explore how interculturalism is enforced in the curricula and everyday school life. Although theoretically teachers accept the principle, they have difficulty in appreciating and positively reinforcing students' differences in their teaching programs, and in managing some cultural and religious claims of immigrant families. They do not always succeed in overcoming their ethnocentric approach and culturally constructed views. The data will highlight the importance of teacher training in enabling them to better implement the intercultural approach in both content and educational styles.

Keywords: Interculturalism, students of foreign origin, educational staff, curricula, relations at school

_____

_____

[1] Dipartimento di Scienze sociali e politiche, Università degli Studi di Milano. E-mail: elena.caneva@unimi.it.

Introduction

Cultural diversity is not a new phenomenon in Italian schools, which began to deal with the presence of students of foreign origin in the '80s. As the Italian educational system is based on the principle of universalism, Italian schools applied this principle to foreign students, too. The right to be educated was guaranteed to all students, regardless of their citizenship, their legal status or that of their parents[2]. Equal opportunities regarding access to educational system, academic performance and curriculum counselling were ensured for all students. Based on this principles Italian schools included foreign students in mainstream classes, in order to treat them in the same way as Italian students.

Nevertheless, the management of the education of children in a culturally heterogeneous context is complex, and Italian schools and teachers needed some guidance to manage the presence of students of different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, some innovations were introduced, as language courses for foreign students, short-term remedial lessons, changes to curricula and to everyday school life. The principle behind these changes was that of *intercultural education*, a concept which became salient in the school context, discourses and official documents as early as the '80s-'90s and which is still now the basis of the Italian educational system.

By using this concept, the Italian educational system seeks to outline the importance of dialogue and exchange among people who are culturally different, in order to avoid conflict and to favour coexistence. Intercultural education is seen as the most important way of preventing racism and intolerance, and of supporting democratic values; it entails the revision of curricula and the use of suitable teaching aids, such as bilingual texts and books. All these concepts are contained in various documents enacted by the Ministry of Education since the '90s (e.g. the document "The Italian strategy for the intercultural school and the integration of students of foreign origin", written in 2007[3]), and they were stressed in the

---

[2] Moreover, the Convention of the Rights of the Child, which was ratified by Italy in 1991, guarantees the rights of children, regardless of their cultural, sexual, national, linguistic differences.

[3] To read the document see Ministry of Education (2007).

Immigration law n. 286/1998 (the so-called Turco-Napolitano law). In the law it was outlined that schools are the best contexts for implementing intercultural projects, whose aim is "to appreciate the linguistic and cultural differences, and promote initiatives of hospitality and cultural exchange" (art. 36).

Besides the legislative interventions, several teaching proposals on interculturalism have been made in the last twenty years, and schools have been increasingly equipped with tools to facilitate the integration of foreign students (Besozzi, 2006). Many schools have implemented specific programmes on intercultural education, aimed at organizing the inclusion of foreign students in the classrooms, teaching them Italian, planning intercultural curricula. In the Lombardy region, all these initiatives and experiences have been collected in a database thanks to the Regional Observatory for Integration and Multiethnicity (ORIM)[4]. The aim is to share the "good practices" in order to implement them in other educational contexts (Colombo, 2008)[5]. Nevertheless, the gap between the declared principles and the actual availability of resources and teaching training activities is still big. Even though the national regulations have been produced for many years to give general information and suggestions for integration, there is a divergence between the "rhetoric of integration" and the "management of schools' changes" (Favaro, 2011).

The article will be focused on the application of intercultural education in daily school activities, in order to understand how it is concretely applied by teachers, what are the issues at stake, which challenges students of foreign origin pose to the Italian educational system. Two issues will be investigated: curricula and everyday interactions, in order to understand how the idea of accommodating diversity is developed in teaching programs and relations with students.

---

[4] The Observatory for Integration and Multiethnicity is the Regional office of Ismu, a no profit organization which carries out research on immigration. Ismu is one of the most important organizations in the Italian context which deal with migration issues.
[5] A lot of research has been done in Italy aimed at identifying the actions that have been undertaken on interculturalism by schools. Among the most recent studies, Santerini (2010), Besozzi and Colombo (2012).

Theoretical background

Intercultural education has become a fundamental principle in Italian schools since the '80s. It is considered the only way to achieve integration among students of different origins and it is shared by teachers, who firmly believe in it. It is strictly linked to interculturalism, a concept that has emerged in the European context to indicate a third form of inclusion beside those of assimilation and multiculturalism (Milone, 2011). The debate on the three forms of inclusion, the differences between multiculturalism and interculturalism (Meer and Modood, 2011), their success or failure requires separate analysis. Here the issue at stake is interculturalism alone, and its enforcement in educational contexts.

International research analyse attitudes and beliefs of teachers towards intercultural education and highlight some interesting results. Some studies conducted in Spain state that the intercultural approach is widely shared among educational staff and is considered the best way to deal with the cultural diversity of students. Garreta Bochaca (2005) describes the changes introduced by teachers in multicultural classes: they talk about the cultures of students, they change curricula, they organize tutorial lessons for students and parents, conferences about tolerance and interculturalism. Nevertheless, teachers describe the presence of students of foreign origin in schools as a problem: they are overloaded with work because of the increasing cultural diversity of children, and much more those who have not been trained in intercultural programs. Moreover, teachers say that specific training in the field of intercultural education lacks and more than half of them have not received any training. Consequently, they consider difficult to put into daily practice the intercultural approach.

Despite the difficulties, there is a general consensus about intercultural education, a principle to which teachers adhere. In their research Llurda and Lasagabaster (2010) investigate the beliefs of pre-service and in-service teachers about interculturalism, and they notice that most of them are favourable to it. Oldest teachers and those who have attended training programs on cultural diversity are the most favourable to accept diversity in class. By contrast, there are not differences between men and women, pre-service and in-service teachers. Similar results come out from the study of Besozzi and Colombo (2012), who underline that the older teachers feel to

be more prepared than the younger in facing multicultural contexts and classrooms.

The importance of intercultural experiences in influencing teacher's attitudes and beliefs is highlighted by various scholars. Attendance of courses on cultural diversity and immersion in a different cultural community contribute to break prejudices and develop intercultural skills (McAllister and Irvine, 2002). Experiences of mobility abroad are also useful because they make people cooperate in order to understand each other, not only linguistically but also culturally (Onorati, 2010). Exposure to different backgrounds, education, travel, personal experiences with discrimination are other factors which contribute to develop intercultural sensitivity (Smith *et al.*, 1997).

Beside these experiential factors, dispositional factors foster changes in teachers' attitudes towards diversity. Empathy (McAllister and Irvine, 2002) and curiosity (Onorati, 2010) influence positive attitudes and behaviours, but they are not sufficient for developing an intercultural approach. They can lead to a false sense of involvement (Rosenberg, 1998) or to a superficial openness, without favouring the real break of an ethnocentric attitude (Onorati, 2010). Garmon (2004) is more precise and quotes three dispositional factors which can lead to a positive change in attitudes towards diversities. Openness (i.e. interest in discussions about diversity), self awareness/self reflectiveness, commitment to social justice are fundamental predispositions.

Most of these researchers analyse the enforcement of intercultural education collecting data on teachers' beliefs, and using questionnaires. Nevertheless, information on beliefs and attitudes is not sufficient, but it would be useful to analyse the practices of teachers. By their discourses and answers to questionnaires their only thoughts about interculturalism are collected. Moreover, examining carefully their opinions, deep self reflections on their prejudices does not come out. For example, the pre-service teachers interviewed by Cardigan and colleagues (2005) seem to adhere to a model of liberal multicultural education: they state they recognise and respect diversities at school, and affirm that they try to adapt curricula and teaching styles to students of different origins. Nevertheless, careful analysis of the authors highlights that in their discourses teachers do not critically reflect on the concepts of racism and ethnocentrism, on their

prejudices and stereotypes. This is an attentive reflection of the authors, but it is not always possible to reflect in a such way on interviewees' words. People sometimes answer to questions trying to give socially acceptable answers, and this can be the case of teachers who declare to adhere to interculturalism, a very shared approach. The risk to collect socially acceptable answers could be even more frequent in the case of teachers who have attended courses on intercultural education and who have to show the acquired skills.

Some studies collected data both on teachers' opinions and their actual practices in the classrooms, and they show that in daily activities to accommodate different cultural and religious needs is very difficult. Even those who declare to be warm and friendly are sometimes prejudiced against the students' cultures of origin (Colombo and Dal Zotto, 2012) and feel uncomfortable in some situations (e.g. when students decide to wear religious symbols, as the headscarf). They also have problems in the relationships with parents, because their values, rules, educational styles, and cultural codes are perceived very different (Fravega, 2003; Colombo, 2004). As Colussi outlines (2012), this perception could be due to the lack of mutual understanding of each other cultures.

The aim of the article is to analyze the daily activities that teachers put in practice at school, taking into account that these practices are the concrete application of the teachers' idea of interculturalism. The way teachers deal with some cultural or religious events at school (e.g. Christmas or Chinese New Year), respond to the claims of families of foreign origin (e.g. the fast during Ramadan, the veil for Muslim girls), change concretely the contents of curricula or their way of teaching are all expressions of their idea of intercultural education. These issues have been investigated in this research[6].

---

[6] The research has been conducted within the European Project (FP7) "Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe - ACCEPT PLURALISM" (http://www.accept-pluralism.eu/Home.aspx).

Methodology

The enforcement of intercultural education by teachers in their daily activities was investigated in the metropolitan area of Milan, a city situated in the North of Italy. Milan is one of the top 15 cities with the largest number of students of foreign origin, which are from (or their parents are from) different countries. Italian schools are in fact characterised by the presence of many nationalities (about 187, according to MIUR, 2011), among which the largest groups are the Romanians, the Albanians and the Moroccans. Students of foreign origin are totally 711,046 in Italian schools (7.9% of the student population) and they have increased notably in the last few years: they accounted for only 0.7 of all students in 1996/1997. It is worth to note here that in the annual surveys of the Ministry of education all students with foreign origin are counted, second generations included. In fact second generation can apply for Italian citizenship only when they are 18 years old, and if they have been living in Italy since they were born.

The research's fieldwork was conducted between March and May 2011, it was based on qualitative interviews and a focus group. I selected some primary and middle state schools where the percentage of foreign children was high and I did not consider the private schools, where foreign children are completely absent or are very few in number. I also used snowballing, asking head teachers and teachers to indicate other schools. This technique was useful and easy to apply, because a network of schools has been created in Milan in order to coordinate the actions of managing foreign students. The network was built thanks to a project, called START project, implemented by the collaboration between the Milan Municipality, the Provincial Educational Department, the Regional Educational Department, the organization Ismu[7] and 4 leader schools. These schools have the task of coordinating and monitoring the actions of the schools which are situated in the same area as the leader schools and which have joined the project[8]. In every school there is at least one linguistic facilitator[9] who teaches in the

---

[7] For information about this organization see note 4.
[8] Almost all the Milan primary and middle schools joined the project.
[9] The linguistic facilitator is a teacher who is dedicated to teach foreign students Italian language courses.

language laboratories and one person responsible for foreign students[10]. In the 4 leader schools there are 4 people responsible for foreign students who coordinate all those responsible in all the schools within the project. In these schools 16 semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with head-teachers (3), deputy head-teachers (3), linguistic facilitators (5, of which 1 is also a teacher of religion and 1 is also responsible for foreign students), teachers (3). An interview was conducted with the person responsible for interculturality at the Provincial Educational Department.

In the focus group 9 people who deal with issues regarding immigration and education were involved: 2 members of trade unions, 2 university professors, 2 school teachers (one is responsible for foreign students, too), 2 members of no-profit organizations and a member of an Islamic association in Milan.

Both the interviews and the focus group were conducted in Italian, audio-recorded and then transcribed.

The finding

Adapting curricula to the diversity of foreign students

Various documents introduced by the Ministry of Education give instructions and advice on the adoption of an intercultural approach in curricula. Since the 1994 the Circular Letter "Proposals and initiatives for intercultural education" (C.M. n. 73, 1994) recommended introducing references to other cultures in history, Italian, music, arts, geography. The aim was to favour the knowledge of different cultures, the exchange among students, the fall of an ethnocentric approach. These aspects were underlined in the following documents, too, as in the C.M. 24/2006 ("Guidelines for the reception and integration of foreign students") and the document "The Italian strategy for the intercultural school and the integration of students of foreign origin" (written in 2007). Based on the general guidelines given by these documents, every school thanks to its

---

[10] In many cases the person responsible for foreign students is also the linguistic facilitator. Both the former and the latter can carry out these roles and at the same time work as normal teachers.

autonomy[11] could develop its own programme and curricula, organize freely activities and time-schedules[12]. Consequently, the change of curricula due to the presence of students of foreign origin depends on the decisions of every school and on its sensitivity to intercultural education.

The interviewees know very well the contents of the documents on intercultural education, and try to put into practise advice in their teaching programmes. In their opinion to revise curricula means not only to introduce new contents, but also to teach students that diversity is richness, to make them aware that the society is today multicultural and multireligious.

To do this they try to involve foreign students in participating actively in class or at least they try to attract their attention talking about the history/geography of students' countries of origin. FC, a teacher in a primary school, declares:

> FC: In the fifth year of primary school we dedicate 40% of the geography lessons to talking about the countries where the children in the class come from. It is the right thing to do, I think
>
> I: Did the school choose to do this?
>
> FC: Yes, some projects are thought up and then carried out. So in history, in geography, in the new curricula…when we teach them about ancient times, i.e. ancient China, we also talk about Buddha, about Buddhism. So, if there are Thai children in the class, or children from those countries, they are involved too. Secondly, we talk about Islam, because when we speak about the birth of Christianity there is also the birth of Islam. So, we can involve almost all the children. We have found a modus operandi. In Italian lessons, we also look for stories, folk tales and myths about the countries of origin of the students…the children say "yes, I remember this, yes! Someone told me this!" (FC, female teacher in a primary school).

Teachers try to put students' differences in a positive light and let other students know about them. FC outlines that she adopted this strategy for

---

[11] The autonomy of schools was introduced by the reform of the educational system of the Minister Berlinguer (Law 30, 10th February 2000). Based on this reform the Ministry of Education set out general national guidelines and establish the core curriculum, but every school is free in its organization.

[12] Schools could also decide how to distribute the total numbers of school hours, how to provide in-service teachers training, how to set up teaching programmes for groups of students.

teaching by practice: it is a "modus operandi" that she took through her teaching experience.

Besides, the involvement of students during the lessons is a way to make them feel important as individuals and to appreciate their differences. Religion is a topic that is well-suited to this purpose, as SM says[13]:

> SM: In the fifth year we talk about all the religions of the world…the five main religions, the religious education teachers have done a project, with the authorization of parents, to let all the children attend this …this path, this process of knowledge about the other religions. And this is very nice because children interact with the teacher. When a teacher is explaining Islam to students, children help the teacher to explain. They interact with the teacher. And in this way they do not feel different from others. "You are of this faith so you could tell us why you have some of these customs"…it is very interesting work (SM, female linguistic facilitator and Religious Education teacher in a primary school).

Nevertheless, as some teachers recommend, it is important to make students comfortable and not oblige them to talk about the origin of their families, their culture and religion. SP, a linguistic facilitator in a primary school explains:

> SP: If a child tells me something about his/her country, if he/she wants to talk about it, well, it's fine. But we have also to take into account that some children want to camouflage, to hide...many children fall into a sort of crisis when they have to talk about their origin (SP, male linguistic facilitator in a primary school).

SP outlines that children react in different ways to the teachers' attempts to involve them actively. Teachers should be sensitive to the needs of children, because their strategies to involve them could be negative and cause the hardening of some children.

Teachers also state that it is not always easy to change curricula, particularly because an intercultural approach is not applicable to some subjects, such as maths or chemistry. Moreover, the revision of curricula, the insertion of aspects that refer to the cultures of students are managed autonomously by teachers. A systematic revision of curricula has not yet been made, but schools and teachers which are more sensitive to intercultural education try to apply it in their daily activities. CB, the head-

---

[13] Religion as an occasion for exchange and sharing differences is also highlighted by other studies (see for example Ottaviano, 2010).

teacher of a split-site school situated in the periphery of Milan, explains well all these concepts:

> I: Do you succeed in consider the differences of students in curricula?
> CB: Mmm, it's difficult, I don't want to tell lies...it's clear that we have to follow the learning programs. We try to create links among…but, honestly, we don't plan a priori a learning program that takes into account the diversity of students. We make this in some subjects, as religion, history. Here we try to link different aspects, in many cases we can find links. But if you ask me: "do you succeed in making this systematically?", I tell you "no". We enforce intercultural programs, but they are targeted on specific aspects or issues, where it is possible to link. But they are few, I'd tell lies if I told you it's easy (CB, male head-teacher in a split-site school).

Consequently, the enforcement of an intercultural approach in the teaching programs depends on teachers' sensitivity. Those who are more sensitive succeed in linking elements of different cultures, even in subjects in which this is more difficult. As CB says:

> CB: Maths is maths. But if we talk about geography, social sciences...here it's not difficult to find links, connections. But, I remember a chemistry lesson. The teacher linked the contents of the lesson to the Arab culture, and to the Greek culture...very interesting. Here, it's a silly example of a science lesson, made in the laboratory, but where the teacher tried to link different backgrounds to make students understand how chemistry is the result of the contribution of various peoples, to make them understand that chemistry was not born here, but we are the custodians of this culture along with others (CB, male head-teacher in a split-site school).

Even though every teacher behaves based on his/her sensitivity, experience, and interests, the orientation of the school towards diversity influences his/her program and style. Financial and human resources also influence the possibility to implement intercultural projects (Colombo and Dal Zotto, 2012). It is worth noting that most of Italian teachers and schools now share in principle the intercultural approach. The issue at stake is, therefore, *how* teachers enforce interculturality, and not *if* they enforce it.

Differences among schools in managing the diversity of students could influence the decisions of parents about which school to choose for their children. The risk is the creation of ghetto-schools. To avoid this, the interviewees outline the importance of involving both Italian and foreign families in some leisure-time activities, in order to favour the exchange and

the development of heterogeneous social networks. MS, the head-teacher of a school which is active in this kind of initiatives, says:

> MS: Italian schools should try to interact and collaborate with the associations situated in the neighbourhood, in order to organize together events in which families can meet, outside of the school. Children interact at school, but families stay alone, don't interact with other families. Here there is the activity "Words at play": Italian mothers teach foreign mothers Italian, but it is not only the occasion to teach them Italian, it is also an occasion to interact, to create networks. This aspect should be strengthened (MS, male head-teacher in a split-site school).

Other occasions to share events with Italian and foreign families are religious festivities or parties organized by the schools for specific purposes (e.g. to celebrate the end of the school-year).

Festivities are often used by teachers to let students know about each other's cultures of origin, favour the knowledge of all students' customs and traditions and promote the cultural exchange. They are intercultural events which are organized and promoted by every school on its own, as in the case of curricula. Consequently, the enforcement of intercultural education within schools could be also analysed looking at the management of festivities.

Festivities as forms of intercultural exchange

In interviewees' opinion festivities are occasions in which cultural and religious differences could be appreciated. Teachers try to let students know about each other's festivities and to involve all students in all celebrations. FC, a teacher in a primary school, talks about the activities organized in order to celebrate some festivities of children of foreign origin:

> FC: We made a cardboard dragon and then we made a parade...and we let children eat with chopsticks, they ate Cantonese rice, and we went to the city centre, and we met all the other schools of Milan to celebrate not only the Chinese but also the Inca Festival of the Sun. We made this for an Arab festivity, too....I don't remember which Arab festivity...And we know that children sometimes don't come to school because there is a festivity. When they come back to school, we let them talk about the festivity, so that their classmates know (FC, female teacher in a primary school).

Festivities which are typical of the Italian tradition, such as Christmas or Carnival, are celebrated, too. The interviewees explain that they try to

promote the universal values of these festivities, not the religious value. In their opinion this is a good strategy to involve all students in the celebrations, even those who believe in another religion. CB, the head-teacher of a school where students of foreign origin are many, says:

> CB: We organize the school Christmas party in various ways, based on the different situations. Generally we compare the festivities of the various countries. For example last year we organized a joint celebration where we intentionally highlighted typical festivities…not so much of the countries but of the social and religious orientations of those countries. We spoke about social orientation, so the Jewish Saturday has been explained, the Arab festivity has been explained, our Christmas has been explained, the Italian New Year's Day, that is shared. This work has been done, because we Italian…but we…Christmas…I really insist on this because I want to let students understand that we consider religion as a process not of catechism, but of social culture. Italy is a country that does not forget 2000 years of Christianity, not because it was the site of the Pontificate but because Christianity is part of daily life. This year we have done some work on Mother Teresa of Calcutta and we gave to students a pencil[14], a picture of Mother Teresa and a prayer about humanity. We were undecided about giving them the pencil: "Do we give them it or not?" But it was very much appreciated, because we depicted her as an historical figure, as a social figure. We will consider other historical people, i.e. San Francesco who is also recognised by the Islamic culture, other historical figures are respected by both the cultures. They do not deny the existence of Jesus Christ, we have to be clear about that. We definitely have to be careful not to create any clashes. (CB, head-teacher in split-site school).

Even though CB thinks that it is important to appreciate and celebrate the typical festivities of students of foreign origin, he also affirms that Christianity is part of Italian culture, therefore students have to learn something about it. CB outlines that Christmas should be explained under its social and cultural aspects, not under the religious ones. Other teachers are firmer in thinking that Christmas should be celebrated, albeit emphasizing its historical significance and its universal values, as TE says:

> TE: Our school has many students of different religions, but it respects the religious festivity of Christmas, we celebrate Christmas. We celebrate it because we are Italians, but we give a more general connotation to it, we outline not only the birth of Jesus Christ but also the values of peace and brotherhood. There are all the families at the Christmas celebration, all the families come and eat traditional Italian food with us quite happily. Nothing has ever happened, they respect us as we respect

---

[14] The head-teacher explained that Mother Teresa defined herself as "the pencil of God", and for this reason he decided to give a pencil to all students.

the fact that they do Ramadan (TE, female linguistic facilitator and responsible for foreign students in a split-site school).

Although teachers believe it is important to emphasize universal values more than the religious significance of festivities, they also underline the fact that it is necessary to celebrate them and not to forget them. In fact they are part of the Italian tradition and culture, of the Italian cultural heritage and they are essential to understand Italian society:

DA: From my point of view, it does not make sense to abolish our festivities. I know that some people think "don't celebrate Christmas because it could offend the Muslims". I think…it is part of our tradition, of our culture…if we were in a Jewish country there would be "the Feast of Tabernacles" or the end of the Ramadan and we would be part of that world. We should find a way to celebrate festivities which is not annoying or offensive (DA, female linguistic facilitator in a primary school).

The educational staff justifies the necessity to celebrate Christmas because it is part of Italian culture. It has a religious significance but also a cultural and social significance and it has to be appreciated in this regard.

To which extent teachers actually succeed in enhancing its social and cultural aspects instead of its religious aspects is doubtful. In their statements, however, foreign families seem to be in favour of the involvement of their children in these festivities. Nevertheless, they seem less willing to abandon some of their cultural and religious practices. Most of problems emerge here.

The management of foreign families' cultural claims in everyday school life

The interviewees state that most of difficulties emerge in relation to the cultural and religious claims of foreign families. Immigrant parents try to transmit their cultural heritage to children, and the most visible aspects of this attempt are principally two, the fast during Ramadan and the opportunity to wear the headscarf for female children. As regard the headscarf, the interviewees say that wearing it is permitted in Italian schools. There are no formal rules that govern the issue, but the Italian educational staff let foreign families decide autonomously. It is worth noting here that in Italy most of women that use the headscarf do not cover their face, and do not use niqab or burqa. Muslims girls who attend Italian schools wear the headscarf or wear nothing on their head.

As regard the fast during Ramadan, most of interviewees accept this foreign families' claim. They try to make easier the fast for children in two different ways. Some schools organize activities during the lunch time for those children who are fasting, others schools let children go home and come back after the lunch time. Nevertheless, some teachers do not agree that children fast. In their opinion making children fast during Ramadan is a violation of their rights and should not be allowed. As RS says:

> RS: As regards Ramadan I would be not tolerant, because in my opinion the right of the child is damaged. Firstly, the Koran says that until 14 years old, until there is a conscious choice, fasting is not compulsory. So, I think I would tell the family to look for another school, because I think that I would be severe about that. I would not allow a child to remain at school from the morning to the evening without eating and drinking. I would have a problem with that, but it has never happened to me.
>
> I: Some schools have opted for letting the children go home at lunchtime…
>
> RS: Yes, perhaps they have. But it is also true that children stay at school until 12 a.m., 12.30 a.m. and then they go home. Then they come back at 2 p.m. but I know that the child has not been drinking since the morning…there might also be some problems, health problems (RS, female linguistic facilitator in a primary school).

In RS's opinion some cultural demands could be satisfied at school, but only to a certain extent: she would allow children to wear the headscarf but she would not allow headscarves which cover the face, she would ban fasting before the age of 14.

So, some interviewees (as RS) think that the possibility for foreign students to practise their traditions should be allowed to a certain extent.

Immigrant families sometimes demand that their children pray at school, but they have never been satisfied in their requests. Head-teachers justify their decision referring to the values of Italian schools, i.e. equality of all students and universalism:

> TE: The child should do Ramadan, well, we respect that…The only thing that we never allow is prayer, but we don't allow anybody to do this. They asked us to put a carpet down and pray. We told them that we have neither the space nor the staff to manage it. Absolutely, nor can Catholics, who have a Convention with the Church to teach the Catholic religion, which I am contrary to, because I think that every religion should be practised privately. The parents did not oppose this and said ok. In this school diversity is experienced through mutual respect (TE, female linguistic facilitator and responsible for foreign students in a split-site school).

It is interesting to note that teachers respect the religious practices of immigrant families but they do not recognise and do not meet some claims, as the prayer at school.

Only a head-teacher told that she accepted the prayer during the school time for specific reasons and for a limited period of time:

> CC: There was only one case of a Muslim family which sent the children to school in headscarves…but it was a special situation because these two girls came here after the closure of via Quaranta school, in a period of transition while they were waiting for via Ventura school to open. They enrolled and they asked if they could come to school in their headscarves, to go home during Ramadan when the other children had lunch, and to pray at 1 p.m. in a classroom we set aside for them. I let them do this in a period of transition, because I knew it was a transition period. But this fact caused unrest among teachers and parents, they began to say: "But if they have decided to come here, to a state school, they have to adapt to the school's rules, so we do not understand why they can wear a headscarf, they can pray at 1 p.m….". There were also people who were more open-minded, who tolerated the situation.
>
> I: Anyway, her behaviour was…
>
> CC: I said "Let's make things easy…" I do not want to bang my head against the wall. I know that in other schools the head-teacher said: "No, if children come here, they have to accept, to accept that they have to pray at other times"; whereas I know that the exemption from lunch is very common (CC, female head teacher in a split-site school).

Nevertheless, her decision provoked some controversies among teachers and parents. The only fact that it was temporary made people quiet.

Consequently, children can carry out some cultural and religious customs but not others: they can practise the traditions that do not undermine the characteristics of the Italian school and that do not influence its organization (i.e. the arrangement of time or spaces); by contrast, they do not practise those traditions that would make the school change its approach: that of protecting and guaranteeing the demands of minority groups in spite of its universalistic values (that are based on equality among all students). For example the fast during Ramadan does not affect the organization of the school and most interviewees agreed that it has to be respected because it is a child's right; also the children's absence during their festivities is allowed because children have the right to celebrate them and it does not affect the class's routine. But the demand to pray during school time is seen as something involving a minority which also requires

the school to reorganize its timetable and space: if prayer was permitted for a minority, it would have to be permitted to all the minorities for equality's sake.

Another reason why certain cultural practices are not allowed or are opposed by teachers is the need to protect the children's rights. The common frame of reference is "the right of the child": in the teachers' opinion if this right is not respected, they have the duty to make it be respected. In some teacher's opinion (as that of RS, quoted above) an example of this is the fast during Ramadan: fasting is an individual and autonomous choice, so parents cannot make children fast but they should let them decide autonomously.

Teachers have difficulties in satisfying immigrant families' claims when these demands affect children's rights, but also their education and well-being. They believe that the demands of parents sometimes negatively influence children, who cannot go through their school life happily because of their parents' wishes and rules. These wishes are culturally founded, such as the restrictions regarding girls, which are typical (from the teachers' point of view) of Muslim families:

> SM: The swimming pool for girls could not be…it is not really accepted. We got a definite no for this girl, who took it all very badly…very badly, doing very bad things, terrible things against her classmates, because of this anger she had inside her. On that occasion we were facing a brick wall.

> I: Was it a single case or were there many cases?

> SM: There are not many cases. But for example make up for...make up for a Halloween party: the children made hats and cloaks, and my colleague put make up on them, some had moustaches, someone dressed up as a cat, etc. It was a disaster, because this thing was inadmissible.

> I: Was it inadmissible to put makeup on the girl?

> SM: Yes, the girl couldn't. Absolutely not. Terrible suffering for this girl who was very happy to do it. And the father came to school saying "never again! It should never happen again because this is going too far". And my colleague: "I did not think I could not! The girl had accepted…" Cases like this are few and far between, there aren't many but there are a few. And the experience teaches us, because now the teacher tries to be more careful, if there is a party she does not put makeup on the girl. In the end the people who are affected are the children, they are the children (SM, female linguistic facilitator and Religious Education teacher in a primary school).

Teachers outline that they learnt how to behave with some students and families thank to the experiences they lived, and they selected some good practices which could be useful in similar situations. When possible, they do not directly address parents' demands, but rather they try to bypass the issue, as in this case:

> FC: This boy did not eat during Ramadan. It happened that I pasted some pictures of Jesus Christ on his exercise book. He told me that he could neither look at these images nor touch them: "I won't do it, because I can't!"….really fundamentalist
>
> I: So, what happened?
>
> FC: Nothing, because I had other pictures for the same purpose.
>
> I: And what was the purpose?
>
> FC: The purpose was to teach the soft "g" sound. I had other pictures, so…but when there are fundamentalist Muslims, especially in fifth year, boys usually –girls less – boys usually do Ramadan (FC, female teacher in a primary school).

Managing of cultural diversity in school is done by teachers trying to mediate, to arrange solutions that do not damage the children's well-being and rights. Inside the classroom teachers can smooth out any difficulties arising from children's cultural differences (e.g. by changing curricula, or by sharing children's cultural traits and festivities with all the students). By contrast, there are some problems in their direct relations with parents. In teachers' opinion the difficulties of interacting with parents depend on the parents' attitudes towards teachers. For example some problems arise between Muslim fathers and women teachers:

> TE: If a boy treats me badly, because he is a Muslim boy, I tell off him, I speak with his father and I tell him: "if you behave with your wife and with your children in this way, ok, but…I am an Italian woman, I am the teacher and so, if you decide to send your boy to school, you should do what I say. Muslim men are quite snobbish but personally I don't give a damn about their snobbishness. They should get over it. I tell him: "If you do things differently at your house, well ok. But here, that's the way it is. If you don't like it, tough" (TE, female linguistic facilitator and responsible for foreign students in a split-site school).

Another type of problem regards the parents' concept of teaching and training children. Some families ask teachers to adopt a severe educational style, which is considered normal within both families and school. Nevertheless, teachers do not approve of this type of educational style and

in their opinion it is sometimes taken to such extremes that it requires school involvement:

> CB: The Arab educational style is very strict. I had to intervene in some cases because families are…let's say…aggressive. So in this case we intervene to remind them that we are in Italy, that, here, Italian law is in force…which does not accept children being beaten. But, I have to say, they are extreme cases. Generally, behaviour…especially the Arabs quickly acquire the Western mentality, contrary to what people think (CB, male head-teacher in a split-site school).

Apart from these cases, which are few and far between in teachers' opinion, the difficulties of interacting with parents regard the concept that parents and teachers have about the school, about the attitude to school and its rules, about the relation between families and school. These differences sometimes produce misunderstandings, so that some schools have decided to employ cultural mediators to resolve the issue. As a teacher says:

> SM: We tried to ask for the support of some cultural mediators, there are some NGOs that collaborate with the school, because we realised that for some people being at school, the culture, the mentality of the school is completely different from our perspective. For example Arab mothers tell me: "Beat him! Beat him if he does not listen to you!" This is a thing…it is impossible for me, really, I have never thought about it for many years! For them it is very normal, as it is normal to give boys very few rules. So we tried to get support from these cultural mediators, so that they could explain our way of seeing school to them and they explained what the problems were to us. We maybe fight desperately for something for the children's sake, whereas at home parents talk to them in a completely different way. The cultural mediator is important because he/she helps them to adopt a different point of view, to understand the meaning of some behaviour. There was a Peruvian mother who never came to a parents' evening to talk with me about her son, she never came. But later we found out that for her it was normal, she entrusted her son completely to us, she entrusted her son's education to us, even though we needed to work with her. The mediator explained this to us and explained to her that we needed her collaboration (SM, female linguistic facilitator and Religious Education teacher in a primary school).

In the interviewees' opinion, in order to resolve misunderstandings it is important to talk with families, to interact and try to understand each other's points of view. To do this teachers have to think and behave interculturally. Nevertheless, by the interviews we could see that this is not always easy, but teachers sometimes have to manage cultural and religious practices that they do not share, consider wrong or negative for children.

They also sometimes tend to think based on stereotypes, explain the behaviours of foreign families based only on cultural explanations.

Conclusion

Research on intercultural education outline that the principle of interculturalism is widely shared among teachers. The educational staff thinks that it is the best way of managing the diversities of students, and try to enforce it in their curricula, teaching programs and school activities.

Nevertheless, these studies also highlight the difficulties of teachers, because of the lack of training courses or practical instructions about how to enforce it concretely.

How do Italian teachers interpret and enforce the intercultural education? How have they introduced an intercultural approach in their curricula and daily activities? How do they respond to foreign families' cultural and religious claims?

The interviews and the focus group conducted with teachers, head-teachers and linguistic facilitators in some Italian schools confirm the results emerged from previous research, but also highlight other interesting aspects.

Italian teachers know well the documents on interculturality produced by the Ministry of Education, and share the approach. But, like an expert in interculturality said in the focus group (SC, responsible for interculturality), the concept of interculturality is used especially in the vocabulary of teachers, and it is interiorized at a theoretical level, whereas in many everyday situations they cannot act by referring to it. One of the reasons of this is that these documents give general instructions and underline some basic principles, but the task of putting them in practice is entrusted to schools and teachers. As a consequence, teachers usually enforce the intercultural education based on their experience, sensitivity, interests, (human and financial) resources. Both in curricula and daily relations with students they adopt their own strategies, which usually come from past experiences.

Teachers of the same school sometimes share an intercultural project, which consist of teaching instructions to introduce in curricula and in

school life. Some examples of this are: the introduction of new elements which refer to the culture of foreign students in curricula (e.g. Italian, history, religion, geography) or the sharing of cultural and religious festivities. The insertion of aspects that refer to the cultures of students in curricula and school life favours the knowledge and the cultural exchange, the recognition and the enhancement of students' differences.

Nevertheless, the improvement of these aspects is sometimes difficult, particularly because some teachers do not realise that their view is culturally and historically determined, or they realise this but have difficulties in overcoming it. As Cardigan and colleagues (2005) note, teachers have not jet reflected deeply on this but their approach continues to be ethnocentric: they continue to enhance Italian traditions and to use textbooks which have a Western European point of view. As one participant in the focus group states (MC, male academic), it is not only the teachers' fault, but also the teaching materials have not yet been created to support teachers in managing the diversities of students. To manage the diversities of students it is not enough to appreciate and recognise their differences. It is also important to teach universal values and to outline their importance. Universal values represent a shared basis and they can be the starting point for teaching children that every human being has to be respected and valued.

Teachers' culturally constructed view could be also seen in their attitudes towards immigrant families and their children. Behaviours of students and of their parents are often explained and justified based on teachers' culturally given thoughts and opinions. For example the habits of some children, i.e. to slouch while they are having lunch, to belch, not to respect women teachers (we are referring to Muslim boys), are explained culturally, and other types of explanations are overlooked (e.g. the need to attract attention for many reasons, the lack of rules for social behaviour, etc.). The culturally constructed explanations are used to justify both negative and positive behaviours: the good manners towards teachers are explained by some supposed cultural traits of immigrant children who, in teachers' opinion, are taught to respect adults more than Italian children.

In addition, the principle of universalism is deep-rooted in the Italian educational system and in Italian teachers. Italian schools are characterised by an egalitarian and inclusive approach: all students are considered in the

same way, they have the same rights and they have to be respected equally. The fact that children whose parents are illegal can enrol Italian schools is meaningful of this.

Universalism is a reference point for teachers in managing diversities, consequently the demands of foreign families which undermine the universalistic approach of the school system are not accepted. A case in point is the demand for prayer during the school time. To satisfy the demands of some minorities is to recognise them and not others, to treat them better than others and not to respect the universalistic values of the Italian educational system whereby every student is the same.

Beside universalism, teachers firmly believe in the importance of guarantying children's rights and well-being. So, they have difficulties in accepting some parents' claims when – in their opinion - these demands damage children. For example parents' refusal to allow their daughters from going to the swimming pool is criticised because the girls feel different from their peers and they suffer because of their parents' demands. In the same way overly severe or aggressive educational styles are criticised because they damage children's rights.

Although equality and children' rights are two fundamental values to respect, it is necessary to accommodate them with respect and recognition of foreign families' cultural needs. To find a balance is not easy, but the risk is to fall into the trap of excessive universalism (which leads to an excessive homogenization) or of excessive relativism (which emphasises the diversities in an extreme way).

The documents on interculturality written by the Ministry of Education are useful tools but they are not sufficient. In the document "The Italian strategy for the intercultural school and the integration of students of foreign origin", for example, the actions needed to implement interculturality are described in detail, and practical instructions are given on the enrolment of foreign students, the learning of Italian, the appreciation of foreign languages, the relationships with the families, how to fight against the racism and discrimination, the review of the curricula, the training of head-teachers and teachers (but also of the administrative staff which work within the schools). Nevertheless, teachers do not often know how to implement these actions practically. They have succeed in implementing actions aimed at accommodating children in their first period

at school (e.g. support for school enrolment, language classes) but they have difficulties in managing other issues that regard the everyday school life, as it is highlighted in the interviews. In practise intercultural education is not fully implemented, and teachers are not supported in understanding whether or not they are applying it appropriately, whether their practices are sufficient, whether their work is intercultural at all, in part or not at all.

Therefore, to improve the enforcement of intercultural education teachers should be involved in permanent training, in which they can share good practices, compare their strategies, reflect on their culturally constructed attitudes and actions, learn how to implement the intercultural approach in contents but also in their educational styles. Secondly, they should promote networks among them (and among schools), in order to share projects and experiences, to standardize educational models and procedures. The START project implemented in the city of Milan is a case in point: the head-teachers and teachers involved in the project had the possibility of comparing their experiences and difficulties, and of creating common teaching tools[15].

Italian schools have the capability/potential to implement interculturality and to manage successfully the diversities of students. The main challenge is, therefore, to train adequately existing and new teachers in order to prepare children for a multiethnic and multireligious society.

References

Besozzi, E. (2006). Le politiche di accoglienza e integrazione dei minori stranieri nella scuola italiana. *Politiche sociali e servizi, 8(1)*, 11-35.

Besozzi, E., & Colombo, M. (2012). *Relazioni interetniche e livelli di integrazione nelle realtà scolastico/formative della Lombardia. Rapporto 2011*. Milano: Ismu.

Bouchard, G. (2011). What is interculturalism?. *McGill Law Journal, 56*(2), 435-468.

Cardigan, N., Sanders, M. & Pourdavood, R.G. (2005). Racism and Ethnocentrism: Social Representations of Preservice Teachers in the Context of Multi- and Intercultural Education. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 4*(3), 1-19.

---

[15] More information about the START Project are available at http://www.ismu.org/start/pdf/pubblicazioneStart.pdf.

Colombo, M. (2008). *Diffondere le buone pratiche: la Banca dati dei progetti di educazione interculturale*. In G. Blangiardo (Eds.), *Rapporto 2007. Gli immigrati in Lombardia* (pp. 293-308), Milano: ORIM.

Colombo, M. (2004). *Relazioni interetniche fuori e dentro la scuola*. Milano: Francoangeli.

Colombo, M. & Dal Zotto, E. (2012). *Le relazioni insegnante-studenti nelle classi multietniche*. In E., Besozzi, M., Colombo (Eds.), *Relazioni interetniche e livelli di integrazione nelle realtà scolastico/formative della Lombardia. Rapporto 2011* (pp. 107-127) Milano: Ismu.

Colussi, E. (2012). *La relazione scuola-famiglia nei processi di integrazione.* In E., Besozzi, M., Colombo (Eds.), *Relazioni interetniche e livelli di integrazione nelle realtà scolastico/formative della Lombardia. Rapporto 2011* (pp. 129-144) Milano: Ismu.

DeJaeghere, J.G. & Cao, Y. (2009). Developing U.S. teachers' intercultural competence: Does professional development matter?. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations 33,* 437–447.

Favaro, G. (2011). Il tempo dell'inclusione. Per una scuola della con-cittadinanza. *Autonomie locali e servizi sociali*, *3*, 449-462.

Fravega, E. (2003). Insegnanti e migrazioni. Come cambia il lavoro nelle classi. In E., Fravega, L., Queirolo Palmas (Eds.), *Classi meticce. Giovani, studenti, insegnanti nelle scuole delle migrazioni* (pp. 10-32)*.* Roma: Carocci.

Garreta Bochaca, J. (2006). Ethnic minorities and the Spanish and Catalan educational systems: From exclusion to intercultural education. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 30*, 261–279.

Garmon, M. A. (2004). Changing preservice teachers' attitudes/beliefs about diversity. What are the critical factors?. *Journal of Teacher Education, 55*(3), 201-213.

Goodwin, A.L. (1994). Making the Transition from Self to Other: What Do Preservice Teachers Really Think about Multicultural. *Journal of Teacher Education, 45*(2), 119-131.

Llurda, E. & Lasagabaster, D. (2010). Factors affecting teachers' beliefs about interculturalism. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *20*(3), 327-353.

McAllister, G. & Irvine, J.J (2002). The role of empathy in teaching culturally diverse students. *Journal of Teacher Education, 53*(5), 433-443.

Meer, N.& Modood, T. (2011). How does interculturalism contrast with multiculturalism?. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*. DOI:10.1080/07256868.2011.618266.

Milione, A. (2011). Young immigrants at school: inclusion and location of rights in Italy. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education, 2,* 173-198.

Miur (2011). Gli alunni stranieri nel sistema scolastico italiano, anno scolastico 2010/2011.

Retrieved November 24, 2011 from http://www.istruzione.it/web/istruzione/intercultura-pubblicazionihttp://www.istruzione.it/web/istruzione/intercultura-pubblicazioni.

Norberg, K. (2000). Intercultural education and teacher education in Sweden. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *16*, 511-519.

Onorati, M.G. (2010). Building intercultural competences in a sociological perspective. The experience of the LLP-IP Interdisciplinary Course of Intercultural Competences. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education, 1,* 208-241.

Ottaviano, C. (2010). Schools and religions: experience, symbols and practices. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education, 1,* 192-207.

Rosenberg P.M. (1998). The presence of an absence: issues of race in teacher education at a predominantly White college campus. In M.E. Dilworth (Eds), *Being responsive to cultural differences : how teachers learn* (pp. 5-20). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Santerini, M. (2010). *La qualità della scuola interculturale. Nuovi modelli per l'integrazione.* Trento: Erikson.

Sleeter, C.E. (2001). Preparing Teachers for Culturally Diverse Schools : Research and the Overwhelming Presence of whiteness. *Journal of Teacher Education, 52*(2), 94-106.

Smith, R., Moallem, M. & Sherrill, D. (1997). How preservice teachers think about cultural diversity: a closer look at factors which influence their beliefs towards equality. *Educational Foundations, 11*(2), 41-61.

Zapata-Barrero, R. (2010). Education as a mirror of Spanish society: challenges and policies towards multiple diversity. *OMNES: The Journal of Multicultural Society*, 1(2), 65-100.

Official documents

C.M. 73/1994, Dialogo interculturale e convivenza democratica: l'impegno progettuale della scuola, 2 marzo 1994. Retrieved February 20, 2011, from http://www.edscuola.it/archivio/norme/circolari/cm073_94.html.

C.M. 24/2006, Linee guida per l'accoglienza e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri, 10 marzo 2006. Retrieved February 20, 2011, from http://archivio.pubblica.istruzione.it/normativa/2006/allegati/cm24_06all.pdf, accessed on 20.

Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989). Retrieved February 23, 2011 from http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm

Law 30/2000, Legge-quadro in materia di riordino dei cicli dell'istruzione, 10 febbraio 2000. Retrieved January 31, 2011 from http://www.annaliistruzione.it/riviste/annali/pdf/030400/030400ar17.pdf.

Law 286/1998, Testo unico delle disposizioni concernenti la disciplina dell'immigrazione e norme sulla condizione dello straniero. Retrieved February 15, 2011 from http://www.camera.it/parlam/leggi/deleghe/98286dl.htm

Ministry of Education (2007). La via italiana per la scuola interculturale e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri. Osservatorio nazionale per l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri e per l'educazione interculturale. Retrieved January 10, 2011 from http://www.etnocommunication.it/briguglio/immigrazione-e-asilo/2010/gennaio/integr-alunni-stran-mpi.pdf.