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“He Was as If on the Moon”. The Relevance of Narratives Told by Teachers in the Understanding of Transnational Experiences Lived by Children

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“He Was as If on the Moon”.

The Relevance of Narratives Told by Teachers in the Understanding of Transnational Experiences Lived by Children

Sara Amadasi

Abstract: In the last decades, some students with a migration background, included in Italian schools, have lived experiences of temporal return trips to their - or their parent's - countries of departure. These journeys can take place during summer holidays or in the school year. The relationships with multiple places that children maintain through these visits feed reflections upon the role of children in social processes, highlighting their deep involvement in global and transnational dynamics. However, when taking place in the school year, these journeys are frequently interpreted by teachers as ruptures within the school system. *This paper*, based on interviews realized with teachers in two primary schools and one first-grade secondary school, aims to present narratives of teachers on transnational experiences of students and shed light on the social changes the school faces. The purpose is to analyze the meanings that transnational mobility acquires in these interviews. The main narrative of discontinuity associated with these journeys is analyzed in its connection to concepts such as culture and identity, to reflect on how the educational system deals with unexpected elements that introduce additional complexity to its structure and the link these meanings have with the reproduction of established interpretations of culture.

Keywords: children, transnational mobility, school, narratives

Introduction

The topic of migration movements involving children has been extensively studied, and these investigations are conducted from different disciplinary perspectives.

However, in researching the topic of children involved in international migrations, only recently, and anyway still rarely, scholars have focused on the complex network of transnational ties in which these children are engaged and the effects these ties have both at the place of arrival and of departure.

While the various forms through which adults who experience migration construct links between several places, such as the place where they reside and the place of departure, has become subject of numerous studies under the concept of transnationalism (Vertovec, 1999; Ong, 1999) when children are the main characters of such dynamics, a perspective in which they are portrayed as vulnerable and victims of migration processes is still dominant.

This interpretation of children's mobility can be observed as a common narrative in academic investigations on children and migration, and as such its deconstruction represents a starting point in the investigation of children's agency (Prout & James, 1997; James, 2009; Baraldi & Iervese, 2014; Baraldi, 2014; Valentine, 2011) and children's engagement in global dynamics. In this paper this second topic will be considered and to this purpose the adoption of the concept of transnationalism is considered particularly appropriate when focusing on stories related to children migration experiences and to investigate children's role in social changes.

Amongst the many dimensions under which transnationalism can be considered (Ambrosini, 2008) or the shapes it can assume, this paper will focus on the temporary return trips to the original country of departure which involve students having a migration background and included in the Italian school system.

These journeys represent a meaningful example of children's transnationalism because they are events which affect both the school system of the arrival country and the society of departure. Moreover, around these journeys several narratives can be constructed by different perspectives and social actors, such as the children themselves, their parents, their teachers or their friends.

Specifically, in this paper I choose to focus on the narratives gathered among teachers in relation to these events. This choice is linked to the decision to observe - and consequently to reflect upon - the extent of the changes that children are generating, through their transnational involvement,

on social structures and institutions that daily host them. The perspective which is adopted is therefore the institutional perspective itself.

The narratives presented were gathered among teachers in two primary schools and one first grade secondary school of two small cities in Northern Italy.

These accounts concern journeys of different lengths and toward different destinations that involved pupils during the school year. What all these events have in common is that these trips involved children from families with migration experiences, and the destination of these temporary trips were the countries from where these families originally left.

What is also relevant is that, while for some of these trips teachers had been warned, on other occasions they had not the opportunity to know that the students were leaving. They only found out the day pupils left, with no notice or information about the length of the trip. This obviously has an effect on the possibility for teachers to plan an alternative program that students can follow despite the distance, with consequences not only on the student's school performance, which is not considered in this paper, but also on the narratives presented by teachers.

By outlining a theoretical framework that is positioned within a social constructivist, non-essentialist approach, I will present a linguistic analysis of teachers' narratives that permits to observe in narratives' plots, the connection between mobility in the context of migration and an essentialist common interpretation of culture, identity and belonging which denies the participation of children in social dynamics.

Narratives reproducing a persistent view of culture as a solid, imprisoning element affecting the behaviors of people, surround us both in everyday life and in academic studies (Holliday, 2018; Holliday & MacDonald, forthcoming). These two spheres – everyday life narratives and academic narratives - feed each other, reinforcing essentialist understandings of complex dynamics, denying the recognition of children's active participation in social processes. The effects on the ways of dealing with these changes in the everyday life affect therefore both children and educational institutions.

In situations where children face events that lead them to experience multiple and ambivalent personal cultural trajectories (Holliday, 2013, p. 3), such as transnational relationships, the educational system seems to be put under stress in an attempt to apply a set of concepts that no longer fit the intense social complexity that these children with their experiences bring with them, outside and inside their daily institutional life.

Therefore, with this article I propose a reflection on how the ability of educational system to recognize, name and give relevance to the multiple and ambivalent experiences of children can make a difference in the recognition of their daily participation within social and educational processes.

The cross-cultural dominant narrative concerning children engaged in international journeys

In the scientific literature, the cross-cultural approach has issued with the topic of children whose lives are characterized by frequent international movements, by proposing an interpretation of these experiences as disorienting and problematic for children.

According to these studies, which refer to children living *place polygamies* (Beck, 1999, pp. 96-97) with the term “Third Culture Kids”, repeated cross-cultural movements at a young age represent a challenge in the identity formation of the individuals (Fail et al., 2004). Children are thus considered as exposed to difficulties in achieving a solid cultural identity (Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011) and at risk of being disoriented and deprived of their sense of belonging (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009).

The interpretations proposed by this field of studies, by adopting an essentialist understanding of cultures as reified, homogeneous elements perfectly corresponding to national borders, construct an image of these children as stuck between solid national cultures. Here cultures are thus conceived as violent forces, pushing on the still incomplete identity of children. The exposure to different cultures becomes therefore oppressing on the child that is seen as still unable to interact and take decisions in relation to external constraining factors.

This representation of the child as stuck among cultures, against which the criticism of some writers is addressed (Mannitz, 2005; Amadasi, 2014), is related to a series of consolidated and widespread narratives that need to be unveiled and investigated to highlight how the state of negativity and disadvantage associated with frequent international mobility it is not a given fact, but something that is inferred through essentialist discourses on childhood, culture, belonging and identity. By following a non-essentialist approach, in this work, these concepts are conceived instead as multifaced, highly ambivalent and contextually based processes.

These narratives concerning children who live experiences of international mobility, find their origins - and simultaneously contribute to the crystallization and reproduction of - three scientific dominant, yet false, discourses.

The first, following a sociology of childhood perspective, is represented by what has been defined as the *developmental discourse* (Kjørholt, 2007; Aitken et al., 2007).

This discourse presents childhood as a biologically determined stage on the way to adulthood. Therefore, children are conceived as incomplete subjects, characterized by an “in becoming” condition (Sirota, 2012) that prevents them from being fully participants in their interactions with the social and cultural world around them. Their full participation in society is ob-

served as a future achievement and thus their views and opinions cannot be considered relevant for their present participation to social dynamics but only in relation to the fact that these children will be tomorrow's adults (Baraldi & Iervese, 2014).

The second, is what Christensen et al. (2000) define the *national discourse*. This, especially when related to children, and exactly because of the developmental discourse running on the background, can be defined as the inclination - clearly observable in the Third Culture Kids studies - to connect identity formation process to confined, stable localities.

This perspective, which creates a direct connection between the process of identity formation and geographical stability is nevertheless evident both in studies that examine mobility as a problematic, risky aspect in the lives of children, and in those observing it as an opportunity to develop an ability to shift between different cultural identities (e.g. Moore & Barker, 2012, p. 555). The reason lies in a strong methodological nationalism (Beck & Sznaider, 2010, p. 384) where a naturalized understanding of nations as real communities has encouraged the increase of debates concerning belonging and social identity as always related to national borders.

For both these areas of studies the funding assumption lies in a strict interconnection between the idea of home and the concept of rootedness, which means that having roots becomes the primary condition for the understanding of social identity (*Ibidem* p. 140).

This national discourse is strictly intertwined with a third *sedentary discourse*. Although Holloway and Valentine (2000) speak about "spatial discourse", I use the term "sedentary" because it well highlights how mobility is usually perceived as opposite to what is the norm in the child's life experiences: residential fixity and domestication are thus presented as the natural and safer spaces for children growth (Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Ní Laoire et al., 2010; Belotti, 2013).

It is on the basis of this discourse, although probably less visible than the national one, that children are usually constructed merely as victims of movements and migration, where the emphases is only on their condition of difference compared to the "normal childhood", and little space is given to how they live, how they give meaning and deal with these experiences.

Following Zinnecker's work on "domestication of childhood" (1990 in Zeiher, 2009), Zeiher reflects on how domestication is not only connected to an idea of restricting the child to domestic and protected spaces, but it is also the result of a process of institutionalization, which takes place both inside and outside the family and where the school plays a main role. This institutionalization follows a structure based on age, proposing and confirming a perception of childhood "as being on a step-by-step path towards adulthood" (Zeiher, 2009, p. 131).

By defining very clear boundaries on what is the normal and positive condition for the development of children and their identities, these three discourses sustain a narrative in which living frequent mobility and experiences of immersion in several cultural environments during developmental years (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, p. 13) represents a problematic background that needs to be managed and resolved.

At a theoretical level, it is meaningful to resort to the concept of transnationalism to introduce a change of perspective, looking critically at these discourses and observing how, empirically, they enter into school daily life through a series of related narratives.

Since one of the aim of studies concerning adult migrant transnationalism is to explore the possibility of “simultaneity”, conceived as the possibility to experience daily activities, routines, and institutions located both in a destination country and transnationally (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004), this perspective can be extended also to children to highlight the relevance of the engagement that children with a migration background can develop toward two or more countries.

Highlighting this aspect can help this and future studies to critically observe established understandings circulating inside school around the mobility of children, and how these understandings have an effect upon the recognition of children’s engagement and embeddedness in global dynamics.

Temporary return trips as a form of transnationalism

The first conception of transnationalism arose at the beginning of the 1990s in the disciplinary context of cultural anthropology. Through the works of Glick-Shiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc (1992), transnationalism is presented as a new analytical approach to understand transnational migrations. These anthropologists define transnationalism more precisely as “the process by which migrants construct social fields that bind together the country of origin and the country of settlement” (Glick-Schiller et al., 1992), while the transmigrant is the person living lives across borders (Basch et al., 1994; Gardner & Grillo, 2002; Glick-Schiller et al., 1992).

When considering transnationalism, it is important to clarify that transnational approaches in recent years have been characterized not so much as a study of phenomena or precise activities, but rather they have been used as perspectives for the analysis of migration (Levitt, DeWind & Vertovec, 2003).

Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt (1999) distinguish three sectors of transnational activity: the economic sector, consisting of the initiatives of transnational entrepreneurs who mobilize their contacts across borders searching for markets, suppliers and capital; the political sector, which includes the actions of party activists, government officials and community leaders whose

aim is the achievement of political power and influence in the country of origin or in the host country; and finally the socio-cultural sector which involves both activities aimed at strengthening the national identity abroad and the collective enjoyment of cultural events and products that recall the places of origin.

According to Ambrosini (2008, p. 18) some transnational common practices such as remittances, temporary and commuting migrations, periodic or definitive returns, generate several effects on the societies of origin, influencing in various ways – sometimes even controversial – the processes of local development, cultural changes, and the expectations and behaviors of non-migrants.

Recently, the term transnationalism has also been linked to studies on childhood and children, giving rise to investigations that focus on children who are members of transnational families (Parreñas, 2001), who live experiences of permanent return (Hatfield, 2010) or considering and investigating the relationship between rights, emotions, place and belonging (Urry, 2005; den Besten, 2010).

In contemporary Italian studies instead the debate around young migrants and second-generation has privileged, on one side, the investigation of social inclusion of students with a migration background in Italian schools (Colombo & Santagati, 2010; Milione, 2011), and on the other the identity construction of young migrants (Ricucci, 2005) and their different strategies of integration (Bosisio et al., 2005). Although in Italy the topic of second-generation transnationalism does not represent a constituted field of research (Caponio & Schmoll, 2011), recently also in Italy the term transnationalism has been introduced, especially in association with issues linked to identity (Meda, 2013) or to practices such as the use of the internet by teenagers to maintain transnational relations (Caponio & Schmoll, 2011, citing Cannarella, Lagomarsino & Queirolo Palmas, 2007).

In this paper, transnationalism is a concept considered relevant because of the potential decostruction it promotes of concepts traditionally conceived as stable and reified forms, such as belonging, culture and identity. Here, therefore, it is used according to a non-essentialist perspective. This means to avoid the risk of falling into the trap of methodological nationalism (Beck & Sznaider, 2010, p. 384) by focusing on transnationalism as a tool to reinforce national identities abroad or as specific practices which bring national habits outside the borders. Rather I wish to draw the attention on the socio-linguistic effects that temporary return trips experienced by children to their parent's country of departure generate in the host society. By shaking and disturbing national institutional structures, these trips can therefore be considered a particular form of socio-cultural transnationalism,

which allows to observe and increase the complexity of contemporary social processes.

Through these journeys thus children generate potential cracks of changes both in the departure and arrival countries opening up two questions: firstly, how transnational mobility of children has potential effects on the school care system in the country of arrival and secondly, how these effects are recognised and what meanings are attributed to them. Through these questions, I will reflect on the Italian school system itself and its resilience and ability to manage and deal with the new complexities which transnational movements have introduced in the everyday life.

Why is the concept of narratives relevant?

Narratives are highly dynamics entities. As they are produced in communication processes (Baraldi, 2014) and continuously influenced by the ongoing experiences people are exposed to in their everyday life, they are never stable, but always subject to changes (Baker, 2006, p. 3). Following Baker perspective, this implies that individuals' behavior is constantly guided by multiple, intertwined, and sometimes competing narratives that surrounds them: "at any moment we can be located within a variety of divergent, criss-crossing, often vacillating narratives, thus acknowledging the complexity and fluidity of our positioning in relation to other participants in interaction." (Baker, 2006, p. 3)

It is in this contingency that the difference between discourses and narratives, that I apply to my analysis, lies. While, with the term discourse, I refer to more structured and crystallized set of ideas, concepts and knowledge, with the concept of narratives I acknowledge in participant's stories a complex network of public representations intertwined with personal stories. What is also subject to investigation is how these two different narratives - which would be defined by Somers (1994; Somers & Gibson, 1994) as ontological narratives and public narratives - adapt and relate to each other with the final aim to construct a perspective that can both legitimize and confirm the structure of a certain institutional environment or disturb its order.

Following Somers perspective (1994), narratives are "constellations of *relationships* (connected parts) embedded in *time and space*, constituted by *causal emplotment*" (*Ibidem* p. 616). Looking at narratives thus mean to focus on how individuals construct the events they observe, giving them certain meanings in relation to a time and space dimension and within which other events took place. One of the main features of narratives is thus to connect, however temporary, "parts to a constructed configuration or a social

network of relationships (however incoherent or unrealizable) composed of symbolic, institutional, and material practices” (*Ibidem*).

It is due to the aspects of *evaluative capacity* and *selective appropriation* processes that the concept of narrative proposed by Somers seems particularly suited to this work, as it allows to conceive individuals as choosing subjects (Amadasi, 2014; Davies & Harré, 1990), with a constant possibility - through narratives - to interact, confirm or disturb structural constraints. It is therefore an individual choice to reproduce public narratives and to what degree to reproduce them.

While Somers (1994) and Somers & Gibson (1994) refer to public narratives as stories widespread in specific social or institutional environments, for this set of narratives Holliday and Amadasi (Holliday & Amadasi, 2019; Amadasi & Holliday, 2017; Amadasi & Holliday, 2018), talk about *grand narratives*. Similarly to Somers’s public narratives, grand narratives are described as those big stories that define our heritages and legitimate the social groups we are part of, acquiring particular relevance when the investigated environment is the educational institution, where the research and data collection of this paper was carried out. Somer’s ontological narratives are also renamed as *personal narratives*.

The reason why in this paper I rely on the terms chosen by Holliday and Amadasi and I talk about personal and grand narratives, taking a distance to Somers’ categories, is that these terms permit to talk about two entities that are in close dialogue with each other, thus avoiding the risk of creating dichotomies and preferring more operational concepts that could help the explanation of dynamic and highly shifting processes.

Therefore, as grand narratives are part of a wider environment participants interact with, “their splinters of grand are irrevocably present in our personal narratives” (Amadasi & Holliday, 2017 citing Kell, 2013; Mannheim, 1936, p. 52). The awareness of this grand narratives is of course very different from person to person and from situation to situation, making the overall picture therefore complex, multifaceted and constituted of shifting plots (Amadasi & Holliday, 2017).

By conceiving narratives as social constructions that create reality rather than representing it (Amadasi & Iervese, 2018), in this paper I specifically examine how discourses presented in section 2 are observable in grand narratives collected with teachers, but also how these grand narratives are disturbed by personal narratives, where teachers reflect and describe the experiences of transnational mobility lived by their students.

These three dimensions - scientific discourse, grand narrative and personal narratives - are relevant to understand on one side, how teachers’ narratives affect the ways in which concepts of culture, identity and belonging are constructed and how their meanings re-affirm the institutional struc-

tures, on the other side to reflect on the importance of creating spaces where new meanings can be fostered and social changes can become opportunities rather than obstacle for educational institutions. Spaces, therefore, enabling the unexpected to emerge.

Methodology and data

Data presented here were collected in a one-year research conducted for my Phd, between 2012 and 2015 in two small cities of Northern Italy. The aim was to investigate how children living temporary return visits to the countries of emigration of their family, and included in the Italian educational system, give meaning to these transnational experiences in the interactions with other children and adults.

However, since many of these trips take place during the school year, a second question proposed by this research concerned the meanings generated within school in relation to these experiences of international movement.

In this article, for a matter of coherence and length, I will focus exclusively on the description of data collection and the methodological choices related to this second question, suggesting to refer to other works for what relates to the analysis of adults-children's interactions in school, children's agency and their participation in social processes (e.g. Amadasi, 2014; Amadasi & Iervese, 2018; Amadasi, 2018).

Nineteen teachers were interviewed, and a focus group was conducted in one of the two schools involved. All the interviews and the focus group were audio-recorded and transcribed for the analysis. The interviews were originally conducted in Italian, and they have been translated into English later.

In the analysis of interviews, the focus is on the contents of these narratives and the causal relationships proposed between children's travel experiences and their experiences within the school. Therefore, I focus on the meanings that the concepts of identity, culture and belonging acquire in the narratives, and how these constructions are connected to the set of scientific discourses that I presented above as dominant in the academic literature and cross-cultural studies.

All names are pseudonyms, in order to protect the identity of research participants.

Finally, when not specified by the interviewee, I will not reveal the countries of origin of the students mentioned in the narratives. This choice aims to bring the reader to draw the attention more on the processes that involve people rather than on background knowledge which might lead to associate pre-existing meanings to "one culture" or "the other culture".

This is an operational choice to overcome the methodological nationalism that this paper intends to call into question, rather than to reproduce.

Data analysis

In most of the interviews collected with teachers there is a grand narrative that presents travelling as a problematic element.

According to this narrative, the condition of transnational mobility and the persistence of forms of involvement with the country of departure, which these journeys feed, correspond to a condition of disadvantage. This condition is frequently described as responsible for creating traumas, generating a temporal and spatial interruption within a process of integration traditionally conceptualized as a linear, one-way path of immersion into a new cultural environment.

In these interviews, the transnational movements of children are frequently associated with words such as “loss” “disorientation” and “interruption”, thus constructing the act of travelling as a rupture in a series of processes through which children become part of a cultural world and of an educational institution.

I have recognized three dimensions in which transnational mobility seems to represent in the stories of these teachers an element of rupture of a linear process: 1) in the process of institutionalization; 2) in the process of cultural integration; 3) in the process of identity formation.

Amongst these three types of narratives, teachers also adopt personal narratives, but this “personal” is overwhelmed by the structural role perspective, making these narratives mainly institutional grand narratives.

However, in the analysis I will also present a different type of narratives, which could be defined alternative narratives (Søndergaard, 2002). Although certainly more unusual compared to the previous three, these narratives are relevant because here teachers choose to call into question the institutional grand narrative of travelling as a break through the use of more personal stories. These personal narratives are created through an action of “putting themselves into their students’ shoes”, creating an interesting overlap between personal observation, empathy and change of perspective that has the effect for the teacher to leave the institutional perspective given by the role, to consider the complexity and ambivalence of their students’ experiences.

The interruption of the narrative conventions expressed in these last extracts permit to shed some light on the tension existing between grand and personal narratives, making visible how, due to close interweaving of each other in everyday stories, the transition from one to the other, although it may be almost imperceptible, it is meaningful in the effects it creates. These effects reside in the possibility recognized to children to combine different aspects of their lives, rather than perceiving them as merely conflictual. This has to do with a series of other issues which would deserve further attention such as: how and to what extent a priori evaluation of experiences, which

diverge from the norm, incorporated and reproduced through narratives, affect the ways in which they can be experienced by the subjects involved? Is a certain experience positive or negative in itself, or is it the set of meanings constructed around it that makes the difference on its final effects?

Is there a space that can be created within the school for children and teachers, together, to co-construct meanings related to transnational experiences? Will this have effects on these children's schooling?

Transnational mobility as a break in the institutionalization process

As I described in the introduction of this paper, transnational journeys take place both throughout the summer break and the school year. In this latter eventuality, the trip has practical effects on the student's school engagement, implying an absence that could last weeks or sometimes even months. These are the situations that are considered and described in most of the interviews collected with teachers.

This is important to be specified because it is not only the journey itself, but what the journey implies in terms of adherence to a certain pathway that is considered by teachers in their narratives. Through the absence of the child, in fact, the routines within the classroom and expectations upon which the school constructs and reproduces its institutional order are inevitably altered, generating the perception of a crack that makes the foundations on which the educational structure is based - but also its weaknesses - observable.

I don't know but it's not possible to upset- it's not possible all in a sudden to upset what is an educational community dynamic for children that anyway- I mean, it needs some balance, there must be [...] I mean, it's fine to receive them but at the same time they are also asked for adaptation because we can't upset our realities for them, I mean, at least I see it in this way. I mean, we can't exceed too much on the other side.

Sandra (primary school teacher)

By aspiring to limit the changes introduced within school by newcomers and their practices, this teacher's request for pupils' adaptation is explicit. The concept of adaptation (supported by the us/them dichotomy, observable also in this extract) has had a certain relevance in those acculturation strategies investigated by mainstream psychology that pursues a cross cultural perspective. The purpose of these studies is to highlight universal and linear patterns of identity, acculturation and adaptation of immigrants (Bhatia & Ram, 2009). From a theoretical perspective, according to Bhatia & Ram (2009) this area of cross-cultural research "has largely presented migration as a series of fixed stages that do not account for the specific culturally distinct and

politically entrenched experiences of newer, non-European, transnational immigrants”.

Therefore, in this first extract, the applied scientific discourse is not one of those described at the beginning of this article, but it is nevertheless orbiting in the area of cross-cultural studies. By making an extensive use of concepts such as adaptation and the us/them opposition, and by adopting a methodological nationalism, this narrative supports the basis for further scientific theorizations based on national distinctions and essentialist understandings of culture.

At the operational level, instead, this narrative actively constructs children’s personal and cultural trajectory (Holliday, 2013, p. 13) as a real threat for the school structure, creating a sort of conflictual dichotomy in the life of the child: on one side, the cultural and personal inheritance the child brings with him/her and on the other, the new school environment of the arrival country. If we match together the two levels this extract presents, asking for “adaptation” thus means the abandonment of those elements which are considered interferences for the educational order. The negotiations between the two points of this dichotomy are not conceivable, creating an idea of distant and incommunicable cultural realities. Although it is not stated openly, the term adaptation thus refers to the “cultural sphere”, which is in fact the second dimension in which teachers observe these trips as breaking events.

Transnational mobility as a cultural break

In this second extract, the first-grade secondary school teacher for the learning of Italian as a second language describes an event involving one of her students, Ali (pseudonym).

Ali arrived in Italy when he was a very young child. According to Lorena’s account, he attended in Italy all the primary school and for a long time he had no journeys back to his country of birth. The school year before the one in which the interview was conducted, Ali’s family decides to go back to attend a wedding and spend some time with the rest of the family left there.

Here Lorena is describing the moment in which Ali, once back in Italy after the time spent away, comes back to school.

Well, it happened that when he came back, he was as if on the moon. Lost. He couldn’t focus on studying anymore, to understand things. He had a fit of tears here at school, and this worried us, and then the coordinator, you know- we spoke with her and she spoke with the parents, we tried to understand. Nothing special had happened, but the disorientation due to the return to Italy. When he left, he was fine, with some school issues, let’s say, like votes and when he came back... all this time spent away, the absence, he missed parts of the program, but I was instead more worried about the psychological side. He almost didn’t answer anymore. He hadn’t forgotten the language, but

it was as if he hadn't taken it back, I don't know, a weird thing that never happened to me especially with someone who had been living here since a while and who had already a certain language skill. [...] In my opinion this was a real cultural disorientation.

Lorena (Italian as second language teacher, first grade secondary school)

What is relevant here is to observe how the interviewee uses terms taken from psychology and how through this choice she creates a connection between the psychological and the cultural dimensions of the child.

The child is described as "lost" (a word frequently used also in other narratives to describe the child after a journey), and this condition is explained through a specific reason: the exposure to another cultural environment. Unlike the first event analyzed, in this extract the focus is not on the process of institutionalization ("all this time spent away, the absence, he missed parts of the program, but I was instead more worried about the psychological side") but on an alleged conflict between cultural realities, which are described as capable of impacting on the psychological dimension of Ali.

Since he left his native country when he was very young and now, he found himself suddenly "immersed" in a cultural environment he had to discover again, the child is here constructed as passive and powerless, and his action on the social or cultural world that he met seems extremely limited. Moreover, what is also worth noting is how, through this assumption, cultural influences seem to be nullified after years of life abroad, as if the child or the family could have no choice but to abandon them once they left their country.

Therefore, in this narrative, the socio-cultural world is narrated as having a devastating – and rather obscure – influence on the child: no explanation is given by the child for this behavior, and according to the story, any explanation was directly asked him. An explanation was instead only requested to the adults of his family. The action of the child is limited to a re-immersion into "the old" culture that seems, in this description, to have the human power to assault him.

Therefore, the child here is not narrated as an actor, but as a passive victim of cultural influences in which cultures are conceptualized as reified entities, autonomous and impermeable to individuals' actions. In this excerpt, both a developmental and a sedentary discourse are reproduced. Although the narrative seems to present also a personal dimension of the story (e.g. "I was instead more worried; I don't know a weird thing that never happened to me), the explanation given to the situation is actually strengthened by resorting to a set of scientific discourses that the teacher is proposing from a role perspective.

In this extract therefore it is possible to observe a good example of 1) how grand and personal narratives can be more or less consciously intertwined; 2) transnational journeys of children with migration background are narrated as disturbing events which interfere with three dimensions of the migrant child daily life; these three dimensions - the institutional integration, cultural integration, identity formation - frequently overlap and fade one into the other through causal correlations. With regard to this last point, the cultural distress that transnationalism seems to represent for children cannot therefore be detached from the idea of the child as an incomplete, “in becoming” subject. It is due to his or her incomplete identity that he/she becomes subjugated to these dynamics, unable to provide personal meanings.

By presenting confusion and disorientation as the only space of action left to children, this kind of narratives contribute to construct and reproducing victimization discourses related to those children living migration experiences.

Transnational mobility as a break in the identity formation process

In the third excerpt, the interviewee is a primary school teacher.

The teacher tells about another episode, where one of her pupils, Feng (pseudonym), was involved in a one-year experience of return to the country of his parents.

While abroad, he attended the school of the country, and after this year he came back to Italy and was included again in the first class of the primary school.

He probably had a quite problematic approach with school because here [...] he didn't learn Italian, there probably he didn't learn Chinese- but here now he is working hard I must admit he is a good student- but now actually he is a bit older, he is seven [...] maybe this is the only example I have of someone who has gone back and forth but with a quite problematic experience- I don't know what is the situation there but this child he doesn't know whether to be Chinese, Italian- [...] eh because probably, I mean- they need to stay in a place in a stable way and probably he feels better here than there because I think I understood- I haven't understood for what weird reason they moved back and forth, I really don't know.

Marina (primary school teacher)

In this extract again several dimensions are intertwined in the same narrative. Initially, the teacher makes some considerations concerning the process of language learning of the student. The evaluation of his Italian learning is strictly correlated to the risk that to its poor Italian, also corresponds a poor knowledge of Chinese. However, the expression of this risk is not sustained by a severe evaluation of Feng's linguistic tools. Rather, the teacher resorts to the issue of identity as a motivation for Feng's performance

evaluation. This happens despite the fact that he is also described as a “good student” who now “is working hard”.

This is relevant to draw the attention on how in these narratives, there is not a direct correlation between transnational mobility and child school performances evaluation. Despite the distance and the absence from school, what seems to be really described as problematic regarding the maintenance of transnational relations, does not concern the final school result, but rather the process of inclusion and development which is divergent compared to the norm. Moreover, the issue seems having more to do with the institutional possibility to define children’s belonging rather than their actual educational skills.

In the final phase of the interview the teacher recalls again the experience of Feng, by talking explicitly about a traumatic experience and associating this trauma to the young age of the student.

In the meantime, for what I understood- because it is still early but ehm, evidently it was a quite traumatic experience to go and return maybe because he was too young [...] I don’t know then maybe things will change but it’s not possible to demand- to move from pillar to post these children back and forth, they are not parcels and they, it ought- I don’t know eh to give them the time to grow up somewhere, to form themselves as persons. There are times which are a bit critical to take them around

Marina (primary school teacher)

In this narrative it is apparent a clear association of developmental discourse and sedentary discourse: the trauma for children lies in the fact that - as they are not yet fully formed - moving too frequently or for too long at a certain age is not appropriate for their growth.

It is important once again to see a reference to cross cultural psychology in the term *trauma*. This resonates with the idea of cultural shock and therefore, once again, to a view of cultures as incompatible blocks (Amadasi & Holliday 2017) which assault the child, with no possibility for him/her to actively interact with the social world around.

Transnational mobility as a space for doubts and ambivalences

Although the narratives analyzed so far represent the majority of the narratives gathered in this research, these are not the only narratives gathered among teachers.

Although less frequently, on some occasions, respondents choose to focus on more personal narratives, where institutional answers are suspended, doubts remain unresolved and an essentialist understanding of culture, identity and belonging is abandoned in favor of an account of uncertainty and ambivalence.

These examples are relevant because by choosing to leave their roles and the institutional perspective, teachers adopt the children's point of view, questioning themselves and allowing to consider the transnational experiences of the students as territories for exploration, both for children and for the school itself.

In these narratives, doubts are not silenced, and complexity is recognized without any attempt to confine it within common, pre-established essentialist concepts.

In the next extract the teacher is describing how children behave once they return from these journeys. While usually the silence that seems to characterize children about their journeys is interpreted by most teachers as a sign of disorientation, Valeria provides a different meaning to the reason why only a few of these children tell about their trips.

Well I think there is a bit this... this is at least what I saw, this attitude to keep things separated, you know? I mean, I don't tell you what I did, and I don't tell you if I feel better or worse here or there. I mean, "I feel good where I am now". This attitude of "feeling good where I am now" and a bit of... I don't know how to explain... maybe there is for them a bit of uncertainty you know? When they leave, to know whether they will be back or they will not, thus it is a bit like "if I feel good where I am, I will be surely fine" [...] I don't know if it is me, that I am not really a chatty one, but I don't think this is the reason. I think it is hard for them, as if they feel sorry in a way, you know? On one side they feel sorry to tell you "I feel better to remain there" I mean, I don't tell you. I actually don't tell you

Valeria (primary school teacher)

In this narrative, Valeria is trying to put herself into her students' shoes, describing a complex feeling and strategy that she imagines her students might experience and adopt while travelling. The complexity that this narrative is trying to portray and to recognize lies in the absence of a dichotomy constructed between "two cultures" or "two worlds" that imprison the child. Words are hard to be found, and no abstraction is employed as reified concept to explain children's behavior: in this narrative, students are acknowledged in their sensitivity to the context and to social relations around them. This ability is completely denied in the extracts analyzed so far. Certainly, acknowledging this complexity means to acknowledge the possibility that children may have no preferences at all, or that they may have conflicting and uncomfortable preferences concerning where to live, but it portrays the condition of ambivalence not as a problematic feature of a disadvantaged individual, rather as an inherent condition of the interactions between the individual and the social world.

The next and last excerpt is another good example of an interviewee who is choosing a personal narrative over the grand narrative of mobility as a danger in the lives of children.

Researcher: and what is- amongst those who come back, what is that you notice most once they are back here?

Teacher: the emotional reaction such as “I had a good journey, I met my relatives, now I am here” exactly the same as saying “I went to see my grandparents in another city”. Some other, they are sad, but the sadness I see is more in those which never came back in their countries [...] thinking about it better, maybe the most painful situations are really related to those who never travel back there.

Linda (primary school teacher)

In this narrative as in the previous one, the teacher is trying to leave her role to take the perspective of her students. The personal narrative she tells is generated exactly upon this change of perspective.

As in the previous extract, the interviewee is giving her personal opinion (“but the sadness I see”, “thinking about it better, maybe”), and it is through this that the teacher is creating the possibility to avoid the cultural equations of grand narratives and to resort to established scientific discourses, which, in the need to provide answers, deny children’s social abilities, essentializing instead complex individual trajectories, which nullify personal and contextual peculiarities.

Conclusions

In the extracts collected with teachers, I have recognized and highlighted some of the essentialist constructions deriving from the three scientific discourses presented in the second paragraph – the national discourse, the sedentary discourse and the developmental discourse.

These three discourses are recognizable with different nuances, frequently overlapping and fading one into the other in the aim to sustain three established narratives that I have identified and analyzed: 1) Transnational mobility as a break in the institutionalization process; 2) Transnational mobility as a cultural break; 3) Transnational mobility as a break in the identity formation process.

In the first narrative presented, what is emphasized is the normative request of alignment to certain national institutional practices from children with a migration background. Therefore, although the applied scientific discourse on the background does not perfectly correspond to those described at the beginning of this article, by using concepts such as “adaptation” and the “us/them” opposition, this narrative is grounded upon - and reproduces - a

wide range of essentialist discourses based on national distinctions and essentialist understandings of culture.

In this narrative, the need for adaptation is thus legitimized both on a national basis and by the need of maintaining the institutional order. Here the transnational journey becomes an element of disorder and disturbance, because it interrupts the migrant integration process – which is conceived as a linear, one-way process of total adaptation to the rules of the host country. This need, here, is made even more urgent by the fact that the newcomers are children. Therefore, the request for their adaptation is motivated by their condition of being both in-becoming individuals and foreigners.

As regards the narrative of transnational mobility as a cultural break, close to the essentialist understanding of national belonging observable also in the previous one, here what is stressed is the passive condition of the child when facing socio-cultural shiftings. This is not only related to his/her immature status, but also to a strong reification of national culture as constraining forces which condition and affect human behavior. In this narrative therefore it is possible to recognize not only a national discourse, but also the developmental one – which draw the attention on the still incomplete condition of the child. This condition becomes problematic if and when the child is exposed to multiple national-cultural forces conceived as conflicting.

Finally, all these three discourses are observable in the narrative which depicts transnational mobility as a break in the identity formation process: the child, because of his/her incomplete condition, needs a sedentary environment to successfully develop his/her identity.

This narrative is also relevant because it underlines how, when related to transnational mobility, the attention toward the child is not so much directed to the effects on his/her learning skills, but much more to the possibility for the school system to define his/her cultural, national and linguistic belonging. In these narratives, and through the legitimacy provided by these discourses, the orientation of the child to two or more cultural environments is mainly conceived as a threat to this institutional order and to their cultural and identity development rather than their school performance.

As well represented by the first extract, these discourses are meaningful argumentative presuppositions in the grand narratives of interviewed teachers and to the process of production and reproduction of the institutional order.

As regards the narrative perspective, although some of these narratives intertwine the institutional perspective with more personal elements, making it difficult to distinguish them as grand or personal, it is in the comparison with some rare alternative narratives, that an observation of the tension between these two spheres becomes possible, highlighting how a perspective based on role is never abandoned in the most common narratives.

The personal aspects of the three narratives that describe these trips as moments of rupture are always supported by a knowledge that is provided by the role, giving further legitimization to the institutional structure.

In what I call alternative narratives instead, teachers recognize the complexity and ambivalence of these experiences, without demonizing them as traumatic or risky for the child. In these narratives, through the assumption of the child's perspective, teachers abandon the reproduction of grand narratives in favor of more personal ones. This shift from the institutional role to a personal position corresponds to a shift in the construction of the child: from a passive victim, to a social expert individual, able to adapt and to choose.

Therefore, if the analysis of these narratives is relevant to recognize and deconstruct dominant discourses upon which these narratives are constructed, the same relevance should be given to those situations in which a small space for alternative narratives is realized. It is in this direction that further studies should be carried out, in order to investigate how individual actions of opening a breach in the way mobility is interpreted within the school creates a huge difference in the way in which mobility and children are portrayed in everyday educational practices.

In all the narratives presented in this article, transnational mobility has the relevance to shed some light on the structural and conceptual tension existing in contemporary school. Therefore, through this paper I stressed how traditional words and concepts are no longer suitable to account for the structural changes that transnational journeys promote, while they try to normalize and blocking the expression of the complexity of global dynamics in which children are not only integrated but actively engaged. These concepts present culture not as a continuum but as incommunicative watertight compartments, failing to grasp and recognize the creative social ability of children to generate culture through the interconnection and co-construction of meanings related to their different resources based on the experience.

With this paper the aim is not ignoring that for some children the experience of living frequent journeys or international movements can be a controversial moment. However, this does not mean that, like adults, children are not socially and culturally able to give meanings and adopt strategies of resilience and negotiation to deal with these situations.

This is exactly where the role of school could take on central importance: in the process of constructing meanings, where meanings are generated, daily, not upon children but together with children. This institutional awareness could thus promote the circulation of narratives in which their transnational experiences are not evaluated in terms of adhesion/conflict to school expectations and categories, but in terms of the richness for the personal and cultural stories of children and for the school itself.

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