

DESIGNING, REDESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING: HOW TO REDUCE DROPOUT RATES IN AN ITALIAN MULTICULTURAL MIDDLE SCHOOL

Giovanna Malusà

Department of Psychology and Cognitive Sciences, University of Trento (Italy)

Abstract

The presence of immigrant students in the Italian school system is now an established reality. Several international and national surveys have highlighted the performance gap between immigrant and non-immigrant students. Underachievement, dropout rates, and ineffective schools are unsolved issues for Italy. The school systems could play a central role in the promotion of authentic intercultural integration, designing real paths towards academic success for all pupils.

This paper reports the main results of an Action Research project, conducted from 2011 to 2014 in an Italian middle school with a high proportion (>30%) of students from immigrant backgrounds and/or at risk of dropping out. What are the goals of this longitudinal study? To encourage regular school attendance and to reduce dropout rates through an experimental integration year between middle and high school, combined with innovative, active teaching methodologies.

The presentation highlights the strengths and weaknesses of each stage of the process. It focuses on time, space, teaching strategies, and on relationships with parents, other classes in the school and on the school network.

Keywords: *Dropouts, Equity, Immigrant students, Multicultural contexts, Action research*

1. Introduction

Decreasing national dropout rates is an important objective for all European Union (EU) member states, intent on promoting equality in their school and educational systems. Early school leaving takes a variety of forms: leaving before the end of an educational cycle, repeating years, evasion of compulsory schooling, irregular attendance, transfers from one school to another, pupils being older than average for their year, or failure to acquire basic skills during their educational career (Colombo, 2015; Santagati, 2015).

The phenomenon is so significant that, as early as the Lisbon Conference, the European Commission required that political strategies be put in place to reduce the percentage of students leaving school early to below 10% by 2010; this target was not met and has now been urgently reaffirmed in the strategic goals of the Europe Agenda 2020 (EU, 2010).

The situation in Italy is particularly serious: despite recent evidence of gradual improvement, it is still at the bottom of the table of 27 EU countries — with 17% of young people classified as *Early school Leavers*¹ (ISTAT, 2015). The majority of the young people who have fallen behind in their educational careers are “*post-migrants*”, to use a term coined by Davide Zoletto (2012). A comparison of the percentages of *post-migrants* and Italian students in this situation reveals startlingly high levels of inequality: 34.4% versus 10.9% (MIUR, 2015b, p. 19).

Although the presence of foreign students in Italy is now a structural fact, recent national (MIUR, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Ongini, 2015) and international statistics (OECD-PISA, 2010) still reveal a gap between their educational performance and that of Italian born students. This learning gap, while smaller, still exists between second generation immigrants² (in the 2013-14 school year this group

¹ The percentage of 18-24 year olds with - at most - middle school diplomas who are not engaged in any form of education or training - definition recently updated in *Early Leaver from Education and Training*.

² Using the definition given by the Italian Ministry of Education, the *Ministero dell'Istruzione, Università e Ricerca (MIUR)*, which defines students born in Italy who are not Italian citizens as “second generation”, while the “first generation” was born abroad.

accounted for more than half (51.7%) of all students born of immigrant parents) and their native Italian peers (MIUR, 2014, p. 3).

The statistics also reveal a tendency for foreign students to be channeled into professional schools and technical institutes: 37.9% of foreign students are at professional schools, 38.5% at technical institutes; this compares with 19.2% and 33.1%, respectively, of their native peers (ISMU, 2015, p. 65). And of course these foreign students are those at most risk of leaving school early, because these are precisely the educational establishments with the highest rates of high school dropout (MIUR, 2013, pp. 14-15).

There are clear national guidelines for schools (MIUR, 2014b; MPI, 2007) on how to support effective integration strategies, and the education system should be central to fostering equality, as many critical studies have noted (Malusà & Tarozzi, forthcoming; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Torodova, 2008; Tarozzi, 2014; Torres & Noguera, 2008; Ventura, 2012), proposing effective preventive strategies and networking activities (Catarci & Fiorucci, 2015; Colombo, 2011).

2. Context

The project was carried out in Trentino (Northern Italy) from 2011 to 2014 in a middle school with a high proportion (>30%) of students from immigrant backgrounds and/or at risk of dropping out. The path is based on local school legislation³, which supports the projects and initiatives of individual institutions aimed at developing further paths to discourage early school leaving.

3. Objective

What are the goals of this longitudinal study? Encouraging regular school attendance and reducing dropout rates through an experimental integration year between middle and high school, combined with innovative, active teaching strategies. In particular: a) helping students to develop self-assessment skills, and to make informed decisions about their own futures; b) promoting the development of key study skills and strengthening their motivation to learn c) identifying and transferring good practice, tested in the action research project.

4. Methods

The methodology chosen was Action Research (AR), a participatory approach, which valorizes the role and self-determination of participants. Instead of doing research *on* people, AR researchers, in fact, do it *with* them (Reason & Bradbury, 2001), deciding the research question together, co-building methods of data collection and analysis and gradually implementing – in a cycle of action/analysis/action – their findings, in order to facilitate processes of social change which may also include a political dimension. The *Project Team* (PT) comprised the principal and 5 teachers – who had conceived the initiative – 2 researchers from the university of Trento and 2 psycho-sociologists from the “Studio APS” (Psycho-Sociological Analysis)⁴.

Verbal, observational, and visual data were collected gradually: archival records and the gray documents (from 2011 to 2014), participant observations and video recordings over a school year, in-depth interviews with key informants (parents and teachers), field notes and elements of meta-analysis, which were shared with the PT.

5. Results⁵

The longitudinal research consisted of three steps: in 2011-12 a network agreement with 10 middle schools in Trentino region was reached; in 2012-13 the new project directly involved teacher

³ Provincial Law no. 5/2006, art. 57, comma 1 «The Province can activate or support, including on the initiative of educational establishments, the recognition of projects involving the innovation of the school cycle, its structure and duration, the integration of training / educational systems, the continuity of the educational offer and school and career guidance»; art. 58, comma 1 «Elementary and middle schools can promote activities to encourage integration with high school curricula in order to develop initiatives to prevent early school leaving and to support students with special educational needs».

⁴ The PT included: Stefano Kirchner, Lina Broch, Maria Videsott, Barbara Baraldi, Claudio Bassetti, Claudio Bertoldi, Franca Manoukian, Claudia Marabini, Massimiliano Tarozzi e Giovanna Malusà.

⁵ This article reports some of the results of research that I partially presented to the international congress of the Italian Society of Pedagogy (SIPED) at Brixen (BZ), Italy, December 3-5, 2015.

teams and the students with immigrant backgrounds from 3 multicultural classes. The redesign of the 2013-14 experimentation enabled the implementation of micro-projects and the establishment of a first experimental class.

5.1. First Phase - Design

The first year (2011-12) was spent setting up the project: expectations, working hypotheses, the tools and methods for recruiting students, teaching and research methods, were all discussed, developing an increasingly rich proposal, shared in a network with 10 other schools in the province.

5.1.1. Expected Target

The project's target group was identified as students who, at the end of the third year of middle school, are still struggling to consolidate the core competences indispensable for success at high school, not because of any cognitive difficulties, but for emotional and relational and/or socio-cultural reasons.

The approval of the students' teachers, and the informed consent of the students involved and their families, were identified as prerequisites for participation, in order that the experience be fully shared. A number of meetings between teachers, students and parents were organized, to build a constructive relationship and a learning pact that would allow the students to take responsibility for co-constructing and evaluating their own learning paths. The initial plan was to involve 10-15 students of both sexes.

5.1.2. The Project "Trapezio" Design

The PT drew up an educational proposal, which involved the deconstruction of the contexts of traditional learning. The proposal included a new organization of:

- a) *space*, in a welcoming place, off school grounds;
- b) *time*, not following a school timetable, avoiding lesson hours and 5 hour days;
- c) *groups*, smaller than class groups;
- d) *relationships*, establishing significant relationships with each and every student;
- e) *content*, concentrating on 3 or 5 priority learning objectives, linked to transversal key competences;
- f) *evaluation methods*, the students are engaged in a self-assessment program and at the end of the course are given a certification of achieved competences – no credits are assigned;
- g) *ways of giving the students responsibility*, through providing the space and the tools to strengthen their autonomy;
- h) *teacher collaboration*, with periodic planning meetings with, and monitoring by, the PT.

5.1.3. Student recruitment

The first attempt to recruit students did not produce the expected results. The network had informed the PT of 19 students who met the project's criteria, from 12 different classes, in 8 different schools. Meetings began with the students' teachers, the coordinating teachers, the parents and the students involved. At the end of this complex phase (May-June 2012), however, only 4 students had joined up, and the project was therefore revised.

5.1.4. Strengths and weaknesses

During the period of student recruitment the PT had pointed out some difficulties a) for the teachers – the lukewarm involvement of some staff, certain doubts about the identifying of target students, the asymmetric management of meetings with the families, a lack of funding for research; b) for the parents – different perceptions of the risks of failure at school and difficult relationships with their children; c) for the students – a lack of motivation to experiment with an innovative course, off the school grounds. The strengths which emerged, on the other hand, were the sharing of an innovative idea within a network of schools, the approval and trust of the parents and the unity of the PT.

5.2. Second Phase – Redesign and experimentation "Trapezio" experiences

Given the strengths and weaknesses outlined above, it was thought best to wait and then relaunch the project in the following school year (2012-2013), in order to have enough time to strengthen collaboration between the institutions belonging to the network, the principals, coordinators and students' teachers in particular. An experimental class group within one of the schools was envisioned, in order to facilitate contact between peers. At first the plan was to enroll the students in a high school, then in a middle school, with the idea of an integration year – which had never been formally approved by the local school authority – eventually being abandoned.

The redesigning of the new course (coined as "*Trapezio*" experiences) involved all the teachers and students of three of the class councils in the middle school which was acting as network leader. The

experimental group was made up of 9 students from Year 2 of the middle school, with the consent of the students and their parents. Every Thursday and Friday morning two teachers worked with the group on transversal activities involving core language and maths competences, designed to fit in with the programs of the classes from which the children came. These activities were always attended by an outside observer, who was coordinating the AR. In line with the requirements of the Ethical Code of Psychological Research (AIP, 2015), the room had a microphone on the communal work table and a fixed video camera which filmed the activity, in order to provide the RA project with data for discussion and analysis.

5.2.1. *Reflections on the project*

The designing and implementing of the project were crucial to both the solving – through *experiential laboratories* – of real life problems and to the development – through collaboration with peers – of a “stick with it” attitude, and confidence in one’s own abilities, aimed at the gradual building of a “life plan”. The students gradually co-built the setting of the classroom, either through *ad hoc* projects that arose out of the needs of the group (classroom, door, table projects), or “ordered” by an external figure, or in collaboration with the other classes.

Within each project the students were supported in the development of transversal competences. Although the work seemed mainly focused on mathematics, more closely connected to the students’ real world, during the metacognitive stage, at the end of each day, linguistic competences could be strengthened, giving the students the opportunity to interiorize the specific language of the subjects and to improve their communication skills within a group and in public.

The teachers’ behavior and the construction of personal relationships and even an alliance with the students were key elements of the project’s approach. The strategies adopted, hard to categorize as a fixed set of behaviors and procedures, were constantly adapted to the events and needs emerging within the group, while maintaining an authoritative attitude and guiding the class towards the attainment of a successful, original result. Links were always maintained with the students’ classes. There were moments when the children had to be firmly reminded of the task at hand, and of their own personal responsibility, others which necessitated emotional support, in attempts to respond immediately to some of the concerns which emerged (such as how to do the homework set, very bad reports in the first term) – all within an educational, instructive atmosphere. Practical experience characterized every learning stage.

5.3. Third Phase - Implementing

In 2013-14 the project blossomed into the creation of a full, experimental, first year class at a middle school. Although funding was reduced, other micro-projects were implemented in the school with the classes from the Institute and the group of 9 students were able to complete their “*Trapezio*” experiences, at the end of which all the students passed the state exam that concludes the middle school program, and are now at high school.

6. Concluding remarks

The promotion of innovative educational paths in schools has proven to be a particularly complex challenge, requiring time, patience and flexible policies capable of addressing the diverse needs currently emerging (Colombo, 2010). The path described in this paper, in particular, was an attempt to offer a response which seems to have proven too sophisticated for these, still relatively immature, political times at the local level. Constantly adapting their original design, the group of teachers tried to offer alternative ways of encouraging a number of at-risk students towards academic success. Nevertheless the ambitious project, developed through trial and error and “*attempted solutions*” (Nardone & Fiorenza, 1995) succeeded in making a small dent in practices that are deeply entrenched within the school system. During the project the problems of bridging the gulf between the two school cycles (middle and upper), which have crystallized into constraints that are hard to overcome, emerged very clearly.

Further questions remain on the ways still open to manage - without funding - an effective AR path in schools (Tarozzi, 2015), above all in experimenting with educational processes which have little political visibility.

Acknowledgements

I thank all the teachers, principals, parents, and students involved in this study for their contribution to the data collection and their active participation in the research process.

References

- AIP (2015). *Codice Etico per la Ricerca in Psicologia*. Retrieved January 8, 2016, from <http://www.aipass.org/node/26>.
- Catarci, M., & Fiorucci, M. (2015). *Intercultural Education in the European Context: Theories, Experiences, Challenges*. United Kingdom: Ashgate.
- Colombo, M. (2010). *Dispersione scolastica e politiche per il successo formativo. Dalla ricerca sugli early school leaver alle proposte di innovazione*. Trento: Erickson.
- Colombo, M. (2011). Contrasting School Leaving through Local Policies: From Investigation to Networked Intervention. *Autonomie locali e servizi sociali*, 2, 169-184. doi:10.1447/35566
- Colombo, M. (2015). Early School Leaving in Italy. A Serious Issue, a Few 'Vicious Circles' and Some Prevention Strategies. *Scuola Democratica*, 2, 411-424. doi:10.12828/80465
- ISMU (2015). *Alunni con cittadinanza non italiana. Tra difficoltà e successi. Rapporto nazionale 2013/2014*. Milano: ISMU Retrieved January 8, 2016, from http://www.ismu.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Rapporto-CNI-Miur_Ismu-2013_14.pdf.
- ISTAT (2015). *Noi Italia: 100 statistiche per capire il Paese in cui viviamo*. Roma: ISTAT Retrieved January 8, 2016, from <http://noi-italia.istat.it/>.
- Malusà, G., & Tarozzi, M. (forthcoming). Ensuring quality and equity in an Italian multicultural primary school. In A. Portera & C. Grant (Eds.), *Intercultural Education and Competences in a Global World*: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- MIUR (2013). *Focus "La dispersione scolastica"*. Retrieved January 8, 2016, from http://hubmiur.pubblica.istruzione.it/alfresco/d/d/workspace/SpacesStore/9b568f0d-8823-40ff-9263-faabl1ae4f5a3/Focus_dispersione_scolastica_5.pdf.
- MIUR (2014). *Gli alunni stranieri nel sistema scolastico italiano a.s. 2013/2014* Retrieved January 8, 2016, from http://www.istruzione.it/allegati/2014/Notiziario_Stranieri_13_14.pdf.
- MIUR (2014b). *Linee guida per l'accoglienza e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri*. Ministry of Education University and Research Retrieved January 8, 2016, from http://www.istruzione.it/allegati/2014/linee_guida_integrazione_alunni_stranieri.pdf.
- MIUR (2015a). *Alunni con cittadinanza non italiana. Tra difficoltà e successi. Rapporto nazionale A.s. 2013/2014. (Sintesi dei contenuti)*. Milano: Fondazione ISMU Retrieved January 8, 2016, from http://www.istruzione.it/allegati/2015/Rapporto_alunni_cittadinanza_non_italiana_2013_14.pdf.
- MIUR (2015b). *Notiziario. Gli alunni stranieri nel sistema scolastico italiano. A.s. 2014/2015*. MIUR - Ufficio di Statistica Retrieved January 8, 2016, from http://www.istruzione.it/allegati/2015/Notiziario_Alunni_Stranieri_1415.pdf.
- MPI (2007). *La via italiana per la scuola interculturale e per l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri. Osservatorio nazionale per l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri e per l'educazione interculturale*. Roma: Ministero Pubblica Istruzione Retrieved January 8, 2016, from http://hubmiur.pubblica.istruzione.it/alfresco/d/d/workspace/SpacesStore/cecf0709-e9dc-4387-a922-eb5e63c5bab5/documento_di_indirizzo.pdf.
- Nardone, G., & Fiorenza, A. (1995). *L'intervento strategico nei contesti educativi. Comunicazione e problem-solving per i problemi scolastici*. Milano: Giuffrè.
- OECD-PISA (2010). *PISA 2009 Results: What Students Know and Can Do: Student Performance in Reading, Mathematics and Science*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Ongini, V. (2015). *Diversi da chi?* Retrieved January 8, 2016, from www.istruzione.it/allegati/2015/cs090915_all2.docx.
- Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2001). *Handbook of Action Research*. London: Sage.
- Santagati, M. (2015). Indicators of School Leaving. An International Frame. *Scuola Democratica*, 2, 395-410. doi:10.12828/80464
- Suárez-Orozco, C., Suárez-Orozco, M. M., & Torodova, I. (2008). *Learning a New Land. Immigrant Student in American Society* (1st edition ed.). Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Tarozzi, M. (2014). Building an 'intercultural ethos' in teacher education. *Intercultural Education*, 25(2), 128-142. doi:10.1080/14675986.2014.888804
- Tarozzi, M. (2015). Editoriale. *Encyclopaideia*, XIX(41), 1-3. Retrieved January 8, 2016, from <http://encp.unibo.it/article/view/5043/4802>
- Torres, C. A., & Noguera, P. (2008). *Social Justice Education for Teachers: Paulo Freire and the Possible Dream* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Ventura, M. (2012). Between intercultural and critical pedagogy: the subtle exclusion of immigrant students. *Intercultural Education*, 23(6), 555-565. doi:10.1080/14675986.2012.731206