

Planning Inclusion as Social Justice. The Challenge of Academic Success for Foreign Origin Students in Italian Secondary Schools

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Conference: ECER 2018

Network: 07. Social Justice and Intercultural Education

Format: Paper

Session Information

07 SES 01 B, Inclusion and Exclusion at School

Paper Session

Time: 2018-09-04
13:15-14:45

Room: CM-Thunsaal

Chair: Carola Mantel

Contribution

Ensuring equal educational opportunities and promoting equity and social cohesion is one of the main challenges currently facing the European Union's education policy makers (Tarozzi & Torres, 2016).

Despite official inclusion policies, international surveys show that students from migrant backgrounds tend to perform at lower levels than their native peers (OECD, 2016). Moreover, national indicators show that in all European countries, even the Nordic (considered to be more equitable), first and second generation students from foreign backgrounds are more disadvantaged in terms of the types of school they are channelled into (usually vocational), their duration of study, attendance, achievement and qualifications.

The theoretical framework of this research is rooted in two main premises.

First, when the educational policies of UNESCO, the OECD and the EU are analysed, particularly with regard to the academic achievements of students from migrant backgrounds, what emerges clearly is the urgent need to create a broad vision of

intercultural education within a wider conception of politics which – crucially – includes social justice. Intercultural education – the EU's official educational model – tends to understate the issue of social equality (Catarci, 2015). This issue can be faced more effectively if the educational perspective is broadened to include not only the values of intercultural dialogue but also the political values of justice in education and a necessarily Utopian vision of a better world (Freire, 2002), rooted in the more radical North American approaches of critical pedagogy and in the Italian tradition of Gramsci and Milani (Mayo, 2007; 2013).

Secondly, the fact that the number of students with non-Italian citizenship in the Italian school system is growing steadily (MIUR, 2017). This reality highlights the need to encourage policies which welcome, respect and support diverse identities in an equal learning process in Italian public schools (Malusà & Tarozzi, 2017), and to ensure social equality and citizenship rights for all, avoiding turning diversity into inequality.

Assuming a critical perspective, this Social-Justice-Education oriented study aims to identify realistic paths towards the provision of quality learning for all pupils who live in difficult environments; its ambitious goal is to construct a social justice education model which prioritises the inclusion of migrant students. The project, part of the doctoral thesis of one of the two authors, explores the following research questions: (1) What are the pedagogical predictors of school success of migrant students? (2) How can students of foreign origin best be enabled to achieve academic success?

In this presentation we will focus on: 1) why the effective inclusion of students from migrant backgrounds requires a shift from Intercultural Education to a more extensive vision of Social Justice Education (Malusà, 2017a); and 2) the main results of the present research (Malusà, 2017b), a two-phase mixed-method design, which investigates the extent to which foreign origin students in secondary schools are failing, and aims to identify the success factors at play when students do not fail.

We will briefly present (i) some analyses of the academic trajectories of 1,325 students of foreign origin in the second year of secondary school in a region of North-East of Italy, with a post-hoc descriptive reconstruction of their school careers, dating back 6 years, highlighting the pedagogical determinants in the successful paths; and (ii) we will put a special emphasis on the multidimensional theoretical model that emerges from the qualitative phase, contextualized in 5 middle schools in Northern Italy, and the 5 steps of an effective plan for the academic achievement of secondary school migrant students (Malusà, 2017c).

Method

The research involves a mixed-method design quant->QUAL (QUAL emphasized), consistent with the “Sequential Explanatory design” (Creswell, 2013), in which the quantitative data analysis of the first phase becomes the background for the second qualitative phase. The first phase sample includes all migrant origin (without Italian Citizenship) second year secondary (high school and vocational education and training) students in the Province of Trento (North-East of Italy) during the 2012-13 school year, with a post-hoc descriptive reconstruction back to 2006-07. The data were extracted from the “Data-Warehouse AUS-PAT”, which ensures an internal validity of the analysis, and were provided by IPRASE, a local education research institute. The variables considered for each student were: (a) background characteristics (gender, age, number of years in Italy, nationality, citizenship); (b) parental backgrounds (nationality, citizenship); and (c) indicators of academic achievement (completion of compulsory schooling, i.e. outcome at the end of tenth grade in secondary school; General Average Point in eighth grade; eventual rejection after the ninth grade; dropout; possible school-to-school transfer). Data analysis allowed us to: (i) identify some typical trajectories associated with particular categories of foreign students, defining them in different ways, according to how long they had been at school in Italy, and what country their parents were born in; (ii) analyze, through a series of multiple logistic regression models, the impact of students' background information on their school career patterns. All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS 19 software. The second phase was conducted from 2014 to 2017 using a critical and constructivist Grounded Theory

Method (GTM) (Charmaz, 2014), oriented toward social justice (Johnson & Parry, 2015). The progressive theoretical sampling includes open and focused observation (82 hours) in 5 Italian middle schools, 28 recorded semi-structured interviews (19 hours) with key-informants (principals and teachers), questionnaires and document analysis. In accordance with GTM procedures, all the material was transformed into text, transcribed verbatim and encoded using QSR NVivo 10. 847 codes and 2,323 occurrences emerged from the open coding. During the focused coding, conceptual labels gradually decreased, depending on which occurrences were more frequent or more meaningful, and 99 subcategories emerged inductively, grouped into 11 categories. These categories were more precisely defined according to their properties and relationships within the theoretical coding and were then reduced to 7 before being integrated into an interpretative final model.

Expected Outcomes

The analysis confirms a relationship between the number of years students have been at school in Italy and their academic success. It also reveals, however, that students from migrant backgrounds are channelled into vocational educational training, even when they have done well at middle school. The results show that students of migrant origin are experiencing a growing learning gap, even when they were born in Italy. Moreover, inhomogeneous patterns in the school careers (269) of these students are clearly revealed: their underachievement involves disadvantage in terms of type of diploma attained, duration of attendance and drop-out rates. The qualitative analysis reveals sterile school projects which often fail to promote academic success. Among the 7 GTM built categories, effective strategic planning emerges as the core-category, directly related to congruent local policies, the suitable evaluation of trajectories and flexible teaching approaches, and with the creation of meaningful relationships with students. The functional model identifies an effective 5-step process, that could be relevant for planning paths of school success for all: (1) being motivated to change; (2) building meaningful relationships with students; (3) facilitating learning; (4) planning and coordinating interventions; (5) supporting the construction of a new life project. The emerging multi-dimensional model involves relational, methodological, organizational, political, economic and ethical dimensions, with the presence of "committed" principals and teachers, as "public intellectuals" key to making a difference, according to critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1988). The research clearly demonstrates the urgent need to include contemporary intercultural education within a social justice framework, with congruent practices and policies that involve all stakeholders, ensuring social equality and granting citizenship rights for all, with an actual *ius scholae*.

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