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Educational practices and action research in multicultural perspective

Il presente contributo, offre una riflessione sull'importanza pedagogica del metodo autobiografico e delle storie di vita. Impiegato a scuola, tale approccio (che, oltre alla scrittura, utilizza anche narrazioni verbali, disegni, immagini, oggetti e musica) si rivela un utile strumento formativo, non solo perché permette ai bambini di migliorare le loro capacità cognitive, riflessive e metacognitive, nonché quelle emotivo-relazionali, ma anche perché rappresenta uno strumento fondamentale per gli insegnanti che in questo modo sono messi in grado di approfondire le dinamiche della classe e quindi di strutturare meglio il *setting* formativo.

Parole chiave: formazione, intercultura, metodo autobiografico, metacognizione, relazione educativa

This contribution offers a reflection on the importance of the autobiographic/narrative method in education. Employed at school, this approach (which, in addition to writing, also uses verbal narratives, drawings, images, objects and music) proves to be a useful educational tool, not only because it allows children to improve their cognitive, reflective and metacognitive skills, as well as their emotional-relational ones, but also because it represents a fundamental tool for teachers, who in this way are able to deepen their understanding of the dynamics of the class and thus better structure the educational setting.

Keywords: Education, interculturality, autobiographical method, self-cognition, educational relationship

1. *The importance of the autobiographical method and telling life stories within the context of educational training for children*

The employment of the autobiographic/narrative method in education can generate further narratives and reflexive processes, therefore enhancing what J. Bruner defined as narrative thinking. In fact, according to the American psychologist, human beings possess a natural predisposition to arrange their experience in a narrative form[1].

Employed at school, such an approach (which, beyond writing, also employs verbal narratives, drawings, images, objects, and music) turns out to be a useful formative instrument, not only because it allows children to improve their cognitive, reflexive, and metacognitive capacities as well as emotional-relational abilities, but also because it represents a fundamental instrument for teachers who in this way are enabled to deepen their understanding of class dynamics and thus to better structure the formative setting.

Attention for spoken sources begins in different investigative contexts although it particularly develops in some moments of common reflection and of collaboration between historical and anthropological investigations. Currently their importance is also widely recognised in the field of pedagogy, in fact listening and dialogue represent two moments unavoidable for the construction of identity, development of numerous cognitive skills as well as for the comprehension and integration of diverse cultures.

Provided below are the results of a quantitative investigation realised through a narrative workshop of action-research conducted with a group of ten foreign children, originating from Romania, Albania, Latin America and Central America, aged between seven and eleven years old, immigrated in Italy mainly due to their parents' employment.

[1] J. Bruner, 1990/1992, p. 56.

The life history of these immigrant children has been collected on the island of Elba during a project begun by the group of research of Pedagogy in the Faculty of Science of Formation of the University of Studies of Suor Orsola Benincasa of Naples, Italy.

The choice of the territory in which the research was conducted was purely casual: the island of Elba has always been a land of encounter and (confrontation) of peoples and culture, first the Phocaeans (VI century BC) followed by the Etruscans, Greeks, Romans, Ligurians, Pisans and finally the English, Spanish and French. In the course of centuries all these populations were attracted to this area both for its' strategic geographical position, and also for its' immense subsoil mineral wealth. Recently, with the development of tourism, it continues to be a chosen destination for those wanting to enjoy natural beauty, and also by those finding in the tourist market a new inexhaustible and ecological mine.

The research aimed at investigating emotional, cognitive and motivating experiences of the foreign pupils interviewed and the modality of perception and construction of their identity.

Contrarily to rationalistic traditions which considered the individual as an autonomous and rational centre founded on immediate self knowledge prior to any social or cultural rapport, we are at present aware of the fact that it establishes within inter subjectivity communication, through the intercession of cultural forms available, from time to time, in determined social contests.

Hence the methodology of life history, the narrative self, results to be the more adequate mode to pursue the finalization of our investigation, which configures not just as a simple collection of information but as an in-depth analysis of the dynamics existing in the cognitive and emotional evolution of the foreign children interviewed, at the moment of comparison with a historical-social reality completely different to their own.

During the course of research two models of interviewing were utilised, the first was easier to apply and aimed at the reconstruction of a life history on "the surface", the second was more

complex and structured to reconstruct some life histories aiming to analyse "in-depth" the individual in question, referring above all to *time* and the *contest* of origin, also seeking to bring to the surface their emotions, sentiments and ideas.

The life history of these migrant children, identified following the same investigative methodology but utilising two diverse protocols of interview, other than provide useful information to pick up the threads of the existential novel of the individual in question, offering an interesting insight on the social situations of the various countries of origin, leading us to reflect on the fact that educative intervention inter-culturally cannot be efficient if not supported by knowledge of the historical-social contests origin of recipient of the same intervention.

Autobiography is a process of writing about ones self and ones own life, giving the story not only something modifiable or interpretable but a real tale and subjectivity true, inconvertible and un changeable for anyone. The "truth" regarding the individual is either placed in the active autobiography, an expression direct by author/individual, or the passive autobiography, written by a second individual, extraneous, taken out of context for the exclusive prerogative of the individual. The autobiography is a valid method of recognizant didactics which poses the individual in a dual position with respect to "me present" and "me past", developing an amnesia which allows self removal without however losing sight with respect to the "me past" which instead is detailed and better known through memories and influenced by lived experiences, nor with respect to the "me present" which is the meter of comparison with past experiences and represents the certainty of the present: both contribute to the formation of the personality which is strengthened by their encounter with the autobiographical individual.

The autobiography is therefore configured as an important instrument of evaluation and personal emancipation by the speaking individual and through the same narration establishing an active contact and participation with the surrounding social reality.

Example of a collected "life history" below:

Nathan's Story

My name is Nathan and I was born in Romania, I'm seven and a half years old and attend the second year of elementary school, I know that many of my schoolmates coming from other countries are put into different classes from those that they should attend, but I attended the first year as I should have, because I learnt Italian when I was still in Romania. My mother had already moved to Italy three years ago leaving me with my grandmother and my father but he had another wife and did not want me to come to Italy to be with my mum.

When I was in Romania I went to the kindergarten then stayed a lot of time with my grandmother and we watched Italian programmes (with Sky) so I felt a little closer to my mum and that's how I learnt Italian. Then one day after my father had shouted on the telephone with my mum they told me that the next day we would have to go to the office to get the documents, so my mum could come and get me. It took two months, then one night my mum phoned me and told me that she would come and get me the next day.

We left early in the morning in the van of my mother's new husband, I slept for almost all the journey, I didn't see anything when we passed through Romania, I woke up when we were in Italy. When we arrived at the port of Piombino and I saw the sea close by for the first time I was very frightened, my mum told me not to be afraid.

I like living here, I made friends quickly with my classmates and I also play with many of them after school, the people in the country are a little different from the Italians that I watched on TV, not as elegant and speak a type of Italian a little different but they are kind to me and my mum.

I miss my grandmother a little but don't think that I want to live in Romania, I would like to be a lawyer and got to one of those Italian cities with skyscrapers and buildings that I see on television, but not to Romania.

2. *An example of action research*

From the analysis of the contents of the stories told by foreign children involved in the investigation it could be inferred that it deals with children tending to be well integrated in the scholastic and social network. This very probably, also depends on the fact that the inhabitants of the island of Elba are used to the presence of foreigners (those who choose it as a holiday destination and those who have chosen it for reasons of employment), beginning with the antique Romans and Etruscans settlers due to the immense wealth of its mines, up to times more or less recent, attracting a colony of fishermen originating from the islands of Ponza and Sicily. All the above has taught the inhabitants of Elba, to accept "the foreigners" and consider diversity an actual resource, so much so that it was them "the others" to decree the tourist and productive development of their island. Hence explaining the fact that our foreign pupils did not find it hard to be accepted by friends as they often in turn had parents and grandparents emigrated from other Italian regions.

In order to have objective evidence and a clearer and more complete framework of what emerges from the listening and lexical analysis of the textual corpus of the ten stories of life told in the context of research, a brief questionnaire has been added, not based on significant features.

Hereunder are pie charts of the more significant answers provided by the children.

How did you feel when you arrived in Italy?

– I was ridiculed 22%

– Fear 38%

– I didn't understand the language 40%



The meeting between the "new"the "unknown" and the "others", always raises huge concerns exceeding which is not always painless.

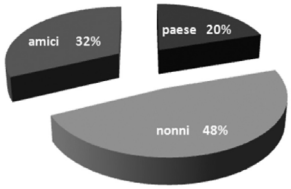
As foreseen, the first sensations on the children's arrival in Italy were not very positive. It is clearly noted the strongest figure of emotion felt by the children was fear generalised against the unknown which they were onfronting, mainly due to the fact of not understanding the language well and the frustrations resulting from fear, not always founded, of being ridiculed for being different.

Very probably it is a sensation of inadequacy caused by the fact of "not feeling at home any more". The people, places, habits and sensations which have been part of their existence until that moment representing key points for them are suddenly missing. Although having been advised of their parents' decision regarding the desire to go and live in a place far away, in order to have a better lifestyle, and to have had the possibility of 'metabolising' such a decision (it emerges from the stories that on average at least two or three months pass prior to departure), however once the project is materialized and revealed by their parents, they discover that not everything is as promising as they had been told. In addition there are reasons, which are not always thoroughly understood given the young age.

The second question shows (see pie chart below) that the children are nostalgic above all for established affections which have been left in their country, grandparents and friends, rather than places. This type of type of answer was also rather predictable: given the young age sentiments of roots in their country of origin were not yet felt very strongly, while it was unable to assert the same regarding the emotional and affections-relations components. This, in our opinion, probably depends on the fact that almost all of them came from villages and/or rural villages and therefore the network of relations and neighbours has not suffered the breakdown of a more advanced urban society characterised by mechanical and impersonal rapports.

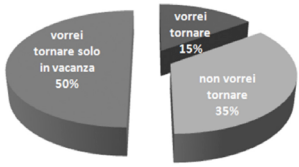
Are you homesick for your country and your relations?

– Friends 32%
– Country 20%
– Grandparents 48%



Would you like to return to your Country?

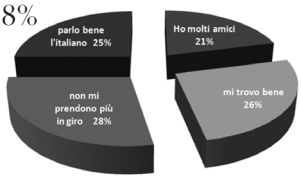
– Only on holiday 50%
– Yes I want to return 15%
– No I don't want to return 35%



Almost all the children interviewed would not like to return to live in their country of origin or rather would like to go on holiday, as they are still a little homesick for what they left behind however perhaps they realise, more or less knowingly, that Italy can offer the prospect of a better life.

How do you find living in Italy now?

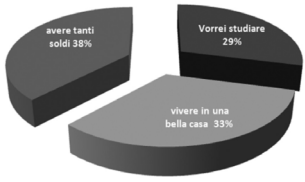
– I speak Italian well 25%
– I have many friends 21%
– They don't ridicule me any more 28%
– I'm fine 26%



Regarding integration, figures show that in respect to the initial sensation of disorientation shown on arrival, the current appraisal is very positive. The young immigrants state to be well, to have made many friends and above all their confidence arises from the fact that they have now learnt the language well and are able to have better relationships, particularly with their peers and in general with adults of their host country.

It is clear, at this point, that the confrontation and interaction with the other, the new, formed a fundamental moment for these children, for their self development and self esteem. Through dialogue and listening they have had the chance of reflecting on their experiences and to begin a sort of self reconstruction and self evaluation which in conditions of isolation would remain "unknown" and incomplete.

What is your greatest wish?
– To have a lot of money 38%
– To study 29%
– To live in a beautiful house 33%



The desires of the young foreigners, as shown in the pie chart, are not dissimilar to those of their Italian peers: the majority of them would like a lot of money and live in a beautiful house. Many of them declared the wish of working as a doctor, teacher, engineer; for analysis convenience same answers have been recoded and incorporated in the definition "To study" which is then the simplest underlying variable response provided by the children.

Such answers, apparently easy and superficial, really hide a deeper way of feeling: in the meanwhile it is clear that regardless of their youth they have understood the formative value of school and the importance of instruction to be able to aspire to the conditions of a better lifestyle from all points of view and also the professions which the children declare to follow when they are adult (doctor, teacher, engineer) are those which in a certain way positions them in a privileged position and close contact with the social community in which they are inserted. Therefore the type of answer provided reveals other than a strong feeling of social liberation (to have a lot of money and live in a beautiful house) is also the desire of integration in a definite and complete manner in the social-cultural composition of the host country.

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