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Peace education;
Education and citizenship;
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Education and social inclusion;
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Civitas educationis

EDUCATION, POLITICS AND CULTURE

Anno VII
Numero 1
Giugno 2018

MIMESIS

SUOR ORSOLA
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Iscrizione al registro operatori della comunicazione R.O.C. n. 10757
Direttore responsabile: Arturo Lando

Pubblicazione semestrale: abbonamento annuale (due numeri): € 36,00

Per gli ordini e gli abbonamenti rivolgersi a:
ordini@mimesisedizioni.it
L'acquisto avviene per bonifico intestato a:
MIM Edizioni Srl, Via Monfalcone 17/19
20099 - Sesto San Giovanni (MI)
Unicredit Banca - Milano
IBAN: IT 59 B 02008 01634 000101289368
BIC/SWIFT: UNCRITM1234

Università degli Studi Suor Orsola Benincasa, via Suor Orsola 10, 80135 Napoli
Phone: +39 081 2522251; e-mail: civitas.educationis@unisob.na.it

MIMESIS EDIZIONI (Milano – Udine)
www.mimesisedizioni.it
mimesis@mimesisedizioni.it

Isbn: 9788857551739
Issn: 2280-6865

© 2018 – MIM EDIZIONI SRL
Via Monfalcone, 17/19 – 20099
Sesto San Giovanni (MI)
Phone: +39 02 24861657 / 24416383

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Colorism and primary school children in Italy: opinions and representation about skin colors

Margherita Cardellini*

Abstract

Pedagogical, psychological and sociological research about the influence of skin colour among primary school children in Italy is very lacking. Although American literature seems to have focused more on that theme, in Italy the interest in this specific issue seems to be still hindered. The following paper presents some results of a research project in which the author tries to understand if and how prejudices and stereotypes based on skin color are present in primary school children. The research is still ongoing and it has been deepened in the last few years. By asking them to imagine themselves in a different skin color, black or white, the researcher was able to detect opinions and representations about black skin and white skin.

Keywords: *skin color prejudices; children colorism; white skin; black skin; primary school; colori.*

1. Introduction

Paola Tabet, an Italian anthropologist, from 1991 to 1994 asked to 7.000 children what would they think if their parents had become blacks. Thanks to the imaginative responses of the involved children, in 1997 "La pelle giusta" was published, a quite known book among scholars of intercultural education in Italy. Thanks to this study, Paola Tabet sparked the interest on an unexplored research topic, prompting a spirited reaction within the educational world, due to the strong words of the children, which were showing many prejudices against black people. Although the book is still widely read and quoted, research on this topic seems not so widespread in Italian context. Therefore, the interest to deepen the topic is born in order to understand what children think today about skin colors in a scenario of many demographic changes taking place in Italy in relation to the presence of people coming from other countries. Although Italy does not provide statistics about the presence of dark-skinned people (as for example the American context do) we

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can observe an increasing media and social interest on immigrants and lots of quantitative analysis has been done to present the phenomenon of immigration in the last few years by the Italian government. The last ISTAT report affirms that over 5 millions of foreign people were present in Italy the 1st of January 2016. Italy has experienced a considerable immigration only in the 90s and in primary school, children started only in those years to deal with black children daily. Italian schools had to think about a model of welcome and integrate with this new multicultural and multi-colored panorama. It is very important to note that, unlike the American context, Italy has never experienced so intensely the phenomenon of black slavery, so the great battles for the black people's rights are not so embedded in the Italian culture as it is for Americans. This is a crucial point for reading and understanding the present research project. So, in the Italian context it is more difficult to find studies about colorism because the "skin color topic" have less involved Italy than America but there are lots of studies that encounter colorism although they have not this explicit goal (Barbiero, 1985; Sagone, 2003; De Caroli, 2007; Zannoni, 2007; Bolognesi, 2010; Pastori, 2010; Lorenzini, 2012, 2013). Skin color has been studied as one of the variables related to multicultural and intercultural context and not so frequently as central focus, worthy of the relevance that should be given to this important component of the identity construction (Bolognesi & Lorenzini, 2017; Lorenzini, 2017; Cardellini 2017, 2015). In America, by contrast, colorism studies have been able to attribute dignity to a topic that deserves to be analyzed in its own specificity. The term "colorism" is not even translated into Italian language and it still not enough investigated. To understand even better the difference between the Italian and the American context, it is also necessary to make some terminology clarifications. If in the U.S. "race" refers to the different physical characteristics (among which skin color), in Italy the term "razza" refers to genetic differences and it is still linked to the fascist period (Cassata, 2008; Falconeri, 2011), where this word was used to indicate biological differences between humans and to justified the Aryan "race" superiority over the others. This word is full of sufferance and Italian people feel quite uncomfortable both in saying and in hearing this "taboo term". However, these emotions of embarrassment and difficulty and the widespread and shared social and cultural agreement which impose a sort of "ban" in the pronunciation of the term "razza", does not eliminate the fact that

> race after all the violence remains a social construct; it changes with the context, it is relational, not essential, and never be finely fixed, but subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation. […] It is a signifier, an empty sign, it is not fixed in a nature, it can not be secured in its meaning, floats in a sea of relational differences (Hall, 1996)

and even if it does not have a scientific credibility it is a "operative" concept also in the Italian context, which means that people still use this concept even if they don't pronounce this word. So, in America race exists both as socially accepted word and concept, while in Italy this word is socially and scientifically rejected. In Italy, at least among humanities' scholars, we use "ethnicity" or "human groups" to refer to physical and cultural differences. While this has helped to clarify the meaning of a very used term in the period of totalitarian regimes, stating that there are no races but only a "human race", it has also meant that there wasn't an Italian word able to distinguish the physical differences from the cultural ones. According to the linguistic relativism, words are not only ways to communicate, but also thought's instruments (Castiglioni, 2005), so the absence of a word may have hindered the presence of a specific research area. This semantic problem translates into a practical problem because in the Italian context it seems linguistically difficult separate cultural and physical elements while these elements may require also a parallel and cross reflection. So, in Italy, colorism exists neither as word nor as a research approach. Conversely, American research, starting from the famous Clark's Doll Test (1947), opened a field of study where skin color is central. How skin color can affect the social preferences of children (Kinzler & Spelke, 2010)? Can the ethnic bias be modeled and modified (Powell-Hopson & Hopson, 1992; Jordan & Hernandez-Reif, 2009)? What do children think about skin color (Derman-Sparks, Tanaka Higa & Sparks, 1980)? Can intercultural education and antiracism dialogue together (Aluffi-Pentini, 1996)?

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

Six hundred fifty-eight children between 7 and 11 years participated in the study (323 girls and 335 boys). All these children attended primary schools in Bologna, Emilia-Romagna. In total 31 classes were involved[1]. In the sample there was 611 light skinned children (300 girls and 311 boys) and 47 dark skinned children (23 girls and 24 boys)[2].

2.2. Procedure

The methodology chosen to make explicit skin color's stereotypes and prejudices was the written composition as Paola Tabet did. The research

1 An email was send to all the primary school of Bologna and the research was conducted with all the schools that answered to the participation's request.

2 We will talk about light, medium and dark skin in the quantitative analysis and white and black skin in the qualitative analysis.

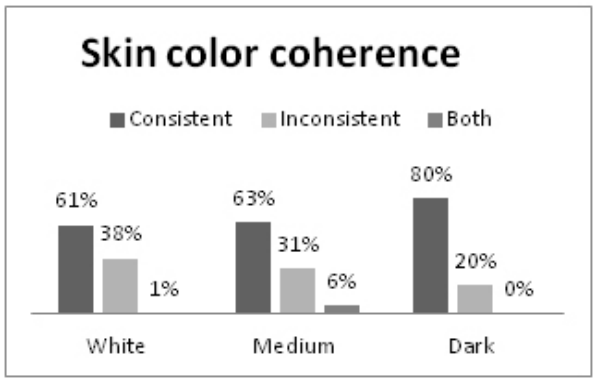
consisted in two distinct steps. In the first step the children were asked to write a brief descriptive composition titled: "*The alarm clock rings! It's time to go to school! You get up, you go to the bathroom and you look in the mirror and… your skin color has changed! You became black/white! Tell me how you will spend the day with the new color of your skin*". The text was reported twice, one with the words "you became black" and the other with the "you became white" sentence, allowing children to choose only one of the two options, regardless of their skin color. This first part has helped to bring out some attitudes, but the major elements containing prejudices have emerged in a very direct second question: "*Would you like to become black/white. Why?*". The question was asked in written form just after they had finished the first text. Again, the question was repeated twice, with the word "black" and with the word "white" and children could choose to answer only to a single question, regardless of their skin color. Allowing them to make this choice was one of the original points of the methodology. This freedom of choice has led to a series of consequences which had had much more complicated the analysis of data. For example, a white child could choose to answer the "Would you like to become white? Why?" question or a black child could do the opposite. Even if the children were given freedom to choose the skin color, the researcher had a specific check list where she noted her perception about children skin color (light, medium, dark). Skin color and origin, foreign or native, are concepts which not always coincide. So, a tanned child who just came home from the seaside, could appear "medium" or even "dark" despite being of Italian origin.

We defined "consistent" compositions those where children chose to answer the question with the opposite skin color (e.g. A white child who chose "Would you like to become black? Why?" or a black child who chose "Would you like to become white? Why?") and we defined "inconsistent" compositions those where children chose to answer the question with their own skin color (e.g. A white child who chose "Would you like to become white? Why?" or a black child who chose "Would you like to become black? Why?").

3. Results

3.1 Quantitative analysis

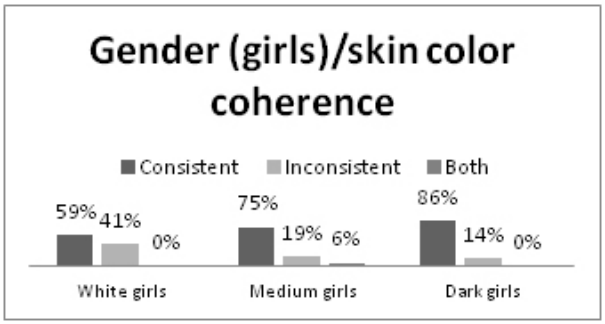
The first result of the quantitative analysis regards the increase of the degree of coherence of the answers with the increase of skin color gradation (from white to dark). White children have a coherence's percentage of 61%, "medium" children a 63% of coherence and dark-skinned children reach the 80% of coherence. So, when the skin is darker, children answer more coherently.



Graph 1: Skin color coherence[3]

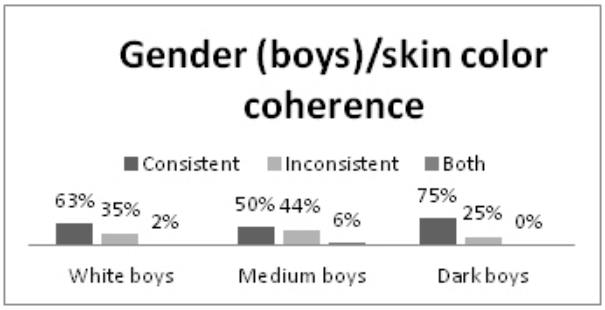
We can hypnotize, for example, that black children are more aware of their skin color compared to their white classmates.

The "consistency/inconsistency"'s answer was also declined according to the sex of the participants, highlighting that girls seem to be more predisposed to identify themselves into another skin color. We could think that girls (73%) better understood the instruction of the task or that they were able to imagine themselves in a different skin color better than boys do (63%). Again, the consistency increases with the skin tone degree.



Graph 2: Gender (girls)/skin color coherence

3 Although the experimenter explicitly asked the children to answer a single question, some of them responded to both. That's why the presence of "both" in the graphics.



Graph 3: Gender (boys)/skin color coherence

After a general quantitative analysis, we observe the answer's content in a qualitative way. Both questions provided a "yes" or a "no" answer, with a request of motivation.

We see that:

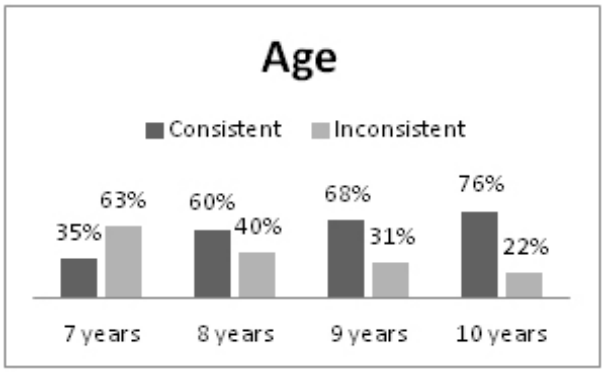
	I want to become black	I don't want to become black	I want to become white	I don't want to become white
white children	23%	32%	11%	24%
medium children	13%	19%	44%	17%
dark children	0%	20%	66%	13%

– When white children answer to the consistent question (Would you like to become black?) they prefer not to become black (32%).
– When medium children answer to the consistent question they strongly prefer to become white (44%).
– When dark children answer to the consistent question they strongly prefer to become white (66%).

It is interesting to observe that:

1. White children say they do not want black skin.
2. Medium and black children say they want white skin.
3. Black children say they want white skin more than medium children.

We also decided to analyzed age as a variable, because it probably had affected children's answer. In this case, we have just analyzed the white children sample because the black children's once (medium and dark) was too small to undertake this analysis. We observed that the consistent answers grow in the same portion with the age. We can assume that the older children better understood the task. It is also possible that older children were more able to imagine themselves in a different skin color than the younger do.



Graph 4: Age

3.2 Qualitative analysis

Unlike the quantitative analysis, where we decided to maintain the distinction between light, medium and dark skinned-children, in the qualitative analysis we opted for the simple distinction between white skinned and black skinned children because in the questions we give to them we used only these two words. The qualitative analysis started by dividing white children's compositions from those of black children. Then, we made another division through coherence/incoherence; so we had 4 categories of compositions.

1. White children that respond coherently
2. Black children that respond coherently
3. White children that respond incoherently
4. Black children that respond incoherently

Thanks to the analysis of the children's answers, we choose to define some categories to highlight the most recurring thematic. This paper does not aim to go deeper into all these categories but it presents a more general panoramic to give a larger and comprehensive vision of the results which, of course, deserve a more specific and critical reflection.

We also report some examples to clarify, thought children's words, the category's content.

When white children answer coherently they explicit 7 issues.

1. *Partiality:* children who accept the skin color's change setting boundaries as, for example, limitations in time and graduation.
   i.e. Limitation is time: "No, I don't want to become black because I felt uncomfortable and embarrassed and it will be hard to persuade my classmates that it's really me. However, I'd like to be black only for one day to feel what it feels like." (Marco, 9 years old, 4° grade class, Italian).

i.e. Limitation is graduation: "Yes, I'd like to become black but not so much black…just a little bit suntanned. I like sun very much and there is the sun in the seaside, so I can get a tan and I like sun very much." (Elisa, 8 years old, 3° grade class, Italian).

2. *Aesthetics*: children discussing if they became more beautiful or uglier if they change skin color. Many children say that, by becoming black, they become also ugly. Other children specify that they accept to became black only if "black is not too dark" as we can observe in the previous category.
   i.e. More beautiful: "I'd like to become black because they could notice me and I like black skin because it's beautiful and very attractive." (Marta, 7 years old, 2° grade class, Italian).
   i.e. Uglier: *"No, I don't want to become black because I will be ugly and I'd look like a Moroccan"* (Gabriele, 9 years old, 5°grade class, Italian).
3. *Equality*: some children say that if their skin color's changes it will not bring life changes because "blacks and whites are all the same", others start to connect discrimination to black people.
   i.e. "I'd like to become black because it's the same if you have black or white skin"[4] (Maria, 7 years old, 2° grade class, Italian).
   i.e. "I'd like to become black because it's the same as to be white but there are some people who say that we are superior, but it's not absolutely true. Yes, it's true that in the Hitler's period there was Nazism and even now, but I would love to say 'stop to this hypothesis"[5] (Carlo, 10 years old, 5° grade class, Italian).
4. *Fear:* Children who express fear and anxiety for this change.
   i.e. "No I don't want to become black because I never did like dark-skinned people and I'm even scared because I think they are weird, but maybe if I was black I did not like the whites. I like my skin and I didn't want change because nature did this choice"6 (Emma, 9 years old, 4° grade class, Italian).
5. *Black as color and not as skin color:* children who refer to the color "black" as a color and not as a skin color.
   i.e. "I don't want to become black because it sucks, it seems like a black wall"[7] (Luca, 7 years old, 2 grade class, Italian).

4 Ti piacerebbe diventare nera? Si. – Perché? Chissene bianca o nera e la stessa cosa (Maria, classe 2°, 7 anni, italiana).

5 Ti piacerebbe diventare nero? Si – Perché? Perché è uguale ad essere bianco, solo che alcune persone dicono che siano superiori ma non è assolutamente così, si va bene, nellepoca di Hitler c'era il nazzismo e anche tuttora, ma io direi basta a questa ipotesi! (Carlo, 10 anni, classe 5°, italiano).

6 Ti piacerebbe diventare nera? No. – Perché? Perché a me non mi sono mai piaciuti quelli con la pelle scura a volte mi fanno anche un po' paura perché secondo me sono strani ma forse se io sarei nera non mi piacerebbero i bianchi. La mia pelle mi piace e non vorrei cambiare perché la natura a fatto questa scelta (Emma, 9 anni, classe 4°, italiana).

7 Ti piacerebbe diventare nero? No – Perché? Fa scifo sembra come un muro nero (Luca, 7 anni, classe 2°, italiano).

6. *Hot, sea, sun:* children who associate exotic elements to black skin. They often describe a nice view connected to summer holidays.
   i.e. "I'd like to become black because I don't like to put the sunscreen when I went in Sardinia during summer, but my black skin protect me from the sun even without lotion"[8] (Davide, 9 years old, 4° grade classes, Italian).
7. *The idols:* children who say they want to became black to look like their idols (e.g. Mario Balotelli, Usain Bolt, Barack Obama, Nelson Mandela, Michael Jordan, Pelé, Michael Jackson).
   i.e. "I would like to become black because I could be Balotelli. I would be really good at play football and I'll be really famous"[9] (Marco, 9 years old, 4° grade classes, Italian).
8. *Negative elements:* children who say that black skin is something bad.
   i.e. "I don't like to become black because I want to stay as I am and I don't want to chance my skin color. Indeed, if I'm the only one with black skin I'm afraid everybody could make fun of me"[10] (Carlotta, 8 years old, 4° classes grade, Italian).

When black children answer coherently they explicit 3 issues.

1. *Approval*. Children who say they want to become white to be like "the others". They are children who claim to feel "alone" in their minority status; often they say that they are the only children in their class to be black.
   i.e. "I'd like to become white because I don't want to be the only colored and foreign girl"[11] (Lilly, 9 years old, 4° classes grade, born in Italy, parents from Angola, dark-skinned girl)
2. *Mockery*. Children who want to become white because of the frequent mockeries. These children tell experiences of derision and discrimination related to their skin color.
   i.e. "I'd like to become white because sometimes when I'm walking in the street there are some guys who make fun of me because of my skin color and I don't like that"[12] (Elisabeth, 8 years old, 4° grade classes, born in Italy, parents from Philippines, medium dark-skinned girl).

8 Ti piacerebbe diventare nero? Si Perché? Perché a me non piace mettermi la crema in Sardegna d'estate ma la pelle nera protegge dal sole anche senza crema (Davide, 9 anni, classe 4°, italiano).

9 Ti piacerebbe diventare nero? Mi piacerebbe diventare nero perché potrei essere Balotelli. Perché? Sarei bravissimo a giocare a calcio e sarei famosissimo. (Marco, 9 anni, classe 4°, italiano).

10 Ti piacerebbe diventare nera? A me non mi piacerebbe diventare nera – Perché? Perché a me piace restare come sono e non voglio cambiare colore di pelle. Poi anche se sono l'unica con la pelle nera ho paura di tutti mi prendessero in giro (Carlotta, 8 anni, classe 4°, italiana).

11 Ti piacerebbe diventare bianca? Si, mi piacerebbe – Perché? Perché non voglio essere l'unica femmina di colore e essere straniera (Lilly, 9 anni, classe 4°, paese d'origine Angola, figlia di immigrati nata in Italia, pelle molto scura).

12 Ti piacerebbe diventare bianca? Si – Perché? Perché alcune volte mentre vado a passeggio ci sono dei ragazzi che mi prendono in giro per il mio colore della mia pelle, è

3. *Identity*. Children who claim the importance of their skin color as an integral part of their personal identity (Lorenzini, 2017). Only in this case, the majority of children say they do not want to change skin color.
   i.e. "I don't like to become white because I don't lake changes and somebody could not be able to recognize me more. To re-start something new it is not so good!"[13] (Iva, 9 years old, 4° grade class, born in Italy, parents from Sri-Lanka, dark-skinned girl).

When white children answer incoherently they explicit 6 issues.

1. *White as color and not as skin color.* Children who refer to the color "white" as a color and not as a skin color (e.g. monsters, ghosts, vampires, mummies, snow, illness, pale complexion, Snow-white).
   i.e. "I'd like to become white because I will look like a vampire and I like vampires"[14] (Mattia, 9 years old, 4° grade classes, Italian).
2. *Identity*. Children who refer to white as their skin color. They seem not to talk about the hypothetic change, but they speak about their white skin.
   i.e. "Yes I'd like to become white because it is the color of the skin that I usually have"[15] (Pietro, 9 years old, 4° grade classes, Italian).
3. *White skin: skin color of other nationalities*. Children who connect white skin with English, Chinese, Russian and Polish nationality. They do not feel to have white skin.
   i.e. "I'd like to have white skin because I can visit Europe feeling comfortable (even America, England, China and Russia)"[16] (Manuele, 9 years old, 4° grade classes, Italian).
4. *Approval*. Children who want to be white because white is the color of the "majority".
   i.e. "I'd like to become white because all my friends are white and I won't be different from them"[17] (Ivan, 9 years old, 5° grade classes, Italian).
5. *I don't want to be black*. Children who, without explanation, clearly say they don't want to be black.

questo non mi piace a me (Elisabeth, 8 anni, classe 4°, paese d'origine Filippine, figlia di immigrati nata in Italia, pelle scura).

13 Ti piacerebbe diventare bianca? No, non mi piacerebbe diventare bianca. – Perché? Perché non mi piacciono tanto i cambiamenti e poi qualcuno potrebbe non riconoscermi più. Dopo cominciare qualcosa di nuovo non è tanto bello! (Iva, 9 anni, classe 4°, paese d'origine Sri Lanka, figlia di immigrati nata in Italia, inserita in 4°, pelle molto scura).

14 Ti piacerebbe diventare bianco? – Perché? Mi piacerebbe diventare bianco perché assomiglierei a un vampiro, e a me piacciono i vampiri! (Mattia, 9 anni, classe 4°, italiano).

15 Ti piacerebbe diventare bianco? SI – Perché? È il colore della pelle che ho di solito (Pietro, 9 anni, classe 4°, italiano).

16 Ti piacerebbe diventare bianco? Siiiiii! – Perché? Perché così posso visitare l'Europa sentendomi a mio agio (anche America, Inghilterra, Cina, Russia) (Manuele, 9 anni, classe 4°, italiano).

17 Così non sono diverso da loro (Ivan, 9 anni, classe 5°, italiano).

i.e. "I'd like to become white because I don't like to become black"[18] (Paolo, 7 years old, 2° grade classes, Italian).

6. *White positive, white negative*. Children who say that white skin is beautiful, the source of happiness, friendship, compassion or even "skin more suited to humans"; or children who explicit negative considerations, connecting white skin to fear or embarrassment. These children seem to talk about "white skin" in a different way, they consider "white color" and not "white skin".

   i.e. Positive connotations: "I'd like to become white because it seems more lively and happy, more suited to human people"[19] (Livia, 7 years old, 2 grade classes, Italian).

   i.e. Negative connotations: "I don't want to become white because it is too light and it's not so beautiful"[20] (Melania, 7 years old, 2° grade classes, Italian).

At last, because the black children who answer incoherently's compositions were only 13, we analyzed them individually. Children who answer "yes" to the question "Would you like to become black? Why?" say they are proud of their skin color because it is part of their identity. They express fear of not being recognized with white skin.

i.e. "I'd like to become black because I'm proud, very proud to be black and I will be black forever"[21] (Lucas, 9 years old, 4° grade classes, born in Italy, parents from Senegal, dark-skinned boy).

In contrast, black children who respond "no" to this question seem not to recognize themselves in the "black skin" definition.

i.e. "I don't want to become black because I don't like the color black and the color of my skin is white"[22] (Michael, 11 years old, 5° grade classes, born in India, medium dark-skinned boy).

4. General discussion

These results showed the ongoing presence of prejudices and stereotypes related to skin color among children between 7 and 11 years old involved in this research. The complexity of children's responses and the difficulty

18 Ti piacerebbe diventare bianco? Si – Perché? Perché non mi piace essere nero (Paolo, 7 anni, classe 2°, italiano).

19 Ti piacerebbe diventare bianca? Si – Perché? Mi sembra più vivace e felice più da persona umane (Livia, 7 anni, classe 2°, italiana).

20 Ti piacerebbe diventare bianca? Assolutamente no – Perché? Perché è troppo chiaro e perché non è tanto bello (Melania, 7 anni, classe 2°, italiana).

21 Ti piacerebbe diventare nero? Si – Perché? Voglio essere nero ne vado fiero molto fiero di essere nero e lo rimaro per sempre (Lucas, 9 anni, classe 4°, paese d'origine Senegal, figlio di immigrati nato in Italia, pelle molto scura).

22 Ti piacerebbe diventare nero? No – Perché? A me non piacerebbe diventare nero perche a me non mi piace il colore nero e poi il colore della mia pelle è bianco (Michael, 11 anni, classe 5°, paese d'origine India, immigrato, inserito in 3°, pelle scura).

that they express in defining themselves "white" or "black" may be the result of a widespread idea of colorblind children (Winkler, 2009) that underestimated the importance of an intercultural education from early childhood which can also take into account all the implicit and explicit prejudices often associated to this physical element. These children seem to be influenced by a multiplicity of implicit social, cultural and media messages and educational professionals should think about this underestimated topic in Italy and about their own personal difficulties to deal with this thematic. What does it mean today for these children to be white or black skinned? It is necessary to restore a sense and an order to the complex reality presented by these children which seems to be not only skin colors aware, but also competent and full of creative ideas. This creativity could become confusion without an educative and responsible adult able to stay in a children's conversation about "race" and racism with the intercultural competence to give an adequate space to prejudices and stereotypes and also to give a "space of containment" to achieve an anti-racist objective. It is a very hard and courageous commitment for the educational professionals because it requires to get involved personally, asking, first of all, what are our skin color prejudices and stereotypes. Concluding, intercultural education should take into account its anti-racist objective against every form of discrimination, even those who refer to skin color and the inequalities or advantages associate to this physical element which are still alive and present also among children. Talking about these "hot topics" should become part of the work of those who work with children in an intercultural and educative sense to try to understand how children are influenced by an ongoing racist society and give them others readings of reality and plural ways to look at the same phenomenon.

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Finito di stampare
nel mese di agosto 2018
da Digital Team - Fano (PU)