

## Immigrant mothers and school Relations with teachers

### *Madri immigrate e scuola Il rapporto con gli insegnanti*

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abstract

Dialogue represents a founding educational principle of intercultural pedagogy and may be traced back to the relationship between immigrant mothers and teachers in school. Through their words and the research conducted in this field, many aspects characterising the relationship between school and immigrant families emerge, at times marked by alliances, shared expectations and intentions and at other times by conflicts and mutual misunderstandings. The role of teachers and their awareness of the dynamics and complexities of migration are decisive not only for building educational alliances but also for the educational and professional success of the children, Italian citizens of the future.

**Keywords:** intercultural pedagogy, dialogue, school

*Il dialogo rappresenta un principio educativo fondante la pedagogia interculturale e può essere rintracciato nella relazione che intercorre tra madri immigrate e insegnanti all'interno del contesto scolastico. Attraverso le loro parole e le ricerche svolte in questo ambito emergono i tanti aspetti che caratterizzano la relazione scuola e famiglie immigrate talvolta contraddistinta da alleanza, da intenti e aspettative comuni, talvolta da conflitti e incomprensioni reciproci. Il ruolo degli insegnanti, la loro consapevolezza delle dinamiche e della complessità dell'evento migratorio sono determinanti non solo per la costruzione di un'alleanza educativa, ma per la stessa riuscita scolastica e professionale dei loro figli, futuri cittadini italiani.*

**Parole chiave:** pedagogia interculturale, dialogo, scuola

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## 1. Migration and the encounter with school

Welcoming a child into a new school means firstly welcoming their family, their mother and father with their own history and their expectations of the school. This is particularly the case for immigrant families, as for them the educational success of their children represents a genuine opportunity for integration, a possibility to improve their own social status, a testimonial of the success of the family's migration after so many sacrifices.

Many reasons underlie the decision to migrate, they are not only related to economic grounds but may be linked to the desire for emancipation and personal freedom, or family ties that lead people to join their spouses, reforming the family group or forming a new one. The presence of family groups is not only the mark of stabilisation and settling in the host country, but also marks the start of a process of integration between immigrant families and the host society (Donati, 2009)<sup>1</sup>.

As several authors have described, mothers play a particularly important role in the process of acculturation to the new context: they are directly involved in transmitting cultural traditions, yet at the same time they represent the point of convergence between the culture of origin and that of the host country (Cattaneo, Dal Verme, 2005).

Statistics underline an increase in female immigration in Italy, and in the past few years the number of females has exceeded the number of males<sup>2</sup> (Dossier Caritas Migrantes, 2015, 2016).

- 1 The history of the constitution of each family group is marked by many different aspects, including: the characteristics of the migration itself (the reasons for migrating, perspectives for stabilisation or a return to the home country, links with the country of origin); the methods of reunification or formation of the family group; the parents' level of education; racial and economic discrimination suffered; expectations towards migration).
- 2 The latest statistics report the percentage of female immigrants at 52.7% (Dossier Caritas Migrantes, 2015), with 107,096 residence permits being issued in 2016 for family reunification (Dossier Caritas Migrantes, 2016).

Having formed the family group, all members are affected by profound transformations; in reunified families, there is a veritable process of re-arrangement of family balances. Parents are on one hand busy reconstructing their bond as a couple, and on the other hand re-establishing their roles with their children: fathers may lose their social relevance, while mothers may acquire it, increasingly becoming the main interlocutor with educational services and school; children, particularly those who continued to live in the country of origin and who are later reunified with their parent, desire to rebond with their parents who, following the migration, are “seen” in a different light.

Particularly in newly founded or reunified families, becoming wives and mothers after being reunited with their husbands, women have to cope with significant changes in their own identity and the new family and social role acquired, and as a result they have to tackle a number of problems, not only of loneliness but also advantages, linked to migration (learning a new language, joining a new socio-cultural context) and maternity (birth of a child, contact with different educational and care practices to their own) (Tognetti Bordogna, 2007; Balsamo, 2003). In some cases the educational styles and experiences of migration can make immigrant mothers insecure of their own knowledge and skills. The ethno-psychiatrist Marie Rose Moro writes

The hypothesis developed is that migration requires a psychological effort on the part of every woman, but is complicated by the constraints of migration: acculturation, loneliness, individualism. Indeed these women deal with loneliness that is not only isolation, it lays bare psychological processes which, in other contexts and environments, are traditionally related to cultural practices (Moro, Neuman, Réal, 2010, p. 3).

Mothers choose to send their children to education services, nursery schools and preschools for basically two different reasons. The first concerns the possibility to access the job market, the second offers their children the opportunity to socialise with other children and learn Italian. (Bolognesi 2007; Favaro, Mantovani, Musatti, 2006).

For parents, children starting school is a significant event of social change, which again transforms family dynamics, as the contact and everyday dialogue with teachers and other families leads immigrant parents, and particularly immigrant mothers, to question their own educational values and styles and indeed their own migration project.

Mothers become increasingly aware that the presence of children leads

to a profound change in their affective, symbolic and economic investments, which no longer focus on the country of origin but rather on the host country: on one hand, they try to hold onto their own traditions and educational styles, and on the other hand to build a mediation between their own cultural references and those found in the host society, particularly those proposed at school (Tognetti Bordogna, 2001).

## **2. Mothers and teachers in dialogue**

With a view to building educational alliances, from the very start of school teachers are committed to building relations of trust and dialogue with the parents. In this initial phase, the privileged interlocutor is the parent or other family member who is most familiar with the Italian language, subsequently daily contact is maintained with the mother, particularly for some cultural groups. The mother is therefore assigned a key role which offers her social visibility, as often she is the person the teachers refer to for information on the child, to make specific requests (homework, trips, school material, etc.), to involve her in all the initiatives concerning the life of the school in which active participation is requested from the parents (class meetings, parent-teacher conferences, educational projects, workshops, etc.).

However, mothers prefer to maintain individual dialogue with the teachers, as participation in group meetings continues to be a problem where there is a poor command of the Italian language, scarce understanding of the school's pedagogical culture, or a sense of extraneousness which is often experienced towards other parents (Bove, 2015; Bolognesi, 2013; Favaro, 2011; Tieghi, Ognisanti, 2009). The teachers themselves underline this aspect, stating:

The problem is that the mother does not know the language, and she is the one who can come (to the meeting), the father comes home in the evening, and we never have meetings in the evening [...] The mother doesn't understand so she doesn't come to the meetings. Then the next day she asks you what was said. I mean, they don't come when we all talk together, when we exchange ideas, then they come the next day and ask: "What did you talk about? What did you say? What do I have to do? [...]" And then the foreigner comes and sits at the back, to one side, so it doesn't even seem like they're there, because we talk to the parents, but at the back you have the immigrant (Bolognesi, 2013, p. 129).

A Ghanaian mother said on the same issue:

I go to all the school meetings. I have a really good relationship with the teachers when I see them, they always have good things to say about my son. But some of my neighbours don't go, because they say they don't understand what the teachers say (Maher, 2012, p. 65).

These two testimonials represent two exemplary points of view of situations which unfortunately continue to persist today despite the consolidated present of immigrant children and parents in schools. From these words, as found in other testimonials, we can see not only a difficulty on the part of the immigrant parents but also that of the teachers themselves, who do not see these parents as interlocutors. In the relationship with immigrant mothers and fathers, often the teachers do not consider themselves cultural subjects who act and interpret the context and the relations between people, starting from their own values and knowledge belonging to the pedagogical culture of the school. This form of ethnocentrism creates misunderstandings and difficulties in the construction of dialogue, often leading to improper requests for linguistic-cultural mediation. In some realities, however, broader reflection underlying these positions is starting to make headway. Research supports the need to develop thought and pathways moving in the direction of the awareness and deconstruction of mutual prejudices (Bolognesi, 2016; Bove, Mantovani, Zaninelli, 2007; Silva 2004).

It must however be underlined how much dialogue with the teachers, particularly at lower school levels (nursery, preschool and primary school), although at times conflictual, offers opportunities for personal growth, a change in self-perception by immigrant mothers. Day to day dialogue with the teachers and other parents leads mothers to change their own perception of their parental role, seeking other methods, other words for interacting with their children. A profound existential change that goes beyond the parental role emerges, touching the whole identity of the woman who experiences migration (Bolognesi, 2017).

Day to day contact between mothers and teachers lays the foundations for a dual process of integration which concerns not only the children but also the mothers: children lead their parents to new destinations, values and educational styles that would otherwise not be pursued or even understood by adults; the more attentive the parents are to the school's pedagogical culture, the more the children acquire its implicit languages and references (Demetrio, 2003, p. 470).

Sometimes immigrant mothers become spokeswomen for discriminatory and depreciating choices made by the institutions which relegate their children to classes in which all, or the majority of, children are of foreign origin; an Indian mother states:

They say “we don’t want foreign children”, but if they say that they don’t understand what school means, because school is equal for all, at school there is no Indian, Pakistani, or Italian, they are all the same, only out of school it’s like that, in school it’s not, because in all the laws, in everything, everyone is equal. [...] when there was a meeting with Italian and Indian parents, I asked just one question: ‘will you tell me what the problem is? That there are too many of our children, or because they don’t know the language?’ They say there is no separation, so why are there no Italian children in our class? (Bolognesi, 2013, pp. 151-152).

For immigrant mothers, school represents a place of integration, a place where they can learn Italian, and these choices made by school institutions thwart their efforts, exasperate their hopes and expectations of access to the same educational and training opportunities as Italians, i.e. the right to citizenship. In these contexts the teachers often support the protest and indignation of immigrant parents as they too – in educational terms – experience this form of institutional racism.

The relationship with teachers may on the other hand become more complex at middle and secondary school level: dialogue becomes more difficult as there are far fewer opportunities for direct contact. Immigrant parents (but also Italian parents) are rarely present at class meetings or parent-teacher conferences, and this becomes particularly visible during the period of guidance in the choice of secondary school, a crucial crossroads for the future professions and possibilities for integration of “second generation” immigrants. Numerous research works have described the many factors involved in steering these choices; part of these focus specifically on the characteristics of young people of foreign origin (gender, ethnic origin, education and social status of the parents) while others refer to the role played by teachers and parents (Galloni 2008; Rebecca, 2009). The lack of dialogue between school and families that is so clear seen in these two levels of school increases the distance and ethnocentrism of schools as well as mutual prejudices, precisely at a time when there is a greater need for educational alliances and exchanges.

The reasons for low participation are the same as those described for lower school levels: working hours that are incompatible with the times of school meetings; poor Italian language skills; little understanding by the

families of the role assigned to them by the school. Set within this framework, it is clear that the phase of guidance in the choice of secondary schools lacks an essential interlocutor, the families: without the involvement of the families, the teachers work directly with the students, over whom they have particular influence. The presence of the parents would help to balance or contrast the guidance offered by teachers who, generally, steer young second generation immigrants towards vocational or technical schools, from which they rarely continue on to university studies (Bonizzoni, Romito, Cavallo, 2014).

So how do second generation students learn? What are the difficulties and strengths of the families, and particularly the mothers, involved in supporting these students in their school paths? As described in the following paragraph, the educational success of students of foreign origin depends on a number of factors. This paper specifically analyses the issue of homework, as this, while obviously not the only one, is a paradigmatic aspect of the dialogue between teachers and parents.

### **3. Homework: entering the world of school learning**

As we have seen, dialogue with teachers allows immigrant mothers to come into contact with the culture of school, and particularly the world of learning their children are immersed in: a world that is often unknown and at times incomprehensible to them, as it is conveyed in a language they often have a poor command of.

Homework is a paradigmatic area of the dialogue between immigrant mothers and teachers, as it is closely linked to the educational success of the children and the processes of integration and construction of identity affecting all the stakeholders (mothers, teachers and children). Through their relationship with the school, mothers have the opportunity to grow, know their own abilities, develop their independence, even though it is rare to see an improvement in their knowledge of the Italian language (Modesti, 2012).

In the past few years, research in different areas has increasingly sought to understand the link between the involvement of parents in homework and educational success (Wingrad, Forsberg, 2007; Goodwin, 200). It has particularly investigated the role played by parents, defined by sociologists also as social capital, manifested through the physical presence of the parents and the attention paid by adults to children when doing their homework (Coleman, 1988; Bassi, 2009). This area obviously represents a particularly important aspect also for pedagogical thought.

So let's try and understand what this means for immigrant mothers, the figures who spend most time at home with their children after school.

Firstly it is worth clarifying that, for immigrant mothers, helping children with homework may be a novelty, as in their home country they are generally not involved in their children's studies at home. In Italy on the other hand, teachers generally expect parents to be involved in homework, or at least show an interest in the contents of the curriculum and the activities carried out in class. The issue of homework often causes lively debate and even conflict between schools and families, which at times may even leave the confines of school and end up reported in the newspapers (Corlazzoli, 2011). Immigrant mothers may be penalised in the role of supporting children in their homework for a number of reasons. The first is cultural: never having seen their own parents do it, they have no idea what to do in practical terms. The second is linguistic: mothers cannot help their children as they have no command of written Italian, but above all are not familiar with the language of the school subjects. The words of some mothers cited below, the first of Moroccan origin and the second from Bangladesh, help us to understand their point of view:

For example, if I have trouble helping my children, I pretend. I open the books to see what homework they have to do and ask: "what homework do you have to do?". If it is maths, I can help them a little, but only up to a certain point. At middle and secondary school I couldn't do it (Modesti, 2012, p. 74).

We are happy with the school, the teachers, they work well, we are happy, we have just one problem and that is the homework. It's not just the homework, sometimes they come to us with their school books: mum, we've got to study this, can you explain what the teacher said? And I don't understand (Bolognesi, 2007, p. 200).

Clearly if situations like these occur repeatedly in the family's everyday life, it may slow the children's learning process as the concepts learned at school, which are then not reinforced through practice, can lead to gaps and delays in the long term.

Obviously the central issue of the problem lies in the mothers' poor command of Italian. They are aware of the importance of supporting their children in their homework, even if this is not part of their own experience, but their poor command of the written language and they are very aware that the language of the subject matter is a real limit for them.

I can't help her, her father can't either, I can't help her in anything at all, they help us. If they study it right or wrong, we can listen but we can't say if it's right. Sometimes they say: you don't say it like that, you have to say this, they are the ones who teach us. [...] I can help her a bit with the reading homework, I can say if it's right or wrong, but it's difficult, where you have to put the article, the conjunction, that's a problem so I have to pay attention. [...] I'm OK with the grammar, the only thing that it very difficult for me is writing. For example, you write a sentence, but I'm afraid I will put the verb in the wrong place. (mother from the Philippines) (Bolognesi, 2007, pp. 200-201).

The continuous and repeated dynamic that places the parent in the role of the person who does not know puts children in a position of relational superiority, generating what Marie Rose Moro defines as “generational reversal”: the children become parents of their parents, and this creates a fracture in the educational processes and in the family balances. But let's see in detail how this reversal takes place.

For the child and his family, entering the world of knowledge transmitted at school represents a particularly delicate step, at times a genuine moment of psychological vulnerability for the child who experiences this period of starting school, learning a new language and different cultural references, as a symbolic separation from his mother and his family. Becoming increasingly skilled in the languages of school and school culture, the child becomes “something else” compared to his family, as he masters all those implicit cultural aspects which remain obscure and incomprehensible to his parents. This is why teachers use children as linguistic intermediaries between the school and families, leading to communicative superiority which in the long term makes the relationship with their parents and the respect for the authority of their role increasingly complex. Moro states however that, precisely because their parents do not represent a “guide in the outside world” for them, introducing them to reality “in small doses”, children take on board the social rules of the host country only superficially, as they cannot integrate these with the ethos of the adopted culture (Moro, 2001).

The question of language also becomes a place of conflict between mothers and teachers, when the latter suggest that they speak to their children in Italian in order to improve their language skills.

You cannot say to me: “do not speak your own language at home because your daughter must learn Italian”. I said: “Listen, I send my daughter to you at school here so that she can learn your language,

if I have to speak Italian with her at home she will learn it worse". I don't speak Italian properly, how dare you? What are your prejudices? You cannot look at all foreigners and mix us all up with the word immigrant. (mother from Iran) (Bolognesi, 2007, p. 199).

The demands of the teachers contradict the role of the mother and her values: language represents a significant part of the structure of identity of any person, and this is even more true for those who have undertaken a journey of migration and who live in an existential dimension of self-extraneousness. (Sayad, 2002). Similar demands not only diminish the cultural roots and identity of the mother and the daughter, but create a rupture in the relationship between teachers and parents, undermining the trust in the school culture and those who should represent it, the teachers. Moreover, from the words of this woman we can see that the teachers have little understanding of the important role played by maintaining the mother tongue in learning a second language, a shortcoming that unfortunately is still widespread in Italian schools (Bolognesi, 2013; Favaro, 2011; Pallotti, 1998).

The dialogue between mothers and teachers, between schools and families, is at times a complex generator of conflicts and mutual misunderstandings, at other times it is steeped in potential, as it supports not only mutual understanding but can lead to an authentic change in which all stakeholders make efforts to re-think themselves, their educational styles and even their own values. Obviously the role played by teachers is decisive in this relationship with the parents. To achieve mutual understanding and a meeting point in this relationship therefore, joint dialogue, as far as possible on equal footing, must be built, aiming at the recognition of the other person and their differences.

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