

Girls with a migrant cultural background:  
school experiences through self-narrative  
Ragazze con background culturale migratorio:  
vissuti scolastici attraverso la narrazione di sé

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ABSTRACT

This contribution aims to undertake a critical reflection on the narratives of school experiences of a group of girls with a migrant cultural background, interviewed as part of a qualitative study conducted in Tuscany, with the purpose of analysing which educational processes can promote the inclusion and educational success of second generations. Through the students' stories, an attempt will be made to trace the strengths and weaknesses that characterise their growth paths and to identify which factors and educational practices can favour the development of the skills they need to plan for their future and actively participate in the anthropological transformations that are affecting society on a global level.

KEYWORDS

Girls, second generation, school, gender, interculture.  
Ragazze, seconda generazione, scuola, genere, intercultura.

Il presente contributo intende affrontare una riflessione critica attorno alle narrazioni sui vissuti scolastici di un gruppo di ragazze con background culturale migratorio, intervistate nell'ambito di una ricerca qualitativa condotta in Toscana, con lo scopo di analizzare quali processi educativi possano promuovere l'inclusione e il successo formativo delle seconde generazioni. Attraverso i racconti delle studentesse si cercherà di rintracciare i punti di forza e di debolezza che caratterizzano i loro percorsi di crescita e di individuare quali fattori e pratiche educative possano favorire in loro lo sviluppo di skills necessarie per progettare il futuro e partecipare attivamente alle trasformazioni antropologiche che stanno interessando la società a livello globale.

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## 1. Narratives that help to know

Jerome Bruner (1996), in the well-known volume *The Culture of Education*, engages in an extensive reflection on the importance of storytelling in the human experience. According to the American scholar, storytelling is not simply something 'ornamental' that we use to "make our leisure time enjoyable" (Ivi, p. 53), it rather represents the 'way of thinking' through which we initiate the construction of our personal identity and we attribute meanings to the social and cultural realities we inhabit. Bruner says "Even our immediate experience, what happened to us yesterday or the day before, is expressed as a narrative. More significantly, we represent our life (to ourselves and others) in the form of a narrative" (*Ibidem*). In this sense, the autobiographical narration constitutes an intra- and inter-personal process that promotes knowledge about our origins, our experiences, the relationships we build with other people, and the relations established with the world, with nature, and with the surrounding human environment.

Narrating ourselves is a re-generative practice through which it is possible to explore thoughts, understand emotions, discover desires, give voice to the body, substantially understand who we are, where we come from and what destination we are heading towards (Cambi, 2002; Demazière, Dubar, 2000; Demetrio, 1996; Ulivieri, 2019). It is, therefore, a powerful pedagogical device through which the person can give and re-give shape and meaning to his or her existence by creating close connections between the innermost dimension of the self, the otherness with which he or she is confronted, the spaces where life unfolds, and the times that characterise his or her becoming. As Sirignano argues (2002, p. 70):

As the narrative proceeds, the narrator can better recognise himself or herself, can observe himself from an entirely new angle, allowing him to discover a part of himself that would otherwise be denied. In fact, besides the narrated events, the autobiographical narrative opens up an enlightening insight into the narrator's personality, his or her way of being, his or her attitude when faced with the roughness of life, his or her weaknesses, his or her qualities, his or her humanity.

Given its innate capacity to promote knowledge and change, the practice of narration has assumed a pivotal role in the field of human sciences and, among these, in both Gender and Intercultural Pedagogy, research areas where storytelling and self-narrative qualify as models and formative devices that favour self-definition and self-assertion both in interpersonal relations and in relations with the world (Ulivieri, 2019). In self-narration, both women and subjects with a migratory cultural background have been finding the disruptive and emancipating force necessary to be known, to claim their needs and their rights, which, oppressed by dominant and repressive power logics, are still severely challenged on a daily basis.

In this specific work, autobiographical narratives allowed us to give voice to the school experiences of a group of female students with a migrant cultural background who, as privileged testimonies, took part in a qualitative study conducted in some secondary schools in Tuscany with the aim of investigating the educational processes implemented by school institutions to promote the well-being and inclusion of second generations (Ulivieri, 2018). As it will be shown, from the hermeneutic analysis of the narratives, as well as the identification of the difficulties and discomforts that these girls claim to have encountered during their participation at school, it emerges their ability to critically reflect on those experiences in which they recognise a positive value and which they consider indispensable for the achievement of educational success (Santagati, Colussi, 2019).

Therefore, the autobiographical narration, with its autopoietic and cathartic vitality, gives the narrator a glimpse of the shadows and lights of his or her own existential project, while at the same time facilitating the focalisation of potentialities and resources that can orientate them towards present and future edifying experiences.

## 2. School experiences between uncertainties and opportunities for growth

Following the temporal and thematic line of the collected narratives, which in most cases start from the memories related to kindergarten, the first factor that the girls recognise as a concrete obstacle to scholastic success concerns the fluency and use of the Italian language which, as the school grade progresses, becomes the key competence both to understand and re-elaborate disciplinary knowledge and to consolidate interpersonal relationships (Favaro, 2017). W., for example, recalls with some frustration the transition from kindergarten to primary school. In the first context, the teachers encouraged her lexical and syntactic skills with educational and playful activities extended to the entire group of girls and boys in the class in a stimulating and positive climate that generated a joyful desire to learn that neutralised the 'weight' of diversity. With the transition to primary school and more formal and structured teaching settings, the sense of well-being felt in the welcoming and inclusive environment of the pre-school was disrupted by the initiation of an individualised pathway often experienced outside the classroom, in a sort of

limbo that made them fear losing continuity with what was happening in the classroom and above all the contact with the classmates.

With the transition to primary school, they told me that I had difficulties in Italian, so during school hours they always put me through some exercises outside the classroom. There was a teacher who followed me individually, but I would lose a few hours with the other classmates. Let's say that this course was useful for me, but at the same time [...] when I came back to the class I didn't understand what they were doing anymore and it was confusing (W., born in Italy, Moroccan origins).

The sense of insecurity regarding language skills can also be found in the words of L. who, at the age of seventeen, even though she was born and grew up in Italy, recognises her limitations in speaking Italian. Her difficulties are mainly due to the obstacles she encounters in the use of articles and verbs that follow very different rules from Chinese, the native language used in her family (Revelli, 2009). According to the student, teachers represent a fundamental bridge for the educational success of second-generation students. In particular, recalling her experience and the results she has achieved, she emphasises her gratitude to her current Italian teacher who, unlike her secondary school teachers, is constantly ready and willing to support her in achieving her goals and overcoming difficulties.

The professors [at secondary school] didn't really care, they didn't ask to learn Italian properly, and it seemed we only went to school to keep our chairs warm. [...] These four years went better than those in Prato. [...] I have an Italian teacher and, whenever she asks me questions, I try to express myself and she tries to understand me and gives me help. For example, she corrects me when I say things wrong and I gladly accept her help. [...] Sometimes I skip words, I skip articles... Writing is better because when I write I think more and I can check if I have forgotten any articles. [...] The Italian language is very difficult. In Chinese [...] verbs don't change, [...] there are no articles, while here there are all the definite and indefinite articles, and then the other articles, too many! (L., born in Italy, Chinese origins).

With the increasing teaching load and the growing complexity of the subject content, as T. recounts, students can experience a drop in their performance which, in addition to negatively influencing midterm and final assessments, can significantly undermine their motivation and self-confidence. In order to get out of the impasse in which T. found herself during her middle school years – for which she says she does not fully understand the reasons – it was also crucial for her to receive specific support from her teachers, thanks to which she “felt a little better” within a highly undermined situation.

When I arrived at middle school, I had weaknesses in just about everything, so I ended up with an average grade of four, three. I don't know exactly what my difficulties were. Maybe it was because I didn't study so much and didn't understand things. At primary school no one helped me, then at secondary school the teachers supported me because I was not able to do it on my own and since then I got a bit better (T., born in Italy, Romanian origins).

The analysis of narratives also uncovers another unfortunate issue that affects girls with a migrant (and other) cultural background. It concerns ‘hate speech’ and ‘toxic words’ that mainly target skin colour, culture of origin, family traditions or religion. C., for example, testifies that she received racist insults once she arrived at secondary school. According to the student, whose reflection goes far beyond a consideration limited to her own experiences, xenophobic language and behaviour have no logical justification because they are usually performed uncritically towards those who display aspects that deviate from the ones incarnated and transmitted by the dominant culture (Bolognesi, Lorenzini, 2017). Those who engage in such behaviour do it because they are conditioned by dogmatic and dichotomous thinking that rejects otherness and leads them to interpret differences as a danger. Thus, along the lines of blind ideological and ethnocentric crystallisations, mechanisms of exclusion and discrimination are activated and they may lead to real situations of violence (Burgio, 2015).

Then we got to middle school and there I had some problems with racism, especially with classmates who didn't understand. For me, it's wrong to be racist because you can't accuse everyone and include everyone! So, at this time the problem was racism, because sometimes they didn't come close to me because they thought so many things, without even knowing me (C., born in Italy, Albanian origins).

Xenophobic prejudices can also sneakily hide in the words and speeches of teachers. As K. reports, during a lecture one of her classmates of Albanian origin was urged by the teacher to study harder to avoid doing the same work as her ‘compatriots’. The student says she does not know whether the teacher had said those words intentionally or not. It is certain that this rather sibylline expression managed to affect both girls and left them with a sense of disappointment (Fravega, Queirolo Palmas, 2003).

Many teachers are racist, I think, but it's my own thought. For example, an Albanian girl who is in my class told me that there is a teacher who told her: 'You have to study, otherwise what do you want to do, your compatriots' work?'. Maybe it was just a little joke to push us to study, but for her, and also for me, it was a big shock (K., born in Italy, Albanian origins).

The school life narrated by the girls is also marked by positive experiences that provide examples of good practices adopted by educational institutions and teachers to promote the educational success of students with migrant backgrounds (Santagati, 2019). Well-being and self-confidence arise, first and foremost, when teachers are able to build educational and didactic settings based on caring (Boffo, 2011) and welcoming intra- and inter-personal relationships (Biagioli, Ongini, Papa, 2021). In an inclusive and proactive environment, it is easier to identify and cultivate one's inclinations, which in J.'s case concern music. The girl states that she has always felt part of the class group to which she has positively bonded and that she has consciously and autonomously chosen the high school she now attends having clearly understood her interest in childhood education.

I have always been good, I was not rejected because I am a foreigner. My favourite subject is music, I did well in primary and secondary school and also now. I personally picked the high school [...]. I chose it because I liked its course: it is aimed at educating children. I like children, I immediately feel at ease with them and they also 'settle' with me quickly. [...] In class we are all together, there are no separate groups (J., born in Italy, Albanian origins).

L. emphasises, conversely, her passion for mathematics, a subject in which she achieves grades that reach excellence.

The subject I like best is mathematics, I do well. In the first term, I got quite well, like seven, eight. Now that the second term is here, the teacher told me I got a ten on three tests (L., born in Italy, Chinese origins).

A school career marked by a desire to learn, confidence in one's abilities, positive evaluations and empathetic and professionally prepared teachers, helps the girls to orient themselves towards the future, seeing university education as an achievable and necessary goal to implement the skills learnt during high school and to obtain qualifications that will allow them to enter the working environment fully equipped.

I'd like to attend Physiotherapy University as my first choice, or if I fail to get in there I'd like to choose the five years of Education. I would like to go to university. It's important for my parents that I go to school, in fact they want me to go to university (A., born in Italy, Albanian origins).

I decided to come here to dental school and then be a dentist, as I also want to go to university. I really like this job and so do my parents. [...] I am confident with the choice I made! (C., born in Italy, Albanian origins).

Finally, A.'s account adds another important piece to this complex and varied mosaic. According to the student, the active participation of parents in their sons' and daughters' schooling is crucial for success in studies (Silva, 2004). In her case, A. is convinced that she benefited greatly from the presence of her mother who followed her and stayed close to her while doing her homework.

I started to learn Italian in kindergarten, my mother also started to learn it and so we made it through. I had no problems doing my homework because Mum also helped me a lot, she was always with me doing my homework, she talked to the teachers. [...] The teachers were comprehensive, yes, all of them, I always had really good, kind teachers (A., born in Italy, Albanian origins).

### 3. For a future to be built together

The picture that the analysis of the narratives gives us, without any claim to being generalised, shows how important it is, for the identity growth of these girls and their educational success, to be able to count on a school with a welcoming climate, capable of valorising different personal and family experiences, of encouraging the values that arise from a coexistence that respects cultural otherness (Prisco, 2021; Santerini, 2017). The narratives reveal a desire to attend educating communities in which meaningful relationships can be created with teachers who are inclined to use dialogue and confrontation as devices for getting to know each other and ready to offer personalised teaching when the school route may appear too steep compared to the available potential (Fiorucci, 2008). Therefore, it becomes clear the demand for a school in which the ethnocentric paradigm is questioned and the principles of equity and inclusiveness are the foundations of a pedagogical action aimed at promoting self-confidence, resilience and self-determination in these young girls. Female students show a strong desire to redeem themselves and,

coherently, the choice to continue studying is seen as an essential step to acquire the knowledge and skills through which to seize future opportunities (Loiodice, Ulivieri, 2017).

To these pressing challenges, Gender Pedagogy and Intercultural Pedagogy can respond by offering spaces for theoretical reflection (Lopez, 2018) and outlining scenarios and educational practices that foster the development of pro-active and enabling skills (Nussbaum, 2012). First of all, there is a need to create settings for discussion and confrontation that will lead to disrupting the logic of monolithic thinking, reticent to change and indifferent to the cultural stimuli that contemporary society is advancing with increasing frequency and rapidity. There is an urgent need to provide learning and teaching environments that encourage new generations and teachers to be confronted with forms of reasoning that are dialogical, plural, flexible and open to critically evaluating the multiple situations and issues that may arise in the course of life (Dusi, González-Falcón, 2021). According to Edgar Morin (2001), the multi-ethnic school – which globalisation has made more widespread than ever before – cannot disregard the formation of well-built heads capable of “learning to be there”, that is, of “learning to live, to share, to communicate, to be in communion” (Ibid., p. 77) taking care of themselves, of others and of the Earth that belongs indiscriminately to all human beings. This implies a rethinking of the principles that regulate educational and scholastic dynamics with the aim of overcoming individualism, ethnocentrism and sexism that indistinctly characterise disciplinary knowledge and shape interpersonal relations. Democracy, equality, and sustainability become values to look at with confidence because they are intrinsically capable of creating resilient interconnections and unprecedented hybridisations between subjects and cultures. There is a need for a school and teaching that ‘learn’ to elevate differences, whatever they may be, as opportunities for both personal and social development, thus removing them from the taboos and preconceptions that tend to turn them into inequalities and discrimination.

This transformation, which has been taking place in Italian schools for more than a decade, must be continually conceived, interpreted, supported and urged so that the inclusion and educational success of girls with migrant backgrounds – and of course of all young people indistinctly – does not get lost in the maze of an illusory utopia but becomes the point of no return for a profound cultural and human renewal.

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