Living in-between: children of immigrants in the urban space

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Abstract

Family and school are not the only educational agencies in daily life of new generations. In this paper, we argue that the city itself can be regarded as well as a great educational agency where an extraordinarily important formative experience takes place. This paper is aimed at exploring the experience of urban space as one of the main components of the process of growth and integration of children of immigrants. This is an experience which takes place in relationships in between indoors (home and school) outdoors (urban context and digital world) spaces, and in between different codes and meanings. This perspective of research aims to investigate the role of urban and digital settings in encouraging or discouraging social integration processes in Italy. The Authors have analysed it through qualitative researches, in between educational studies and urban policies.

Keywords: urban settings; educational processes; children of immigrants; multicultural society.

Abstract

Prendere confidenza con il proprio contesto di vita costituisce un passaggio fondamentale nei percorsi di crescita dei ragazzi figli di immigrati. Orientarsi nel proprio quartiere e nella propria città, così come inserirsi in reti di relazione all'interno dello spazio digitale, divengono opportunità irrinunciabili nello sviluppo dell'identità sociale. Le autrici, all'intersezione tra studi pedagogici e politiche urbane, intendono tematizzare con questo articolo come l'esperienza dello spazio (urbano e digitale) costituisca un aspetto fondamentale nei processi di crescita. Un'esperienza che si gioca nella relazione tra spazi interni (la casa e la scuola) e spazi esterni (la città, il quartiere e il mondo digitale), con codici e significati spesso differenti. Scopo ultimo dell'articolo è delineare gli elementi fondamentali di un ambiente capace di promuovere la definizione di identità plurali nelle nuove generazioni.

Parole chiave: spazio urbano; processi educativi; figli di immigrati; società multiculturale.

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1. *Introduction. The challenge of space experience*

In the last years, several studies have highlighted the importance of a recent topic in Italy: how children of immigrants experience the growing up process. Such studies describe the children's behaviour and educational strategies with a strictly sociological approach (Andall, 2007; Ambrosini, Molina, 2004; Colombo, Romaneschi, Marchetti, 2009; Besozzi, Colombo, Santagati, 2009; Colombo, Leonini, Rebughini, 2009). At the same time, other studies have researched cultural pluralism in schools, focusing on the theme of welcoming children who have just arrived, teaching them the Italian language and – even more recently – studying the intercultural routes which can involve foreign, Italian children or Italian children with foreign parents, in a school context which is more and more multicultural (Favaro, Napoli 2004; Granata 2015; Maggioni, Vincenti 2007; Santerini, 2010; Zoletto 2007).

There is very little research about the educational processes of children of immigrants through the analysis of their daily life in urban and living contexts (Cologna *et al.*, 2009). Such an approach enables to consider these youngsters as an integral part of society (even though they are not Italian citizens yet) and at the same time, helps measuring hidden elements as their level of integration, intercultural dynamics, inclusion processes within a precise frame: the city, a space where the new generations build their identity day by day.

This paper will tackle the issue of urban space as an educational agency. The Authors believe that the growth process of these social characters is highly influenced by the fact that they either feel "at home"or "foreigners" in their local environment and, at the same time, in the digital world. This represents a very relevant topic in the field of intercultural research about children of immigrants.

Now, some questions stimulate us: what kind of relationship does a child (who was born and raised in Italy by foreign parents) build with his own urban and digital environment? What is the role of the experience of walking, moving, building relational networks within the city and the web in their educational processes? We have tried to answer these questions through an interdisciplinary approach.

2. *"Experiencing the space" during growth*

The experience of space is a daily event in the course of everyone's life, through which one experiments emotions and receives negative or

positive inputs. Such experience is indelibly engraved in the life of a person.

For a child who is becoming a teenager, it is vital to become acquainted with the city where he lives, with its languages, its messages, its history, its rules. Learning how to move in the city is a way to become independent, to learn about the surrounding context, to mark significant reference points or even simply to wander aimlessly.

Trying to find an orientation always implies the possibility of getting lost: such an experience is very healthy in the growing up process besides being a constant condition in life. Getting lost or finding the way, getting outside of the domestic walls, of the protected domestic environment, facing an unpredictable hence dynamic environment are components of the growing up process: Italian and foreign children (who were born in Italy or who arrived to Italy as small children with their parents) are united by this crucial stage of their development: the moment when they start moving around the city without the need of being with an adult (Cloutier, Torres 2010). However, this process has different features according to each one's biography or to the timing of the arrival from the original country.

From the words and stories of several children, we can understand that their sense of plural belonging – which is at the same time an extraordinary opportunity and a source of loneliness and uncertainty – is reflected in the relationship with the city. For them, the city is a mirror of their dispersion, of their uncertainty, of a variety of ties sometimes difficult to manage.

In the history of other children on the contrary, the city is full of reference points and "friendly places", spaces where people can meet and which enable to draw a pathway between the places where someone is being waited for (home), where someone is welcomed (house of friends, school, parish, youth club, mosque, park). And it is from these places, from this city which appears like a text to understand and interpret, that possibilities open up: the possibility of understanding and interpreting, of building uncommon and personal stories.

3. *Becoming foreigners in one's own living space*

Children who were born in Italy from foreign parents know Italy as the only place to live in, and often Italian is the only language they can speak. These youngsters do not miss a past, a lost condition and

an abandoned homeland: they only know the present of their condition. However, they have a precise moment when they cross a border as well. They talk about a 'before' and an 'after' too; they do not mean the homeland (before) and the new country (after), but the passage from a period of homologation with the peers to a condition when they feel strangers because they are often regarded as foreigners (Granata A., 2015; 2016).

In the biography of the youngsters belonging to the second generation there is a point of non-return, the sudden and pervasive discovery of being different. Twine (1996) speaks about *boundary events*, episodes that take the shape of a blind reference to a difference, like a question, a compassionate look or true racist insults in school, on public transport, on the streets. Such situations threaten one's self esteem, influence the identity which is taking shape and which is particularly sensitive to the judgment of the people around.

I walk through the hallway in school… people walk by me, crowding the corridors. I am one of them. I dress like them, I talk like them, I even swear to be tough with them. I am involved in the scene, caught up in the gesticulations of twelve year old. 'P-A-K-I' someone screams… For me the scene has stopped… I move through white people, only following motions. I feel as someone has blown my cover. All eyes are on me now. The intruder has been identified (Rajiva, 2005, p. 172).

The example of this Canadian girl of Pakistani origin is particularly meaningful: she speaks the same language of her mates, goes to the same school, wears the same clothes, listens to the same music, but from a precise moment she is identified as an 'outsider' in the environment where she was born and raised. The apparently innocent fact of being called a «Paki» (Pakistani) is the revelation of a condition which will accompany her life and which will lead her to feel different in every context.

The school, the block, the whole city are the places where this difference is recorded. This way, teenagers think of the city as a set of looks – good or suspicious – which accompany their growth. Such looks, engraved in the memory, have the strong power to condition and sometimes define the identity of somebody who is growing up. Some people recall that they realized they were different when they were pushed off the bus because of the dark skin, or the day someone in school filled their diary with insults and threats referring to their origins. In literature, they are called visible minorities, because they are defined as a minority by the looks of other people.

Teenagers can have all sorts of reactions: they can avoid catching the bus which recalls the fear and desolation of the episode or look for an environment with people who share the foreign condition, the same religion or have the same ethnic origin. Their own block can be a place to run away from if one feels threatening looks; the gym is no longer a welcoming place where to feel at ease, the school is a closed environment where one's individuality is not enhanced, the disco is a prohibited place for one who has become, in one day, a foreigner. In these cases, the greatest risk is that a person closes himself in the house because he fears the city. He feels the need of protection from the city and finds it in a private life, in his ethnicity, which is either re-discovered or invented to avoid an external judgement.

Both for those who have arrived and for those who were born here, the experience of crossing boundaries affects their daily life: every day they are called to cross limits, to adapt themselves to new frameworks within which there are different languages and rules. As they grow up, they need to learn how to understand them and use them differently in the various contexts.

4. *Living in between indoors and outdoors: the role of digital world*

"Indoors" and "outdoors" are not so clearly defined as they seem to be: they actually show several contradictions. It is true that often, the home where a family lives is the one which is more easily lived and organized according to the culture of the country of origin, but it would be misleading to conceive a dichotomy between the indoors space as a place of tradition and the outside as a place of exposure to what is new.

Indoors and outdoors, proximity and distance are two dimensions often tied together and subverted by actions and habits, where languages superpose and taint each other; children of immigrants have, in this sense, a fundamental role in redefining such balance. The presence of the internet and of satellite TV in most families makes different worlds come closer, helps feeling near to friends and family who live far away; the habit of using chat lines puts teenagers who were born in Italy in contact with virtual communities who are tied to the cultures or beliefs of the parents. At the same time, when the relationships with the members of the family become complicated and distant, teenagers tend to identify themselves more easily with the outside world rather than with the inside, domestic, familiar one, made of rules which sometimes teenagers no longer share.

As Marc Augé (1992, En. trans. 1995) states, the outdoor space invades the private one through the media, which transform what is global into something which belongs to the indoors world. The media cut the distances between different worlds, as they show images of far away places and events. What is local seems more and more external: the ties with the block, face to face relationships which can take place only in a real space are ignored in favour of indirect, virtual relational experiences. For many youngsters, chat lines are true relational spaces, virtual social centres where they can meet people whom they would have never been able to meet elsewhere; they meet boys and girls from the whole of Italy but also foreigners. And to do this, they do not need to get out of home and face the adventure of the relationship within physical spaces.

Social networks in particular are places where young people can 'play' with their identity, more than in face to face situations. Showing themselves with or without Islamic veil, showing or hiding their faces, alone or with their friends. Children of immigrants' identity is mutable (as in the case of Italian children), and it changes according to personal relationships and life experiences. Social networks can be places where this dynamism and plurality are more easily accepted.

5. *Conclusions. Towards a space able to educate for diversities*

We have seen how children of immigrants describe the public space, sometimes as a place where they feel foreigners even if they arrived when they were very small. Sometimes, the city can be a space where one can rediscover his own origins, build a plural and complex identity, create new relational spaces. In their stories, the city never plays the role of a neutral framework: it is also a space which is dense of meanings for the construction of educational processes. The city is often able to mark the differences, creating exclusion processes, but it is also able to recognize diversities and enhance places for plural relationships (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2010). This challenge is shared by all main European cities, even the ones who have only recently experienced immigration (Granata E., Pacchi, 2011).

Hence, there is a very important educational task: taking care of the life and evolution of the public space. It is not enough to obtain a citizenship (even though this is a necessary step that cannot be postponed) to feel like citizens of a given country. Nor it is sufficient to be successful in school: it is necessary to feel at ease in the daily life spaces; in public contexts and not only in the domestic ones.

The experience of the immigrants' children who live in the city then proves to be a very important pedagogic lesson. While the generation of the fathers used ethnic blocks and proximity systems as fundamental resources to survive and mark their own specificity and difference, the generation of the children has a different perspective on the city and on the spaces with an ethnic connotation. They are a borderline generation, set in the narrow space between the culture and the world of their parents and a future, which opens a multiplicity of opportunities and interpretations of that given culture. This generation faces the challenge of building – within the urban, digital and domestic spaces – occasions for intercultural comparisons, spaces where people can open themselves to diversity as a primordial human trait (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2010). The public space can become a place where everyone is educated to diversities: both "old" and "new" citizens.

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