"Fluid" Identities: Promoting Social Integration through Pluralingualism and Intercultural Education"

Cinzia Colaiuda[1]

Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to analyze the outcomes of an action research project carried out in primary schools in Italy (2011-2015), devoted to the integration of all children (native speakers, migrants, refugees, foreign children) through the development of plurilingual and intercultural policies and the validation of all languages and cultures of origin. Children's self-esteem and motivation in language learning were fostered on the basis of an inclusive approach to diversity perceived as a positive social and human value.

Data were collected through teachers' annual reports, daily class diaries, semi-structured interviews, working groups. Through competency self-assessment and meta-reflection teachers improved their professional profile in order to act properly in multicultural contexts. All materials were fundamental for analyzing the positive or negative impact of the project on children's behavior towards diversity and otherness, their perception of their culture and language of origin in relation to their peers and their integration in a multicultural classroom.

Through the implicit use of a whole-community approach parents from migrant backgrounds spontaneously took part in the main didactic activities of the project sharing elements of their language of origin. In so doing, they showed openness with the culture and language of the host country. At the same time, they were perceived as official members of our society by the local community.

1. Introduction

In the era of the so-called "liquid modernity", characterized by international migration and huge population flows, people possess transnational identities that reflect the fluidity and complexity of post-modern societies. The paradigm of identities' metamorphosis is particularly true for migrants, refugees, foreign children, that "navigate" constantly between the world of the origin and the host country: they belong to both social and cultural universes. Since social identities are created and maintained through interaction with other people, transnational identities can be developed only among those who not only master both languages, but also have the social skills to establish connections with people from both worlds, through transactional processes based on the mediation of cultural contents.

Moreover, if we consider schools as social microcosms, we can easily observe that in a multilingual classroom there are normally several languages that coexist in the same physical and mental space: the language of schooling (normally it coincides with the official national language, e.g. Italian in Italy, French in France), foreign languages taught at school, minority languages, dialects, children's mother tongues.

Nowadays the real challenge is to transform multilingual classrooms in plurilingual microcosms where all languages and cultures play an equal role in educational ecosystems. In so doing, schools can create not only the presuppositions for the acceptance and co-integration of cultural and linguistic diversities, but also the basis for a more democratic and inclusive society.

In the last decades plurilingual and intercultural education has played a fundamental role in many European countries. Studies and researches of the Language Policy Unit of the Council of Europe have underlined the importance of an inclusive and pluralistic education for enhancing social and cultural integration of all students.

From this point of view, pluralingualism and interculturality can foster the rights of all learners to equity and quality in education through the validation of their languages and cultures of origin. This integration process is possible only through the acceptance of mutual social and cultural diversities, the proactive participation of all children in school life and their positive engagement in the learning process. In so doing, they reconfigure their linguistic repertoire including the language and culture of the host country in their linguistic and cultural identity (Beacco, Little, Hedges 2014).

Obviously didactic materials and teaching activities play an important role in this integration process for developing the so-called "intercultural communicative competence" (Byram 1997). Furthermore,

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[1] University of Torvergata, Italy

studies and researches have shown the importance of authentic materials for the acquisition of language skills through pupils' literacy engagement.

In this perspective, our analysis is focused on pupils' production of collective stories - whose main features are derived from fairy tales of children's culture of origin[2] - during an action research project devoted to plurilingual and intercultural education.

2. Theoretical Framework

The notion of intercultural communicative competence presumes the conception of language as an implicit form of cultural knowledge though which speakers interact in social life and interpret the world in which they live.

This conception is based on the assumption that there is a strong relationship between linguistic and socio-cultural competences: language is an inseparable part of the culture it belongs to, since the construction and communication of cultural factors among members of the same community are based on language.

From this point of view the notion of intercultural communicative competence implies not only learners' ability to deal with their own cultural meanings as well as those from other cultural worlds, but also the acquisition of both language and cultural competence.

Byram underlines that authentic literary text can foster the development of intercultural communicative competence since they can be seen as cultural products of a particular community (Byram 1997). Moreover, they can promote symbolic meaning negotiations and cross-cultural experiences though interaction processes among cultures while nurturing mutual empathy, tolerance and acceptance for diversity.

The fundamental importance of interaction for the construction of reality is underlined also by Bruner that considers language as the most powerful instrument for co-creating new, possible worlds and cultural meanings, since "language not only transmits, it creates or constitutes knowledge or reality" (Bruner 1986:132).

Bruner points out that each person is not an isolated atom but a part of the cultural environment in which she lives inheriting its symbolic dimension that she then recreates. In this creative process of reality, Bruner underlines the importance of negotiation processes for the construction of new meanings "by which individuals can regulate their relations with each other" (Bruner 1986:149).

Since human beings relate to one another through "transactions", in so doing they share their mutual world views, their cultural assumptions and beliefs. According to Bruner, this transactional process implies that "learning how to use languages involves both learning the culture and learning how to express intentions in congruence with the culture" (Bruner 1986: 65).

It is also essential to consider that from a very early age we are exposed to read or listen different literary texts such as fables, legends, folk tales, fairy tales that reflect not only the fundamental heritage of our own culture, but also archetypical images and symbols that we can find also in other cultures, whose main features and contents are shared in transactional acts through the use of language (Bruner 1986: 57).

The educational and pedagogical importance of the aesthetic use of language is also underlined by the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (Council of Europe 2001) since it can foster not only the development of human values and ethical principles, but also children's intercultural awareness, empathy and tolerance for diversity.

If it is true that literacy engagement can mitigate the negative effects of socioeconomic background, identity affirmation through the validation of the culture and language of origin play a fundamental role for the integration of marginalised children in the classroom, particularly through teacher-pupil identity negotiation (Cummins 2011).

3. Pedagogical procedure

Due to the systemic structure and complex nature of the action research project itself (2011 – 2015), data were collected using several "tools" that can be divided in two main categories:
   a) Teachers' materials: annual reports, daily class diaries, interviews, working groups
      The analysis of teachers' materials showed an ongoing interest of teachers in this project since it is able to promote social, cultural and language integration of all pupils and, in so doing, it is a concrete answer to the problems of a globalized world, in which many cultures and languages coexist in the same geographic space.

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[2] In this context pupils' collective stories can be defined as "authentic" texts since they are based on concrete cultural and linguistic "materials" of children's heritage.

The use of action research, that fostered a bottom-up approach to educational issues, was very useful for increasing teachers' self-awareness towards linguistic plurality and diversity, their motivation and interest in pedagogical issues as well as in innovative teaching methods. Through competency self-assessment and meta-reflection, teachers improved their professional profile and learned how to interact in multicultural and plurilingual settings in order to foster the inclusion of all pupils in school life.

b) Children's materials: multimedia, drawings, podcasts, videos, posters
Children shared tales belonging to their culture of origin and, on the basis of those narrative models, they wrote together a new, collective story based on heterogeneous elements representative of all cultures and languages through a process of meaning negotiation.
At the same time, they learned not only that each plot - or *fabula* - is composed by unique sequences of events involving its characters (or actors), but also that common symbolic, archetypical elements can be found in the deeper structure of the plot. In this way, children became aware of the "commonalities[3]" of different cultural expressions and learned to appreciate the social and human value of diversity in multicultural settings.

The main features of the project were constantly revised through the proactive feedback received from schools that took active part in it. In so doing, its macro-structure was improved and adapted to Italian schools' needs. At the end of each school year, all materials were digitalized and, in so doing, they could be shared on schools' websites in order to create a sense of online community and of co-construction of knowledge among all social "actors" involved in the project.

4. Conclusions

This article has shown the fundamental role of plurilingual and intercultural education for fostering social integration and cultural inclusion in multicultural classrooms as a two-way process.

A particular focus was given on the so-called intercultural communicative competence, that implies the necessity to develop both plurilingual and intercultural competence for fostering communication processes among people with a different cultural background.

The interrelated concept of "commonalities" as defined above played an important role during the development of the project, since it presumes the importance of the interaction with classmates from diverse cultural backgrounds and the development of reflective thinking according to personal worldviews and perception of the others.

The main activity was the creation of collective, pluricultural stories based on mixed elements (characters, settings, etc) from fairy tales of children's cultures of origin. Results showed that the particular, sensitive nature of this activity was able to enhance children's self-esteem and motivation for learning the language of schooling and the culture of the host country through the validation of their mother tongue.

In relation to the fundamental role played by teacher-pupil identity negotiation, this action-research project pointed out not only the fundamental role of teachers' awareness and behavior towards cultural and language diversity for nurturing the integration of all pupils, but also the importance of peer interactions in promoting mutual understanding and respect for otherness.

All in all, the use of action research played a fundamental role for upgrading the level of preparation of primary school teachers to act properly in multicultural classrooms.

At the same time, the implicit use of a whole-community approach to integration fostered the proactive participation of parents that spontaneously took part in the project sharing meaningful elements of their culture. In this way, families with migrant backgrounds - that often live in linguistic and cultural isolation - were involved in school life and were perceived as official members of local communities.

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[3] "With commonalities […] students are engaged in transformational self-reflection as they reexamine their own presuppositions and world view and make connections with the reflections of others" (Gómez 2014: 137)

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