Educating for empathy in order to promote the well-being of second-generation foreign minors

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This article provides a reflection on issues related to identity building by second-generation foreign minors in Italy, proposing an empathic approach as an education strategy for achieving a better standard of living. In fact, these minors, especially during adolescence, feel the great discomfort caused by dual cultural affiliation, which often subject them to the pressure of different incompatible and irreconcilable systems of values and beliefs. The use of the empathic approach to educational and training actions addressed to them represents therefore an educational strategy of particular importance because, on the one hand, it helps these children to open themselves to relationships with trust, on the other hand it encourages them to improve integration strategies to achieve real inclusion.

Keywords: education, identity, empathy, foreign minors, Italy

Introduction

The complexity of cultural and social processes determined by the current increase in the presence of foreign citizens on European territory had, in the last decade, a great impact on young generations of immigrants who struggle with processes of adaptation and social-cultural inclusion both when they arrive on European soil as teenagers or near adults, and when they arrive at an early age or are born to parents who are already resident (Second Generation Foreign Minors - SGFM). In this second case, in particular, they have to deal with issues related not only (or not mainly) to feeling "different" from their peers because of the somatic traits that characterize them; but also (and above all) with those arising from feeling "unequal" to their family of origin, from whose culture they tend to distance themselves especially in adolescence. In fact these minors, pressed by opposite messages stating that in the family it is not good to be Italian and in school (often) it is not good to be foreigners, also try to face with serenity the process of identity-building typical for their age, causing feelings of discomfort which, when they fail to be correctly processed and expressed, end up generating maladjustment or deviance.

What can be done?

My interest in the existential, cultural, social and educational condition of the SGFM was consolidated during my activity as Honorary Judge at the Juvenile Court of Bari (TM) which I have been carrying out since 2015 and during which, on several occasions, I was confronted with these minors, foreign in appearance but absolutely and profoundly Italian in their lifestyle and feelings of cultural belonging;

minors who, although well integrated with their peers at a social level and (apparently) calm during childhood, come to the attention of juvenile (civil or criminal) justice usually starting from the age of 13, because they have become either authors or victims of abusive behaviour at school (school bullying, physical aggression towards classmates or teachers) or in the family (where they often confront parents who are not very accommodating to their life choices and violent in the way they express this disappointment, to which they respond with matching violence or aggression).

In confronting Social Service representatives who deal with them, I find myself having to identify educational and judicial tools capable of bringing their behaviour back into legality, and above all capable of preventing such conduct in the future. As an educator, therefore, I ask myself; on which educational aspects should I focus my work in order to help them improve their existential condition? The present contribution intends to reflect, from a pedagogical perspective, upon this question.[1]

Problems of identity development in second generation foreign minors

In recent years, in Europe, the issue of SGFM is growing in importance and raises important questions, questioning the definition of social integration in the presence of immigrant populations now established for years.

Who are the SGFMs?

Under the label of SGFM, now established on an international level, reference is made to different populations: children born in the society receiving their immigrant parents (*second generation in the proper sense*) and children born abroad and arriving in Italy later (*second generation in the broad sense*). Within this second group, however, it is necessary to make a further distinction between those who arrived in Europe at an early or preschool age (and who follow a path of cultural and social adaptation very similar to that of second generations in the strict sense) and those who arrived in adolescence or at the age of majority.

In the context of social and political reflections on the subject of immigration, which represents today a central topic of television and electoral discussions, the category of SGFMs is least considered, in the erroneous common opinion that if a foreign child is born on European territory and has citizenship, he will automatically live a peaceful life, far from the problems of those who arrive later. That is not correct. In reality, the paucity of socio-cultural tools and forecasts proves unable to support these children in the process of building integration models capable of giving voice and expression to their *composite identity,* which is the result of an encounter between the two souls that constitute it - the biological soul (original) and the cultural soul (local). This creates important problems in their educational development.

For first-generation immigrants - those who arrive in Italy at the age of majority or as adults - welcoming interventions are provided (with all the regulatory limitations that the law ultimately imposes) offering forms of gradual insertion in society (REI, art. 31 TU, etc.) and enhancement of that *different culture* of which they are bearers and detractors; for the SGFM, no educational or social support is provided by law and these minors (later adults) are facing the process of internal fusion alone, finding their dual belonging to a unique social, cultural and existential plane difficult to bear. They are in fact measuring themselves against a double level of expectations: familial and social.

On the one hand, the family constitutes the primary context within which complex negotiations take place between the values and cultural traditions of their country of origin and their identity redefinition, determined by the welcoming country; here they must combine identity factors, rules and relations with the demands of a new life context. In general, the growth of these children is characterized by inclusion within the social and scholastic reality in which they live when their family is well integrated; but when parental integration is not satisfactory, children are confronted with the strong resistance of fathers or mothers who do not accept their child's adhesion to welcoming social norms. Often, when the culture of origin is very rigid, these minors undergo important acts of physical or moral violence from their own family, which interrupt not only their integration process but also any normal and peaceful process of emotional development.

On the other hand, there is society, which for children is represented above all by the world of school, their first and most important place of socialization. Here too, the level of well-being of SGFM minors depends on the people they are dealing with: when the social and cultural context of the class is open to diversity, they will be facilitated in their process of development and emotional and cultural growth; when either the class or the teachers are (even unknowingly or implicitly) not very welcoming, these minors will tend to live everyday life with malaise, having to divide their world into two: family life and social life.

In the first case, children succeed in achieving a perfect balance between their two different worlds, thus transforming their characteristic composite identity into an extraordinary resource of growth, and merging the two into a single world; in the latter case, on the other hand, they manifest forms of emotional distress characterized by low self-esteem, anger or frustration that often turn into maladjustment, rejection, aggression.[2] As an honorary judge, but above all as an educator, whenever I find myself in front of these minors I realize that pedagogy cannot remain indifferent and must intervene to support them

in building a positive self-image and a balanced and consolidated social identity.

So, how can one manage all this?

Promoting empathy for pedagogical *trans – formation*

From a social-pedagogical point of view, the condition of SGFM offers a privileged terrain and an unprecedented space for understanding current phenomena and dynamics related to the formation of social identity.

Theorists of social identity[3] have always linked their reflections to the analysis of intergroup relations, stereotypes and prejudice. In the course of their development, with the increase in migratory phenomena of various types and also with the spread of the internet and technologies that have greatly shortened distances, theories of social identity have had to deal with profound social changes that affect the diversified composition of social groups within the same nation, the multiplication of subgroups in a social structure, the development of multiple appurtenances and horizontal comparisons between distinct groups, the ever increasing complexity and fluidity of social categorization systems.[4] In these new social conditions, the mere opposition between personal identity and social identity now seems insufficient to describe the complex web of relationships that each subject develops within his reality, while the social transformations underway highlight conditions in which it is increasingly necessary to simultaneously hold multiple forms of self-representation and multiple levels of self-other comparison, as happens for the SGFM.

Classical theoretical models have therefore gradually widened their horizons in the awareness that today, in our society, each subject develops multiple selves intersected with each other, and that their different self-representations can be simultaneously active and salient, instead of mutually exclusive. In this case we can speak of multiple identities.

In this direction, a promising field of pedagogical-social research is opening today, examining the way in which multiple identities reconcile themselves by working in unison; and the way in which people manage the growing complexity of their internal world and their relationships, remaining effectively connected to each other without denying any of the parties involved.[5]

This line of reflection which concerns the identity construction of every subject living in current reality, and in particular the condition of today's adolescents, is precisely the *trans-formative pedagogy* within which we should insert the process of identity formation of the SGFM, who grow up trying to make use of the encounter between the two souls which constitute them.

In order to be implemented, such a perspective calls into question a multiplicity of psycho-social phenomena including *empathy* and the *ability to assume multiple perspectives*.

What is all this about? How is empathy defined pedagogically?

Empathy, as Stein states, means placing oneself near the other,[6] thinking with the heart,[7] turning towards the other with receptive attention in order to find and hypothesize the threads with which this other weaves life - but it does not mean ontological fusion, becoming one with the other. Therefore, as Mortari comprehensively states[8] it is the ability to feel the other. In fact, understanding does not take place in an emotionally neutral attitude, but always requires an emotionally situated attitude.[9] In its intensive form, understanding means being capable of empathy, seen as the ability of grasping extraneous lived experience and presentifying the experience of another that "is announced in me".[10] Understanding therefore means emotional sharing that becomes "mature" when the partnership draws on the personal world of the other, seen and understood just like "another". It is not so much a spontaneous gift but demands, as its condition of possibility, a maturation of the subject's psychic activity spheres: an intellectual maturation, in the sense of a contemplating intelligence; a pro-social maturation, capable of evolving into a stable ethical attitude; the acquisition of relational and communicative skills, which provide the subject with habitual attendance of the personal world of the other.[11]

Being a qualitative acquisition at the end of training activity, *mature empathy* is the object of reflection of pedagogy in a proper and adequate sense. Empathy, in fact, includes instances that, in hindsight, are all constitutive of authentic education. The first is truthful intentionality: mature empathy means letting be or wanting to see the other for what he is, in his otherness; this intentionality makes empathy a dianoetic virtue and the opposite of a projective and possessive attitude.[12] The second is ethical intentionality: considering and esteeming the other as good and committing to promoting this good, supporting the original process by which he can reach a certain fulfilment, according to personal potential. Seeing the other, one can say, for what he is, but also for what he can be, and perhaps what he wants to be / must be.[13] This intentionality, obviously, makes empathy an ethical virtue. The third is community intentionality, which sees and intends the other as an essential presence or personal reality, existentially irreplaceable. This underlines the fact that there is a revelation of the self to itself that would not happen without the gashes that the other can open in his personal world - what poets, philosophers, religious men call the secret of the heart. The person appears here as an event which in order to be needs to be recognized in being, freely receiving the gift of self-knowledge

from the initiative of another. This intentionality makes empathy a spiritual virtue, the "cause" but also the "effect" of a process of educational growth oriented towards the well-being of the person and the prevention or overcoming of situations of existential distress due to the lack of recognition of one's self.[14]

Mature empathy, in short, is the authentic form of empathy: it holds together the truthful, ethical and spiritual act present in every authentic educational action, and at the same time it manifests the very essence of education, based on relationships. In fact, the empathic good conscience sees the personal profile of the other thanks to an intuition of his personal world that, despite "shadowing", manifests itself, gives itself and is said to be able to coincide, at least for a moment, with it and share it, basically love it. Therefore, with regard to this formative virtue, we can simply speak of the *empathic gaze*.

Educating for the "empathic gaze" allows subjects to accept different perspectives, manage multiple affiliations and improve their own interrelation strategies by developing deep understanding.[15] In this sense, pedagogically understood *mature empathy* represents a fundamental resource for promoting pro-social behaviour and improving communication skills, eliminating relational discomfort and promoting individual and collective well-being in our society, both in normal contexts and in intercultural contexts.

Focusing on the development of empathy can be an important educational resource for SGFMs, so much so that it is also considered a precious protective factor in the process of social integration, because it is able to promote greater emotional flexibility and greater availability to others by opening up the road to a positive management of one's composite identity and limiting problems related to less functional characteristics. Implementing a *pedagogy of empathy* towards the SGFM, an education oriented towards deep understanding and acceptance of the other and the recognition of instances in which the other is a carrier, can therefore not only prevent and limit the uneasy condition of these minors, but also make them actors of the future social and cultural progress of our country. They will, in fact, be able to empathically understand the concerns of their native peers who do not accept them, and help them to open up to others inside a pedagogical dimension.

But is this enough to ensure their inclusion and well-being? Certainly not. Forming identities in an empathic perspective should become the main object of teaching in all schools, for all children, so that they become adults capable to accept all differences, not only those of race but also those of gender, religion, etc.

Only in this way can we think of a possible future in which the (biological and familial-cultural) differences of the SGFM become valuable resources capable of promoting the flourishing of multidimensional, inclusive identities in an atmosphere of well-being.

Conclusions

Considering SGFMs as resources in the current process of social development in our country is fundamental, and achieves a twofold objective: first, recognizing a social role for these young people and welcoming them in a truly inclusive way, avoiding dangerous marginalization and discrimination that cause discomfort and maladjustment; secondly, overcoming the question of their dual origin (biological and native) and transforming it into a point of strength able to imbue society with an *empathic inclusion* in a trans-formative perspective. A *trans-formation* intended as construction of new shared values and a renewal of general social well-being.[16]

Notes:

1. In this case the minor will automatically acquire Italian citizenship if one parent is an Italian citizen; otherwise he will be able to acquire it at the request of the interested party only if he or she demands it within one year from becoming eighteen, and only if s/he has resided from birth, legally and without interruption, in Italy (art. 4.2 Law no. 91/1992). If, on the other hand, he was born abroad but was regularly resident in Italy for at least 10 years, the foreigner may apply for citizenship pursuant to art. 9 of same law. In this case, however, the Ministry does not operate a mere legitimacy check, as in the previous case, but enjoys a wide margin of discretion in accepting or rejecting the request
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