

INCLUSION IN ITALIAN SCHOOL: MUTUAL PERCEPTION OF ITALIAN AND FOREIGN STUDENTS

Maurizio Norcia^a, Antonella Rissotto^a

^a Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies – National Research Council
Corresponding author: maurizio.norcia@istc.cnr.it

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Abstract: This article is about dynamics of inclusion and reciprocal perception among Italian and foreign students, a particularly relevant topic in Italy. In Italy, in fact, proportion of foreign students has increased much in last 15 years, from 0,7% to 7,9% of the total number of students.

The increased presence of migrant students in the schools of our country has strongly raised the issue of the importance of observing and studying the coexistence of Italian and foreigners, mainly from social and psychological points of view. The study focuses on psychology of coexistence, analyzing perceptions owned by Italian and foreign students about mutual presence: is students' estimate of number of students from other Countries (Italy included) correct? Which characteristics correlate with wrong estimates (by shortcoming or excess)?

The context in which the research has been carried out was the Junior High School, both because School is a sort of laboratory for studying dynamics of coexistence inasmuch it represents a well-defined and scaled-down setting compared to social context as a whole and because this way it is possible to prevent since later, in the education, conflicts tend to emerge.

Keywords: Inclusion, perception of diversity, prejudice

INTRODUCTION

Immigration in Italy appears to be as a quite recent phenomenon, which substantially began in the early Seventies, and became a peculiar dynamic of Italian demography in the early years of the twenty-first century. According to Eurostat [1], in 2012 Italy was the third European Country as for foreign residents, with 4.8 million people, after Germany (7.4 million) and Spain (5.6 million) along with the United Kingdom (4.8 million). Considering percentage, Italy is placed in eleventh place in Europe.

According to ISTAT, foreign residents in Italy on 31 December 2013 is 4,387,721, 335 thousands more than the previous year (+7.9 %). Women have increased more than men (9,09% vs 6,67%); furthermore considerable differences concerning the distribution of immigrants in the different areas of

Italy have emerged: 35% of immigrants reside in the North-west, 26,3% in the North-east, 25,2% in the Center and 13,5% in the South. Also increases differed depending on the area: in the North the increase was 7.2%; in the Center, 9%; 12% in the South (2013 compared to 2012).

Data from ISTAT (2012) [2] also show that the majority of immigrants in Italy was from Romania (1,072,342) and that an increase of migrants from Central and Eastern Europe has occurred: Moldova, the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Bulgaria. Also the number of people from Asian countries such as India (+14.3%), Bangladesh (+11.5%), the Philippines (+8.6%) and Sri Lanka (+7,6%) have increased.

The increased presence of immigrants in our Country in the last years has strongly raised the issue of the reciprocal representations of "foreigner" with the aim of understanding the conditions that make coexistence a positive experience or a conflicting one. In fact, sharing the same living space per se is not sufficient to promote a real cultural inclusion. Studies conducted both in Italy and in other Countries [2,3] seem to agree that the contact between residents and migrants in itself is not sufficient to reduce the level of stereotype that leads to cultural bias. For this reason, having information about the mutual perception owned by Italians and foreigners in the contexts of coexistence seems to be particularly important.

Research that Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies has carried out in Italy mainly directed at better knowing dynamics of coexistence establishing among students in Junior High School. In particular system of mutual representations was observed with the aim of collecting information about conditions which can promote a correct perception.

Research group has chosen, as setting of this study, Junior High School. This choice was taken for three main reasons.

First, the presence of migrant students in Italian schools is very relevant and has greatly increased in the last 15 years [5]: since the academic year 1996/1997 to 2010/2011 foreign students have grown since 59.389 (0,7% of the whole number of students) to 711.046 (7,9% of total).

Second, Junior High School has a strategic role in studying multiculturalism: this happens because in Italy it is preceded by a level of schooling (Primary School) in which there are very few conflicts among different ethnic groups; it is, on the other hand, followed by a level of education (High School) in which these kinds of conflicts tend to emerge. Detailed information on relational dynamics experienced by students surely allow to better understand and thus to prevent face-offs.

Lastly, School is a sort of laboratory for studying dynamics of coexistence inasmuch it represents a well-defined and scaled-down setting compared to social context as a whole.

RESEARCH

Objectives

Main objective of the study presented in the following pages was understanding the dynamics of coexistence that are established in a context such as the Junior High School. In particular, researcher intended to observe the mutual perception and representations of Italian students and migrant students, in order to acquire information on those conditions that can promote inclusion, or, on the contrary, conflict and division.

Method

Sample

Taking into account the premises of the study – acquire information about multicultural coexistence –

Junior High Schools with higher presence of stranger students (more than 20%) were selected. On the whole, 11 Junior High Schools were involved in the research.

Furthermore, schools were selected considering their territorial position in order to guarantee good levels of geographic, social, cultural and demographic heterogeneity. It has been also considered their position: schools located in cities, towns and small villages have been included.

The questionnaire

To collect data, a structured questionnaire has been built. It included questions about school and family context, about representation of stranger and of inter-ethnic relationships, relational scholastic and extra-scholastic contexts (see Table 1).

During building of the questionnaire, researchers gave special attention to the cognitive complexity of the tool, to the understandability of its questions and of modalities of response. It has seemed necessary, considering the characteristics of the sample: the age of the participants and their nationality (and the resulting mastery of Italian language). Also control questions have been used in order to cope with social desirability bias. A pretest involving 70 students was also made with the aim of testing the understandability of phenomenon considered.

Table 1: Categories of questionnaire

Themes	Dimensions
▪ School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Composition of classes ▪ Number of strangers
▪ Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Composition ▪ Education level ▪ Family's occupational level
• Representation of stranger in relational scholastic and extra scholastic contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cognitive perception ▪ Emotional reaction
▪ Relational extra scholastic context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Group of peers ▪ Activities with peers ▪ Interactions with peers
▪ Personal data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sex ▪ Age ▪ Nationality

Perceptual Coherence Index (PCI)

With the aim of analyzing the coherence between the perception of the presence of foreigners owned by the respondent and the real presence, a three-level index combining these two aspects has been built (see Fig. 1): 1) Level "C", for consistency between what is perceived by the respondent and the real data; 2) Level "L", if the person owns a lower perception than the actual situation; 3) Level "G", if the respondent's assessment is greater than the real data.

	Real data		
	Low	Mid	High
	Perception of presence of foreigners	C	L
	Mid	C	L
	High	G	C

Figure 1: Building of Perceptual Coherence Index

Analyses

“How many strangers?”

Some items of the questionnaire were aimed at understanding the perception of strangers owned by pupils, referring to the classroom, the school or the city (metropolis, town or small village).

In addition to subjective information, regarding the perception owned by students, also more objective data were acquired, such as the real number of foreigners in the schools.

The classes involved for each school were those with the highest number of foreign students. That being stated, the real presence of foreign students was evaluated by calculating, for each class, the average number of non-Italian students. The mean was 6 students per class (with a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 12 students per class). The percentage of migrant students ranged in classes from 10% to 75%, whereas in different schools, from 6.8% to 20.7% and in different locations (metropolis, town or small village) from 4.5% to 15%.

Perception of presence of foreigners and feelings

Table 2 shows that the students owning negative feelings towards other students of different nationalities perceive a greater presence of foreigners; in contrast, those who express positive feelings show a lower perception of their presence.

Table 2: Perception of presence of foreigners and feelings

		“Foreigner students cause feelings...to me”			X ²	Sig.	
		Negative	Neutral	Positive			
Perception of presence of strangers: “Foreign students are....”	“none”	N	0	1	3	6,263	0,394
	Δ % ¹		-100	-45	66		
	“a few”	N	27	145	160		
	Δ %		-10	-5	7		
	“some”	N	25	121	112		
	Δ %		7	2	-4		
	“many”	N	8	37	24		
	Δ %		28	17	-23		

PCI crossed with nationality of respondents

Table 3: PCI * nationality of respondents

		Nationality		X ²	Sig.	
		Italian	Non-Italian			
Perceptual Coherence Index	Lower than facts	N	96	51	7,513	0,023
		Δ %	-12	33		
	Correct	N	119	40		
		Δ %	1	-4		
	Greater than facts	N	278	83		
		Δ %	4	-12		

Table 3 shows outcomes of the crossing between the Perceptual Coherence Index and nationality. It shows how students of foreign nationality have more frequently (compared to what one would expect) a lower perception than

¹ Δ %: variance (percentage) between observed frequency and expected frequency.

reality; Italian students, on the other hand, seem to have more frequently a greater perception than reality or consistent with it.

PCI crossed with sex of respondents

Table 4: PCI * sex of respondents

		Sex		X ²	Sig.	
		Male	Female			
Perceptual Coherence Index	Lower than facts	N	76	71	2,361	0,307
		Δ %	0	0		
	Correct	N	75	85		
		Δ %	10	-10		
	Greater than facts	N	195	165		
		Δ %	4	-5		

Considering sex differences, it emerges that female respondents own more frequently (than expected) a perception coherent with facts. The male students, on the other hand, are more numerous among those who have a greater perception than real situation.

PCI crossed with age of respondents

Table 5: PCI * age of respondents

		Age (years)			X ²	Sig.	
		< 13	13	> 13			
Perceptual Coherence Index	Lower than facts	N	86	80	19	11,667	0,020
		Δ %	-8	11	-2		
	Correct	N	74	66	26		
		Δ %	-12	2	49		
	Greater than facts	N	178	114	25		
		Δ %	11	-8	-25		

Considering age, data show that it seems to be negatively correlated with perceptions inconsistent with facts: increasing age, in fact, the number of those who have a greater or lower perception than facts significantly decreases ($p = .020$). On the contrary, as the age of the respondents increases, also the number of people owning a correct perception of quantity of foreigners increases.

PCI crossed with location of the school

Data show that mainly students from Metropolis or towns own a perception greater than actual facts; in small villages, where the *contact* is less mediated, perception is lower than reality.

Table 6: PCI * location of the school

		Location of school		X ²	Sig.	
		Metropolis/town	Small village			
Perceptual Coherence Index	Lower than facts	N	67	80	6,687	0,035
		Δ %	-17	20		
	Correct	N	95	65		
		Δ %	9	-10		
	Greater than facts	N	203	158		
		Δ %	3	-4		

Outcomes seem to be consistent with several studies in social psychology which shine a light on the way closeness (in spatial terms) strongly influences building of positive relations [6].

PCI crossed with homo/heterogeneity as for sex, nationality and religion of groups**Table 7:** PCI * homo/heterogeneity as for sex, nationality and religion of joined groups

Composition of joined groups as for...		Perceptual Coherence Index			X ²	Sig.	
		Lower than facts	Correct	Greater than facts			
Sex	Homogeneous	N	37	28	92	2,578	0,276
		Δ %	5	-20	6		
	Heterogeneous	N	85	93	207		
		Δ %	-2	8	-3		
Nationality	Homogeneous	N	88	96	250	3,402	0,182
		Δ %	1	-6	2		
	Heterogeneous	N	11	20	30		
		Δ %	-10	40	-13		
Religion	Homogeneous	N	102	106	258	9,067	0,011
		Δ %	-3	-7	4		
	Heterogeneous	N	18	24	24		
		Δ %	21	49	-31		

Data (see Table 7) seem to show that respondents joining heterogeneous groups as for sex, nationality and religion more frequently own a perception consistent with reality. Students, on the other hand, who join more homogeneous groups tend to have a wrong perception, by shortcoming or excess. Once again, hence, it emerges that hanging out with people different as for specific characteristics improves coherence of perception with facts.

PCI crossed with presence of foreign students in the class**Table 8:** PCI * presence of foreign students in the class

		% of foreign students in the class			X ²	Sig.	
		Low (<25%)	Mid (>25% & <33%)	High (>33%)			
Perceptual Coherence Index	Lower than facts	N	21	65	61	136,280	0,000
		Δ %	-65	41	49		
	Correct	N	31	63	66		
		Δ %	-52	25	48		
	Greater than facts	N	220	82	59		
		Δ %	50	-28	-41		

From Table 8 it emerges that as the proportion of foreign students increases, also increase respondents owning a perception coherent or lower than facts; on the other hand, the number of people having a perception greater than reality.

CONCLUSIONS

The perceived presence of foreigners increases with the decrease of the direct knowledge of the context. When the frame of reference is their class, 51% of teens surveyed believed that the presence of foreign students is low; those that, on the contrary, consider it high or very high respectively constitute 39% and 10% of students. Once school is taken into account, overview changes: 5% of respondents reports a *low* presence of foreign students in their school, whereas 44% and 52% think the presence is – respectively – high or very high. If you then consider the town/city as a more extended context of reference, the percentage of students who believe that the presence of foreign students is low, drops to 3%; the percentage of those who think that this presence is

high or very high change significantly, increasing respectively to 14% and 83%.

This information, together with outcomes regarding location of the school considered, composition of groups attended and proportion of foreign students in classes (see above Tables 6, 7, 8), highlight the centrality of subjectively experiencing a given context in the development of an accurate perception of the presence/number of people from other nationalities, confirming the role of the *Contact* as a facilitator of a reduction of stereotypes. *Contact*, studied by various scholars [2,6,7,8], has specific characteristics and specific behaviors that can help or hinder its effectiveness: creating multicultural and cooperative contexts (Allport names these “colour blindness”) and situations of cooperation within the group or among groups; one of the most important outcomes of this study, in fact, can be summed up by

the sentence *cohabitation without interaction*: within the class the foreign student has its space and place but the interaction is weak; once outside the school, this lack increases in relation to other social circles, such as circle of peers, because it faces with difficulty of relating with diversity. The *Contact* should also support the equality of status through, for example, social norms that sustain tolerance, promoting knowledge on social groups and on different historical backgrounds [9].

In summary, this *action-research* has had two main objectives: the first aimed at acquiring knowledge (*research*) into the field, and not through the media. Together, promote inclusion (*action*) within a so important context for youth's cultural and civil development. School, in fact, is a basin in which knowledge and socialization are intertwined with the aim of promoting the development of those who will become tomorrow's adults.

Second, another important outcome of this study is being able to acquire information not only on the positive aspects of the interaction with each other, but also on the difficulty to relate with those who are culturally different from us. It is not always possible to acquire information on what people, in this case teenagers, think, especially when the answers may be affected by the social desirability bias. The survey seems to have caught a *situation of transition*, where *de facto* we cannot speak of full integration: next to attitudes positive towards multiculturalism, seem to emerge "gray areas" or even negative attitudes which should be something to meditate on. This would allow to identify recommendation for the promotion of multiculturalism, and, this way, become the starting point for future research and interventions.

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