TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR A DEMOCRACY AND INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM.CHALLENGES FOR TEACHER PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY[10]

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Abstract: *Within the European debate on quality education for all, and along with the willingness to implement the Rights of Children, the paper will examine how diversities – which may relate to immigration status, disability, ethnicity, culture and social class – can challenge teachers' identity and class context in order to enhance the diversity of each student as a resource. The paper will analyse data gathered during an action-research project, which has been developed in so-called high-complexity classrooms in Primary schools, with the aim of investigating the process of implementing teaching strategies for inclusive pedagogy. It will discuss how this process engages teachers in a dynamics between pitfalls and creativity as well as between school cultural barriers and educational opportunities. This leads to transform their professional identity, by developing a deep reflexivity in their own contexts of practice and strengthening their competence to support democracy and inclusive classrooms.*

Keywords: *teacher professional identity; inclusive pedagogy; diversities; heterogeneous context; democracy;*

1. Introduction: towards teaching and learning 2030

The rapid changes in globalization, increased migration, growing diversity and technological advances require people to be well prepared to meet the demands of the global economy and participate successfully in a culture of democracy in our complex societies (Council of Europe, 2016; European Commission, 2018). Education is internationally recognized to play a key role in this process of change, by providing learners with the competences for a life to act as democratic citizens. The *Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030* (UN, 2015) highlights that the main scope of the school is to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (Goal 4). This means improving education through greater access and equity for all learners, as well as the creation of safer and democratic learning contexts. Indeed, inclusive education is defined as the "process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners". It leads to overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation and achievement of all students, where the term *all* embraces the existing *diversities* in class, "which may relate to their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, culture, religion, mental and physical ability, class, and immigration status" (Unesco, 2017, p. 7). This principle comes along with the willingness to implement the Right of Children (UN, 1989), according to which all children have the same right to develop their potential in all situations and at all times, regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, disability or other status. This principle of non-discrimination has been asserted in other important international treaties and texts, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (art. 26, 1948), the UN Convention

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[10] This contribution, fully shared by the two authors, was drawn up as follows: paragraphs 1, 3, 5 by Isabella Pescarmona and paragraphs 2, 4 and References by Alessia Cinotti.

on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994), and the UN Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960). These aim at ensuring that all learners are valued and engaged equally, and devote special attention to those who have traditionally been excluded from educational opportunities. In Italy, the educational guidelines have receipted the challenges of promoting more inclusive learning strategies at school over the last decades. Equality of educational opportunity for all has been affirmed since the Italian Constitution (art. 3, art. 33-34, 1948), and it has been deployed in many institutional documents during the years[11].

Within this educational tradition, which strives for inclusion in increasing heterogeneous classes, and according to the current European educational debate, teachers are recognized as key agents in achieving the provision of quality education.The right to education cannot be fulfilled without trained and qualified teachers. While teachers are crucial to the quality Agenda in Europe and in Italy, there is still a failure to engage more broadly with teaching and learning in heterogeneous classrooms. What knowledge and skills teachers should acquire in order to effectively achieve and ensure inclusive and quality education for all has to debate within the context where teachers work everyday.

The paper would like to investigate how teachers respond to the challenge of creating an inclusive democracy classroom, by implementing different strategies to enhance the diversity of each student in the learning process. Furthermore, it will examine in which terms this leads to transform their professional identity.

2. Inclusive and equitable pedagogy for heterogeneous classrooms

Since the 1990s, international scientific and political debate has promoted the concept of "inclusion", in which access and participation of *all* children are considered a priority, guaranteeing *equality of opportunity, access and retention in integrated setting*, through a particular attention to all the different kinds of diversity(UNESCO, 1994). Schools cover a key role in facilitating both the inclusion processes and the personalization of learning, by providing teachers both educational answers and teaching methods, which are designed to reach out to diverse learners. Indeed, high-complexity classrooms can no longer read as an emergency, but need to be faced more structurally through an *inclusive pedagogy*. This is closely linked to the creation of a supportive learning environment that allows each learner to be fully considered and feel equally valued (Nordlund, 2003). However, such a learning ideal may raise some resistances for teachers that strive for achieving and maintaining acceptable outcomes in heterogeneous classes.

This issue has led to the concept of *inclusive approach*. As Florian (2015) stated "the inclusive approach is predicated on a shift in pedagogical thinking away from conventional approaches that work for most learners existing alongside something additional or different for those (some) who experience difficulties, towards one that involves providing rich learning opportunities that are sufficiently made available for everyone, so that all learners are able to participate in classroom life" (p.11). In other words, inclusion aims to transform the traditional educational perspective, which is typically based on a "specialised answer to special needs", into an "ordinary answer to the needs of all". Instead of many teachers believe that they need *specialized* strategies to reach all students, it can be more beneficial to know that teachers can better support the learners by *differentiating instruction* through *multiple* strategies (Tomlinson, 2004; d'Alonzo, 2017).

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[11]The main ones are: Law 104/1992 (*"Legge-quadro per l'assistenza, l'integrazione sociale e i diritti delle persone handicappate*) that promotes integration of persons with disabilities into school;"La via italiana per la scuola interculturale e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri" (MPI, 2007), which encourages the development of intercultural education and strategies in multicultural classrooms; and "Indicazioni Nazionali per il curriculum" that defines the school a learning community where a global and pluralistic citizenship is nurtured (Miur, 2012).

Differentiating instruction is an approach to teaching in which teachers actively *plan* for student's differences *a priori,* by providing them with more options, so that each student can learn better (Valiandes & Neophytou, 2018). It does not make much sense to present information in a monodimensional way and expect every student to learn effectively. Teachers should use multiple strategies to make sure that all students are involved in the information being taught. They may respond to the variety of students' needs in the classroom, by modifying the *content* (what is being taught), the *process* (how it is taught), the *final product* (how students can demonstrate their learning), and *planning/designing* the learning environment (how the classroom "feels" and how the class works together). It means to design contents and environments that can be effective and usable to the greatest extent possible of students, regardless their cultural background, learning style or abilities (Algozzine & Anderson, 2007).

Hence, teachers need to adopt many strategies of valuing diversity, such as: presenting ideas thought both auditory and visual means; using reading materials at varying readability levels; including materials written or created by people of different backgrounds and/or perspectives (content); working in small group, varying individual and group activities; varying the length of time a student may take to complete a task (process); allowing students to work alone or in small groups on their final products; using rubrics assessment; varying the type of final test (final product).

In terms of rights, nowadays pursuing the route of equality and diversity by adopting *differentiating instruction* is one of the main challenges to ensure a quality education (Heacox, 2012).

3. Research Context and Methodology

This study aims to examine the teachers' perspective, while they are implementing strategies to deal with students' *diversities*. In order to highlight teachers' beliefs, values and practice in the context of their own work environment, an action-research case study has been carried out (Sagor, 2000). The research project has been developed in so-called high-complexity classrooms[12] in 6 Primary schools in the municipality of Bologna (Italy), by involving a reference group of 24 teachers of different subjects. It is designed on these main phases: (1) a preliminary exploration of teachers' needs and analysis of their problems; (2) a teacher training course[13] on *inclusive pedagogy* and *differentiating instruction*; (3) a formulation of multidimensional actions and their implementation in teachers' classes[14]; (4) a follow-up and a critical evaluation of the process.

During the research phases, a qualitative methodology is adopted to gather and analyse data (cfr. Miles & Huberman, 1994; Neumam, 1997). The main data collection tools that are used are in-depth interviews with teachers. These aim to explore:

How teachers define the issues of diversity in class, and which problems they identify (phase 1). The main questions were: *"What does diversity mean for you?"*, *"What major*

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[12] As a nowadays common situation in Italy, these classrooms consisted of a large number of pupils, both males and females, including pupils with disability or learning diseases, pupils in situation of socio-economic disadvantage, and pupils coming from migrant families.

[13] The training course consisted of 28 hours lessons, which were conducted by University Professors and some in-service school teachers. It involved participants through an active methodology in order to enhance the dialogue between theory and praxis. The main contents provided were: a modern framework of inclusive and democracy pedagogy, the related student-centred teaching strategies, and the principles of differentiating instruction for Primary school.

[14] The teachers were required to implement at least one of the inclusive and democracy strategies that they have learnt during the teaching training course, by analyzing and adapting it to their own classes. This phase lasted almost two months.

challenges and problems do you face while working in an high-complexity classroom every day?", and "*How do you usually address the different learning needs of your students?*";

Which difficulties and solutions they encountered in implementing new inclusive and democratic teaching strategies, and how they redefine their role in class (phase 4). The main questions consisted of "*What teaching/learning strategies did you try out for making students participate, after the training course?*", "*Could you give an example of how have you developed an inclusive strategy in your class?*", "*What changes did you recognize (if any)?*", and "*In which terms did this process contribute to re-think your teacher's role in class?*".

All the interviews have been transcribed and inductively analysed by identifying patterns, labelling themes, and developing category systems (cfr. Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Tominimize the invalidity of the research, the researchers provided the participants with transcripts of their interview so that they could revise them, and be involved in a continuous professional development. Indeed, the final aim of action-research might be to support teachers to tailor teaching and learning to their students in their educational settings, through a participatory and democratic process.

4. Findings

Although *inclusive approach* has helped to ensure a growing attention to *all the different kinds of diversity* in schools, this approach is not significant in terms of practices. By improving accessibility and learning conditions for*all*, the project has contributed to improving rich learning opportunities in so-called high-complexity classrooms.From pedagogical point of view, the actions carried out during this project are in line with the need of re-organization of school to cater for disadvantages or disabilities in order to achieve "acceptable level of learning" and increase support to teaching-learning processes.

The outcomes of the phase 1 show that teachers tend to define *diversity* as a very controversial topic. A large group of teachers considers "*heterogeneous classrooms*" a very stressful experience, particularly concerning some teaching subject areas (e.g. Maths and Italian language). Conversely, a small group says that this kind of complex situation is an "*occasion*" that the majority of teachers can tackle through a gradual and careful "*accompaniment*" and support. Although they perceive diversity as a resource, they have great difficulty in meeting the various needs of their students. During in depth-interviews, many teachers describe these difficulties in terms of "*obstacle*", which hamper a "real" implementation of an inclusive approach in their classroom. The main ones concern: a) teachers' beliefs and prejudices that constitute barriers to education ("*I think that students from certain group are really weak*" or "*have high abilities in particular subject areas*"); b) lack of resources allocated to the implementation of initiatives ("*it would like to do more, but school is poor, we do not have economic resources to do better*"); c) lack of knowledge on inclusive approach ("*I need more training opportunity*"); d) lack of time ("*I do not have time ... we are always under pressure*); e) lack of a coordination among all classroom teachers ("*I feel isolated*"; "*I would like to do more, but I need the support of my colleagues*").Indeed, the majority of teachers involved in the research tend to adopt a teaching method based on the repeated reading of the text, accompanied by the underlining,and a finaloral presentation of the key concepts to the students. To simply, teachers tend to present information in a single way.

Based on an initial screening of teachers needs in these educational situations, one of the objectives of the research was to promote the *inclusive pedagogy* and the*differentiating instruction* (phase 2). Thus, a joint experimentation among classroom teachers were implementing in order to create an "inclusive framework", which led teachers to develop a role of responsibility in becoming an "intermediary" between "students" and "learning

objectives" (phase 3). The data collected by monitoring the teaching actions in phase 3 demonstrates an increasing impact of the training course on teachers' action. The objectives are partly achieved and further, in some cases, deep changes in teaching practices are recorded. During the final interviews (phase 4), some teachers state they have introduced in their everyday teaching some new strategies such as, presenting ideas thought both auditory and visual means, varying the length of time a student may take to complete a task, allowing students to work alone or in small groups on their final products, and varying the type of final test. Concerning the impact of these strategies, a group of teachers state, "*At first, I was not comfortable with this kind of lesson. It was not easy to introduce 'something new' in my teaching style*". Another group complain about the effort in planning each lesson for diverse students' learning needs. But, at the end, a large group of them affirm, "*I'm so relief! I realized I can manage successfully a complex class situation*". Furthermore, another group recognize the power of collaboration with their colleagues for breaking the isolation they perceived at school and sharing common problems as well as a wider range of solutions. This leads them to develop new skills, such as planning *a priori* and observing the class in a different way.

Not only does the data gathered highlight how the project provided teachers with the possibility to become more familiar with the *differentiating instruction*. Above all, it shows that this action-research was an opportunity for them to think about their own *professional identity*, in relation to difficulties, motivations, beliefs, prejudices. For example, a teacher affirms, "*Thanks to this experience, I found the courage to tell to myself that sometimes I feel ineffective and I thought some students were 'inapproachable'. But now, I realized I have the power to act*". Finally, a large group of teachers stated that this project allowed them to reflect on their own *know-how*, strengthen their knowledge of new teaching methods and strategies, and nurture equal teaching processes to improve the participation and learning achievements of their students.

5. Conclusion

Research findings allow to gain a deep qualitative interpretation of the process, which highlights some positive aspects and results, but nevertheless also a number of concerns and challenges for these teachers. The study shows that their professional development is related not to the embedding of new methods and techniques in the usual way of teaching, but to the development of a new way of looking at their everyday practice and at their role in class. The research helps these teachers strengthen their competences and skills to support a more different and inclusive learning process, and considering the class context and organization part of the problem – as it could work as an obstacle or a resource in making the change possible. Properly by tackling challenges, which arise from both the pre-existent way of teaching and school cultural context, these teachers recognize themselves *active agents of change*, and developed a deep multifaceted and reflective professional identity. Thus, participating in action-research leads them to feel empowered and improve quality in education in their own high-complexity classrooms.

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