

# Intercultural practices in group settings. Inclusion in territorial education, between action research and scientific supervision

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From a pedagogical perspective, the work deals with the relationship between territorial education and group settings with adolescents. Some elements of a project (In Gioco Con Arte, created with the contribution of the Department for Family Policies in the Reggio Emilia area) will be discussed, and several aspects relating to the scientific supervision of the project will be reported. In particular, the contribution will address the intercultural variables within educational groups, as emerged in the research-action work conducted from January to November 2022. We'll discuss the relationship between them and the concept of "identity" as proposed to students during the Teaching of Inter-cultural Pedagogy, in the A.Y. 2021/2022, at the Department of Education and Humanities of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. In this sense, we will try to draw a common thread between research and academic teaching, highlighting the relationship between scientific supervision and its feedback in the academic field, through an intersectional perspective via the use, in the context of intercultural pedagogy, of the concepts of "interpellation", "stigma", "ghost of the foreign body", "double absence" and "skin-ego".

Keywords: territorial education, intercultural pedagogy, identity, action re-search, critical pedagogy.

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## Introduction

This paper<sup>1</sup> deals with the intersection between an experience of territorial education with adolescents, and the Academic Teaching of Intercultural Pedagogy (in the A.Y. 2021/2022) at the Department of Education and Humanities of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. In this sense, the purpose of our argumentation is to highlight the link between the intercultural variables within group-centered (Dozza, 2000), territorial projects, and its theoretical elaboration with “in-training” students.

The project we will draw upon is *In Gioco Con Arte (At Play With Art)*, a multi-disciplinary, pedagogically-related frame, organized with the contribution of the Department for Family Policies (Dipartimento per le Politiche della Famiglia, Italy), and set in the Reggio Emilia area<sup>2</sup>.

Before we can zoom into the first concepts of our argumentation, notice that the project has been laid out in a time-frame of ten months, in 2022, and involved two distinct districts of the city.

The first one, *Foscatto*, is well-known in the area for its distinguished, circumscribed perimeter, laying out the possibility for a *neighborhood-re-*

<sup>1</sup> The contribution is the result of a collaborative effort. The authors shared the structure of the entire article and the bibliography. Alessandro D'Antone is the author of paragraphs 1 (Introduction) and 5. Lavinia Bianchi is the author of paragraphs 2, 3, and 4.

<sup>2</sup> The project partners are reported below: Coop. Soc. Progetto Crescere; Coop. Soc. Pangea; Coop. Soc. Madre Teresa; APS K-LabAB; ACER-Azienda casa Emilia Romagna (Reggio Emilia); Consorzio Oscar Romero; Società consortile a R.L. La polveriera; Consorzio Winner mestieri E.R.; Servizi Sociali e Assessorato alla Cultura del Comune di Reggio Emilia.

*lated* pedagogical intervention: on the one hand, its architecture provided a noticeable lack of communication with the outside, producing the conditions for a rather detectable isolation from the city; on the other hand, this peculiar condition (i.e. a mildly expanded and plainly delimited area) set the basis for a quite interesting space for educational relations, making possible to locate a common room in the district both for the project activities, and open for the community to participate<sup>3</sup>.

The second one, *Polveriera*, is a more centered district in the city, with organized spaces for educational projects to be carried out. Lacking a “real” neighborhood due to its already arranged setting, this context has been a peculiar spot for the project to convey different educational needs, in and out the district itself. For instance, the different groups welcomed, with the coordination of professional educators, specific segments of home education and supervised visitation projects (in agreement with the social protection service for minors – D’Antone, 2020).

Both sections of the project had two distinctive elements: the first regarded the group task, centered on the production of art products to be processed – in a narrative way – inside the groups themselves, and to be brought into the neighborhood as well. The second has been the value of the families, taken into account to plan, assess, and participate to the different activities.

Since it has been an extracurricular project, strongly linked to the territorial communities, its balance between strictly-structured educational settings and more unwind forms of organization has been coherent with the very nature of the project: “carrying out the task” has always been accompanied by forms of socialization, inclusion, and communication with local contexts, making it not only a project “on art”, but a more broadly connoted context of territorial education (Tramma, 2010).

The articulation of the project laid out the theoretical foundation for a joint didactical activity during two academic lessons: as a matter

<sup>3</sup> For a broad analysis – with a critical pedagogy fashion – of the educational space and its logic, notice preliminarily the remarks by D. R. Ford (2017, p. 54).

of fact, the focus on groups rather than on individuals made possible to highlight how the processes of cultural inclusion, for them to actually work in their authenticity, need a social, pedagogically arranged context, in order to achieve the elaboration of the conflicts and the implementation of cooperation (Fiorucci, Pinto Minerva and Portera, 2017). Yet, taking into account the sole notion of “difference”, especially within an intertwined framework of different existential trajectories, ran the risk of excluding the political dimension of the problem (Catarci, 2016).

Moreover, the focus on group-centered settings made evident how the relationship (of conflict, cooperation, and resistance) was more prominent than individual differences (Contini, 2009; Bianchi, 2019). To achieve such a point of analysis, the focus shifted from the “individual” (here considered as an abstraction, as we will point out later) to the social dimension in which “she/he acts” and by which “she/he is determined”, within numerous forms of causal events (Lewis, 2017).

Considering the concept of “identity”, and drawing from Francesco Remotti’s work (1996), we brought in a dynamic “self scheme”, comparable to the *movement of the tides on a shore* (*ivi*, p. 3). If we assume the metaphor is true, the separation between the *structure* of the event and its *motion* leaps to the eye: the former maintains a prominent place on the scene, while the latter remains in the background.

Therefore, while upholding the importance of *movement* – and, doing so, the significance of different educational paths not only travelled during migration processes, but, more broadly, throughout the entire course of life (Dozza, 2016) – we also tried to give thought to the *structure* itself.

Namely: the body scheme, the configuration of personality, the processes of inculturation, and the departure and destination communities, not only considered as pedagogically appraised dimensions of life and education, but also as institutionalized social forms in

which the individual is “always-already” situated (as Louis Althusser stated, it is a form of *interpellation*) in a social and cultural web of practices and meanings (Backer, 2022, p. 61). In this sense, when Erving Goffman writes

The central feature of the stigmatized individual’s situation in life can now be stated. It is a question of what is often, if vaguely, called “acceptance”. Those who have dealings with him fail to accord him the respect and regard which the uncontaminated aspects of his social identity have led them to anticipate extending, and have led him to anticipate receiving; he echoes this denial by finding that some of his own attributes warrant it (1963, pp. 8-9).

Goffman states that, according to our premises, every form of exclusion (even through the social mark he is renowned to have defined as “stigma”) not only travels throughout an outspoken form of relationship (be it a direct kind of racism, sexism, infantilization, subordination, or straightforward exploitation), but also because of ideologically-drenched social structures whose effects appear as quite hidden (Althusser, 1996, p. 30).

In this perspective, the individual (and its allegedly apodictic “identity”) represents a form of abstraction, since everyone is already a subject within a complex social structure, whose educational experiences (in schools, in extra-curricular projects, within lifelong education and learning plans, during work, etc.) have an impact on the possibilities of emancipation or in aggravating forms of exclusion (Leonardo, 2009). Thus, it enables the understanding of the complex movement within identity itself rather than considering it an already shaped form. Since this movement suffers from a universalist ideology of general pacification and suppression of conflicts (even the pedagogical ones), whose contradictions entail the very concepts

of racism and multiculturalism<sup>4</sup>, it is important at this point to draw a link between the concrete identities of the subjects involved in the project, and the abstraction/generalization we provided in the classroom to outline its characteristics through case studies.

Within a heterogeneous group in terms of abilities, knowledge and competences, a project on art which focuses on groups rather than on individuals shifts the “center of gravity” of the project from the interpersonal relationship between subjects to the pedagogical structure of the intervention (Palmieri and Prada, 2008; D’Antone, 2023).

Consider the following situation: if art is conceptualized and used as a tool to enhance the expression of self within interpersonal relationships, the risk of “tokenization”<sup>5</sup> of one or more subjects could be very real, leading to the encapsulation of a subject within an artistic artifact which defines his/her alleged identity. But if, on the contrary, the artistic artifact is considered as a mediator object between the group members, the pedagogically arranged *équipe*, and the territory in which the group gathers, art ceases to be a tool for inclusion to become, at the same time, a context of practicability and a cooperative task (Dozza, 1993; 2000). In this second meaning, an art related project could facilitate non-abstract self-expression instances, con-

<sup>4</sup> As stated by Immanuel Wallerstein, identity and racism have a common history based on the “ethnicization” of work force, therefore “racism has always combined claims based on continuity with the past (genetic and/or social) with a present-orientated flexibility in defining the exact boundaries of these reified entities we call races or ethno-national-religious groupings” (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991, p. 34).

<sup>5</sup> We use the term “token” here in a pedagogical fashion. As Niemann (2016) states: “Tokens are perceived as homogeneous. Their actions, decisions, values, and mannerisms are interpreted in a stereotype-consistent manner [...]. Stereotypic expectations may lead to the encapsulation and entrapment of tokens in particular roles, such as specialists in ethnic or gender matters and symbols of workplace diversity. They may trigger in the token feelings of inadequacy, stigma, inequity in the workplace, and stereotype threat, which refers to the fear of proving true the stereotypes about one’s group [...]. Stress is added when tokens’ imperfections and mistakes are perceived as reflective of their group, while their successes are deemed exceptions to the group stereotype” (pp. 1-12).

necting everyone's individual performances to a superordinate target. During the *In Gioco con Arte* project, art was always considered as a group task which defines a specific topic of discussion (usually related to the 2020 Agenda for Sustainable Development) and enhances the possibility for the group to talk about it *outside of the group itself* – that is to say, in the district of affERENCE. Thus, for instance, if the superordinate task, as defined by the preliminary group discussion within the group agenda, refers to the participation to a debate on the youth stance on gender equality and violence on women:

- the group discusses the topic in a cooperative way (circle arrangement, speaking turns, conflict management, etc.) with the educators as tutors and mediators;
- the artistic artifacts will reflect the terms emerging from the discussion, defining themselves both in the form of personalized tiles to be placed on specific spots of the district, and of cards with messages which present some sort of relevance with them;
- the group gathers to discuss the action taken, in order to re-work in a critical-reflexive way the group task.

Following the indications outlined by Riccardo Massa (2000), in this way the project defines itself via the instances of expression, performativity and reflection on the action taken; everyone's identity is not aprioristically defined, but shaped and operating at the same time in a social context in which the relationship is mediated by work, conflict, and cooperation. This work setting does not eliminate the ideological effect on education (Backer, 2022), but permits to identify its ritualization, making space to critique, resistance, and inclusion.

## *The ghost of the foreign body and the Double absence: intersectionality on an intercultural framework of education*

The interpretative lenses assumed in this work solicit a search for self-interpretive, and hetero-interpretive, itineraries and critical relativization that aimed – starting from the analysis of concrete and well-known situations and problems – at a true “intercultural understanding” (Fiorucci, 2020; Ouellet, 1991; Desinan, 2003). Starting with the exploration of two constructs, we will then expand the theoretical references to the postcolonial and critical perspective to focus on the research sample. As researchers immersed in the context, “cognitive decentralization” and critical ethnocentrism at every step of data collection and analysis have been pursued.

As mentioned above, the overall aim of the researchers is to employ and make useful the data emerging in the field of research within the teaching proposal in university courses.

This possibility makes the achievement of the pedagogical foundation concrete and practicable – i.e., the recursiveness between theory, practice, and new theory.

In particular, according to the data emerging from the research, a reference is made to two constructs borrowed from postcolonial and critical literatures: the *Double absence* by Abdelmalek Sayad, and *The ghost of the foreign body* by Étienne Balibar.

In the *Double Absence*, Sayad (2002) strongly criticizes the “science of migration” which deals with migratory flows by adopting a numerical and economical stance, considering moves across the borders, and comparing the countries of origin of migrants and the rich host countries. Sayad concludes that migration is a *total social fact*, which concerns an internal and external system related to the migrants and the host country.

According to Sayad, the migrants must occupy the space made



available by the host country, and they must stay there, as if to demonstrate with their presence the social unthought. The term “immigration”, instead of “migration process”, reflects the ethnocentric logic of the hosting country. In this way, Sayad expresses a radical critical argument on pseudo-concepts, which appear to be too vague, as “integration” and “minorities-naturalization-assimilation”.

Furthermore, in *The ghost of the foreign body* (2019), Balibar argues that “otherness” – the other, towards whom we experience infinite ethical responsibility – is a political subject. The political dimension cannot be separated from the cultural and the intellectual. Wandering people are not unhappy bodies, tossed about, defenseless, sacrificed, at the mercy of the militarized police of the European states; on the contrary, they devise strategies, build solidarity, and invent forms of collective sociability. They are (political) actors and not just objects. Thus, second generations, even more, cannot be considered by national policies as *foreign bodies*.

## Some intercultural variables of the project: presence-absence of the theoretical sample

According to the interpretative framework outlined above, here we propose an analysis of the research theoretical sample (Charmaz, 2014) from the engaged and postcolonial pedagogical perspectives. Following this interpretative lens, we focus on the composition of the theoretical sample and their “presence-absence” in the Italian juridical system.

The research sample – viewed from the grounded constructivist perspective that emphasizes its explanatory and interpretative potential – consists of about 30 young men and women. Many of them are “second generation” migrants: born in Italy, but not Italian citizens. In particular, they are guys born in Reggio Emilia between 2005

and 2007, of Burkinabè, Senegalese, Tunisian, Chinese, Ghanaian, Moroccan, Indian, and Dominican with Nigerian parents. Only two participants were born in the country of origin, and then migrated to Italy in their early childhood. One participant was born from a mixed couple.

The intercultural variable manifests itself in the dual belonging, the innate mediation skills of these young people and the lack of legal recognition with its implications.

- First emersion: out of 30 participants, 20 are non-Italian citizens;
- second emersion: only the group of Italians has a certification of vulnerability or special educational need (BES).

The first possible inferences concern:

- users benefitting from socio-educational interventions are mostly non-Italian citizens;
- users with health certifications and support are Italian citizens.

## Why is it that the diagnoses do not also concern the group of non-citizens?

From an engaged pedagogical perspective, the problem of Italian non-citizenship, besides being felt in school, has material repercussions on people's lives and on the construction of a common imaginary: it begins, in fact, to take shape as a perturbing element, doubly absent, extraneous; a *non-person* (Dal Lago, 2004).

Following Sayad and Balibar's suggestions, we can, in fact, understand how deleterious this is for the formation of an identity and a sense of belonging: the non-Italian citizen is "doubly absent", and society perceives her/him as a "foreign body". According to Balibar, it is the fear of people settling in: it is the ghost of the foreign body, whose definition is always arbitrary. It remains true that the ideolog-

ical construction of the internal enemy, of the foreign body, of the virus, the whole phantasmatics of immunity, is elaborated around the fear – possibly fabricated and always manipulated – that people will settle down? In this sense, much responsibility lies with toxic narratives (Fiorucci, 2020). Today, the threshold of fear has been raised: the fear is no longer that they will settle, but simply that they will arrive, that they will be there – despite their small numbers and their placement in suburban neighborhoods. The danger is not the immigrant, the danger is “the foreigner”.

The case study presented here is a privileged observatory for analyzing and deconstructing cultural implicitities and, more importantly, for designing new interventions and elaborating new research paths. These inferences on the sample also constitute a background investigation to delve into group dynamics, with particular regard to conflict management, collaborative practices, and inclusive (or faux-inclusive) behavior.

Indeed, these preliminary inferences are sensitizing concepts that allow the design of new pathways for research and new practices, as advocated by critical pedagogy with an intercultural perspective. For this purpose, we make an attempt to interrogate the underpinnings, tensions, and discrepancies of Italian Special Educational Needs (SEN) policies and citizenship policies through the intersectional and interdisciplinary framework of Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit). DisCrit allows to share how ability is distributed and withheld based on race through policies and practices, and recognizes interlocking oppressions faced by students at the interstices of multiple differences (Annamma, Connor and Ferri, 2013; 2016; Migliarini, D’Alessio and Bocci, 2018).

## *Skin Ego* and intercultural pedagogy: group variables to enhance conflict, cooperation, and inclusion

In this perspective – and according to the utilization of groups in an intercultural fashion –, the group not only reaches a goal through its work, but also allows each member to express themselves. Everyone can discuss the work done *in* the group, but it is also possible to performatively express by means of the body both the sense and the meaning of the product, as well as one's emotional investment in the work carried out by the whole group (Dozza, 2000; Massa, 2000).

Since leaving the “internal space” of the group (the common room, the place set for artistic purposes, etc.) represents the possibility of articulating, on the existing project, a range of other possible experiences in less structured and well-known contexts, this form of practice (i.e. the possibility to show the group work in the neighborhood or in schools, in order to support its discussion and socialization in other environments) also allows individual habits to be suspended, in order to open up expressive possibilities in times and spaces endowed with unprecedented specificity. As D. R. Ford states (2022), the time of education is not linear (De Giorgi, 2020), nor is possible to conceive a singular temporal line to understand the emancipatory – and, thus, not only cyclical repetition – path of education itself. Michael Alhadeff-Jones (2017) writes:

Theorizing the rhythms of emancipatory education is an activity that is critical, not only because of the knowledge it may produce but because it leads one to challenge the temporal standards that constrain the educational phenomena it relates to. At the core, entering into the activity of theorization constitutes therefore an invitation to transgress (p. 216).

In this way, an educational setting is not a circumscribed set of spaces, times and rules organized to control the group or to manage the work which must be produced, but an opportunity to *broaden the possible times and practices* the group itself could express itself into. Namely:

- the artistic artifacts made with the support of an artist or with professional educators, while sharing tools, instruments, and devices to enhance cooperation and thematize the different points of view of every member;
- the discussion set to prepare what message could be endowed in the artifact production, in order to decide how to deal with the different standpoints and organize activities outside the group;
- the development of group structure while maintaining a quite flexible openness to the possibility of other members to join and participate, or to welcome members who, for different reasons, have not been able to participate to the activities for some time;
- the shift from the inside to the outside, balancing the time spent in the group and the activities set outside of it; and so on.

Moreover, the very group structure outlines some interesting specificities which could not be unspoken. Talking about “groups” and “identity” laid out an interpretive discourse about how the groups, on a material basis, could enhance a dynamic formation of identities while promoting mutual exchange, conflicts, and cooperation. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, Didier Anzieu (2016) writes:

With small groups it had already been observed that the participants tend to fill up empty space – if the room is very big they bunch together in one part of it; if the chairs are set out in a circle they put tables in the middle – or stop up gaps: they do not like to have empty seats between people; they pile up spare

chairs in a corner; the empty place of an absentee makes them uncomfortable; they keep doors and windows closed, even if this makes the atmosphere physically suffocating. In a large group, in which anonymity is more marked, fears of fragmentation are reawakened and members experience the threat of losing ego identity, individuals feel lost and try to stay safe by withdrawing inside themselves or into silence (p. 31).

Bringing in the concept of *Skin-Ego*, Anzieu outlines a parallel between everyone's own body (i.e. the *skin* as a permeable membrane from the inside and the other bodies in the social context) and the material world in which everyone is situated, with active purposes (the social work aimed at reaching a result) and passive ones (being a member of a social structure with specific spaces, times and rules) (Dozza, 2000). Thus, the body acts as a layer between the inner self and the possibility of social relationship determined by the social context and the material body. More accurately, the communal identity reacts to the dynamic of this membrane, which facilitates or obstructs the possibility of enriching or evolving in the relationship with others.

As Zeus Leonardo (2009) pointed out, the skin is not only a metaphor or a theoretical concept aimed at a better understanding of profound, social dynamics (as we just stated with reference to Didier Anzieu), but also a material characteristic which indicates the mutual participation in a multicultural and multiethnic society. Through the skin, as a real membrane which maintains specific social connotations, and as a theoretical layer which indicates the concept of *threshold*, it is possible to thematize the concepts of closeness and distance, of closure and openness, and the possibility of *hybridizing* one's very own *skin* with the characteristics of others.

To do so, we believe a spontaneous organization within a pedagogical discourse and framework is not sufficient: in order to avoid the risks of exclusion or subordination (even the more hidden forms

of it, as stated in the Introduction), a pedagogical arranged setting is required to connect a common task (a *mediator* object in the social field – Vasquez and Oury, 1974; Papi, 1978; Dozza, 1993) to the different times and rhythms in the group. In doing so, the very same pedagogical movement of “inclusion” defines itself differently: from the insertion of a subject in a group, to the freed-up space within the group itself, in order to enhance the subject’s possibilities to express in a non-directive fashion.

For instance, if a topic of discussion and cooperative work is already decided when a new member shows up, her/his inclusion in the group could run the risk of subordinating her/him to a discourse on which the subject couldn’t have decision making possibilities. On the contrary, if the topic decision is equally shared, the new member could not only participate since the beginning of a process of discussion, expression, and work, but she/he could also be part of a group basing on a real commitment and not on a fictitious one.

In fact, *art* as a concept could be seen, and with good reasons (as Lev S. Vygotskij<sup>6</sup> brilliantly pointed out), in its interplay with *work* – in particular when considering “work”, as Dino Formaggio (1977) suggested, as a mediation practice between natural and cultural forces. Moreover, for artists, the act of creating art is often considered as a form of work, because it involves dedication, time, effort, and skill: whether the medium is painting, sculpture, photography, murals, painted tiles, creative messages on paper, etc., artists invest their energy into their creative process, blurring the lines between work,

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<sup>6</sup> Vygotskij (1997) writes: “It is from this point of view that we should approach vocational training in the techniques of this or that realm of art. The instructive value of these techniques is extraordinarily great, in the same way as is every form of labor and every form of complex activity; it becomes even greater still once it is turned into a tool for training children in the apprehension of works of art, inasmuch as it is impossible to fully enter into a work of art if the techniques that are part of its idiom remain utterly foreign. It is for this reason that a certain minimal technical familiarity with the system of every art has to become part of public education” (p. 259).

commitment, and desire<sup>7</sup> – thus, enabling *at this stage of the process* the possibility of a spontaneous form of learning instead of a systematic one (Visalberghi, 1988). Within the project *In Gioco Con Arte*, art as a mediation practice to convey group experiences of discussion and socialization made possible to strengthen community cohesion by fostering family bondings, developing empathy, emotional intelligence, and a greater understanding of others” experiences, thus promoting a broader sense of inclusivity and communication between subjects who participates to different territorial projects and in different districts.

In conclusion, this project represents a significative experience to lay out a pedagogical design respectful of everyone’s specificity, opening up the possibility to dissent and resistance (Jullien, 2016; Ford, 2019), and generating a multiple matrix of space-time in which the “different skins” could touch, communicate, and express, not drawing upon abstract differences, but articulating real ones through shared, real practices.

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<sup>7</sup> As stated by H. Park (2023): “I find that there are multiple layers of tensions in the painting event: tensions between adult’s instruction and children’s own pleasure, between children’s assigned identity and desired identity, and between the “proper” use of given materials and experimented methods of engaging with human to nonhuman materials”. In other words, through a defined practice the learning processes are mediated by adults/educators’ power in the educational relationship, the subject’s previous knowledge and experiences, and the instances of cooperation and resistance within the task itself, making the task a complex process of subjectivization” (p. 103).



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