

THE (IM)POSSIBLE SUCCESS OF DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS. REFLECTIONS ON EDUCATION, MIGRATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

THE PAPER FOCUSES ON THE “UNEXPECTED PATHWAYS” OF SUCCESSFUL STUDENTS WITH AN IMMIGRANT BACKGROUND: THESE BIOGRAPHICAL ROUTES, THAT SEEMS SOCIALLY IMPOSSIBLE, RAISE THEORETICAL ISSUES AROUND THE INDIVIDUAL-SOCIETY, ACTOR-STRUCTURE RELATIONSHIP. DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS WHO SUCCEED REPRESENT A SOCIOLOGICAL CHALLENGE IN THE ATTEMPT TO UNDERSTAND ATYPICAL SITUATIONS AND TO IDENTIFY THE INSTITUTIONAL PROCESSES AND THE STRUCTURAL OPPORTUNITIES THAT FACILITATE THEM, REDUCING ETHNIC INEQUALITIES IN EDUCATION.

THIS FRAMEWORK IS THE STARTING POINT OF THE *SU.PER. PROJECT (SUCCESS IN EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS OF STUDENTS WITH IMMIGRANT BACKGROUND)*, BASED ON THE COLLECTION OF WRITTEN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF 65 IMMIGRANT STUDENTS, ATTENDING UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATION IN NORTHERN ITALY. THE BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH ALLOWS TO DEEPEN THE SOCIAL CHANGE THAT DERIVES FROM THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION ON EDUCATION. WITHIN THIS INTERPRETATIVE PERSPECTIVE, THE ARTICLE UNDERLINES THE CONTRIBUTE OF THE *SU.PER. PROJECT* TO A NEW “DEFINITION OF THE SITUATION”, THAT CONSIDERS POSSIBLE THE EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS, DRAWING NEW NARRATIVES AND DISCOURSES ON INEQUALITIES, BUT ALSO GIVING VOICE AND SUPPORTS TO DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS, AND INTRODUCING THEM TO A FIELD OF UNFORESEEN POSSIBILITIES.

KEYWORDS

EDUCATION-MIGRATION-SOCIETY RELATIONSHIP, STUDENTS OF IMMIGRANT ORIGIN,
SCHOOL SUCCESS

INTRODUCTION

Students who succeed at school despite a disadvantaged and immigrant background, are a common feature in educational systems (OECD 2018), even though scholars and policy-makers have focused more on failure rather than educational success of immigrant-origin students. This paper focuses on the educational success of immigrant students, that questions the traditional explanations of educational inequalities, based on family background and inheritance of social disadvantage from one generation to another.

This perspective represents the premise of the Su.Per. project (*Success in educational pathways of students with immigrant background*), promoted by Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. The research is based on the collection of written autobiographies of a group of 65 successful students with an immigrant background, attending upper secondary education in Brescia, an emblematic area of multicultural schools in Northern Italy.

Their “unexpected pathways” featured by an educational success that seems socially impossible, raise theoretical and methodological issues around the individual-society, actor-structure relationships: disadvantaged students who succeed represent a sociological challenge in the attempt to understand atypical situations, since these educational routes are statistical exceptions or social irregularities. However, they should be analyzed as a specific configuration of general conditions of possibility and as distinctive sociological rules for studies in the sociology of education (Lahire 1994). These unusual pathways should be regarded in relation to the institutional processes and structural opportunities that facilitate them.

Furthermore, the biographical approach is particularly suitable to deepen the social change that derives from the positive impact of immigration on education: The Su.Per. project contributes to a new “definition of the situation” (Thomas and Thomas 1928), that consider possible the educational success of immigrant students, drawing new narratives and discourses on inequalities through the ambitious idea of rethinking a sociology of education that not

only criticizes inequalities, but also revises the relationship education-society, gives voice and supports disadvantaged students, introducing them to a field of unforeseen possibilities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis of the successful trajectories of immigrant students can be based on three theoretical and methodological premises.

- 1) Among *migration studies*, US scholars has introduced the fruitful hypothesis of “immigrant optimism” (Kao and Tienda 1995), considering immigrant families as the main driver of educational success. Migration is considered a family project of intergenerational mobility and parents’ optimism regarding their offspring’s prospects are decisive in the educational outcome. All immigrant parents, as pointed out by Portes and Hao (2004), regardless of nationality, have high educational aspirations for their children and are willing to make major sacrifices in order to achieve these goals.

In Europe, Maurice Crul has been studying successful second-generation youth since the Nineties: this scholar and his colleagues link the idea of a specific drive among immigrant families to the theoretical issue of institutional barriers and opportunities in the educational system and the labour market in different European countries, in order to see how people manage institutional challenges and find alternative routes to success. The recent ELITES project shows how it is possible to accumulate social and cultural chances over time, while moving up the social ladder, thus breaking the perpetual cycle of habitus inherited through class position (Bourdieu 1990). Initially, small chances open to other possibilities and are the starting point for further gains, with a sort of snowball effect called “the multiplier effect” (Crul et al. 2017).

- 2) In the field of *sociology of education* Lahire is one of the most important scholars who analysed the school pathways of youngsters from more

disadvantaged backgrounds to gain an understanding of the distinct trajectories (success, failure and dropout) that can emerge from similar social backgrounds (1995). He wrote: “there is a real sociological challenge in the attempt to understand atypical situations” (Lahire 1994: 75). Since the 1990s, studies in the sociology of education have faced the problem of individual pathways in education and their link with social structure, analyzing what makes the individual educational path a specific configuration of general conditions of possibility, and dealing with atypical or improbable situations of educational success of disadvantaged students: according to Lahire et al., these social irregularities cannot be classified simply as contradictions and statistical exceptions to the “sociological rule”, but are themselves specific sociological rules. The analysis of these exceptions aims at enabling to understand how agents critically and interpretively build and reproduce the societal and institutional conditions to which they belong. A student’s pathway involves a power of agency and an intentionality of project, which are particularly visible in critical situations, crossroads and junctions that trigger choices within a sufficiently broad field of possibilities for an individual. Lahire revised Bourdieu’s theory: in complex societies with multi-differentiated spheres, individuals deal with multiple socialising experiences, echoing a heterogeneity of principles cohabiting the same socialised and socialising body and intervening differently, depending on social roles, fields of practices, spheres of activity, micro-contexts and types of interaction (Lahire 2013).

- 3) From a methodological point of view, the biographical approach offers a way of analyzing the transformational character of migration and is useful to interpret the migration-education-learning nexus: there is unpredictability around migration and learning, because learning is multi-faceted and can have both positive and negative outcomes for the migrant (Morrice 2014). In some way, migrants have experienced migration as a “traumatic” event in their life, but this experience paradoxically motivates and immunizes them, acting as a learning process to get ahead or to overcome difficulties. In *Migration and Biography* (1990), Ursula Apitzsch demonstrates empirically that young migrants

generally develop an intercultural disposition that may lead to upward mobility in the receiving country, contrasting the working-class position of their parents (Apitzsch and Siouti 2014). The biographical approach allows to assume ethnic difference not merely in terms of the reproduction of predestined outcomes, but rather in a dynamic fashion, where students are part of a complex process that may no doubt reproduce inequalities, but where they are also largely able to reduce its effects. This approach provides an idea of the genesis of social events and social changes – typical consequences of migration – and records social reality from the perspective of acting and suffering subjects, as well as highlighting possible coping and transformational resources (Alheit 2005).

AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

This paper focuses on improbable and unexpected pathways taken by successful students with an immigrant background. In order to do this, I will use the empirical documentation deriving from the Su.Per. project, a qualitative study based on the collection of educational autobiographies of successful students of immigrant-origin attending upper secondary schools in a Northern province of Italy (Brescia). The project aims at identifying personal and social factors that lead immigrant students to educational excellence; highlighting the difficulties and obstacles that they must face; reconstructing the social change emerging from biographies in which the migration disadvantage is transformed into an educational advantage.

These successful students have been selected using specific criteria, drawn from a literature review and from focus groups with teachers. These include good educational integration, high performances, high cognitive skills, and good relationships with peers and teachers (Santagati 2015). 65 immigrant-origin students are involved, aged 14-19, foreign born (39) and native-born (26), males (21) and females (44), with 23 different citizenships (mainly Morocco, India, Albania, Pakistan, Romania) and attending different type of upper secondary

schools (13 lyceums, 20 in technical institutes, 22 in vocational institutes, and 10 in VET centre). The 65 involved students were asked to write an “educational autobiography” using a self-interview grid, aimed at helping them recount the most relevant experiences, encounters, emotions and choices undertaken during their educational careers. They were asked to remember their past educational life, reflect on their educational present and imagine their future, analyze successes and failures, and offer advice to other students to encourage them in their education. The grid is structured in 34 points, with an introductory presentation and a final section on personal data (cf. Santagati 2018).

The method of “educational autobiography” is quite well-known and, undoubtedly, not a new approach in sociology. “The Polish Peasant in Europe and in America” is the first sociological research on the importance of people representing and reflecting on their own lives and relationships, including letter-writing, life stories, and constructing “immigrant autobiographies”. Life writing is central in Thomas and Znaniecki’s (1918-20) sociological view because autobiographical narratives in which people represent themselves facing social change deriving from migration highlight that people construct themselves in situational and relational ways (Stanley 2010: 139-140). Even though writing is difficult for students with an immigrant background, autobiography offers imaginative spaces, which can build resilience and resistance and forge the self through a developmental process facilitated by writing, capturing the reflexive development of the relations between the self and the social world through socialization (Merrill and West 2009).

RESULTS

The autobiographies have been analysed with the software Nvivo (the analysis is still ongoing), in order to manage a high number of long written texts, working in a research group with different type of coding procedure (Santagati and Bertozzi 2019). In this paper I want to pay attention to students’ narratives concerning the meaning of

success, the school experience that promote success in the learning process, the description of the Su.Per. project and its consequences on school success through the students’ autobiographies. I will focus my analysis, especially, on this point of the interview grid: “My teachers have asked me to write my story, because I am a “good student”. What does it mean to be among the best students? Do I feel I am an “excellent student”?”.

Discussing the vision of educational success, immigrant students of the Su.Per. project reflect on their educational present, remembering positive and negative aspects of their institute, happy moments and obtained successes, considering the effect of immigration (or of their parents’ migration) on their present experience in upper secondary school. The educational success of immigrant students is linked to a learning process, which appears deeply rooted in the migration process. At the same time, migration appears as a biographical rupture that becomes an asset; an experience of family sufferance and failure, but also as a source of biographical learning; a chance to reflect on failure and gain awareness of disadvantage; an experience that transmits and fosters non-cognitive skills – learnt with the support of family/teachers – that are strong predictors of educational success.

The analysis highlights, however, different meanings of educational success, to be considered not only in terms of good marks and outcomes, deriving from individual talents and skills. Success is defined mainly as a process: students emphasize that the challenge is the perspective of continuous improvement and lifelong learning. “True success” in education emerges from the attitude of not give up in times of crisis, from the ability to face and overcome obstacles and failure, from the perseverance over time and from the ability to cultivate hopes and ambitions for the future.

*“The goal is to overcome one’s abilities or at least increase them. To obtain the desired result, then, is not a goal but a transition” (Anastasia, Poland).
“It is not easy to tell my story, because, for me, it means to live again all the moments of crisis and difficulty that I would never want to live again. But with this opportunity, I hope I can help other*

students who are in a crisis like the one in which I found myself. I want to show all the emotions I felt during that time and how I came to this success. I never thought that one day I would write my experience and that I would share it with others. I was very lucky not to give up after a failure. I tried until I overcame the obstacle that did not allow me to reach my goals. We must always face insecurities and never stop trying again” (Tiana, Pakistan).
“I’m not a successful student, I think I have some ambitions. “Things to do in my life” is the name I’ve given to my projects’ list; teachers say that I’m a good student, I prefer to call myself a “student full of hope” (Mr. Nobody, Philippines).

Considering their educational present, students consider general aspects concerning their institutes. Undoubtedly, the positive role of the educational institution in the integration process is influenced by its specific characteristic, by the ethnic school composition: the multicultural nature of Italian schools is a good surprise for immigrant students. Hannah points out the “democratic nature” of the Italian schools, evaluating positively the chance and the right of students to participate and to indicate representatives involved in the decisional process at school and provincial level. In this frame, “to be student of a specific institute” well organized and situated in a good area, “to be a student of a multicultural and democratic school”, or “to be a student with an immigrant origin” in a institute open and welcoming to immigrants, with activities dedicated to this target, are features that represent different biographical conditions that allow to benefit of general or specific measures or project.

“It is a fantastic school, no matter where you come from, it’s a colorful school full of different people with different personalities, they accept who you are” (Aicha, Senegal). *“The first day of the high school... when I found I was not the only foreigner, I felt calm”* (Miriam, Albania).

Almost all the group of immigrant students explicitly refer to the experience of this Su.Per. Project: in which researchers and teachers identified criteria to select “successful students”. In their narratives, students report that their teachers asked them to

write their educational autobiographies, because “they are seen / defined / selected / considered / chosen” by teachers as “good students”, “excellent students”, “successful students”, as “one of the best students”.

Students, writing about their participation to Su.Per., describe first their emotional state, associating to this event a wide range of positive feelings: “I was . . . happy / enthusiastic / satisfied / thankful / good / great”. Some of these emotions derive from the idea to make others (especially parents and teachers) happy and proud for the honour of participating to the Su.Per. project. Students feel appreciated and recognized as “one of the best students”, responding well to adult expectations.

Moreover, students assign different meanings to the participation to the project: this experience was interpreted as a “chance / privilege / honour / merit”, namely it is an option and an opportunity given by educational institutes and by teachers, at the same time appreciated and deserved by students able of cultivating and responding to high educational expectations of adults. The chance to write their successful stories seems “something unexpected” (Lovy, India), but it is not so difficult to reach (Anita, India), for students who never give up (Sammi, Pakistan) and who stand out for the value of their difference, because they are not like others (Amna, Albania).

The most interesting perspective that emerge from this analysis concerns the various effects deriving from participating to the Su.Per. project, reported in the students’ narratives: increase of self-esteem, self-confidence (Destiny, Morocco); more ambitions (Jawhara, Morocco); demonstration of resilience, perseverance and determination (Kalos, Senegal); desire to improve skills, desire to overcome obstacles and difficulties, desire to reach the outcomes of the best students of their classroom (Tasfee, Bangladesh); increase of commitment to learning and better educational results (Aicha, Senegal).

Above of all, to be “defined” as an excellent student, and belonging to the group of the best students, assumes the meaning of making this successful biographical perspective possible and socially acceptable, even for these disadvantaged immigrant

students. Students, who are disadvantaged for their low socio-economic status and for their migratory status, begin to think, for the first time, that “they are” or “they will be” or “they could be” excellent students. With this new idea/vision, a new field of “unexpected possibilities” in education are shown. These possibilities are not social exceptions: teachers (but also school leaders, sociologists, politicians, citizens, etc.) intervene with new narratives on ethnic inequalities in education that define and make possible what seems impossible. The consequences of these discourses are biographical and social processes of change that foresee the educational success of immigrant students: we are aware that the “definition of the situation” (Thomas, Thomas 1928; Merton 1971) precedes, orientates and limits any possible action, but a redefinition of the situation can change the biographical trajectories and make possible what, before, was socially defined as impossible. The need of a “new definition of the situation” that consider possible the educational success of immigrant students implies the transformation of institutional expectations and orientations, highlighting that the policies effectiveness starts from a change in the “definition of situation”, namely in cultural meanings that has to be combined with programmes, measures, and activities.

“My teachers have asked me to participate in this project, because they consider me an excellent student or a student who could be excellent” (Anuar, Morocco).

“I never thought of myself in these terms before this project, I thought that best students were only those who do not need help” (Tiana, Pakistan).

“Before this project, I was just thinking of getting by. The Su.Per. project woke me up. He made me understand that not only because you are different, you have other origins, you cannot have what they have, you cannot be good at school. Being chosen among the best students is helping me to get more and more involved, because nothing is impossible” (Aicha, Senegal).

“The fact of participating to the Su.Per. project is a great honor for me, I would never have thought to look like an excellent student in the eyes of a teacher” (Lisa, China).

CONCLUSIONS

From this brief analysis of the educational auto-biographies, it emerges that successful immigrant students can play an important role in social change. The school experience has helped the students to discover “what they want”, teaching how to act. In fact, the educational pathway is represented by Su.Per. students as a process that progressively extends and widens the possibility to act and to become a successful student/person. These students discover to be “good students” and, so, they can act as good students: this improvement process does not stop, maybe they could become someone important in the future and, undoubtedly, they widen their educational chances with respect to those offered in the country of origin.

In a positive sense, the school experience represents the first step of long way, which must be climbed to reach good results: this is not so difficult for who is used to face and overcome difficulties, as migrants are used to do. From one hand, the others can limit significantly decisions, actions and freedom, not only with their intervention but mainly with their opinions with respect to the educational career of immigrant students. From the other hand, teachers, principals (society in general), act as motivators, promoters, if they can encourage actions and decisions, and to highlight talents also when students are not aware. The significant others, that embody institutional expectations and orientations, can make the difference, as Aria from Morocco concludes: *“we do not underestimate that every single action that for someone is insignificant, for another is worth a lot. Each one should be helped and encouraged, not forgot or discouraged”*. This analysis, to be continued, underlines the need of a “new definition of the situation”, from the point of view of social actors, but also from the point of view of researchers, and requires a social, cultural and educational change that can consider possible the educational success of immigrant students. “The probable is the social fact par excellence” (Mercklé 2005): it is necessary to reflect on structural chances and subjective expectations that reinforce the

probability of realization, if we want to work for the reduction of educational inequalities.

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