

Adopted students and intersectionality, starting points for a first analysis

Studenti adottati e intersezionalità, spunti per una prima analisi¹

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Abstract

Students with an adoptive background present a multiple intersectionality condition, with an overlapping of different identities: adoptive, ethnic and ability wise, which exposes them to possible multiple discriminations. This article, thanks to data collected by family associations, intends to investigate this complexity by highlighting the most important problems, the school's and healthcare's interventions to address those problems and the possible additional and complementary actions that can be put into place to encourage inclusion and integration of disabled students with adoptive and ethnically different backgrounds.

Keywords: adoption, ethnic identity, multiple discrimination, intersectionality, disability.

Sommario

Gli studenti con background adottivo si trovano in una condizione di multipla intersezionalità, con una sovrapposizione di diverse identità: adottiva, etnica e di abilità, che li mette in una posizione di possibile discriminazione multipla. Questo articolo, grazie a dati raccolti dall'associazionismo familiare, intende indagare tale complessità mettendo in evidenza le problematiche più importanti, gli interventi attraverso i quali la scuola e la sanità rispondono e le possibili azioni aggiuntive e complementari che possono essere messe in atto per favorire l'inclusione e l'integrazione degli studenti disabili con background adottivo e etnicamente differenti.

Parole chiave: adozione, identità etnica, discriminazione multipla, intersezionalità, disabilità.

Introduction

This work investigates, thanks to a wide variety of data collected by Italian family associations, according to an intersectional perspective, the possible multiple discrimination experienced by adopted students as a consequence of the concomitance of a plurality of different conditions: disability, adoption, belonging to an ethnicity different from the one of their own family². This type of approach, when speaking of adoption, is, in this breadth, new and literature is often lacking. The interconnection of different social and structural categorizations for this type of students, in fact, is particularly complex because it combines in multiple ways different possible disadvantage factors, so that their consequences must be considered in an integrated way, rather than analyzed individually. In class, adoptees' difficulties get often dealt via a medical approach that seldom takes into account elusive aspects connected to their little known and understood biographical data. On the other hand, often when dealing with pupils with disabilities, it is disability itself to become the unique focus of attention in schools³. In the case of adoptees, even if adoption by itself should not be perceived as a disadvantage, their specific personal

histories and the reasons why adoption was needed, often contain several critical issues (loss, trauma, mistreatment, etc.) and sometimes, the adverse effects of these specificities may get also amplified by the way society perceives them. Speaking about ethnical origins, it is widely acknowledged that the identity processes in adoptees, internationally and/or inter-ethnically adopted, regarding growing people who were born and sometimes lived for years in geographical, human, social, cultural contexts different from those in which they found a family, may present complexities due also, but not only, to the perception that society has of such different families (Ferritti, Guerrieri, 2019; Lorenzini, 2018; Lorenzini, 2019). The intersectional lens allows so to take into consideration discrimination as generated by the connection among the multiple categories of individuals' identities allowing to think diversity as based simultaneously on the relation between similarities and differences (Marchetti, 2013).

The scientific literature on adoption has focused on the adoptees' clinical problems (Brodzinsky and Palacios, 2010; Andolfi *et al.*, 2017), pointing out the high incidence of certified disabilities and, in a school context, of learning difficulties often caused by a plurality of unfavorable conditions that characterized their pre-adoptive life (biological parents' health and addictions; deprivations and traumas suffered in early childhood; genetical conditions that may have increased the possibility of abandonment, long periods of institutionalization, physical and psychological abuse, neglect, etc.). All these adverse childhood events might evolve in language and cognitive difficulties or emotional and relational instability. The greater vulnerability of these students compared to their non-adopted peers, if not adequately addressed, can generate risks of educational failure and social exclusion. How this vulnerability may be connected to other critical issues (physical features different from parents' ones, a *before* and an *after* in their life history, the presence of fragmented and intrusive memories, acquiring a different language by adoption etc.) in hindering academic success, is yet little investigated.

The aim of the authors, from the observational point of view of associationism, area to which they belong, is to promote the beginning of such an investigation, through the description of the collected data.

Italy is the second country in the world for the number of minors entering it by international adoption. In the last 10 years (2009-2018) 37.103 minors have been adopted, 27.174 of them internationally (CAI⁴, 2019) and 9.928 with national adoption (Department of Juvenile Justice, 2019). The CAI data show that 66.4% of 2019 admissions concerned boys and girls with one or more special needs (774 out of 1205 minors) and that 52 minors, or 6.7% of minors with special needs, were «children with trauma, behavioral problems, physical and mental incapacity» (CAI 2019, pp. 49). In 2019, Coordinamento CARE⁵ launched a study addressing parents and teachers (1.907 questionnaires were completed by adoptive parents and 1.801 questionnaires by teachers) and found that about 2 out of 5 adoptive parents say that their children need individual and/or personalized educational plans⁶, confirming the general impression that adopted pupils experience a more complex and upward school path. Already in 2014 CARE obtained, unique case in Europe, the first set of national rules⁷ dedicated to the well-being of adoptees in school. The intention was to reach teachers and school deans not only to suggest simple solutions to critical bureaucratic issues but also to give the first glimpse of the complexity of adoption. The 2019 research showed that the interventions to take care of such complexity were still work in progress for far too many schools and, clearly, it is still very important to keep investing in the proper training of teachers on the subject.

Internationally adoptees, for example, deal with a plurality of issues. The development of the adoptive identity depends upon the construction and integration of a dual cultural

belonging: to the country of origin and to the country of adoption. International research confirms that in adoptees the ethnic dimension plays a fundamental role when building identity (Manzi *et al.*, 2014; Ferreri *et al.*, 2015; Lorenzini, 2012, 2013, 2018). The balance between the two cultural backgrounds seems to have a direct impact on the psychosocial well-being of the adopted youth. International adoptions, indeed, are mainly configured as trans-racial adoptions (in Italy they represent about 60%), that is, somatically different minors adopted by white and western parents. Looking at the five most frequent countries of origin in the last five years, almost 1.500 of the children adopted internationally came from countries where dark skin is prevalent, almost 1.400 from the heterogeneous Russian Federation composed of populations with different phenotypic traits, and over 500 minors from Hungary where there is a very high prevalence of adopted Romani children⁸ (Fig. 1).

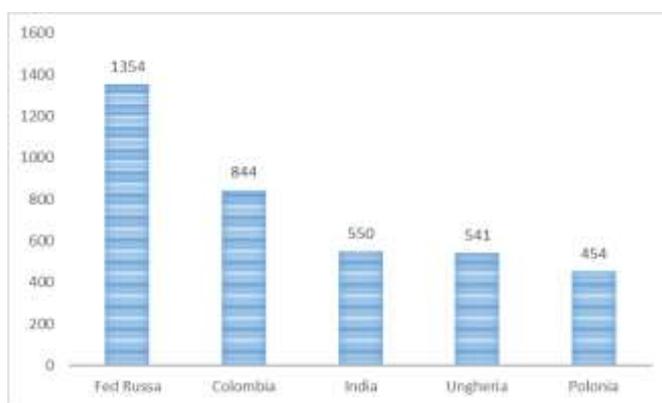


Fig. 1 Minors for whom the authorization to enter Italy was issued according to the first five countries of origin by number - Years 2015-2019 (Source: elaboration of the authors on CAI data)

The process of building a plural identity is indeed very complex both on a cognitive and emotional level. The construction of ethnic identity is a dynamic, fluid, negotiated process, linked to the social context in which we live and to the attribution of meanings and signifiers (Sökefeld, 2001). Unlike their second-generation peers, with whom they share the search for a combinatorial identity among the plural ones they carry, the construction of the adoptees' ethnic identity does not take place within the family, by mirroring in their parents, but it is built in solitude, balancing belonging and extraneousness. It invests the very nature of filiation. Furthermore, the process of integration of the adoptee's two cultures favors the family's⁹ which thrives on a strong emotional and belonging bond, while the access to the heritage of the country of origin is weak. The ethnic identity of the adoptee's birth-country is subtractive (as is the construction of a new mother tongue) compared to that of the host country. It is time by time revisited and modified, depending on the adoptive experience and the attribution of meaning that the social context gives to a specific ethnic group, often based on prejudices and discrimination. Most of the times Italian adoptive families lack the awareness and the skills to grow dark-skinned children in white communities, inducing in them the perception of being white (colorblindness) even if society keeps considering them foreigners (so-called «Paradox of transracial adoption» in Lee, 2003). Without adequate preparation, white parents cannot offer their children the appropriate tools to react to racist micro-aggressions and/or to blatant racist episodes (Simon and Altstein, 2001). Children are simply not educated and made aware of what it means to live in a white society having dark skin or different somatic traits. From research data on racism episodes

in Italy that occurred to adoptees between 18 and 35 years of age, it emerges that most of them were victims of micro-racism and verbal attacks (Lorenzini, 2012, 2013, 2018). Recent research on this issue found that 70% of adoptive parents of children with different ethnic backgrounds (proxy respondents) declare their children suffered at least one episode of racism; over 60% of these regarding children of African origin. In 40% of cases, racist episodes occurred in school (Ferritti and Guerrieri, 2019).

Adoption is a judiciary measure that allows children to grow in permanent families and it is of crucial social importance. Adoptees need their differences to be recognized and accepted. The peculiarities of their life-stories are very often misunderstood leading to over-diagnose learning disabilities in them in early life and psychiatric conditions later on. Their skin color is often seen too little by their parents while it is highly exposed in a society not inclusive enough. This puts them at a crossroads of possible discrimination that must be addressed in order to minimize pernicious effects that may contribute to family crises and disruptions. During periods of *crisis*, schools can, as always, either be of help or provide the umpteenth backdrop for failure. In the post-adoption groups for the parents of adolescents, when crises emerge, the topics addressed involve theft, violence in the home, drug trafficking, irresponsible sexual behavior, alcohol use, negative peer associations, running away, psychiatric crises, mandatory health treatments and community placements. Always school dropout takes center stage. In the middle of such events, instead, a strong connection with well-trained teachers could be extremely important and useful. (Guerrieri, 2018)

1. School and life paths

The Italian model of inclusion shows differences in respect to that of other countries (Canevaro and de Anna, 2010; Piccioli, 2017). Italy, in fact, fully includes in regular classes pupils with disabilities, guaranteeing their participation in school life and striving to allow educational success for all students regardless of their belonging to specific minorities (D'Alessio, 2013a). The growing awareness on the matter suggests that it is the society that, in terms of structures, organization, methodologies, makes people disabled, shifting the focus from the disability of the individual to the fault of the institutions (D'Alessio, 2013b). This perspective is definitely contrary to ableism that does not recognize dis/ability as a socially constructed identity but perceives disabled people as intrinsically different, as individuals deviating from the standards of skill they aspire to achieve (Erevelles, 2000). Nevertheless, Italian school seems yet not sufficiently equipped to handle the complex biographies of students who are, at the same time, adopted, disabled and ethnically different. These intersecting categories urge schools to identify innovative educational solutions recognizing the needs and resources of these specific students.

Frequently, for example, references to cultural biographies are totally absent in PDPs (Piano Didattico Personalizzato) and PEIs (Progetto Educativo Individualizzato) (Chieppa, 2019). Adopted pupils and students, as outlined previously, are often SENitized – similarly to what happens to migrant students (Migliarini, D'Alessio and Bocci, 2018) – and schools employ PDPs thought for students with SLD missing crucial issues such as the effects of PTSD and attachment difficulties, ignoring the hardship to deal with fragments of the past that need integration with the present. In this way, in those fundamental educational plans, the medical determinants seem overrepresented underestimating any other identity component. Most importantly, it seems that the strategies proposed in such PDPs are not resolving the actual everyday problems¹⁰. To

recognize multiply layered differences and their complexity is fundamental to remove barriers as well as to understand what institutions actually need. This scenario particularly affects adoptees since, even if adoption is a very effective recovery measure in childhood development, it does not fully extend to the area of school performance (van Ijzendoorn and Juffer, 2006; Pollak *et al.*, 2010; Stevens *et al.*, 2008; Merz and McCall, 2011; Ricchiardi, Coggi, 2019). International research highlights important shortcomings in school readiness (Merz and McCall, 2011), school problems already in basic school, especially for children who were adopted after 12 months of age and coming from traditional institutions (van Ijzendoorn and Juffer, 2006), above-average difficulties in basic disciplines (Vinnerljung *et al.*, 2010). Verhulst, Althaus and Verluis-den Bieman (1990) report an incidence of SLD higher in adopted children, 13.2% versus 4.4% of biological children; more recently, Molin, Cazzola and Cornoldi (2009) noticed significantly higher than average attention difficulties. For adopted pupils, educational success often appears hindered by the results of traumatized life paths (Lauretti, 2020). Further investigation is needed since it is not clear the assessment of SLD in children with such traumatic experiences and different biographies and cultural origins (Simonetta, 2014).

As previously said, how the intersectionality of the differences affects the learning potential of the adopted pupils is still a rather unexplored, albeit mapped, area. For instance, only recently it has been considered how the adoptee's story might be an important ingredient to conflictual situations in a class. Children, activated by what happens in class, may enact survival behaviors in disturbing and unsettling ways, difficult to understand¹¹. After all, this is the nature of trauma: *The characteristic of the trauma is that, in general, it is not possible to observe it directly: it shows itself through the effects it produces* (Luzzatto *et al.*, 2016, pp. 44). As already mentioned, only too often the school's reaction focuses on the request for a certification in order to guarantee additional resources to teachers (Ferritti and Guerrieri, 2020). Instead, the reasons behind this type of behavior can be manifold. One is abuse: it is difficult to have data on sexual abuse suffered by adopted minors, which is often discovered only after the adoptive placement, while international studies show that it has happened very frequently (75/95%) among children adopted with special needs (McNamara and McNamara, 1990; Minsheu and Hooper, 1990). Furthermore, information about sexual abuse is often not revealed (even when known) to prospective adopters fearing that those minors may not find an adoptive placement or that this type of information may stimulate in the parenting couple a fearful mind representation of the child; sometimes the information is withdrawn just for a misunderstood sense of privacy and secrecy. On the contrary, lack of information hampers the adoptive parents' task, since it makes it difficult for them to decipher the child's behavior. The trauma of abuse interferes with the emotions that children experience when separating from the family of origin and building the attachment to the new family. It is no coincidence that sexually abused children often undergo, due to their complex stories, multiple placements before their arrival in a definitive family. Once they arrive in a safe family, children are overwhelmed with affection and attention that may act as traumatic reactivators that lead them to engage in seductive and sexualized behaviors towards parents and other children, creating confusion and discomfort. Social and school relationships can be severely jeopardized by the consequences of these complex situations.

Other complexities should not be underestimated either, such as the new language's acquisition by international adoptees, (Freddi, 2015). Internationally adopted children learn quickly Italian basic vocabulary and daily common expressions, while a more

abstract language, necessary for school learning, is learned much more slowly. Therefore, they might present difficulties not so much in learning to *read* as in understanding the text and reporting the learned contents. Sometimes they may have trouble in understanding and using specific disciplinary terms that become more and more abstract. In fact, the learning mode of the new adoptive mother tongue is not *additive* (the new language is added to the previous one) but *subtractive* (the new language replaces the previous one), and it, therefore, implies a greater difficulty that may sometimes make them feel without words to express themselves, triggering negative emotions that prevent learning. To support a pupil, just arrived by international adoption, the usual paradigms might not be sufficient. It is important to avoid assimilating the internationally adopted pupil to the migrant one since s/he does not bring his family (or parts of it) with him and s/he does not have a daily usage of the original language as the migrant pupil does. Language is also connected to many other emotional aspects linked to memories of the pre-adoptive life and to the wish to fully belong to the new environment that requires the acquisition of a second mother tongue. In a few words, it is connected to identity issues, like physical features are. In a way, the change of language, as well as a body growing totally different from the parents' ones, are the physical representation of the huge transition an adoptee undergoes in life. Bodies and words, after all, fill space and communication.

In 2019, CARE promoted research focusing on the perception of adoptive families and on the experience young adoptees had about discrimination and racism, trying to pinpoint how much Italian adoptive families are prepared to face those when turned against their children. The research proceeded in a qualitative way, targeted at adoptive parents and adoptees by two different tools. Parents, who adopted between 2001 and 2019 in NA or IA, were involved via an avalanche sampling, randomly distributed, without statistical significance. Questionnaires were distributed with closed and open CAWI questions and 2.418 out of the 2.550 completed questionnaires were valid (95%). The research involved adoptees via interviews. The questionnaires were with closed and open questions CAPI. The panel counted 20 adopted individuals, aged between 16 and 24 (10 males, 10 females), 6 nationally adopted and 14 internationally. The average age of the adoptees was 18.75. The collected data actually confirmed that in Italy, if one is phenotypically different, one can be a victim of racist episodes (even if Italian citizen). By the collected data, 70% of the adoptive parents to somatically different children declared that they suffered at least one episode of racism. Furthermore, those who most denounced episodes of racism (almost 61%), were parents of children of African origin. Most importantly, it emerged that the most frequent place where the racist episodes occurred (40%) was school. The interviewed adoptees reported both racist aggressions and micro-aggressions and of being constantly asked, often with very intrusive questions, about their foreign origin (even national adoptees when somatically different) being seen as *non-Italian* just because of their skin color or appearance. Both the young women and the young men of the sample suffered stereotypes about femininity or masculinity in relation to their country of origin (over-sexualization the females or the contrary males). Most of the interviewed told those events to parents, relatives and friends finding help and sometimes (but not always) a solution, but almost all of them reported that parents had not warned them about the possibility of a racist incident before it happened. When asked what they suggested in order to spur a change in social attitude, all the interviewed, pointing out that Italian society still knows very little about adoption, answered it was necessary to build a correct culture by giving more voice to the protagonists and they underlined the central role the school might play in this process.

Conclusions

Important theoretical frameworks (e.g. Disability Critical Race Theory – DisCrit) explore, also in educational environments, how the ethnic dimension and the ability status get socially constructed and made interdependent: racism validates and reinforces the abilities and the abilities validate and strengthens the racism (Annamma *et al.*, 2013). Studies show that African American students in U.S. schools are more likely to be classified with mental retardation, emotional or disabled disorders than their white peers, while an over-representation on the ethnic basis is not found when the disability is sensory (blindness, deafness) or affects impairments. Racial and class disparities in measuring academic performance and achievements are well documented by Anglo-American scientific literature.

Students from historically marginalized racial or ethnic groups, students of low socioeconomic status (SES), and students who are language learners have significantly lower achievement scores than their white, middle-class peers (Tate, 1997; U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). [...] Furthermore, American Indian, African American, and Native Hawaiian children ages 6 through 21 were more likely to receive special education services than in all other racial or ethnic groups combined (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs, 2014). These trends may emerge, in part, because of issues of assessment bias. Assessment bias can occur when the design of an assessment or interpretation of results systematically disadvantages certain groups of students because of differences in race, SES, language proficiency, or cultural norms (Lane and Leventhal, 2015) (Lewis and Fisher, 2016, p. 340).

In the US context, the intertwining of dis/ability and racism is detectable even when African American students are labeled *at-risk* only because they are black (Annamma *et al.*, 2013). In Italy, this happens to students of foreign origin but above all to adopted students when the two categories coincide. Risks are amplified and two opposite things may happen: on one hand, the student's needs might be denied or remain unseen, on the other, they might be pathologized recurring too frequently to a compensatory or *pathological* pedagogy (Annamma, 2018) which attributes the difficulties directly to students without considering the socio-environmental gaps. It is observable an excess of categorization, especially in the vast area of the special needs (SEN) where students with socio-environmental gaps or NAIs are included. Often, this is the only way left to the teachers in a bureaucratized school to activate inclusive tools, but sometimes students get trapped in these categories mainly out of prejudice, since even with the best intentions, pupils with migrant backgrounds, were they second generation or adopted, are considered problematic. This is the so-called phenomenon of SENitization as an inclusion strategy of students with a migration background (Migliarini, 2017). Classification of such students in special categories might evolve in their expulsion from the class context or it might imply they are totally delegated to support teachers, or that they simply linger for a long time in a category apart, missing standard educational opportunities. Least but not last, it may happen that schools arbitrarily discourage the enrollment of potentially complex pupils. This is easily achieved in a number of ways: simply opposing enrollments once the year has started, claiming that the class *maximum capacity* would

be exceeded, resorting to the fact that those students do not belong to the correct *user area*, enrolling them forcibly one year behind the registry age or failing the first year of insertion, or simply not guaranteeing the tools necessary for the best learning.

Although the theoretical and regulatory framework of the Italian school is inclusion oriented, students with multiple intersections are at risk of micro-exclusions which can cause marginalization and dispersion (Migliarini *et al.*, 2019). Possible new approaches could be investigated to augment awareness of perspective teachers. International literature (UK and Australia), for example, suggests, in the case of adopted pupils, the need to know how to deal with children with attachment and post-traumatic issues (Bomber 2012, Brooks 2020). To acquire general knowledge about adopted pupils and students and/or in foster care helps to take into account the multiple situations described in the present work. Eventually, we must point out the complex situation of secondary school (Guerrieri, 2018). Academic difficulties in secondary schools start to appear more evident in the literature: in France, 43% of adopted children appear to have difficulties against 20% of non-adopted children (EFA survey, 2015)¹². A multidisciplinary approach is needed and adoption must explicitly appear as an important area to know of.

Note

¹ The opinions expressed are personal and do not bind the institutions they belong to in any way.

² In the article we use the term *ethnicity* to avoid that of race used in the Anglo-Saxon world but which in the Italian and social sciences context appears inappropriate. Although we know that not all people with a migrant background consider themselves to belong to an ethnic group, but rather to a nationality, in the case of the people adopted we cannot use the term *other nationalities* because they are Italians.

³ In a survey conducted in Bologna in 2009 on children with disabilities with parents with non-Italian citizenship or adopted by Italian families, 51.1% of the teachers interviewed believed that the difficulties were mainly attributable to disability (Caldin and Dainese, 2011).

⁴ CAI is the central Italian agency for International adoption.

⁵ Coordinamento CARE is a network of adoptive and foster family associations and actually is the most important and unique Italian network of such associations.

⁶ The so-called PEI (Individualized educational plan for children with disabilities) and PDP (Personalized didactic plan for children with learning disabilities and other generical special needs) in the Italian school system.

⁷ *Le linee di indirizzo per il diritto allo studio degli alunni adottati*, MIUR 2014.

⁸ National adoptees too may have analogous issues, many of them are Romani children, more and more of them are children of first-generation migrants and some of them are themselves first-generation migrants. Unfortunately, in Italy, data on NA is still less precise and available than that regarding on IA.

⁹ Family cultural socialization strategies through which adoptive parents negotiate cultural and ethnic experiences of adopted children to promote the development of their ethnic identity play a key role in this direction, but in Italy they are still underdeveloped (Ferreri *et al.*, 2017).

¹⁰ R. Lombardi, for example, investigated the necessity of revisiting the structure of PDP's in Guerrieri Nobile 2015, while, among others, Chistolini (2006) and Ricchiardi Coggi (2019) describe the wide variety of issues involved in dealing with the difficulties of adopted pupils in school performance.

¹¹ In the post-adoption project launched by the Lazio Region in the two-year period 2018-2020, a supervision axis is dedicated to the school theme. From November 2018 to June 2019, 17 cases were supervised for a total of 20 minors, of which 13 adopted nationally and 7 internationally. Some of the observations reported here are the result of the coordination work of the second author in this project (see also Ferritti, Guerrieri and Mattei 2020).

¹² More and more are being studied fragility issues in adoptive families (especially during the adolescence of the adoptees). Recently the CAI started a research on crises during this specific period.

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