

Spaces for Native and Foreign-Born Parents: When Personal Thoughts Can Become an Opportunity for Learning

Dalila Raccagni¹ 

Guest edited by Alan Bainbridge, Laura Formenti, Ewa Kurantowicz

Abstract

Globalisation characterises our current century and, as a consequence of its worldwide spread, it affects a multiplicity of disciplines. In light of this phenomenon, the present article, which describes qualitative research in family pedagogy, focuses on foreign-born parents. The life stories of these parents provide an interesting point of reflection on the importance of recognising themselves as bearers of a unique history, despite being citizens of the world.

The narrated and shared personal experience is characterised by relationships and thoughts that have helped form the individual. These same relationships represent themselves in the present in the host country and challenge the subject to a daily learning experience. However, the learning and reflective moment is not limited to self-reflection. Therefore, it is fundamental for foreign-born parents to be able to interact with other subjects, who in turn are required to be welcoming towards the foreign parents. This is an attitude that requires fearlessness because a sense of security or fear towards others is an expression of the trust that a community has in itself. If one believes in the community's ability to integrate other individuals within itself, then its members consequently have an attitude of openness towards the foreigner: in other words, they are not afraid of the different culture. This predisposition requires parents to adopt a logic of globalisation which includes rights and duties; it is a challenging task since the planetary dimension of citizenship cannot be achieved without a true commitment to reflection, active decision-making and education.

¹ Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy, dalila.raccagni@unicatt.it,
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3782-0059>

Sustainable ecologies are associated with relationships, culture, ethnicity, and education. Therefore, it is important that within local communities spaces of encounter between parents are fostered, so that the thoughts of the individual can be shared. These spaces should be built with the awareness that human sustainability itself is often related to creating sufficient hope in individuals and communities, building meaningful dialogue and an experience of communion through all the differences. In these contexts, the subject as such lives a continuous educational and formative experience, which leads them towards their own personal and social search of the self and others. This experience is possible as a result of the foreign-born parents' capability of reciprocal socialisation, sincere dialogue, and confrontation with the other (i.e. the native parents) in the diversity and richness of which each one is the bearer.

Keywords

foreign-born parents, narration, dialogue, meeting place

Introduction

One of the fundamental characteristics of our age is globalisation. Migration, which is a direct consequence of it, represents one of its most irreversible features, as shown by the majority of studies. During the XX and XXI centuries, the recession of space and national borders has brought an acceleration of international migration processes. This is a typical trait of globalisation stimulated by the space/time revolution (Scidà, 1999, p. 77), which has generated “a multiplication of the human migration movements across the entire planet, thus leading to the direct confrontation between very different people, cultures, stories, religions, and languages” (Daclon, 2008, p. 57). Undoubtedly, the European phenomenon is fertile and privileged ground for studies on migration processes, as opposed to a worldwide context which would yield significantly different results. In this regard, we can affirm that “in fact, the political and social instabilities, the violent ethnic conflicts in the East, and poverty and wars in Africa are some of the factors that have recently changed the world and have contributed to transforming Southern Europe into an area of migratory attraction” (Baganha, 2009, 23).

Specifically, there are several meanings that can be attributed to migration, starting from those conveying the idea of an event or act forced onto people, to those referring to environmental, economic, and family issues. Migration is mostly voluntary and largely prompted by social and economic status. The unfavourable conditions in the place of origin that encourage the decision to migrate are called *push factors* and include, among others, economic poverty, war, and lack of educational or professional opportunities. Moreover, most migrations involve

the movement of a single family member who, over the years, then expands the opportunity of migrating to the rest of the family. In particular, within the context of the generalisation of family reunions during migratory processes, two categories may be defined. On the one hand, international marriages between citizens and individuals with no citizenship; on the other, migrants who have settled down in the host country and have their partners join them provided they had previously officialised their relationship status in their native country.

It is the latter category that has spurred the interest for the present work, since this research has involved foreign-born parents residing in the provinces of Brescia and Bergamo in northern Italy.

The choice of migrant families is the result of the author's interest in the issue, especially in light of the consistent and continuous presence of foreign-born families in the areas mentioned above. These families are an integral part of the social tissue and they play a crucial role as an educational agency, and thus as the future social capital of the local context. Their stories are different from what is often narrated on the front pages of newspapers and on television news; indeed, the media is often guilty of causing misinformation among the population by confusing the protagonists of the current migration routes with the immigrant population. The latter are either people who have obtained Italian citizenship, are citizens of another European Union country (or are signatories of the Treaty of Free Movement), have received asylum status for humanitarian reasons, or have obtained a residence permit for an indefinite period of time.

Among this group are people from the Republic of Ghana who, due to their large presence, are ranked as the 21st most frequent immigrant population in Italy, and it these subjects that the present research shall focus on. This scale of immigration is not unexpected in a context such as that of Italy which has been witnessing, for over thirty years, many migratory processes that have resulted in 123 different nationalities settled across its territory. The presence of Ghanaians has been numerically important and stable since the 1980s, despite a progressive decrease in recent years, as shown by statistical data.¹ Initially, migration mainly involved the breadwinners; now, families have been reunited owing to the residency

¹ As of 1st January 2011, the number of Ghanaians residing in the province of Bergamo was 1,935—a 14.6% decrease compared to the previous year; while in the province of Brescia, there were 5,804 (3.4% of all resident foreigners in Brescia). As of 1st January 2019, among 5,255,503 resident foreign citizens in Italy, 11.7% of these lived in Lombardy. Among the 51,382 Ghanaians residing in Italy, 10,909 live in the Lombardy provinces of Brescia and Bergamo (3,533 and 1,574 respectively) (Caritas, Migrantes, 2011; Caritas, Migrantes, 2019).

permits they obtained for family reunification. However, in order to understand the migrant person, we cannot limit ourselves to statistic and demographic considerations, especially since, as Tobie Nathan underlines, “the foreigner, even the neediest one, is rich in languages, smells, feelings that he brings with him, he is rich in explanations, creatures, objects of which he becomes, through the magic of the journey, their representative among us, his hosts” (2003, p. 46).

For this reason, and with the intention of narrating the life stories of the parents involved in the study, we adopted the autobiographical method in order to investigate the classic pedagogical categories through the axiological, relational, communitarian, and reflexive dimensions. The life stories collected through semi-structured biographical interviews are presented here in order to share, among other different pedagogical categories, the significant role of dialogue in the negotiation between the relationship with the self and the other and the need for educational spaces where parents can converse and share their experiences.

Listening to Oneself

If the migratory experience manifests itself often exclusively through the quantification and instrumentalisation of numbers, the narrative method becomes an important tool for the emergence of men and women's past experiences, thoughts, and perspectives that may often otherwise remain hidden by the statistics. Frequently, the foreign-born parent experiences, within the host country context, a feeling of estrangement, insecurity, discomfort, inferiority, and often even scarce social visibility. These feelings are worsened when the individuals are called into question by a society that fails to perceive them as guardians of a story. Thus, the subjects must, first of all and regardless of their past experiences, recognise themselves as the carriers of a generative and performative narrative to which they are called to bear witness. Indeed, the subject is first and foremost the bearer of a family history, but also a personal one. His or her identity is multiple and is therefore manifested in light of their family, social, and narrative identity.

From an educational-pedagogical point of view, the family presents itself as a narrative relational system. It is a generator of meanings, operating methods, and traditions. Thus, the family culture and memory are also elaborated by virtue of the exchanges interwoven with the surrounding environment, which occur in a determined space and time and have characteristics that cannot be homologated or generalised. In particular, the family narrative follows a precise rhythm whereby the past becomes present and manifests itself while also becoming the future, thus generating an opportunity for planning (Pati, 2017). The narration

of family history and culture is therefore indispensable for the construction of a personal identity and for the development of the subjective feeling of belonging to a shared symbolic universe. It is only through these experiences that the parent can become a narrating subject in society.

The narration generally defined as a story, a semiotic linguistic presentation of at least two successive states of things, events, or actions, in truth should not be strictly intended as a mere flow of written or spoken words. On the contrary, we must be aware of the strong pedagogical and educational value that the narrative methodology can assume.

In the specific case of human sciences (philosophy and pedagogy included), “the autobiographical narration takes on the role of a true methodology that starts from a self-orientative and educational itinerary and that allows you to work on your own experiences until you reach the strengthening of your identity, which, in turn and by combining past, present and future, opens itself up to new projects” (De Carlo, 2010, p. 15). In order to recognise and own our memories, it is necessary to be able to assign appropriate names to things, people, and feelings. The parents must be able to divide their personal story into progressive steps, highlighting and marking those facts and events that represented emblematic moments for them: it is these contingencies that generate a narrative passage for life. Only by reflecting on their own story and becoming able to narrate it do people become their bearers. In this way, the story can then also be shared with the community and, in a perspective of continuity with the present research, with other parents.

In particular, the person who is able to reflect is often unaware of the attention they are paying towards this learning process. This implies that the person shall change in consideration of the reflectiveness that learning requires. Indeed, it is only through critical reflectiveness that transformative learning can occur. Although it is often difficult to assign a name and concretely identify what has been learnt through the life experience of being a foreign-born parent and thus having lived the migration experience, changes can be perceived and recognised.

However, this recognition must not be limited to the individual level; it should also be expanded to society. Thus, it is fundamental that those who welcome this change possess a welcoming attitude and, above all, are willing to listen.

Through the dialogic relationship, in which the listener and the narrator share a place and a time of collaborative listening and become their own learning resource, the narrator may be able to re-elaborate their own personal experience, starting with self-reflection. In addition, dialogue can provide the same opportunity to the listener, who may experience self-reflection through the narrator’s story. The re-

interpretation of the essential experience and the possibility to share it with others prelude to and require an attentive and active listening (Kanizsa, 1993).

In pedagogy, active listening is indeed an effective way in which the subject can show respect towards another person while also validating their opinion without ensuing futile discussions (Elia, 2015, p. 297). Active listening is a fundamental characteristic of ecological communication itself, since to be ecological in communication means to be in contact and in tune with three factors: the sender of the message, the receiver, and the context. In ecology, there is a concurrent interaction between different complex organisms and the environment, which must be preserved. Therefore, transferring these principles to the field of communication means activating group behaviours that provide for the free exposition of one's own ideas in harmony with the group and its global project (Liss, 2013).

Consequently, dialogue is not a mere conversation and not even a necessary exchange of information. Dialogue is guided by the subject with the aim of revealing to their interlocutors new information about themselves. Therefore, we must adopt an attitude of availability towards the other, which ensures that "understanding is not categorising the experience of the other into our own, but rather opening our personality to understanding the problems of others: this principle [...] teaches us that even during listening, the ethical need for availability is essential" (Bertin, 1962, p. 74).

In this regard, it is clear how the narrator entrusts their experience, their values, and all the encounters and events that have studded their personal experience to the other. Such non-judgmental listening requires a self-referential attention to the thoughts, feelings, and emotions aroused by the story and the consequent willingness to decentralise one's own point of view.

The act of respecting another individual calls for the recognition of differences and the awareness that each one "must be respected by virtue of their equal dignity in an attempt to enhance the diversities that qualify and identify them, in terms of unrepeatable uniqueness" (Butturini, 1996, 34).

As a consequence, it is not appropriate to channel all the stories in a generalisation process, especially given the uniqueness of the subject. This means that, in order to welcome the other, one must accept their way of acting and expressing themselves, as well as the ways in which they both communicate and interact with each other. Only by adopting this attitude does the role of dialogue become generative and a concrete opportunity to help the continuous negotiation process, which is generated by the relationship between the self and the other, both bearers of stories.

Parents, foreign- or native-born, must therefore be helped in acquiring a position of openness and acceptance towards the challenge that daily interactions present to them. In any case, this is a challenge that questions the meaning of being a parent today, even more so for foreign-born parents. In this regard, it is important that the parent called into question by the change must have knowledge of their own parental experience and of what this implies psychologically and concretely. Indeed, it is this condition only that can define the dynamism of their role.

In light of these considerations and from a research perspective, the following interesting questions were asked to the Ghanaian parents participating in the study: *From your point of view, are there different ways of being a mother/father in Ghana? What are the traits of being a parent in Ghana that you would like to bring to Italy? If you were to give some advice to an Italian parent, what would that be?*²

Thus, even though dialogue possesses a transformative power, we believe that the words uttered by these parents should not be limited to the present research, but rather should be shared with as many people as possible.

For this reason, in the present work we have hypothesised the need to build spaces for dialogue and narration between native- and foreign-born parents so as to provide them with contexts of exchange and education.

Spaces of Dialogue for Parents

The solipsistic and solitary tendency of our cultural age, as well as that of many families, tends to hinder relationships. However, in order for everyone to experience a real opportunity for non-judgmental discussion, this perspective must be abandoned. In this sense, we emphasised how fundamental a fearless attitude is, because “the sense of security or fear towards the other are the expression of the trust a community has in itself. If the community believes in its ability to integrate other individuals within itself, then we have an attitude of openness towards the foreigner and we do not fear their culture” (Cotesta, 2002, p. 5). Thus, it is vital that the parents’ everyday actions tend towards a logic of globalisation, which includes rights and duties. This is indeed challenging because “the planetary dimension of citizenship cannot progress without a commitment to thoughts, decisions, and education” (Cambi, 2006, p. 82). In addition, this shows how the identity of a community is increasingly complex and complicated,

² The questions were formulated according to the Ghanaian parents’ level of proficiency in Italian. The translation reflects the edited wording.

enhanced by the multicultural multitude that today animates the places in which we live.

The relationship itself is “a place of mutual learning when one experiences common humanity” (Bellingreri, 2019, p. 56). On the other hand, we are aware that meeting and mediation spaces do not exist by nature, but on the contrary, they must be sought, desired, created, and defended. These are paths that in a conscious and intentional way need choices and institution; otherwise, the risk is to fall into indifference, into superficial relationships that hinder free expression when instead the encounter with the other can become an experience of recognition.

In this regard, the answers given by the Ghanaian parents are interesting, in particular when they were asked to give advice to the native-born parents. Their answers were compelling and emblematic even though they were not actually instanced directly to the native-born parents. In addition, they can become interesting topics for pedagogical research since they provide reflection and change.

Among some of the themes that emerged from the Ghanaian parents’ advice is the one of authority, in reference to which a father suggested “that you don’t need to be as strict as we are in Ghana, but at the same time you shouldn’t give the children too much freedom. *You should teach them a good education and one that is needed in life.*” However, it is difficult to speak of parental authority since every family is a context of production of normativity (Favretto, 1994, pp. 59–83); in particular, according to the perspective of legal pluralism, the right associated with being a member of a family arises from the structure of the family group itself and from the need to determine rules in daily life. In any case, the attempt to define the normativity existing in each family nucleus and thus embodied by the parents themselves could lead, in light of the diverse opinions and life stories, to changing, distorting, or confirming one’s own actions in this regard.

A further reflection stems from another father, who stated that in his opinion “there is a different way, in Italy or even in other European countries in general, I see children have a lot of freedom, but with some things we must remind the children that they are ignorant and therefore it is necessary to educate them. *They are given too much freedom, in my opinion you can’t give them too much freedom. When it comes to some things it is necessary to recognise that they are still children.*” This could help native-born parents to reflect on the theme of freedom, in full awareness that the parent, through their educational action, plays a key role in their children’s present. However, at the same time the parents also act in an attempt to lay the necessary foundations for the realisation of their children’s future, full of freedom and autonomy.

Lastly, the matter of culture is also remarkable; this emerges from the words of a mother who stated that “first of all it is important that they maintain their culture”. This point can lead to a debate on hot topics such as culture and the intergenerational transmission of traditions.

There are several studies (R. Kaës et al., 1995) that underline how a person may be influenced by the place in which they live and the stories that accompany them; thus, in a hypothetical debate between native- and foreign-born parents the role that they attribute to their children within the intergenerational bond framework could emerge as the link that ensures continuity with the country of origin. However, it could also concurrently stand as the starting point for the chain of filiation, through which the child forms their identity. It is clear how in these spaces of dialogue the parents become aware of their way of being, of how their personal history affects them and how they can achieve awareness of automated actions through careful planning and purpose. Therefore, only in the exchange and in the reciprocity endorsed by these places is it possible to achieve useful results and a productive experience. Every family can be considered as a microculture (Formenti, 2001, pp. 102–103), of which every parent becomes its spokesperson.

However, these spaces must be sought after, starting from when the same sustainable ecologies come into contact with these intertwined stories and relationships, with culture, ethnicity, and education. Consequently, it is important that local native contexts promote meeting places for parents—so that the thoughts of an individual can be shared with others—in full awareness that human sustainability itself is often associated with the creation of a sufficient hope in individuals and communities. This, in turn, builds a meaningful dialogue and an experience of communion through differences that, nevertheless, must be valued.

Conclusion

These considerations stem from the perception of the life stories of the foreign-born parents involved in the study. These reflections and emotions have led us to contemplate how research should not stop at the problematisation of pedagogical categories belonging to family studies, but rather it should focus on the realisation of these meeting places. These places could be implemented in different contexts and local services, from the religious community to the school system.

These contexts are places that could also become micro-communities, which A. Bellingreri (2010, p. 204) defines as “empathic”, meant as a “welcoming autonomy”, from an ethical perspective that “consists in a common search for

truth and in mutual recognition of objective goods and shared personal values. Therefore, understood in this way, this secularity presents itself as a universal human position, which lives and interprets every occasion of confrontation as a process or situation of co-learning.”

From this perspective, the subject as such would live a continuous educational and formative experience, which would lead them towards a personal and social exploration of the knowledge of themselves and others. This experience could be the result of the foreign-born parents’ mutual socialisation, sincere dialogue, debate with the other—in this case the native-born parents—in a context of diversity and richness of which each one is the bearer. All this also means that it will often be necessary to welcome the possible conflict and its generative value, since it would mean “paying attention to the possibilities for contingent reorganisation that every relationship offers us. In fact, in every encounter and in the relationship that sustains it, it is possible to pay attention to the discontinuity that opens up in every exchange” (Morelli, 2014, p. 17). Indeed, every culture can give and receive from others precisely because culture itself is not without contamination, encounters, and relationships, wanted and unwanted. “Every people has its own culture—wrote Father Lorenzo Milani—and no people has less than another,”³ therefore no educating community can take responsibility for avoiding exchange and encounters with people from different cultures.

Therefore, creating opportunities to meet, prompted by the educational intention of taking care of and listening to each other in order to learn from the other, offers parents the opportunity to meet around the educational convergences that are inherent to being parents, regardless of their origin.

We believe that it is only by giving a concrete voice to these parents and accepting what they can pass on that change can occur today. This change could lead to the awareness that, as parents and as adults, we must never become entrenched in our own convictions. Only in this way can we become the increasingly reflective protagonists of the educating community.

References

- Baganha, M. I. B. (2009). Il modello migratorio dell’Europa Meridionale. In M. T. Consoli (Ed.), *Il fenomeno migratorio nell’Europa del Sud* (23-33). FrancoAngeli.
- Bellingreri, A. (2019). *La consegna*. Scholè.
- Bellingreri, A. (2010). *Cura dell’anima. Profili di una pedagogia del sé*. Vita e Pensiero.

³ Scuola di Barbiana, Lettera a una professoressa, Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, Firenze, 1975, p. 139.

- Bertin, G. M. (1962). *Educazione alla socialità e processo di formazione*. Armando.
- Butturini, E. (1996). *Educare alla pace nella scuola attraverso un approccio interculturale*. In A. Agosti (Ed.), *Intercultura e insegnamento*. SEI.
- Cambi, F. (2006). *Incontro e dialogo*. Carocci.
- Caritas, M., (2011). *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2011*. IDOS.
- Caritas, M., (2019). *XXVIII Rapporto Immigrazione 2018-2019*. Tau Editrice.
- Cotesta, V. (2002). *Lo straniero. Pluralismo culturale e immagini dell'Altro nella società globale*. Laterza.
- Daclon, C. M. (2008). *Geopolitica dell'ambiente: Sostenibilità, conflitti e cambiamenti globali*. FrancoAngeli.
- De Carlo, E. (2010). *Autobiografie allo specchio: Strumenti metodologici del ri-leggersi tra educazione degli adulti e narratologia*. FrancoAngeli.
- Favretto, A. R. (1994). Pluralismo e microrealtà sociali. *Sociologia del diritto*, 1, 59-83.
- Formenti, L. (2001). Il genitore riflessivo: Premesse a una pedagogia della famiglia. *Studium Educationis*, 1, 100-110.
- Elia, G. (2015). *La complessità del pensiero pedagogico tra tradizione e innovazione*. FrancoAngeli.
- Kaës, R., Faimberg, H., Enriquez, M., & Baranes, J. J. (1995). *Transmission de la vie psychique entre générations*. Dunod.
- Kanizsa, S. (1993). *Che ne pensi?*. Carocci.
- Liss, J. K. (2013). *La comunicazione ecologica*. La Meridiana.
- Morelli, U. (2014). *Il confitto generativo. La responsabilità del dialogo contro la globalizzazione dell'indifferenza*. Città Nuova.
- Nathan, T. (2003). *Non siamo soli al mondo*. Bollati Boringhieri.
- Pati, L. (2017). Editoriale. *La Famiglia*, pp. 5-9.
- Scidà, G. (1999). Globalizzazione, mobilità spaziale e comunità transnazionali. *Sociologia urbana e rurale*, XXI/58, 64-85.