

Multiple discriminations and the risk of cultural impoverishment. Considerations regarding the pedagogical challenges of the complex societyⁱ

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Abstract

This paper presents an overview of some of the major themes addressed by the Multidisciplinary Course on Human Rights Education coordinated by the authors for the Department of Education, Languages, Interculture, Literature, and Psychology (FORLILPSI) of the University of Florence in collaboration with the Italian Committee for UNICEF. The main thrust of the Course - and therefore of these notes - was and is the valorisation of children's rights education as a resource for combating the various types of discrimination that underlie processes of exclusion and social marginalization and that increase risks of educational poverty and cultural deprivation. More in detail, we analyze that set of cultural practices, behaviours, and beliefs that generate sexist and racial prejudices and lead to systematic violation of the rights of social groups, which thus suffer processes of inferiorisation.

Il contributo che presentiamo sintetizza alcuni dei principali temi chiave proposti durante il Corso Universitario Multidisciplinare di Educazione ai Diritti, coordinato da chi scrive per il Dipartimento Forlilpsi dell'Università di Firenze in collaborazione con il Comitato Italiano per l'Unicef. Il filo conduttore del corso, e dunque delle riflessioni che affidiamo a questo articolo, è costituito dalla valorizzazione dell'educazione ai diritti dell'infanzia come risorsa per contrastare le discriminazioni che stanno alla base dei processi di esclusione, di marginalizzazione sociale e che alimentano il rischio della povertà educativa e della deprivazione culturale. In particolare, il saggio va ad analizzare quel complesso di pratiche culturali, atteggiamenti e credenze che genera pregiudizi

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sessisti e razzisti e che conduce ad una violazione sistematica dei diritti dei gruppi sociali che subiscono un processo di inferiorizzazione.

Keywords: children's rights, educational poverty, multiple discrimination, sexism, racism

Parole chiave: diritti dell'infanzia, povertà educativa, discriminazioni multiple, sessismo, razzismo

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1. Fostering the practice of rights to contrast educational poverty

According to data published in October 2020 by Eurostat, in 2019 more than 25 million boys and girls in Europe were at risk of poverty; that is, 22.5% of the entire population under 18 years of age (Eurostat, 2020). The 2017 Save the Children report on educational poverty contains data and analyses useful for understanding the complexity of a phenomenon, child poverty, which in recent years does not seem to be dropping at an acceptable rate (Save the Children, 2017). We do not, to date, have elements sufficient to fully estimate the impact that the consequences of the pandemic may have had on the quality of life of our young and very young generations, but we may conjecture that the number of minors at risk of poverty is only destined to increase in coming years. What we do know is that children make up the segment of the population most at risk of poverty, of exclusion, and of marginalisation (Gruppo di lavoro per la Convenzione sui diritti dell'infanzia e dell'adolescenza, 2020). We also know how close a correlation exists between family poverty on the one hand and children's educational and scholastic disadvantage and loss of opportunities for affective and social development on the other (Nanni & Pellegrino, 2018). In short, we know that educational poverty puts the right of many children to grow up as active members of their social communities in jeopardy, and that this in turn heightens the risk of economic deprivation. Economic poverty and educational poverty reinforce one another and the disadvantage that is transmitted from one generation to the next (Save the Children, 2018). Intergenerational transmission of poverty is a factor as well-known as it is difficult to combat (Natoli & Turchini, 2018). In order to break out of the vicious circle of this injustice, it is necessary to focus on valorisation of education and training, on full implementation of the fundamental right to instruction, and on achieving educational success as concrete steps toward contrasting economic poverty. In addition to economic support policies targeting families in difficulty, then, what is needed is purposeful investment in children as a strategic societal resource. The primary aim of such investment should be to guarantee equal educational opportunities for all children and to guarantee that every child has access to a quality education.

Inequality is the primary factor determining poverty and social exclusion; data published in analyses and reports have demonstrated that the phenomenon has remained at substantially stable levels in Europe over the last 15 years. According to Eurostat statistics, in fact, only in 2017 did the number of individuals at risk of poverty decline to a value below that recorded for the year 2008 (Eurostat, 2019). The children most at risk live in single-parent or very numerous families, and in families in which the parents are underemployed. At the same time, however, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the parents' income alone is not an absolute guarantee against the risk of poverty. A family's economic fragility is correlated with multiple factors: the parents' level of instruction and/or a migratory background, to cite two of the weightiest. It is also known the risk of concentration of the urban poverty in deprived areas, which are characterized by social segregation and stigmatisation (Limes, 2016). With this premise, we can affirm that child poverty must be read as a multidimensional phenomenon (Botezat, 2016), a phenomenon, that is, which cannot be efficaciously addressed by taking action with purely economic means such as subsidies or income support measures benefitting the adult components of the family alone. And here, we must once again stress the importance of actions aimed specifically at children and specifically designed to lower the risk of educational poverty.

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Educational poverty should be understood as a process rather than a condition; as a result of a process of exclusion that limits children's right to education and makes their human growth an impossibility. Limiting the right to education prevents children from participating in growth opportunities that favour acquisition of the knowledge and development of the competencies that are indispensable to mastering the complexities of a society in which children risk marginalisation or exclusion.

Another signpost to furthering our understanding the issue of educational poverty points us toward comprehension of just how early the process of exclusion sets in. We know that there exists a strong correlation between educational poverty and a lack of educational opportunities during early and very early childhood, and that it is more urgent than ever that quality standards be put in place within European educational systems, starting with educational services for early childhood. But available data on the coverage rate of educational services for early childhood do not suggest that this urgency has been actually grasped. At the European level, the positive role of early childhood education and care (ECEC), within a framework of policies for education and training formulated from the perspective of the lifelong, lifewide and lifedep learning that is considered central to construction of a just and open society, is emphasised from many quarters. As far back as 2014, an Eurydice-Eurostat Report entitled *Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe* del 2014 pointed up not only the importance of early childhood education for children's personal development and growth, but also the benefits that investments in quality educational services for the 0 to 6 year age range can have, on the social level, for contrasting the processes of marginalization to which disadvantaged families and communities – and above all the children who suffer the effects of such a condition – are exposed in complex societies (Eurydice-Eurostat Report, 2014).

«Early childhood is the stage at which education can most effectively influence children's development. It is increasingly acknowledged, therefore, that investment in high quality ECEC lowers the cost for society in terms of lost talent and helps reduce public spending in the long term on welfare, health and even justice. Moreover, by laying strong foundations for successful lifelong learning, high quality ECEC brings particular benefits to disadvantaged children. It therefore serves as the keystone for building more equitable education systems» (Ivi, p. 19).

Implementation of more equitable educational and training systems, in a perspective of building inclusive societies, therefore requires investments in high-quality educational services for early childhood. Along the same lines, in the Council of the European Union's *Council conclusions on early childhood education and care: providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow*, adopted in May, 2011, we read the following: «If solid foundations are laid during a child's formative years, later learning becomes more effective and more likely to continue throughout life, increasing the equity of educational outcomes and lowering the costs for society in terms of lost talent and public spending on welfare, health and even justice» (Council of the European Union, 2011, p. 2).

Despite the evidence supporting this assertion, what emerges at the European level is a persisting tendency to accord less attention to ECEC than to any other level of education or training. Vice versa, we know that measures intended to guarantee more equitable access to educational services for early childhood could contribute significantly to achieving two of the priority objectives now facing us: to reduce the rate of early school

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leaving and to contrast the risk of poverty and social exclusion faced by the weakest segments of the population (*Ivi*, p. 3).

Leaving the policy plane for the more concrete world of education and training, we feel it worthwhile to take note of the extent to which an approach to education based on children's fundamental rights could represent an efficacious lever for fighting educational poverty. It would seem to us that the highest priority in this sense goes to the need to integrate the professional training of educators and teachers by promoting interdisciplinary programmes in human rights education with the aim, on the one hand, of providing incentives to introducing fundamental rights into our curricula and indeed our daily activities; on the other, of favouring reorganization of our material and relational contexts with the aim of making the informed exercise of these rights a normal practice and a shared experience (Biemmi & Macinai, 2020). Conscientious, trained educators and teachers can favour active participation by children and adolescents in the educational, scholastic, and training contexts and stimulate development of students' abilities to express their ideas and opinions, to listen to those of others, and to cooperate with others.

An approach based on the paradigm of human development and on promotion of capabilities is the theoretical groundwork for this proposal, which sees in the educational, scholastic and training contexts the most precious of resources for promoting equal opportunities for learning and for human development and, therefore, for contrasting educational poverty (Sen, 1999). In the words of Martha Nussbaum (2016, p. 51), «to the extent that a society values the equality of persons and pursues that as among its social goals, equality of capabilities looks like the most relevant sort of equality to aim at». What is indispensable here, if these contexts are to “keep their promises” in terms of educational opportunities, are adults who know how to orientate their professional roles toward full involvement of their students in realising the capabilities that contribute to a person's human development: understanding, being, being with others, acting (Nussbaum, 2011).

We need educators and teachers who are capable of offering concrete occasions for putting into practice the cognitive skills that are indispensable for understanding reality: applying thought in a critical form and in a flexible manner in order to acquire knowledge; turning acquired knowledge to decision-making and problem-solving. The cognitive dimension of development (knowing and using knowledge) draws on the deepest dimensions of being and strengthen them: the self-awareness, self-efficacy and self-esteem that are essential to independent management of one's life and to the process of identity-building that accompanies it. The dimension of interpersonal and relational competencies opens into the social side of living together: communicating, negotiating, affirming or denying, empathising and cooperating, worrying about others' wellbeing and the common good, seeing oneself in others and feeling one is a member of a community. The dimension of acting, finally, is that of daily doings, of the actions that must be carried out if one is to function in the contexts of everyday life, in relation to one's needs, one's desires, one's possibilities.

Marco Rossi Doria holds that resiliency, understood as the «capacity of human beings to come to terms, on a daily basis, with a precarious, alarming, or menacing existential situation or with a state of affairs in which the possibilities and occasions that life instead grants to others are out of their reach is not a “gratuitous” virtue» (1999, p. 124). A framework for education directed toward the practice of rights encapsulates those opportunities to exercise cognitive and non-cognitive competences that can favour initiation of the process of

empowerment in the face of conditions of deprivation and powerlessness that curb the full human development of children and adolescents.

2. Sexism and racism: analysis of two cultural mechanisms that generate discriminationⁱⁱ

If, as Macinai writes, «inequality is the primary factor determining poverty and social exclusion» (*Ibidem*), it may prove useful to examine the two major cultural devices that underlie the processes of exclusion, discrimination, and, in the final analysis, systematic violation of children's rights: sexism and racism. A copious international scientific production demonstrates that sexism and racism – to which we must add classism (Davis, 1981) – are forms of discrimination which can profitably be analyzed on parallel tracks, since they are based on analogous devices for social construction. In particular, both these forms of oppression and discrimination are rooted in a paradigm for interpreting reality – which we could call “naturalist ideology” – predicated on the belief that groupings by sex and by race have natural, biological, innate bases. The intersectional approach, which intersects the variables of sexism and racism, arrived, albeit belatedly, also in Italy and in recent years has also been used in the field of pedagogical research (Francis, 2018).

As we will see, sexism and racism, while two specific systems of differentiation and domination, indulge equally in “naturalization” of relationships that are instead socially constructed. Before we begin our discussion it may be useful to define a few key terms that lend themselves to paired association: sex/race, sexism/racism, gender/ethnicity, nature/culture.

The term “sexism” was coined in the 1960s by the U.S. women's movement, as an analogue of the term “racism”, to indicate a tendency to discriminate against individuals on the basis of their sex (biological). The term therefore indicates any arbitrary stereotyping of either sex, males or females, solely according to sexual affiliation. Sexism is thus a binary term that can be readily used in relation to instances of discrimination perpetrated against women and against men, equally – although in the women's lexicon it was originally a buzzword with a specific aim: to speak out against injustices and prejudices damaging to the female sexⁱⁱⁱ. Annamaria Rivera writes:

«The term and the concept were modelled by analogy on the term “racism”; as one who proclaims and justifies the supremacy of one “race” over another is racist, so one who proclaims and justifies the supremacy of one gender over another is sexist. The word “sexism” was intended to stress the parallelism between the mechanisms, the devices, the constructs that shore up the two systems of devaluation, discrimination, and subordination, both of which are based for the most part if not on explicit biological arguments, in any case on processes of naturalization» (Rivera, 2010, p. 27).

The term sexism was coined by the North American feminists in parallel with another term, “gender”. The most efficacious system for understanding the meaning and the innovative reach of the concept is to define it by contrast with the word “sex”: the word sex denotes a strictly biological category defined on the basis of anatomical-physiological distinctions between males and females; gender, instead, is a social construct that speaks to the non-naturalness of differences between the sexes and asserts the central role of culture in the processes of gender socialization and learning of male and female gender roles. The Italian *genere* is the translation of the English-

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language term gender, which was officially introduced into international scientific debate by U.S. scholar Gayle Rubin (1975) and became the “inaugural concept” of a new analytical perspective within women’s studies. The phrase “sex/gender system” describes «the set of processes, adaptations, patterns of behaviour, and relationships by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity and organizes division of tasks between men and women, differentiating the ones from the others» (Piccone Stella & Saraceno, 1996, p. 7).

The sex/gender system, which transversal to all human societies, imposes on individuals born *male* or *female* to become *men* and *women* and to consequently interpret different roles which – on pain of social sanction – are absolutely not interchangeable (Ruspini, 2009; Bourdieu, 1998). Over the course of the 1980s, the Italian translation of the term gender – *genere* – began to make its timid appearance in our linguistic usage as a neologism imbued with a certain ambiguity, since it established a new acceptance for an existing word. Italian-language dictionaries use the word *genere* with reference to a grammatical category (the word *sedia* is of the feminine *genere*, gender; the word *tavolo* is masculine); only very recently has a definition of the concept relative to its referential and not its strictly linguistic meaning been formalised. *Genere* is thus an ambivalent term, since it denotes both a grammatical and a social category (Luraghi & Olita, 2006). Thus, to disambiguate, it is sometimes necessary to have recourse to the expression *genere sociale*^{iv}. Gender, or *genere*, is thus «a useful and controversial category» (Rivera, 2010, p. 39) and one that possesses the all-important potential to «bring together in a single concept everything that is social, constructed, and arbitrary in assignment of differences to the sexes so emphasising the variability that exists between one society and another as well as the possibility that such an assignment could be subject to change» (Busoni, 2000, p. 27).

At the linguistic level, the distinction between sex and gender thus evinces two different theoretical perspectives and references an old debate, nature vs. culture, which has been applied even in discussion of the origins of the differences between the sexes. We could formulate the problem as follows. Do women and men learn to be different or should responsibility for their differences be attributed only to their different inherited biological legacies? Are differences in behaviour and psychological makeup determined by biological/genetic/hormonal data or are they, rather, the product of cultural conditioning and environmental influences? In short: are the differences between men and women innate or are they learned (Rogers, 2000)? This apparently ingenuous query is still today at the centre of the social debate over the equality of the sexes; in this context, the terms sex and gender refer to the innatist and the cultural perspective, respectively.

Faced with the still highly topical query posed halfway through the last century by Simone de Beauvoir (1949) – is one born or does one become a woman? – the defenders of the gender camp respond without hesitation: we *become* women (and men). It was from this assumption that the field of gender studies arose within sociology before it spread out, progressively, to become a topic of philosophical, historical, linguistic, anthropological, and even pedagogical interest; with the objective, in all cases, of revealing the cultural underpinnings of a phenomenon that is made to pass for “natural”.

The critique of the processes of “naturalisation” is also central to anti-racist thought. As Giovanna Campani, (2000) observes: «The processes of naturalization of differences and of social discrimination invest men and women as well as ethnic groups, the populations of the colonised countries, that are reduced to biological

groupings – races – or “racialised”» (p.82). The concept of “race” is probably that in which the process of naturalisation/biologisation of difference is most explicitly a function of an ideology destined to justify discrimination and oppression (*Ivi*, p. 83). The term race is in fact based on the idea that the human species can be subdivided into biologically distinct groups characterised by different intellectual, value-oriented and/or moral capacities, and the consequent belief that it is thus possible to lay out a hierarchy in which one particular – hypothetical – racially-defined grouping may be marked as superior or inferior to another. The category race has by now been largely abandoned in scientific debate: it is considered «a category as unfounded as it is paradoxical» (Rivera, 2010, p. 16) that tends to describe, classify and hierarchise something that is instead strictly historical and social, a sort of “imaginary category”, applied to real human groups, that is functional to devaluing, stigmatising, discriminating against certain groups, minorities, populations (Guillaumin, 1972 and 1992). Annamaria Rivera points out that «the traits on the basis of which certain groups of humans are distinguished to then be discredited, discriminated against, inferiorised, segregated and, in the worst case, exterminated, can be physical or moral, real or presumptive, visible or invisible: in the final analysis, *all the “races” are invented* [Italics is ours]» (Rivera, 2000, p. 18). The social stigma can be applied even in the absence of any visible physical identifier (for example, skin colour) since it is primarily the fruit of a process of social and symbolic construction (Goffman, 1963).

Although it is scientifically unfounded, the concept of race continues to influence the social perception of certain categories of humankind as different and inferior, and consequently to legitimise discrimination against those belonging to them. And so we come to a definition of racism, which may be formulated as follows:

«a system of ideas, discourses, symbols, behaviours, actions, and social practices which, by attributing natural, quasi-natural, or in any case essential, generalising, or defining differences to human groups and their member individuals justifies, legitimises, pursues, and/or perpetrates behaviours, rules and practices of valorisation, stigmatisation, discrimination, inferiorisation, subordination, segregation, exclusion, persecution, or extermination in their regard» (Rivera, 2000, p. 20).

If race, especially following the tragedy that was the Holocaust, has been totally delegitimised as an analytical category, the terms “*etnia*” and “*etnicità*” – “ethnicity” – are at the centre of interpretative diatribes within the scientific community. The Treccani Italian encyclopaedia tells us that the word *etnia* was borrowed from 19th-century anthropology, in which context it stands for «a human grouping distinguished from others on the basis of racial, linguistic, and cultural criteria». But today, the same encyclopaedia tells us that «many scholars (principally, cultural anthropologists and historians) have instead stressed the arbitrary, constructed character of ethnic affiliations, highlighting the political phenomena behind the rise of ethnic groups. More than a common “substance”, the members of an ethnic group would share contrasts with other ethnic or national groups». That is to say, various scholars – in the main anthropologists (Gallissot & Rivera, 1997) – have remarked on the arbitrary and constructed character of ethnic affiliations, stressing how they are rooted in ideology. The concept of ethnicity would thus risk falling into that essentialist trap – earlier reserved for race – that attributes given pre-determined traits (although, in this case, cultural in origin) to human groups independently of their social

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contexts of reference. Ethnicity can, in this sense, become the accomplice of racism, as recent history has all too clearly demonstrated.

«Now, even though the term “ethnicity” does not refer, as does race, to biological characteristics but to cultural and linguistic differences (...), it is unfortunately in the name of ethnicity that the foundations for inferiorisation, oppression, subordination, and exploitation are laid, as the last few years of European history have tragically taught us. Like the tragic example of “ethnic cleansing” in the former Yugoslavia illustrates, ethnicity can also be a basis for racism. In fact, the signs and the signifiers that racism turns to its purposes need not necessarily be biological or physiognomic but may likewise be linguistic, territorial, or cultural» (Campani, 2000, pp. 85-86).

Following this brief incursion into the genesis and the meanings – problematic and conflictual all – of certain key words at the centre of gender and intercultural studies, it may be useful to conclude by returning to the parallelism between the concepts of sexism and racism. We can, at this point, identify two foundational elements that compose a common denominator: sexism, like racism, is a complex system of domination (that calls ideological, symbolic, social, and political dimensions into simultaneous play) that produces a hierarchy of social groups and an inferiorisation of certain groups with respect to others; the principal ideological device on which both these systems are based is naturalisation or biologisation. It was feminist sociologist Colette Guillaumin who in the late 1970s theorised the systematic, by no means accidental, and non-innate character of sexism and racism. In her *Sexe, Race et Pratique du pouvoir. L'idée de Nature* (1992), she proposes a historical and sociological analysis of the ideas of sex and race and the social relations that produced them; she demonstrates that women and non-whites are oppressed groups and that it is that same oppression which creates the groups in the first place. In other words, men and women, whites and non-whites, are categories that have nothing natural about them and, therefore, nothing eternal: they are antagonist classes produced when systemic forms of domination, of exploitation, of appropriation are practiced by one class (of sex, of race) with respect to another, transformed into “natural groups” by an ideology that fabricates “the idea of nature” to conceal the social origin of asymmetrical relationships between groupings by sex or by race. Colette Guillaumin’s works dovetail perfectly with – and have contributed substantially to defining – the perspective which today is called “intersectional” and which analyses the reciprocal reproduction of social relationships determining oppression. If we embrace the paradigm of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), gender and ethnicity (together with a multitude of other variables such as social class, disability, sexual orientation, religion, migratory status, age, nationality, species) cannot be analysed separately, since they interact on many levels and often simultaneously in such a manner that each element or “axis of the person” must be read in relation to the others. Only through multidimensional reading can we come to understand both the mechanisms involved in building each of our single identities and, at the macro level, the systems of systematic injustice and social inequality that are at work. Should we want to essay a conclusion of a strictly pedagogical nature, we could say that if sexism and racism are based on aprioristic prejudices and stereotypes acquired unknowingly in early childhood (Brown, 1995), it is essential that there be a specific educational commitment to prompting our new generations to engage in complex, reflexive thinking that rejects generalisations and commonplaces and opens without hesitation to inclusion and the infinite forms of taken by “difference” (Macinai, 2020; Pinto Minerva, Portera & Fiorucci, 2017). What

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we need do is experiment – adults and children together – with that difficult art of critical thinking which can so enormously amplify the spaces of our freedom and our comprehension of the world while reducing to a minimum the risk of typing, simplifying, or passing *a priori* judgment on the *other* as different from *us* (Fiorucci, 2011).

ⁱ Emiliano Macinai wrote the section 1; Irene Biemmi wrote the sections 2.

ⁱⁱ This paragraph is based upon work from the project “*In Your Face. A Research Collaboratory and a Pedagogical Handbook Mapping Racial and Sexist Visual Stereotypes*” funded by the University of Florence.

ⁱⁱⁱ Attribution of the origin of the term is not universally agreed upon. According to Fred R. Shapiro (1985), the word “sexism” first appeared in print in an article entitled “On Being Born Female” published on November 15, 1968, by U.S. feminist Caroline Bird in the periodical *Vital Speeches of the Day*. We read: «Sexism is judging people by their sex when sex doesn’t matter. Sexism is intended to rhyme with racism. Both have been used to keep the powers that be in power» (p. 90). The common roots of “sexism” and “racism” and their essential relationship to power emerge clearly from this brief incipit.

According to other sources, the terms “sexist” and “sexism” were inaugurated in the same year (1968) by Sheldon Vanauken in his pamphlet *Freedom for Movement Girls – Now* published by the Southern Student Organizing Committee in Nashville, Tennessee.

^{iv} Herein, the gender or *genere* to which we are referring is “social”.

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