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Education is a battleground of power, identity, and inequality. This volume unravels the tensions between exclusion and inclusion, privilege and marginalization, tracing how policies, epistemologies, and ideologies shape who belongs—and who is left behind.

PROCEEDINGS

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Inequality, Inclusion, and Governance

AGAINST SCHOOL STIGMATIZATION: SUCCESSES, CONFLICTS AND MAIN CHALLENGES OF THE EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY OF THE PISACANE SCHOOL

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This article examines the efforts of the Pisacane School in the Tor Pignatara neighborhood of Rome to combat school segregation through the creation of a self-organized educational community of practice. In a context marked by stigmatisation and the flight of families without migratory background, the community – including teachers, parents and NGOs – developed innovative educational practices and collaborative spaces. These initiatives transformed the school into a place of pedagogic innovation and inclusion, fostering links with the surrounding neighbourhood. Over a decade, these efforts increased the school's attractiveness, reversing declining enrolment and inspiring similar initiatives elsewhere in Italy. However, challenges remain, including tensions with local authorities, internal conflicts over the balance of power between stakeholders, and limited engagement from migrant families. In addition, the success of these inclusion efforts has led to the risk of school gentrification, potentially marginalising the very migrant community the school sought to serve. The Pisacane school provides an important case study of localised responses to segregation, highlighting the potential and limitations of community-led efforts to address systemic educational inequalities. It highlights the need for wider institutional learning and national policy support to understand and sustain these transformative practices.

school segregation; community of practice; learning spaces; educational community; school gentrification

INTRODUCTION

It has now emerged from various studies (Cognetti, 2012; Pacchi and Ranci, 2017) that schools are becoming the mirror of extremely dangerous processes of social segregation. In neighbourhoods with a higher concentration of immigrants, for fear of a lower quality of learning and educational offerings, the phenomenon of *Italian flight* is becoming more widespread, i.e. the enrolment of the children of a growing number of Italian families, even far from their own homes, in schools with a lower percentage of pupils of immigrant origin. While this phenomenon reflects a strong sensitivity to the presence of migrants, it is the perverse result of the way in which in Italy school autonomy (and the abolition of catchment areas) has been implemented, which has led to growing competition between institutions. This education market which has been allowed to operate essentially without any regulation is producing serious selection processes on a national and social basis. The result is that, paradoxically, while the neighbourhoods of Italian cities “generally continue to have a relatively mixed social composition and there are few areas where there are real phenomena of concentration of residents of foreign origin, it is precisely the formation of schools that highlights a much more radical segregation dynamic” (Cognetti, 2012, p. 135).

In this article, we have decided to analyse the case study of the Pisacane school, which represents a very significant experience of school segregation and desegregation. In a context marked by stigmatisation and the flight of families without migratory background, the community – including teachers, parents and NGOs – developed innovative educational practices and collaborative spaces. These initiatives transformed the school into a place of pedagogic innovation and inclusion, fostering links with the surrounding neighbourhood. By analysing the networks of actors and groups involved, through qualitative interviews and by actively participating in meetings, co-design activities and public events, we set out to identify successes, conflicts and main challenges of this community of practice.

1. THE CASE STUDY: THE PISACANE SCHOOL IN TOR PIGNATTARA NEIGHBOURHOOD IN ROME

The Pisacane school is located in the Marranella area of Torpignattara, an eastern suburb of Rome that has struggled with a negative reputation since the 1970s, long before significant immigration began. Since the second half of the 1990s, this area has gradually become one of the most ethnically connoted

areas of the neighbourhood, characterised by a predominant Bangladeshi presence, to the extent that it is also referred to by the toponym *Banglatown* (Broccolini, 2010). At the same time, the Pisacane school has seen an increase in the proportion of pupils of foreign origin. As the percentage of pupils with a migrant background increased, the school was subjected to waves of moral panic and was labelled *the school of foreigners*. There was a massive exodus of families without a migrant background, which contributed to a much more radical increase in the presence of pupils without Italian citizenship. As a result, in the 2010-2011 academic year, a striking 97% of new enrolments at the Pisacane school were children with a migrant background. This statistic is particularly remarkable given that, at that period, only around 20% of the residents of the Tor Pignattara neighbourhood had foreign citizenship.

As a teacher interviewed in those years pointed out (Vereni, 2018, 75-76):

What should seem problematic about the Pisacane school is not the presence of foreigners, that is absolutely obvious, since they all live around here, so it is normal that they come here. What should make the news is that instead the Italians left, the Italians actually said at one point: “We’re not going to this school, we’d rather take the car every morning”.

This case of very strong residential segregation of pupils of immigrant origin has made it a focal point in the national debate, fuelled by right-wing politicians who have used the school’s demographics as an argument for implementing the 2010 Gelmini Circular, an Italian legislation which tried to set a ceiling of 30% for foreign¹ students in each class.

In response to this increasing marginalisation and stigmatisation of the school, a self-organised process of emancipation began in Pisacane in 2012. An ongoing path who have been as protagonists some headmasters, many active teachers, a parents’ association and several NGOs. A community of practice aimed to innovate educational practices, but also to create welcoming spaces that integrate local neighbourhoods into the school environment.

2. A SELF-ORGANIZED COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The emancipatory path of the Pisacane School has been triggered mainly by the arrival of a new headteacher with a Montessori background (Annarita Marino).

¹ In Italy, citizenship legislation, which is largely based on the principle of *ius sanguinis* (right of blood), has significant implications for children of migrant origin. Despite being born or raised in Italy, a significant proportion of these children are considered foreigners under the law.

The starting point was to the idea to use the school premises as a lever for change and to open the school to the neighbourhood.

The headmistress says that when she arrived in Pisacane school for the first time, she found a building that was structurally closed, introverted and not very welcoming:

The first day I entered the school I can't forget: I go in, I cross the hall and I see this long corridor, all the doors closed, you couldn't see a picture of a child hanging on the wall... in short, there was no sign of a kindergarten! So I go back and I say: "Sorry you sent me to the offices, but I'm looking for the school!" and she says: "No madam, go that's the school".

The first fundamental moment in the history of Pisacane, therefore, was to open the doors of the different classrooms in order to create more opportunities for communication and connection, between students and between classes, and, in general, to immediately convey a message of openness and exchange; the second step was to open the doors of the school to local NGOs involved in social and intercultural activities, in order to extend this commitment to exchange beyond the school walls, where educational activity is traditionally confined.

When Pisacane was attacked in the media as a 'problematic school with too many foreigners', this process was still in its infancy. After this symbolic attack, these initiatives and the first alliances between teachers increased significantly, and the contribution of parents to these activities also became more and more important. A key moment was the creation of the Pisacane Parents' Association 0-11 (now 0-99), which led to the formalisation and accentuation of the active and proactive role that some parents were beginning to play. This association will soon be given a room on the ground floor of the school, which will be the headquarters of its activities in the area for years to come. This space, thanks to its permeability to the street, and therefore the possibility of being visible in the neighbourhood, became the perfect place to host the organisational meetings between parents and teachers and those of the local inhabitants' committee (Tor Pignattara Neighbourhood Committee) and a lot of afternoon activities (such as music or Arabic courses). Many of these extra-curricular activities will then be incorporated into the formal curriculum of the school. In 2016, these activities were joined by the end of year event called *Taste the word*, organised in the school premises but open to the whole neighbourhood. As defined by one of the mothers of the Pisacane Parents' Association:

The meaning of this festival is to open the school to the neighbourhood and to let them into the school, because the neighbourhood (...) has no squares, there is only Largo Pelestrello, which is not very welcoming, it has no cultural spaces and we have always thought that the school could compensate for these deficiencies by making its courtyard a meeting place and with its activities a cultural reference point.

3. INTERNAL DIALECTICS AND THREE CHALLENGES

The self-organised community of practice of the Pisacane school is certainly an experience of great interest, also because over the years it has become an instrument of high-level pedagogical action and research on diversity/mobility/migration and has fostered the creation of important local and national networks, such as the Roman network of open and participatory schools. However, we must avoid idealising this path: the Pisacane community of practice is in fact a situated and contextual field with many internal dialectics and challenges to face.

The first point to analyse is their great difficulty to dialogue and collaborate with local authorities (e.g. City Hall, Municipality). This is mainly due to a lack of territorial vision on the part of the municipality, which rarely seems interested in supporting the processes taking place at the Pisacane school. One of the main dialectics within the Pisacane School's community of practice is just related to the nature of the relationship with local institutions: some take a more oppositional stance and promote self-organisation and avoid having particular relationships with local municipality; while others call for more public intervention, e.g. to maintain certain areas of the school. This dialectic has always been present in the school and has entailed a continuous and tiring oscillation. More recently, a participatory process has been launched to create a 'Community Education Pact' between schools, NGOs and the Municipality of Rome to strengthen the network between schools and with some municipal services. A new path, not without its issues.

A second relevant challenge is related to the so-called educational monopoly of the school. In fact, the community of practice includes activist teachers who are used to sharing power and educational responsibility with NGOs and parents, as well as teachers who believe in the educational monopoly of the school and are afraid of external interference. This second group of teachers considers confrontation with parents and NGO's useful, but who insist on the absolute predominance of the educational role of the school and, in particular, of the teacher component. This position is well summed up, for example, by the words of this Pisacane teacher:

The parents' association was stimulating until it became too intrusive (...) the association can help me with many things, but it cannot get involved in didactics, it cannot get involved in the real dynamics of the school.

A third challenge is the involvement of families of migrant origin. Attempts in this direction have always been considerable. For example, in order to involve foreign parents more closely, the community of practice decided from the outset to open an Italian school for women within the school. In time, this initiative led to the creation of the Intercultural Centre for Women *Miguelim*, which still exists today and is coordinated by one of the most active NGOs in the school (Asinitas onlus). Some parents of Bangladeshi origin became first class representatives, then mediators involved in many projects. In general, however, the contribution of foreign families to this community of practice is still extremely underrepresented, so that it can be said that the transition of migrants from the role of beneficiaries to that of promoters is slow. This is also due to the fact that the need for pedagogical innovation is not a priority for many families who face daily economic, social and cultural challenges, as many families of migrant origin do.

4. FROM SCHOOL SEGREGATION TO THE RISK OF SCHOOL GENTRIFICATION?

In ten years, the number of pupils enrolled in the school has increased considerably and it has become attractive again for many Italian families, so much so that a secondary school has been opened. Thus, despite the many internal dialectics analysed above, we can say that it has been a very successful course. At the same time, however, a new and not easy challenge is looming on the horizon. Indeed, the aura of a more open and inclusive school has been created around the school and this has attracted the interest of Italian young and creative families (e.g. designers, architects, artists) who are now increasingly settling in the neighbourhood; on the contrary, the migrant component is decreasing sharply. So we are beginning to talk about the risk of a passage from school segregation to school gentrification (Pearman and Swain, 2017). This new challenge makes the story of the Pisacane School both more problematic and more interesting.

This experience mirrors that of many other similar emancipatory paths in marginalised Italian contexts. Fragmented and too isolated stories that finally need to be properly understood and supported as great opportunities for institutional learning.

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