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Politics, Citizenship, Diversity and Inclusion

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Do the CPIA's Educational Programs and Teaching Reproduce Social Inequality?

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Keywords: *Social inequalities, Adult migrant learners, Illiterate students, Teachers, CPIA*

Introduction

Over the last ten years the development of new and intensive migration flows has had an impact on western European societies including Italian society. Consisting of a wide variety of people moving into Europe— «refugees and asylum seekers, migration in the context of family reunification, marriage migration, exchange students and high-skilled workers» (Pulix and Van Avermaet, 2017: 59) – these uncontrollable migration processes have changed the European idea of reception and acceptance of migration. In particular, it is the so-called refugee crisis, which consists of a considerable number of refugees originating from the Middle East and Africa, that has exerted great pressure on western European societies. Therefore, the traditional processes of acculturation as well as the school system seem to have been strongly affected by it.

Focusing on everyday Italian school life it is easy to see this. It is possible to identify the absence of valid, continual and consistent political actions aimed at guiding schools (and in particular teachers) in order to facilitate the social and linguistic integration of these new members of society. Despite this, the Italian school system and the people who work every day in and for schools try to provide an important contribution to this process of integration.

This paper focuses on the courses of Italian as a foreign language as conducted by the CPIA (*Centro Provinciale per l'Istruzione degli Adulti*) called *Percorsi di alfabetizzazione e apprendimento della lingua italiana*. In fact, language classes have a central role in the lives of migrants. Not only do they offer the occasion to improve language fluency, but they also help migrants to develop social and intercultural skills that will make them feel better in the hosting society. Likewise, speaking the language of the host country is not only important for everyday life, but is often a skill required by governments. In Italy (as in many European countries) people have to demonstrate and/or certify their language knowledge to obtain a long-term residence permit and citizenship. For this reason, since the CPIA has a key role in the migrants' development of linguistic, social and intercultural skills, it is indeed compelling to investigate the CPIA's teaching and didactic practices.

My reflections are based on my experience as a teacher at CPIA No.3 in Nuoro, Sardinia, during the school year 2017/2018, and on data collected by a survey given to 131 CPIAs during the school year 2018/2019. Conducted by a self-administered online questionnaire from February to April 2019, it involved 83 A023 teachers, teachers thus identified per the February 2016 Decree of the President of the Italian Republic. Specialised in teaching Italian as a second language, A023 teachers offer an insight into the CPIA's teaching and educational practices. Entitled *A023: Chi? Come? Dove? Quando? Perché*, the survey was aimed at observing and describing the role and professionalism of A023 teachers in the CPIAs.

The paper therefore investigates the role of the CPIA in social reproduction. In order to critically evaluate it, the paper describes the CPIA, its students and

its teachers. Focusing on its language courses and educational offer, the paper investigates the assessment made for the placement tests and the final exams. With these observations and reflections, it is possible to see whether the CPIA's educational program is able to integrate migrant adult learners or place them, especially those who are illiterate, at a disadvantage.

1. The CPIA

The CPIA (*Centro Provinciale per l'Istruzione degli Adulti*) is the Italian language school for foreigners and the public institution responsible for adult education. It began to work regularly in the school year 2015/2016. Its predecessor was the CTP (*Centro Territoriale Permanente*), which was established in July 1997 by Ministerial Order No. 455. According to Orazio Colosio (2015), however, it was immediately clear that the CTPs had many weak points, and so it was decided to reform and reorganise them. Begun in 2006, this reorganisation took many years, but eventually resulted in the creation of the CPIA. With the Decree of the President of the Italian Republic No. 263, the CPIA was officially established on 29 October 2012.

Today the CPIA offers the following:

- lower secondary school exam courses (*Percorsi di istruzione di primo livello*);
- upper secondary school exam courses (*Percorsi di istruzione di secondo livello*);
- Italian language courses for foreigners (*Percorsi di alfabetizzazione e apprendimento della lingua italiana*).

This paper focuses on the Italian language courses organised at the CPIA.

2. Students

The significant increase in the number of people seeking refuge in Europe in the past few years has dramatically changed the composition of CPIA learners. In addition to the sizeable increase in the number of students, the diversity of learners is notable. The arrival of people from Middle East countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, or from various African countries, mainly from Nigeria, Eritrea, Somalia and Gambia, has had a marked impact on the CPIAs. Compared to the past, the variety in the profiles of students has become more pronounced and complex than what it used to be. Within this framework, it is clear how teachers have had to face new types of learners that in the past were not even conceivable.

For this reason, teachers have had to take into consideration this notable variety of learners when rethinking and reconsidering their educational projects. Diversity can be encountered in many criteria that can influence teaching and the choice of a particular pedagogical approach. With regards to CPIA students, it is essential to focus on and consider two of them: personal history, and literacy and educational background.

Firstly, it must be remembered that a large number of students were subject to experiences causing trauma. Teachers have to be very careful when approaching them. Students, many of whom are women or unaccompanied foreign minors, are often contending with stressful experiences without the support of their family and friends, support which could be vital for learning and overcoming obstacles. All of these problems make it difficult for them to learn and should not be ignored. In fact, these kinds of situations «not only constitute a

problem for learning but also result in depressive moods if not outright depression» (Fritz, Donat, 2017: 166). Quoting a social worker at *Volkshochschule* Vienna interviewed by Thomas Fritz and Dilek Donat during their research, it is easy to understand what teachers observe and confront in their classes on a daily basis: «If only their minds were free» (Fritz, Donat, 2017: 163). This quotation very much represents how migrant learners are often highly motivated but at times find it hard to concentrate. They can be distracted by all the problems related to their history and their life.

Literacy and schooling background are the second main point to be considered. In terms of their level of education there is a noticeable diversity among learners. Some have more than five years of schooling, others more than eight, but a considerable number are illiterate (in some cases completely illiterate). In addition, many are vulnerable students. If for years it was thought that foreign languages had to be learnt by literate students, the recent migration flows have eradicated this belief. The fact that a large number of students had a level of proficiency lower than those described in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001) forced researchers and teachers to develop and implement course planning and language assessment tools for teaching both literacy and L2. Annalisa Bricchese (2019) has recently highlighted the difficulties faced by non-literate adults or adults who are beginner readers and writers. It is known that adults «with little or no formal education or home language literacy take up to eight times longer than educated adults to reach the A1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages» (Naeb, Young-Scholten, 2017: 420). Illiterate students have specific needs and in order to achieve their goals they need appropriate support. As researchers contend (Borri, *et al.*, 2014), illiteracy is a very complex and articulated phenomenon to study. In addition, it has been shown that literacy development in L2 is strongly connected to many other factors.

Thus, the complexity of both learning a language for illiterate people and providing language support for teachers is clear.

3. Teachers

Most teachers are primary school teachers who do not have to be specialised in teaching Italian as a foreign language. Because of their ability to teach Italian to young native speakers, it has been wrongly taken for granted that they can teach adult foreigners. Since the school year 2017/2018, A023 teachers have also been working at the CPIA. Although specialised in teaching Italian as an L2, they comprise only a small part of the school staff (1 or 2 in each CPIA).

4. Teaching and the didactic practices

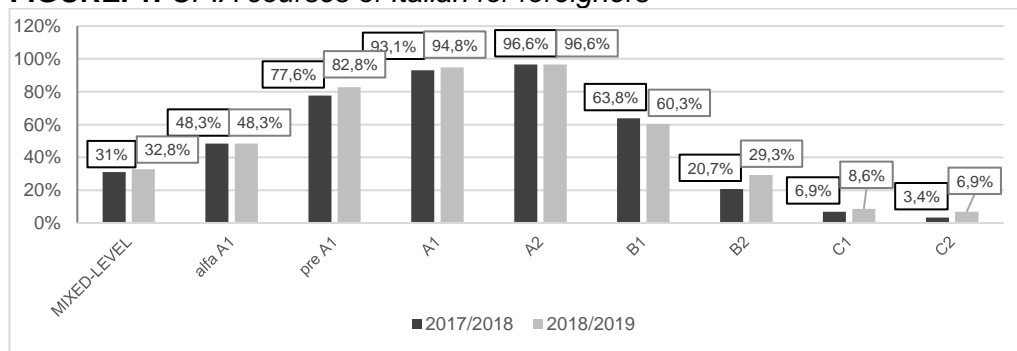
Having focused on CPIA students and teachers, it is now the turn of CPIA courses of Italian as a foreign language and related activities.

4.1. CPIA courses of Italian for foreigners

Fig. 1 shows the level of Italian language courses held at the CPIA. The majority are beginner and elementary classes; only in a few CPIAs it is possible to attend upper-intermediate or advanced classes. It seems that the CPIAs do not take into consideration and respond to the needs of people who want to develop their language skills above an elementary level. Clearly, the large number of

elementary classes is strongly linked to Italian residence policies. «Non-EU citizens who apply for a permanent residence permit are asked to take an official language test in order to demonstrate that they have reached CEFR level A2 (Law no. 94/2009; MD 4 June 2010)» (Masillo, 2017: 258).

FIGURE. 1. CPIA courses of Italian for foreigners



Source: A023: Chi? Come? Dove? Quando? Perché?

4.2. The assessment: the placement.

An important feature of CPIA activity is the assessment done at the beginning of each course. The CPIA language course regulation establishes that the first 20 hours of each language course (10% of the total amount) have to be used for *accoglienza*. In addition to welcoming students and explaining the learning objectives of the course to them, teachers have to profile students during this first part of the course. Especially for illiterate students, this is the key moment in which teachers can understand their students' level of schooling and test their abilities in reading and writing.

In order to ascertain how the *accoglienza* works in the CPIA, our sample of A023 teachers were questioned about the way classes are made up. Focusing on placement tests, it was possible to point out some weak points in the placement assessment.

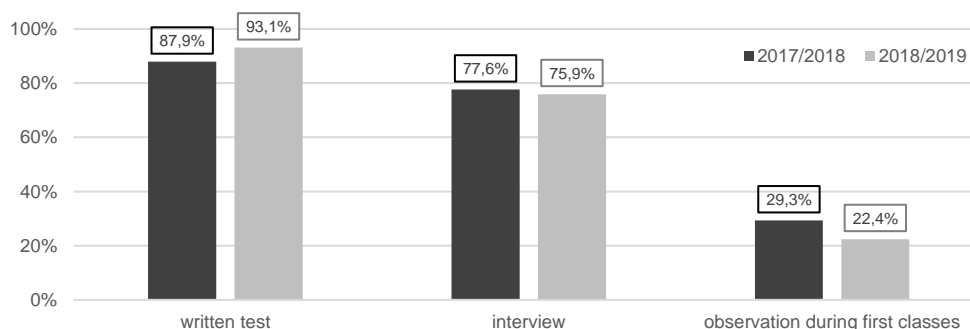
It was found that in the majority of the Italian language classes there is a considerable percentage of students (32.8% for the school year 2017/2018 and 39.7% for the school year 2018/2019) who are not able to follow and understand the class: activities often are too difficult for them. This can be seen as a consequence of the placement assessment not working as it should. The inability to place students in a class corresponding to their level is often the result of a placement done hastily and superficially or it can also be due to a lack of the teachers' skills in language testing and assessment.

This is a point where the CPIA's regulation appears to be better than its practice. In fact, with the *Patto Formativo* CPIA should not have any problem in the placement assessment of students. The *Patto Formativo*, which was originally created during the CTP system period and later improved during its reform and reorganisation, is a valid tool for placement assessment. Though the *Patto Formativo* does not set out how to perform the assessment or investigate a student's profile – it is up to the teachers to decide how to do it – it does enable teachers to focus on the most important aspect of a student's background and experiences. Likewise, teachers are enabled to observe and take into consideration all the previous skills, knowledge and experiences of their students to better understand and define their learning objectives and in particular their language needs.

In spite of the validity of the *Patto Formativo*, it appears that due to a lack of appropriate and suitable training of teachers the placement assessment fails to meet quality standards. Many of the A023 interviewed claimed that the placement assessment does not work because of the poor-quality training of the primary school teachers. Not only do many primary school teachers apparently ignore knowing how the *Patto Formativo* should be used. It seems that some of them do not even have the knowledge and insight to understand the key role and the benefits of a well-executed placement.

About 30% of the teachers interviewed claim that often procedures for the placement are not shared and that teachers rely instead on their own experiences.

FIGURE. 2. *CPIA's placement assessment*



Source: A023: Chi? Come? Dove? Quando? Perché?

Concerning placement activities, Fig. 2 shows that writing tests are the most used tool in the majority of the CPIAs. An interview is used by about 76% of the CPIAs, while class observation has the lowest percentage.

As Lorenzo Rocca (2019) recently stressed, placement assessment is not easy. The placement, as with every kind of assessment, should be done following set procedures and by skilled teachers. In turn, teachers should have the ability to create and use tools in which aspects such as age, gender, countries of origin, ethnicity, religion, literacy and educational background and motivation for learning the language are all taken into consideration. A structured interview, whereby all of the above-mentioned aspects needed to define the student's profile are considered, is a useful tool for the placement assessment. Furthermore, it must be remembered that in recent years the number of tools for placement assessment has increased significantly. Even if a standard model of placement does not exist, being up to date can greatly help teachers. A valid example is the recent contribution offered by the Council of Europe Toolkit. With its 57 tools, it should be a point of reference for teachers who want to improve their placement assessment.

4.3. *The assessment: the final exam.*

The final exam is another key point. Paola Masillo (2017) pointed out that there is currently no national standard test in Italy. Thanks to the agreement signed in November 2010 between the Italian Ministry for Home Affairs and the Ministry of Education, University and Research, the CPIAs are simply provided with some test specifications and guidelines. It is up to CPIA teachers to design and administer the tests (Machetti, Rocca, 2017).

Our survey showed that the CPIAs create and use different tests, and a considerable diversity in test design was found. It is interesting to see that the tests evaluate language skills in various ways. Whereas some consist of three

sections, others consist of six. Writing, reading and listening seem to constitute most of the final tests administered in the CPIAs while exercises aimed at evaluating speaking, vocabulary and grammar are found in just a few. It is clear that the lack of a national standard test raises questions of validity and reliability. There is no comparability among the exams organised by all 131 Italian CPIAs.

Regarding the Italian language test for the issuance of a permit for EU long-term residents organised by the CIA in agreement with the local prefecture, Paola Masillo (2017) voiced many criticisms. As this exam is very similar to the one administered at the end of CIA courses, it is worthwhile to concentrate on Masillo's findings. It is immediately possible to see many similarities to our data. The Italian researcher found a lack of fairness and transparency. She underlined the low validity and low reliability of the tests. Her claims are confirmed by the answers and the statements given by our A023 teachers. In fact, almost 30% of them judge the final exam of their CIA as unreliable and not valid. In addition to these findings, on 23 February 2016 the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* published a very interesting article on Italian language tests conducted by the CPIAs.

TABLE. 1. CIA Italian language test (February 2016)

	students who passed the exam	students who failed the exam	students who failed the exam %
Bolzano	3.826	1.562	28,7%
Brescia	15.973	7.889	27,3%
Milan	47.172	12.879	21,4%
Padova	7.536	23.148	29,5%
Modena	7.769	2.705	25%
Roma	34.316	5.130	13%
Naples	10.956	1.317	10,7%
Reggio Calabria	4.700	838	15%
Palermo	4.017	599	12,9%
Enna	206	0	0%

Source: *Corriere della Sera* 23/02/2016

According to Table 1, it is possible to see the uneven score distribution of test results. It is undeniable that there is no comparability between the 10 exams taken into consideration in the article. These data highlight the lack of a language testing and assessment culture in Italy. These findings are most certainly connected to the involvement of test developers who lack appropriate and suitable training. «The total lack of a culture of evaluation and assessment in Italy is an incontrovertible fact, and very influential considering the impact that the (...) test could have» (Machetti, Rocca, 2017: 217).

Conclusions

Based on our data it can be said that current CIA courses of Italian for foreigners sometimes reproduce social inequality. In fact, all of the weak points described in the paper do affect and have negative consequences on the learning and life of the more vulnerable learners. In spite of the hard work and dedication of many people who work daily at the CPIAs, it is clear that there are too many aspects which do not work. On the one hand, it appears that many of the negative points highlighted in this paper, such as the placement assessment or the final exam, are linked to the lack of suitable teacher training. It is undeniable

that CPIA regulations are in need of reform and reorganisation. The requirements for being a teacher of Italian for foreigners are some of the most important aspects to be rethought. In fact, all teachers working on courses of Italian for foreigners should be required to have a degree and be appropriately qualified. On the other hand, as has been claimed on many occasions during our survey, many deficiencies in the system are linked to the lack of coherent national CPIA regulations and practices. In recent years, various projects aimed at sharing good practices among the CPIAs have been organised. An example of the attempts at improvement is the so-called *Piano PAIDEIA*. In any case, strong and effective action is needed. What has been done up to now is surely not enough.

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