

# **Narratives of Refusal, Narratives of Engagement, Narratives of Organisation.**

**School Activism As Citizenship-in-Practice for  
Young Refugees and Migrants in Italy**

**Angela Scollan & Federico Farini**

ISA World Congress of Sociology, Toronto

*Session: Social Movements, Youth Participation  
and New Transnational Forms of Citizenship*

# This presentation

Data produced through 4 researches in Italy (2006-2014)

- 1) **Let's get together**: promoting young people's perspectives on their social networks and experiences in multicultural classrooms, using photographs taken by them as the starting point of personal narratives
- 2) **COMICS** (*Children Of Migrants Inclusion Creative Systems*) promoting social participation using visual art as a medium for expression
- 3) **Re-Generations**: young migrants' and forms of political participation in Florence
- 4) *Socio-cultural analysis of risk, trust and affectivity in groups of young people* (**Risk/Trust**): exploring narratives of young people not employed, not in education, not in training

# Methods

Data consists of young migrants' narratives, promoted and collected in 62 focus group and 118 individual interviews. The participants in the researches were 13 to 18 years old at the moment of data collection and resident in Italy for more than one year

- Promotion of young people's narratives to support a phenomenological description of social participation
- Participants' narratives promoted through dialogical forms of communication. Inspired by Mercer and Littleton (2007) research on dialogic teaching, dialogic research aims to facilitate researcher and participants' active engagement

# Themes of the Presentation

- Marginalisation in the education system (due to system's structures and expectations)
- Marginalisation in the political system (due to legal status)
- From marginalisation to the invention of new forms of inclusion: **school activism**

Data was collected over a period of 8 years 2008-14 via 4 research projects. Each project had diff aims but all included interviews and focus groups with younger people. Notwithstanding the different aims of the research projects, three themes came out strongly:

- 1) narratives of exclusion from education
- 2) narratives of exclusion from politics or political participation/systems
- 3) invention of different ways of participating in politics through young people social movement ← **school activism**

# Marginalisation in the education system

In the data sets considered, participants' narratives present a situation of limited agency in the education system. Irrespectively of their individuality, migrant students are categorised as members of a problematic group. In the excerpts below, the language used to convey the narrative, in particular the concept of 'respect' indicates that ethnic-based categorisations are perceived as a negation of agency.

Modena, "Let's get together Research", December 2006:

*"...School is the most difficult thing, because if you have problems, then you see that they really expect you to have problems; before you start because you come from a different place. A bad assignment and you are in need of support, but this is not the same for Italian students. They are told to study more, not that they need support, in a way that it is up to them, not up to support they receive, which is somehow more respectful..."*

# Marginalisation in the education system

Tilly's idea that inequality becomes embedded in organisations, like schools, where it is used to build categorizations and structures of inclusion/exclusion (1998) helps analysing an interesting aspect of participants' narratives

Piacenza, "Risk/Trust Research", June 2013

*"...I feel that teachers genuinely want me to succeed, but they are anxious because they have this idea that migrants have problems and it is enough to be a bit slower than they run around asking for help and you are not seen as the same as others anymore. But maybe you just need time. This makes it hard you may learn Italian but you do not feel like part of the school as the others. Also because when it is said that you need support no one can see what you can do already: you become a preoccupation..."*

# From marginalisation in the political system to the invention of new forms of inclusion: **school activism**

Participants' narratives concerning inclusion in the political system develop around their distrust in the concrete possibility of agency, connected to their citizenship status. Two short excerpts illustrates the divergence between personal engagement and limited agency

## Excerpt 1.

Modena, "COMICS Research", February 2008

*"...Politics is like football for me, I pick my team, I watch, I get angry if a team I hate wins...but I will be never good enough to play, because I am no citizen..."*

## Excerpt 2.

Florence, “RE-generations Research”, February 2008

*“I think that if rights are also about what you can potentially do, maybe you won’t but you are not prevented, I mean offering you possibilities, I do not have rights. Or I have less than Italians in Italy. I cannot vote or I can dream of changing the town but I cannot really as I will never be a candidate. Unless I change myself and become Italian in the passport, but this would be like changing to have rights that others have for what they are”*

However, exclusion is only one possible outcome. Another possible outcome is that the excluded groups invent alternative forms of solidarities and engagement.

**School activism** describes the process of re-inclusion in the political system, based on agency, trust commitments and the development of personal relationships

# School activism

Although presenting conditions of marginalisation, participants' narratives also introduce a counter-process of trust-building.

The narratives collected remind of Kelman's (2005) model of trust building. Kelman analyses conditions of radical distrust and building trust in workshops involving Israeli and Palestinian representatives, where trust was built through successive and increasing degrees of commitment, starting from the building of a feeble temporary trust (working trust) not committing participants to anything beyond the solution of specific problems.

Two excerpts help illustrating this process within the collected narratives:

Excerpt 1:

Modena, “COMICS Research”, November 2008

*“...There is a lot to do, because you know you do want as many students as possible attending the debate and understanding the meaning of it, not only the free time to smoke and drink. I got friends almost without speaking, just doing things which made sense to all. And another thing is that I understand and master the meaning of my actions and I feel this is reckoned as they trust me as I trust them. I have showed skills and trustworthiness...”*

## Excerpt 2

Scandicci, “*Ri-Generazioni Research*”, May 2010

*“...What I am excited about all those strikes and protest in the street to save the school against privatisation is that I am not ‘someone in deficit’ anymore. I am not the struggling one to be helped, but I can help with my thoughts and practical actions. Actually, I was not friend with any of the guys in the political group. I was working with them before befriending them. You walk in the streets with people you do not know well, but also you know them well in the sense that they share what you want for the future. Of course, then you become friend with some, actually a good friend. Fun is part of the friendship but really it is what you want from the future that make you feel closer politically and in a personal sense...”*

# Conclusion

Young migrants experience marginalisation in the education system and in the political system.

School activism is the context for the development of working trust through political participation and involvement in activities with peers. Working trust creates the presupposition for trust based on affectivity

## Modena, “Intendiamoci Research”, December 2006

*“...I think that soon everyone who lives in the country will be able to vote for a candidate, which makes sense as we all live and share issues and hopes with Italians. But this is not really the point. I used to hate Citizenship Education, because it is about rights I do not have. But I understand now, the thing is not having rights, citizenship is about doing it, doing the citizen. This is what I am, a ‘maker’, we all are...”*

## Modena, “Risk/trust Research”, June 2013

*“...I cannot be happier than when I am not a Moroccan anymore. I mean not a Moroccan first then a person. It is like being born again, and I think it is the same for the Italian guys. The same. Not you are that because you come from there, but you are something different each time, I mean you are the cause you are fighting for...”*

# Thank you!

**Angela Scollan**  
**a.scollan@mdx.ac.uk**

**Federico Farini**  
**federico.farini@northampton.ac.uk**