

Inclusion begins in the family. Workshop for migrant parents

Report

On Friday, December 2, the workshop “L’inclusione comincia in famiglia” (Inclusion begins in the family) was held at the headquarters of the Popoli Insieme association in Via Briosco 15, Padua. The workshop was part of Parents for Inclusion project and the Module 1 was tested. This first meeting aimed to assess the issues related to being a foreign parent in Italy and, if possible, propose initiatives to get active at the local level and try to improve the situation.

Present at the meeting were 8 people: a man of Iranian origin in his 30s; a woman of Moroccan origin in her 40s; and another woman of Brazilian origin in her 60s, 2 social workers aged 30, a Ethiopian couple and a woman in her 40s from Serbia. All participants are first-generation migrants and have children raised in Italy: their children are aged 0-23.

The meeting began with an initial explanation of the workshop and the European project on the topic of migrant parents and the problems they encounter in managing the raising of their children in a foreign context. Afterwards, those present were asked to write on a card five words with which to summarize the difficulties encountered by a foreign parent in Padua: the activity was made individually and then participants were divided in 2 groups. When in group, the participants had to collect only one list of words. So at the end we had 2 lists.

A second moment of the workshop began with a moment of sharing by sticking the newly written cards on a poster board and then dividing them into general categories. Some recurring themes emerged: **work, culture, home and school**.

Each theme was discussed by those present, revealing very interesting similarities and diversities both at the theoretical level and at the practical level of dealing with difficulties.

Regarding the issue of **work**, first, the difficulty of finding a job was highlighted, and second, the complicated reconciliation of work schedules and children's daily lives. Work turns out to be hardly compatible with children's various school and non-school commitments, and the Italian state certainly does not alleviate the situation. Since much of the care work in Italy is managed intra-family, those who migrate cannot count on a network of relatives and the burden of the daily management of the children falls entirely on the shoulders of the parents. This is exemplified in the experience of one of the women present who recounted how, in order to manage the children, her husband works during the week and she on weekends. Adding to the problem of day-to-day

management is the economic difficulty that often forces both parents to work, making work-family reconciliation even more complicated.

The second topic of discussion concerned **culture**, understood as a set of practices, beliefs and ideologies shared and reiterated by a group of individuals. According to one participant, the cultural difference between the family context and that of everyday life is such that it becomes an obstacle to the integration of children. One is faced with what is perceived as a paradox: raising a child with the culture of origin knowing that he or she will have difficulty interfacing with the Italian culture because he or she is not provided with the cultural codes to interpret the context in which he or she lives. An example of such a paradox is found in the custom in Iran of taking off one's shoes to enter the house. The daughter every time she enters a new house asks whether or not she should take off her shoes in this house. The parent's difficulty is evidenced in the fact that the child perceives taking off her shoes as an obligation imposed by her parents and does not see it, instead, as a cultural difference and this limits her in interpreting correctly the context in which she finds herself. However, the other participants noted how the culture of origin is important because it is part of the children's identity and how it is impossible to eliminate one's origins. One example given to support this statement concerns the fact that in Brazil it is customary to cook only one dish per meal, while in Italy one finds several courses within the same meal. Although the son grew up with Brazilian culture he was taught to respect different cultures and that, depending on the culture and context of reference habits change, learning to adapt to each new situation.

The real difficulty in supporting children in a cultural context that is extremely different from that of their origin was emphasized. One participant said that he arrived in Italy when he was 30 years old, thus spending most of his life in his country of origin, Iran, and how this makes it very complicated to raise his daughter in a context whose cultural codes he still does not fully share. He went on to say how he is afraid that his daughter is in a liminal condition not belonging to either the context of origin or the context in which she is growing up, thus exemplifying the concept of "*double absence and double presence*" theorized by sociologist A. Sayad.

It refers precisely to the condition of first- and second-generation migrants who find themselves to be foreigners in the context of origin and, at the same time, foreigners in the context of arrival as well. One is absent because one does not fully share the cultural codes of either the country of origin or the country of arrival. One is present in both contexts by family tradition on the one hand and by daily life on the other. Furthermore, it was observed how, especially one participant, perceived an imperative to cultural binarism and, therefore, how he felt obligated in choosing only one cultural affiliation on pain of non-integration. This feeling is something that is perceived in daily life practices, especially in the school context of their children.

School was the third topic discussed, dwelling particularly on the difficulty of reconciling school and work. School has many vacation periods during which managing children becomes complicated. Added to this is the fact that daycare centers in Italy are fee-paying and not all families can afford such an expense. In addition to organizational and economic difficulties there are also unpleasant incidents of racism. It often happened that, at school, the children of the parents present were subjected to more or less visible forms of racism, and the aspect that concerned the parents the most was whether this phenomenon could become so frequent as to be normalized. However, one participant noted how it is often the migrant parents themselves who are also prejudiced and intolerant of their children's teachers and school. It is necessary to remember that teachers have to manage and educate a large group of children with many differences among them. The participant mentioned the importance of being understanding toward one another because only in this way can an environment be created that is more open to dialogue and integration. One proposed solution was for teachers to learn about the cultures of origin of children of immigrant parents so as to create a common ground between teachers and parents: this turned to be a possible output of the group of parents. However, as another participant suggested, it is also true that there are many children in the classroom and it is always complicated to keep in mind the personal differences of each child.

The last topic addressed was that of the **home**. Participants pointed out that managing the home and expenses is often difficult both financially and organizationally.

This theme ties in with the issue of home-work reconciliation and the organization of living time. There was also a discussion about how the home and public contexts are extremely different on a cultural level, and one participant added how this difference can cause difficulties in integration by picking up on the discussion of cultural difference addressed at the beginning of the meeting.

For the final moment of the workshop, an attempt was made to represent through some images the topics of the discussion that had just ended. During this activity, participants could not use words. There was a variety of images available, and participants agreed and were quick to choose the images that in their opinions represented the best what they felt and what they discussed.

Popoli Insieme's facilitators are aware that the Module 1 was tested with some modification on its first draft, but the changes are due to the will of participants to speak with each other, share their opinions verbally as much as possible, to the point that facilitators decided not to stop that process.

The conclusion reached at the end of the meeting was that everyone has their own cultural references and it is not possible to change them, at least not completely. However, these cultural differences are present and cause real problems that need to be

dealt with on a daily basis. They cannot, therefore, be ignored but it is necessary to find a way to convince ourselves.

Furthermore, it was understood how problems that seem individual are, often, shared by many people and how, in this case, it is useful to unite and group because in this way collective solutions to individual problems can be found.