Skin Colors Test II. A teaching experience and aesthetic experience in middle school

Skin Colors Test II. Un'esperienza didattica ed estetica nella scuola media

Gabriella Falcicchio* e Giovanni Perillo**

Abstract

The article aims to report and analyze the teaching experience and the research carried out by artist and art teacher Giovanni Perillo throughout middle schools in the province of Bari, Italy. In some cases, the research was carried out with his classes, in other cases, with the help of colleagues. Perillo has designed a research path called Migration aesthetics, playing with skin color and aesthetical preferences of students. The work, which has an artistic and aesthetical characterization, presents interesting implications from a pedagogical and educational point of view and from the point of view of the maieutics approach with which it was carried out. Through the research, hidden stereotypes and prejudices which hardly ever surface in pre-teens emerged, putting them in front of a healthy displacement.

Keywords: aesthetics; skin color; prejudices.

Sommario

L'articolo intende analizzare l'esperienza didattica e di ricerca condotta dall'artista e docente Giovanni Perillo nelle scuole secondarie di primo grado della provincia di Bari, Italia. In alcuni casi, la ricerca è stata condotta di persona con le proprie classi, in altri con l'aiuto di colleghe. Perillo ha ideato un percorso di ricerca dal nome *Estetica delle Migrazioni*, mettendo in gioco il tema del colore della pelle con le preferenze estetiche degli studenti. Il lavoro, che ha una caratterizzazione artistica ed estetica, offre interessanti implicazioni pedagogiche ed educative, anche per la metodologia maieutica

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utilizzata. Attraverso la ricerca, infatti, emergono stereotipi e pregiudizi nascosti, che difficilmente vengono esplicitati durante la preadolescenza, generando in loro un salutare disorientamento.

Parole chiave: estetica; colore della pelle; pregiudizi.

Premise[1]

In a previous study (Perillo, 2019) I have found that a great number of researches showed the influence of automatic stereotyping processes in the generation of associations among people with very dark skin, and words and concepts with a negative impact (Dovidio et al., 1997; Fazio, Jackson, Dunton e Williams, 1995; Gaertner e McLaughlin, 1983; Greenwald, McGhee e Schwartz, 1998).

The presence of a very dark-skinned man, for example, can trigger violent and criminal thinking. Social psychologists have documented the stereotype of «Black Americans» being violent and criminal for almost 60 years (Allport e Postman, 1947; Correll, Park, Judd e Wittenbrink, 2002; Devine, 1989; Duncan, 1976; Greenwald, Oakes e Hoffman, 2003; Payne, 2001; Sagar e Schofield, 1980). Some associations between social groups and concepts can also be bidirectional. In the United States, a study showed how faces and bodies with very dark skin could trigger «thoughts of crime», just as thinking about crime can trigger immediate associations with people with very dark skin (Eberhardt, Purdie, Atiba Goff e Davies, 2004).

Colorism (Walker, 1982) is a pervasive and harmful phenomenon like the state of inferiority that individuals could internalize because of their skin color, which is a consequence of the belief that very light skin somehow makes people more beautiful. It is worth recalling, for example, that in the 1940s, psychologists Kenneth Bancroft Clark and his wife, Mamie Phipps Clark, devised the well-known Doll Test to study the psychological effects of segregation on children of very dark skin. In 1950 Kenneth Clark wrote a document for the White House Conference on Children and Youth, in which he summarized the results of this research. Robert Carter of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund used Clark's findings in court to prove that segregation damaged the development of the personality of very dark-skinned children.

The Supreme Court cited the 1950 Clark document (whose view was corroborated by social scientists, such as Briggs, Davis, and Delaware) in Brown vs Board of Education's decision. The US Supreme Court used it repeatedly:

the language of skills by blending the «separate-but-equal» treatment systems, and arguing that

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[1] Gabriella Falcicchio wrote the abstract and the paragraph «Evaluation of the educational experience»; Giovanni Perillo wrote the paragraphs «Premise», «A new question», «Experiment».

children of light and dark skin in segregated schools and women without the right of access to exclusively male prerogatives suffer from lack of capacity. (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 69)

We have been gaining an interest in prejudices and stereotypes which could influence evaluations (Perillo, 2017c) and aesthetical choices (Perillo, 2018a) since 2013. We started the Migration aesthetics (Perillo, 2017a) in 2015 with the aim to measure the pervasive action of socio-cultural models in the perception of terms and images connected to prejudices and stereotypes in relation to migration processes and skin color. It is a path of research: an artistic creation regulated by scientific principles and created applying experimental research (Lombardo, 2004). The research study aims at detecting aesthetical preferences in a set of migration maps and diverse skin colors and detecting possible stereotypes and prejudices which support the aesthetical preferences. It also wants to stimulate conflict in the interacting subjects triggering reflection upon the influence of conventions and to promote a possible re-definition of some terms, images and their evaluations. The first experiments with students between the ages of 11 and 13 years old (Perillo, 2017b) detected the aesthetical preferences between items painted with several skin colors (Perillo, 2018b).

These experiments were followed by new ones which had the intent to also detect possible stereotypes and prejudices tied to skin color which may have influenced students' judgments and aesthetical preferences. The Skin Colors Test (from now on SCT) was created for this reason.

The experimental hypothesis of the SCT was based on a quantitative and qualitative evaluation of a difference among the responses of an interacting subject between their initial aesthetical choice, in which the subject did not know that the colors were taken from human skin, and the possibility to confirm or modify the choice after knowing that the items were painted with human skin colors. The results of the first experiment with the SCT at the «Davanzati – Mastromatteo» Comprehensive Institute of Palo del Colle, Italy, confirmed the initial hypothesis. There was a difference in the responses of several subjects between their initial aesthetic choice, and the choice made after the nature of the colors was revealed. Not only the choices but also their motivations were changed. The former mostly tied to the aesthetical quality of the colors, the latter mostly based upon socio-cultural foundations.

The data brought us to the conclusion that the dyscrasia between the initial choice and the following modification, led some students to put in relation the image not quite with the skin color, but rather with what the skin color identifies at a social level.

A new question

SCT underwent some modifications in the following phase in order to increase the detection of stereotypes and prejudices tied to skin colors. In the first application of SCT, the drawing with heterogeneous colors (from the lightest color to the darkest) received the most preferences and it was often considered a representation of equality,

respect for diversity, union, etc. The drawing with dark colors, received a high number of initial preferences (35) and the highest number of modifications against it (13) after the revelation and only 1 in favour of it. The drawing with the light colors, received the lowest number of initial preferences (14) and the highest subsequent modifications in its favour (13). Thirteen was also the number of modifications for the heterogeneous colors drawing.

The reasons for the confirmations or modifications reinforced our conviction about the role of prejudice in the choice when the color is referred to skin, thus becoming the man or the woman' skin in the students' mind, along with the negative or positive notions, also unconsciously, attributed because of socio-cultural models.

Some examples could give an idea of the process. M13 chose B «because I like dark colors», then he modified his choice in A «because I didn't know that those were skin colors». Eleven students claimed a sense of belonging, denying the initial choice of B thus choosing A although they gave it a low score: «because it's my skin color». M12 chose A because «I liked the color» and confirmed A «because I don't like dark skin people». After this phase of the project, we reconsidered the images of the SCT removing the heterogeneous colors drawing (it got about 63% of the preferences) in order to make the aesthetical preferences between homogeneous dark and light colors more evident.

Skin Colors Test II (from now on, SCT II) aims at generating more crises which may lead the interacting subject to modify several times their choice. The colors and what they identify on a social level, are at the base of automatic stereotype creation processes whose reasons of the modifications we listed above (the process of identification of one's skin color with the lightly colored item). If the interacting subjects learnt that the light colors do not belong to non-Italian people, but rather to Africans and Asians, and that the dark colors belong to tanned Italians, would they modify their choice again?

In this case, would the skin colors similar to their color, the nationality of the people to whom those colors belong to or other reasons explain their choices?

Experiment

Sample

134 (62 females – 72 males) students of the «Dante Alighieri» 1st-grade Secondary School of Modugno, in the province of Bari. The test was set up by teacher Giuliana Fieno (project coordinator at the school), Italian teacher Gloria Gagliardi, and Art teacher Cesira Greco.

Stimuli

We created two maps by painting two canvasses of 140x140 cm (we used 30x30 cm

prints for the test), each one made up of 9 squares. One canvas presented dark skin colors which were quite homogeneous among them (A). The other one had light skin colors (B).
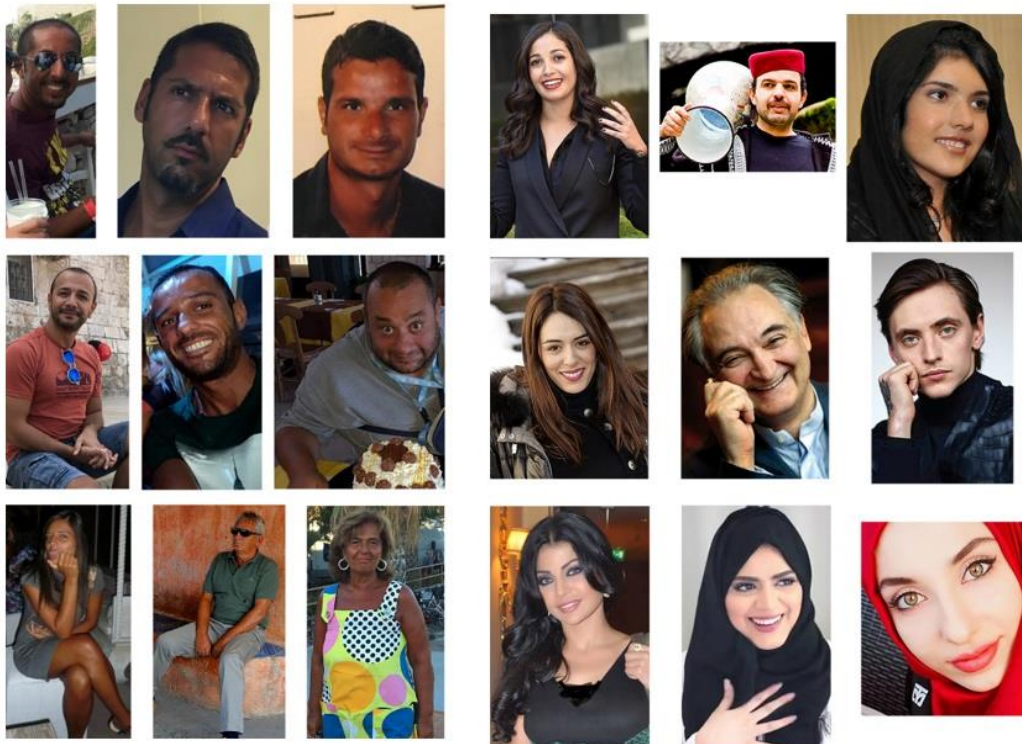

Fig. 1 Italian color sources.   Fig. 2 Non-Italian color sources.

The light skin colors were found on the Internet and belong to 9 famous people of diverse nationalities (Akkari Nabiha – Tunisian, Marzouk Mejri – Tunisian, Aisha Bibi – Afghan, Sofia Essaidi – Moroccan, Jacques Attali – Algerian, Sergei Polunin – Ucranian, Haifa Wehbe – Lebanese, Al Juhara Sajer – Saudi Arabian, Kubra Dagli – Turkish). Dark skin colors were taken from photos of tanned Italian citizens, a great part of them from the city of Bari.
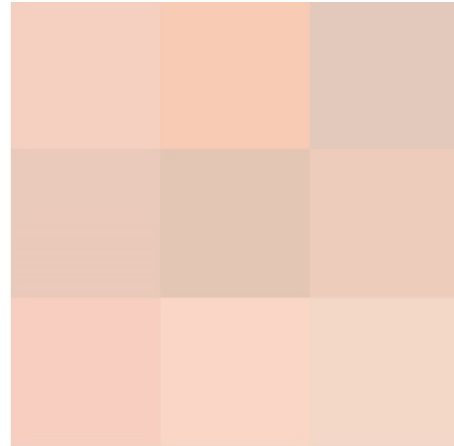
Fig. 3 A – *Dark skin, 9 colors*
Print 30x30.

Fig. 4 B – *Light skin, 9 colors*
Print 30x30.

Procedure

Each teacher independently showed the paintings to their students. They asked the students to give a 1 to 10 vote according to their aesthetical preference and indicate which of the two colors was their favorite. Once the students expressed their preference, they were asked to give a reason for their choice. Later, the students were informed about the nature of the colors. They were told that the colors were skin colors but the nationality of the people whose skin was depicted was not revealed yet.

At that moment, the students were given the chance to either confirm their choice or to change it, but they had to give a reason either way.

At the end of this phase, the sources of the two printed images were shown to the students. Each photo depicted the person from which the skin color in the square on the image was taken, and it also informed them about the name and the nationality of the person.

Outcomes

	A	*B*
Judgments	944 (417 f)	904 (455 f)
Preferences	74 (26 f)	59 (35 f)

Tab. 1 Judgments and aesthetical preferences. Sum of the judgments and aesthetical preferences of the two paintings (A dark colors, B light colors). Female votes are indicated to evaluate possible gender differences.

Reasons given for the confirmation or modification of choices

Let's now analyze some reasons that were given by the students, females (F) and males (M), for their confirmation or modification of choices, the first and second choice (sc)

after the two information received, which we think matter the most for our experimental hypothesis.

Confirmations

– Several students seem to fear that other students might view them as racists: F12 confirms her A choice (cancels B) «because I'm not a racist and I also like black people».

– Several answers show that the chosen criterion is color and nationality accompanies it in the last choice:

- M11 confirms B «because it gives me a sense of life. I don't want to modify my choice». (sc) He confirms B «because I was surprised when I found out that people of other continents are like us. I'm not changing my choice».

– Some choices are based upon skin color:

- F12 confirms B (cancels her A choice) because «it makes little difference to me whether the skin color is dark or light» (she canceled «but probably I'd prefer living with people of B skin color»). (sc) She confirms B «because even if they're foreigners I like their skin color».

– In other answers there is a shift from the choice of the color to the skin color and then to the nationality:

- F11 chooses B «because I like the colors». She confirms B «because I prefer a lighter skin color». (sc) She confirms B «because they are from Bari just like me».

– Several students feel the need to explain the confirmation of their choice:

- M10 confirms A because «I don't want to change my choice even if I know that I chose a different skin of a different person or a person I don't know, but their emotions are the same as mine». (sc) He confirms A because «I don't let these choices shape who I am, while people make these choices to stand out or to make themselves visible».

– Several students demand respect for the differences, claim equality among all human beings:

- M13 confirms A because «nothing changes whether the skin is light or dark colored: we are all human beings».

– Some students not only demanded respect towards differences and claimed equality among all, but also showed a positive identification in being Italians and citizens of Bari:

- M12 confirms A «because, in the end, we are all the same». (sc) He confirms A «because the "black ones" are Italians and from Bari, so I say A».
- M12 confirms A «because dark skin people are not different from light skin people and I know because I have a black friend». (sc) He confirms A «because they are Italians and most of all from Bari».

– A student speaks about the experiences of her friends:
- F12 confirms A because «even if people in the B photo are foreigners, I confirm my answer because I have friends that are often insulted but I consider them good people».

Modifications

– Several students changed their choices when they knew that the light colors belonged to non-Italians:
- F11 confirms B «because I like light colors the most». (sc) He modifies in A «because with this test I learned to appreciate dark skin too».
- M11 confirms B «because I am sure of my choice». (sc) He modifies in A because «I don't want foreigners».

– In the shift from color preference to skin preference, some students highlighted their fascination for diversity:
- F13 modifies in A «because I like a darker color for skin, it makes me think about something different than me and it quite fascinates me». (sc) She confirms A «because black people that I see inspire trust, fondness, and originality. Even white people seem to be nice but I confirm my choice».

– For some students the criterion shifts from the color to the skin color:
- M13 confirms A because «I like dark colors». (sc) He modifies in B (canceling his A preference) because «dark skin people, the majority, are nicer than other people».

– For some students the criterion shifts from the color to the face of the people in the photos:
- F12 modifies in B «because I prefer the people that were shown to me, they're more beautiful».
- F12 modifies in A «because I didn't know about the meaning but I vote A because you shouldn't choose the color of the skin. Even if they're different, inside we are all the same». (sc) She confirms A «because even if they're foreigners they can live in Italy and we shouldn't make differences just for the skin color».

– The inferences of some students attributed light colors to Italians and identified Italians in photo 1 as second generation ones:
- F12 (judgment score: A 5, B 10) modifies in A «because it's people's color». (sc) She confirms A because «they come from other countries but they are from Bari now. I couldn't believe it, they are from another city but they were born here and are from Bari».
- M12 (judgment score: A 8, B 4) confirms A «because the 9 colors are the most frequent and harmonious and, in some tones, give me the idea of tanned skin». (sc) He modifies in B «because after seeing "foreigners" of Italian

nationality I understood that whatever the color of a person they will always be accepted (at a first glance they all looked like Italians)».

- F12 (judgment score: A 7, B 9) modifies in A «because I don't want to offend black people but I feel guilty for choosing letter B». (sc) She confirms A «because white people are always "treated better" than black people because black people are Italians and I want to try to welcome them in the Italian community».

– Some of them underline they are not racist:

- F12 chooses B «because this very light pink gives me a sense of calm and it makes me think of human skin». She modifies in A «because I'm not racist and I think that skin color doesn't matter». (sc) Confirms A «because nationality or skin color makes no difference to me. We are all the same».

Modifications and new modifications

– For some of the students the choice shifts from the appreciation for a color to the need to show their appreciation for non-Italians:

- F13 modifies in A because «I had to choose this one because I know I would have expressed racist feelings by choosing the other one, and I don't want to». (sc) She modifies in B because «I don't care if they are not of Italian origin, what matters is that they are human beings and that they're ok».
- M12 modifies in A «because we immediately choose those who have our same skin color and discard those who have a different skin color». (sc) He modifies in B «because I was left in disbelief when the teacher told us who the skin colors belonged to».

– The choice criterion shifts from the color to the skin color, then to the nationality:

- F13 modifies in B because «I changed my mind and I don't accept black adults because I am scared of them compared to "normal" people with light skin». (sc) She modifies in A because «for the same reason I said earlier and because talking about colors I am attracted by darker tones, also, in this case, I would avoid both "prototypes" of people because they don't have a distinct nationality».
- F12 modifies in A «because I respect black people. Even if they are marginalized, they are always positive and they never give up». (sc) She modifies in B: «I like foreigners a lot because they are always happy and would do anything to have a happy life».

– The choice criterion shifts from the color to the skin color:

- F12 modifies in B «not because I don't like dark skin colors but because light skin colors make me feel at home». (sc) New modification in A occurred because «when I saw those people they looked friendly and nice, almost friendlier and nicer than light color skin people».

Analysis of the outcomes

We tried to measure the different elements that characterize the reasons for the choices just to highlight the diverse nuances underlining each choice, either confirmations or modifications. For this reason, we have categorized data, on a sample of 87 responses, relevant to the items mainly linked to the aesthetic stimulus upon which the reasons given by the students for their confirmation or modification was based.

	Criteria in the choice reason	*n. of items in reasons*
A	Color	37 (42,53%)
B	Nationality (positive o negative)	40 (45,98%)
C	Skin color (positive o negative)	67 (77,01%)
D	Photo (positive o negative)	13 (14,94%)

Tab. 2 Criteria in choice reasons. Letters indicate different criteria in choice reasons and how many times the criterion is present in the reasons given by 87 students, considering that each student could adopt more criteria in his answer.
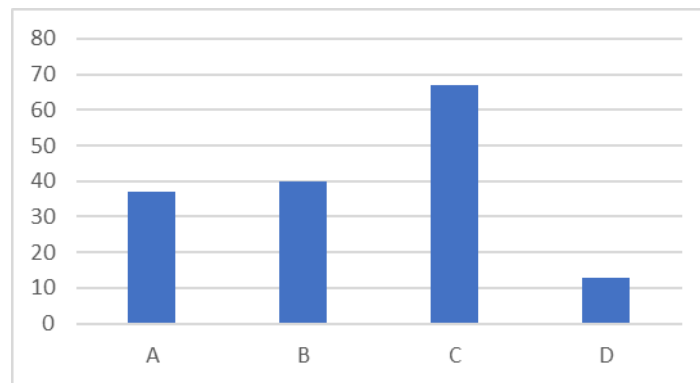

Fig. 5 Criteria at the basis of the choices.

Moreover, we have categorized the data relevant to those items that are not strictly tied to the aesthetic stimulus, that characterizes the reasons given by the students upon which their confirmations or modifications are based.

	Criteria in the choice reason	*n. of items in reasons*
E	Fear to be considered racists or xenophobic	9 (10,34%)
F	Confirmation of the choice («I'm not changing my choice»)	13 (14,94%)
G	Respect for diversity, equality, etc.	29 (33,33%)

H	Collective identification (white skin, we're Italians, they're foreigners, etc.)	36 (41,38%)
I	An account of direct experiences	4 (4,60%)
L	Statement of being non-racist	9 (10,34%)

Tab. 3 Criteria in choice reasons. Letters indicate different criteria in choice reasons and how many times the criterion is present in the reasons given by 87 students, considering that each student could adopt more criteria in his answer.
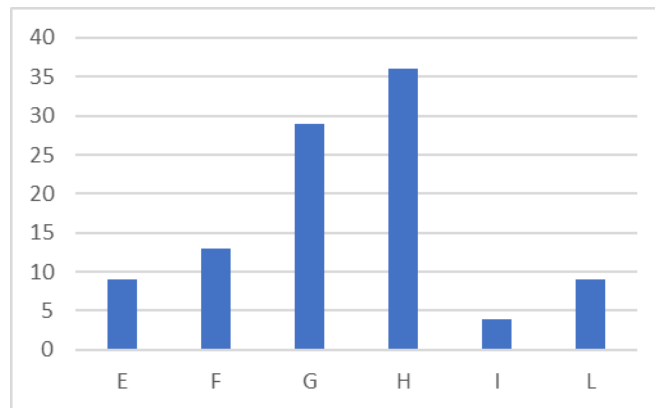

Fig. 6 Criteria at the basis of the choices.

Several student responses still seem to highlight the fear of being perceived as being «racists», so much so that they decided to modify their initial choices even if supported by clearly different votes, or, in some cases, to openly declare that they were not racists. This occurring more predominantly in cases in which the preference is given to light skin colors. For instance: F11 confirms B «not because I don't like dark skin people since we are all the same, but because I don't like dark colors». (sc) She confirms B «because I don't like very dark colors but we are still all the same». F11 confirms B (she canceled «I like light skin more») «because the colors are more beautiful and I prefer both kinds of skin». F13 confirms B because «the skin color is pink but it doesn't matter for the color in the other picture». (sc) She confirms B «because as I have already said I like the skin color, but it doesn't mean I am a racist».

It is possible to tell apart choices which are mostly based on color, for example, F11 confirms B because «even if they're not Italians I don't want to modify my choice». F12 confirms B «because even if they're foreigners their skin color is ok for me»; F12 confirms B «because, anyway, even if they're foreigners, they're still human beings like we are, so we must respect them»; F12 chooses B «because the colors are well mixed». The highest number of choices, according to the histogram (see letter C), is based on the color of skin: F11 modifies in B «because I'm a little scared of those people with a different skin, now I chose the second photo because I like light skin better».

Considering letter H in the histogram, it clearly appears that many students activate a process of recognizance of an element of social identification: F12 confirms B «since I'm Chinese, I choose B because even if they're foreigners, they're human being just

like us»; M11 confirms B «because I was surprised to know that people of other continents are just like us. I won't change my choice».

In this case, the projections about color push students to modify the external information (the photo) and to identify as Italians the subjects in the photo with B colors: F11 confirms B «because I prefer a lighter skin color». (sc) She confirms B «because they're from Bari just like me»; M12 confirms B «because I prefer light colors anyway, I'm not interested about the people because they've got light skin color and they're Italians anyway».

If it seemed possible to read a sort of hesitation about being called racist for the light skin color choice, for the dark skin color choice, we might read a sort of defence of one's choice, emphasizing the weight of the choice. F12 confirms A (she canceled B) because «pink skin belongs to non-Italians, while brown skin belongs to tanned Italians, so having chosen the most beautiful picture, I won't change my choice»; F10 confirms A because «I won't change my answer»; F11 confirms A because «I don't want to change my mind. I was impressed by the fact that the photos are of human skin. I prefer the brown one anyway». (sc) She confirms A «because you mustn't judge people for their skin color but for what they have inside»; M10 confirms A because «I don't want to change my choice even if I know I have chosen a different skin and so a different person or a person I do not know but who has got my same emotions». (sc) He confirms A because «I don't let these choices model me, other people prefer to adopt these models to stand out or to show off»; M11 confirms A (he canceled B) because «black people are no different than white people». (sc) He confirms A because «I won't change my choice»; F11 confirms A «even if I know that the color tones I chose belong to people with dark skin it doesn't matter because I won't change my opinion just because I saw people who are different than me since in our being different we are all the same»; F12 confirms A «because other people would have changed because they stick to their skin color but I didn't change because also dark skins must be respected».

Evaluation of the educational experience

The educational activity carried out with the SCT I and II is not just aimed at asking children about their aesthetic preferences about colors. In the first part of the project, it was very interesting to see that heterogeneity was preferred over homogeneity. The outcomes also silently suggested that in the category of «beauty», the differences, proximity, plurality attract us more. The following phases saw an increase of complexity of the aesthetic submissions with a series of «traps». These traps aimed to intertwine the aesthetic dimension with the cultural one (the social and educational) expressed in the reasons given for the choices, and later on, even with the confirmations or modifications. A few pedagogic observations must be made to highlight the value of this activity. First of all, the position of Art in education.

With the SCT, the artistic dimension becomes experimental and it is given a

scientific framework without misrepresenting it. For its nature, Art does not have moralizing intentions. It acquires a social façade because it is not only about the evaluation of beauty by the people involved, but it literally gives a body to apparently neutral stimuli.

The stimuli *per se* might stay neutral even after the revelation that the colors are actual human skin colors, but in reality this neutrality is not possible.

The reasons why neutrality is swept away, thus, opening a completely different scenario are many: because the items reveal people, and bodies, and it is because of these bodies that the skin is what is chosen based on its color. All these elements cause displacement. In the SCT II, the alienation is even greater because the faces become real and reveal the double play as it is not only about skin. This already recalls prejudices, in other words, the emotional connotations of judgments. It is also about light skin colors for foreigners and dark skin colors for Italians, and this too overturns expectations.

The «trick» creates alienation as a subtle yet effective educational action. If the category of alienation underlines all contemporary Art, it also offers the chance for creative educational solution. In this case, it is not about pointing children towards values of tolerance or welcoming, nor is it about pedagogical intentions which entail purposed activities in order to instil contents. SCT is free from all of this. It is not about giving lessons of good coexistence indicating what is good and what is not. Rather than that, the purpose is to place kids in a game, to let them participate in a creative tension between aesthetic judgment and cultural judgment of people. In the space between, girls and boys perceived an «earthquake». For a few minutes they asked themselves where they were exactly, and looked at themselves in the mirror without being judged. The educational value can be found in the surfacing, the rising of something buried in themselves with no evaluative concern. It is about creating a crisis, an internal conflict, a commotion which brought the kids to ask themselves «what do I actually think?». And it is no trivial feat because intercultural education often presents itself as moralistic and exhortatory, as an utterance of what is good in a future pacific society. It has assumed stereotypes and prejudices as critical points, but it has handled this white-hot material with extreme difficulty. One of the reasons why it is really hard to work with prejudices is that they are subtle and they stay hidden. For example, it is difficult (even in a moment in which hate speech seems to be legitimated on social networks and on the media), to admit to being racist.

More frequently the form of prejudice will be «I am not a racist, but…», «I have nothing against black people/gay people/Muslims, etc., but…». And it is unlikely that someone would explicitly affirm that would prefer a segregated society or purged from «different» people or that they do not care if someone drowns in the sea. If these are the usual issues which can be found among people, it becomes more complicated when we talk about secondary school aged kids.

Pre-teens are generally reluctant to open up with adults, at school in particular, where — with few exceptions — relations are structurally hampered by evaluations and by the

common repressive tendency of school rules and teachers. To carry out an authentic project with them is challenging because they are used to responding «as the teacher wants me to answer», and not to opening up. Rather than that, they perceive the danger in a request for sincerity. So working with these delicate topics on such an explicit level might be a huge mistake. For this reason, another important feature of the SCT from a pedagogical point of view is that it makes what is below the surface emerge without deceiving. Students are actually lured by an experimental activity and they literally get into the game because it is creative and fun. This approach creates a positive atmosphere and when the revelation about the human skin hidden under the color becomes clear, they let what is inside easily appear. Including the fear of being «judged negatively». This element is clearly inferred from the answers that almost become defensive when one wants to justify the confirmation of a color, exactly as it happens when one adds an «ideological» framework in the presence of positive prejudices.

In a spontaneous way, the students link that color, which, metaphorically, in the beginning was at room temperature, to a medium-high temperature, because it recalls identifications, emotions and they are also associated with recurring topics in the media. Their attention is shifted and their choices show the underlayer which, with an «open hand» play, would not emerge. During the SCT, teacher's educational sensitivity is activated and it gathers in a maieutic way what has surfaced, and it triggers in/with/among the students a positive dynamic of personal research, and discussion, and a non-judging debate of open reflection. In this respect the initial project became a dynamic and growing process which is, from school to school, acquiring new forms starting from the experiment itself according to the responses of the students, and to the breadth of the debate the teachers started, as well as, opening up to unknown developments.

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