



# Training in Pedagogical Research in Contexts of High Socio-Cultural Complexity\*

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## Abstract

This paper aims to present some theoretical issues currently emerging in educational research on intercultural training of teachers and educators. The paper starts by briefly presenting some theoretical backgrounds of current intercultural education research, with special reference to the field of intersectionality studies. It will then proceed to highlight the relevance of drawing on a postcolonial critical perspective in dealing with educational research within socio-culturally complex environments. To conclude, the paper will try to outline some possible educational perspectives aiming to enhance the inclusive character of socially and culturally complex training contexts.

## Keywords

Training contexts – Intercultural training – Intercultural education – Sociocultural complexity

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## 1

## Theoretical premises: complexity, intersectionality

In order to reflect on the theme of this conference – “Multicultural Communities for Which Formation?” – in other words, on the projects, paths, knowledge, and skills that can emerge within training contexts characterised by socio-cultural and linguistic diversity and complexity, it may be useful to start from an awareness that now seems to be firmly present in the field of pedagogical-intercultural research<sup>1</sup>: that is, the fact that most of today’s training and educational contexts are characterised by heterogeneity that we cannot reduce to one single key of interpretation.

We could say in particular that – far from being possible to describe and understand them only (or mainly) by proceeding from a series of presumed “cultures” that are predefined or in any case rigid (and that one would presume would determine the paths of individuals and groups in a linear manner) – today’s educational contexts, as well as people’s experiences, turn out to be characterised by a diversity which is in fact made up of a plurality of cultural and linguistic repertoires. On the other hand, those same repertoires are also enriched (and diversified) by virtue of generational and socio-economic aspects that have, perhaps, just as much of an impact on the emerging complexity of educational contexts as they do on more strictly cultural and linguistic aspects, without neglecting the relevance of exploring this same complexity in the light of gender differences, as the scholars working in the field of intersectionality studies naturally teach us<sup>2</sup>.

All these elements – and many others with them – are in fact ‘intertwined’ today in the personal and training paths of individuals and groups. Indeed, to take up precisely the perspective of the above-mentioned studies on intersectionality, we could say, perhaps, that today more than ever, what surfaces – among trainers, educators, teachers, researchers – is the awareness that training pathways, as well as more generally people’s experiences, emerge in the intersection of such a heterogeneity of aspects.

With regard to the ways in which these intersections occur, there are at least two elements that seem important to recall here, since they appear to be of particular relevance from a pedagogical point of view, as well as for the training of teachers and educators. First of all, the fact that, according to an intersectional perspective, the interweaving (“intersection”) between the different aspects does not take place on the basis of predefined differences, i.e. not on the basis of presumed “essences”; rather, in line with what has just been said about the importance of avoiding “culturalist” readings in the analysis of heterogeneous and complex educational contexts, the “differences” themselves should be thought of from a “relational” perspective. In other words, differences should be described as *relations* between elements: they would therefore not precede interactions (differences as predefined ‘essences’), but would emerge from the interactions themselves (differences *as relations*). It is no coincidence, for instance, that if we refer to the field of cultural production/reproduction, transmission/transformation, a scholar such as Arjun Appadurai has highlighted the importance of privileging the use of the adjective ‘cultural’ (in reference to the various possible ‘cultural’ dimensions) rather than the noun ‘culture’, which could more easily entail running the risk of making essentialist assumptions<sup>3</sup>. This aspect of difference as a relationship, is one that appears to be of particular significance for pedagogical research, if we consider the central importance that the relationship – and in particular the “educational relationship” – assumes in the educational sphere, especially in reference to the “taking shape”, in the educational relationship, of the paths of persons in training.

Secondly, a further element that appears particularly significant from a pedagogical point of view is the awareness – clearly expressed in a number of contributions in the field of intersectionality studies<sup>4</sup> – that people’s training paths not only emerge in the relationship/interaction between different elements, but also take shape within

historical-social contexts that are never 'neutral', but charged with relationships often characterised by 'asymmetries' in the positioning of the various subjects. It is no coincidence that Gill Valentine speaks in this sense of 'power-laden spaces'<sup>5</sup>. From the pedagogical point of view, we may, for instance, think of the very unequal possibilities that, in different territories/contexts, trainees have of accessing the various resources (material and immaterial) necessary for each of them to mature/express their potential (their 'capacities', in Nussbaumian terms) to the full. We need only think of the numerous studies that monitor old and new poverty today, as well as specifically educational poverty<sup>6</sup>. It is perhaps with reference to these different possibilities of access to resources (including cultural and educational) on the part of different social groups, that Ulf Hannerz proposed using the notion of 'creolisation' to describe the heterogeneity emerging in contemporary complex societies<sup>7</sup>.

At the same time, particularly with regard to so-called 'intercultural' relations in highly complex contexts, one cannot underestimate the importance of the fact that specific educational contexts bear the marks of equally specific historical paths, especially with reference to the long 'colonial' season, as well as to the various processes of decolonisation.

On one hand, attention to this should make us aware of the risks (to which we will soon return) that some elements of the "colonial" type of educational relations (and the epistemological and discursive assumptions on which they rested and to which they contributed in facilitating) are present even today – more or less explicitly – in contexts and in contemporary educational practices: suffice it to think of analyses, albeit diverse, like those of Achille Mbembe on the present "postcolony" scenario and that of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on the continuance of colonial modalities in many of today's educative contexts, both in the North and in the South of the planet<sup>8</sup>. See also, in the context of the Italian debate, the risks already highlighted some time ago by Milena Santerini or Massimiliano Fiorucci, among others<sup>9</sup>.

On the other hand, this attention to relations that developed historically in colonial, decolonial and post-colonial contexts could help us to mature, even within the pedagogical-intercultural field, the awareness that these relations should never be read only in a univocal and linear sense. One thinks of Paul Gilroy's studies on circulation and exchanges/transformations emerging in the context of the 'Black Atlantic'<sup>10</sup>, or the suggestions we find in Michel de Certeau's analyses of the ways in which the presence of the "other" can also emerge in the context of "colonial" relations as a presence that limits/alters colonial space as a "space of appropriation"<sup>11</sup>.

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## A critical postcolonial perspective in teacher and educator training

A pedagogical research approach inspired by a critical postcolonial perspective seeks to distance itself (a *critical* distance in fact) from the epistemological assumptions emerging from colonial-type relations<sup>12</sup>. First and foremost, from the tendency to distinguish/contrapose – according to rigid binary type thinking – "us" and "them": this contraposition was based on and nourished by systems of knowledge/power that contributed to the rigid and stereotyped construction both of the "other" and – conversely, and in a complementary manner – of the "us" as taught by now classic analyses such as those of Edward Said<sup>13</sup>. In fact, as Miguel Mellino has rightly remarked, Said – starting from Foucauldian analyses of the functioning of processes of knowledge/power in the genesis of Western modernity – set out to show how "the West's domination over the East [functioned] also by producing certain 'discourses' about the other"<sup>14</sup>. In this sense, as is well known, Said invites us to remember – and it is Mellino again who emphasises this – that we should consider "colonialism and imperialism not only as political-economic phenomena but as dis-

cursive formations or regimes aimed at the production of certain images or stereotypes of cultural otherness functional both to the creation of a Western culture or identity and to its hegemony or domination over the rest of the planet”<sup>15</sup>.

In the light of this, we could consider how the construction and functioning of these discursive formations or regimes was necessarily also based on the diffusion of certain discourses on education, including perhaps, first and foremost, those relating to the alleged “civilising colonisation”, the paradoxes of which were drawn attention to by the aforementioned de Certeau<sup>16</sup>. But just as many examples of this kind may be found in the field studies conducted by anthropologists interested in the historical role played by Western-based educational institutions in various contexts of cultural contact, for example, in the thoughts of the aforementioned Hannerz on the paradoxes connected to the diffusion of so-called literacy in Africa (particularly, in the case of Hannerz’s research, in the Nigerian context)<sup>17</sup>. Or in Barbara Rogoff’s insights into how, in the North American context of the late 19th and early 20th century, schooling was often seen as a tool “to change the customs and habits of native communities”, as “a means by which to ‘civilise’ the Indians”<sup>18</sup>.

One of the “colonial” elements that have long innervated certain parts of the pedagogical discourse (and on which certain educational practices in highly complex contexts are perhaps still based today) was the stereotype of the “other” as lacking in cultural/symbolic resources and almost always only to be civilised/helped/corrected. See, in this sense, the lucid critique made on several occasions of this assumption/stereotype by the aforementioned Spivak, an author who is one of the main points of reference in the field of postcolonial studies. In her works, Spivak has also often manifested specific attention to certain aspects of pedagogical discourse, including, in some cases, the issues of teacher training, as can be seen in her reflections on and experience with, teachers in rural schools in West Bengal, as described, for example, in the text *Righting Wrongs*<sup>19</sup>. In that same piece, she dwells on some aspects of her work as a teacher in the field of humanities in a context of the Global North (Spivak is a professor at Columbia University in New York), and her description of one of the changes in attitude that establishes a critical distance from at least that particular colonial stereotype is especially effective: “The first condition and effect is a suspension of the conviction that I am necessarily better, I am necessarily indispensable, I am necessarily the one to right wrongs, I am necessarily the end-product for which history happened, and that New York is necessarily the capital of the world”<sup>20</sup>. In this sense, Spivak shows the direction in which to move, but this also allows us to grasp the assumption to be left behind: It is a direction that appears particularly relevant especially when considering the sphere of training for those who will be or are called upon to operate educationally in heterogeneous contexts, because it highlights the importance of working on a position that appears theoretical, ethical and pedagogical at the same time, and to which we should ‘coach ourselves’ as trainers, educators, teachers.

If we accept Spivak’s invitation and also try to adopt, at least at times, a critical postcolonial perspective, we can attempt to reflect on what might be some remaining colonial-type assumptions in the strictly pedagogical sphere, and in particular in the context of training educators/teachers called upon to operate in multicultural and heterogeneous contexts.

We can be guided in this direction by the work of the American researcher Christine Sleeter, who – in addition to having extensively studied topics such as *multicultural education* and anti-racist education in different educational contexts – has also worked extensively in the specific field of teacher training for teachers called upon to work in highly complex and heterogeneous educational institutions. In a 2010 article entitled *Afterword. Culturally Responsive Teaching: A Reflection*<sup>21</sup>, Sleeter very thought-provokingly focuses on some of the critical issues/difficulties she has come across in her initial teacher training activities, particularly with regard to how the meaning of culturally responsive teaching is often misunderstood.

On the one hand, Sleeter observes, there is the risk (to which we have already drawn attention to some extent) of essentialising ‘differences’<sup>22</sup> and thereby interpreting the pathways of individual learners by tracing them back to a set of elements usually – and very often somewhat arbitrarily or at least reductively – associated with certain cultural and social groups<sup>23</sup>, thus neglecting the plurality of intersections dwelt on at the beginning of this contribution.

On the other hand – and this is a second risk, connected in some way to the previous one – we might think that it is a matter of teaching learners ‘their’ cultures<sup>24</sup> at this point, which would in a certain sense imply representing them (and the other in general) as a sort of ‘tabula rasa’ that we would be called upon to ‘fill in’. On the contrary, it is precisely from the learners’ strengths, from the knowledge and skills they already possess – and which are also connected to their diversified cultural and linguistic repertoires – that we can design learning and teaching environments, paths, situations. This is, in a certain sense, the criticism that Paulo Freire already made of any ‘depository’ type of education, that is to say, of a form of education that ‘nullifies or minimises the creative power of those being educated’<sup>25</sup>. To which is added – again in Freire’s words – “all social action of a paternalistic nature”<sup>26</sup>.

There are then two further ‘dangers’ against which Sleeter again, warns us<sup>27</sup>, and which she highlights as also emerging at times in the contexts of training, and in her case, as mentioned above, of teacher training. That is to say, on one side, there is the fact that we often struggle to grasp the complexity of educational contexts and therefore tend to look for solutions that respond to only one aspect of that complexity, thus running the risk of implementing actions that are sometimes simplistic or in any case far removed from the concreteness of the contexts, while on the other is the risk associated with the difficulty we most often make in ‘seeing’ the culturally/socially/historically constructed character of ‘our’ pedagogical theories/practices, with the consequent tendency to confer on them – often unconsciously – a character of presumed universality and neutrality, while it is often only to the pedagogical theories/practices of others that we attribute a ‘cultural’ character.

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## Possible ways of working

It is not always easy to be aware of these risks. As Sleeter herself suggests – and as emerges, precisely, from a critical postcolonial perspective on education in heterogeneous contexts – these are assumptions that often remain implicitly at the basis of both our theoretical reflections and the educational formation we put into practice. How can we try to keep our guard up against them? And how can we then try to imagine and construct training/learning/socialisation environments that seek to combine such self-critical awareness with effective sustainability/feasibility/transferability in contexts and practices? However, on closer inspection, these are the two sides of the same question, since – according to the hypothesis outlined so far – it is also starting from a broadening/diverting of the theoretical outlook that we can describe, interpret and subsequently try to accompany/guide some aspects of today’s highly complex contexts. It is possible to try to sketch out some possible avenues of work, with specific reference to the question of the training/self-education of those who are preparing to work in heterogeneous, *multi-* and *intercultural*, multilingual contexts.

If we bear in mind the aforementioned risks pointed out, for example, by Said, a first direction to work towards, also in the contexts of training of trainers, could be that of trying to equip ourselves to move away from a theoretical-pedagogical approach of a purely “binary” type; in other words, it would be a matter of trying to train ourselves to read complexity and intersections, starting with those closest (at least potentially) to teachers and educators in training. An interesting track could be, in this sense, that of starting from (and enhancing) the characteristics of heterogeneity, interculturality and



plurilingualism also of the same learning contexts/environments in which educators and teachers are trained. One thinks, for example, both of classrooms and courses, including university courses, and of the contexts in which any internship, apprenticeship, service learning, etc. activities take place. In order to move in this direction, we should, among other things, acquire reading keys/tools that allow us to read heterogeneous, *multi-* and *intercultural* and multilingual contexts, highlighting not only their weaknesses and problems, but also (above all) their strengths: those of the persons undergoing training, families, groups, communities, but also of the teachers and educators and of the institutions in which they are trained and operate<sup>28</sup>.

It is again Sleeter who provides us with a valuable insight (and a valuable suggestion) in this sense, when she suggests that learning to teach/educate in a manner sensitive to cultural diversity (the aforementioned culturally responsive teaching) “begins with dialogue (between teacher and students, between teacher and parents, and so on) and with the teacher’s own willingness to spend time as a learner in the community of his or her pupils”<sup>29</sup>. Mutatis mutandis, we find in these words a Freirean overtone, of the Freire who suggested that, in order to be able to teach, we must learn first from our pupils, bringing into focus, for example, generating words and themes from which to build paths, together with communities in fact, that would really attempt to be paths of consciousness-raising and emancipation as well. “I have learnt to practise teaching that is attentive to cultural diversity”, writes Sleeter not surprisingly, “departing from dialogue and placing myself within other cultural contexts, and supporting and extending that learning through formal study”<sup>30</sup>.

In other words, Sleeter points to a circularity of practice and *reflection on practice* that – in addition to being a consolidated and essential modality of teacher and educator training – can have an additional value in terms of training together to educate, teach/learn in highly heterogeneous contexts: in such contexts, in fact, practice exposes us on a daily basis to socio-cultural and linguistic complexity, and shared reflection on practice, and also from the standpoint of colleagues and trainers, it helps us to broaden our outlook and increase our awareness of the situated character of our pedagogical, didactic, organisational cultures as well.

It is no accident that it is yet again Sleeter to explain that “a large part of [her] work as a teacher trainer consisted in placing future teachers in the position of learners in community contexts that were unfamiliar to them”<sup>31</sup>, guiding them “in their learning” within communities with tools such as structured interviews and observation guides from which reflections emerged that could ultimately be valorised as a basis for classroom discussion. guiding them ‘in their learning’ within communities with tools such as structured interviews and observation guides from which reflections emerged that could ultimately be used as a basis for classroom discussion<sup>32</sup>. This is, after all, the aforementioned circularity between shared reflection and practice, through which we can train ourselves in that shift in/expansion of outlook to which a critical postcolonial perspective summons us.

Trying to work in this direction on the level of pedagogical, didactic and organisational culture(s), with specific reference to the training of educators and teachers called upon to operate in heterogeneous, multi, intercultural and multilingual contexts, could also be important not only in recognising the plurality and heterogeneity of these cultures, and thus their historically, socially, culturally constructed character. It could also help us to look at the ways in which these characteristics structure (often without our being aware of it) the contexts and practices within which teachers/educators are formed. And this could help us – when designing training environments, pathways and situations – to become aware of how these historically situated characteristics may themselves turn out to be, not only weaknesses, but also barriers or obstacles to the participation of future teachers and educators. In some cases, in fact, this “long tour” (of anthropological<sup>33</sup> as well as postcolonial inspiration), through plurality and complexity could help us to rediscover (or sometimes to see for the first

time, perhaps) some of the strengths of those pedagogical, didactic and organisational cultures that guide our daily practices, the richness of which we too often fail to grasp, precisely because we perhaps take them too much for granted.

It seems of primary importance, in this sense, to ‘train’ ourselves – right from the formation stage – to work as a team, in collaboration (‘train together’), to try – as Anna Maria Piussi<sup>34</sup> has suggested – to broaden our outlook, to grasp interdependencies, to improve our self-observation capacities, to place our reflection/action in a participatory (intersubjective) process. In this direction, a valuable contribution can still be made today by approaches inspired by Action Research, which, as Chiara Bove has happily summarised, can help us to mature (train) *at the same* time the ability to root our educational action within specific contexts and the ability to maintain a distance, and therefore a critical and self-critical reading of the contexts themselves and of our practices within them<sup>35</sup>. Of course, as Bove herself reminds us, it is not always easy for “those who work in the field”, immersed right in the complexity of everyday educational work, to also become “researchers, therefore capable of mediating between perspectives, points of view, theoretical readings of problems, systematic use of methods, production of new knowledge”<sup>36</sup>. And, in any case, it seems interesting, as the author herself notes, “to understand action-research as a flexible methodology” that, even if not always “reproducible tout-court” in educational contexts (the author refers to school, but one could probably extend her reflection to non-formal contexts), can constitute a reference from which “to deduce guiding criteria for training and for educational/didactic action in an intercultural perspective”<sup>37</sup>, as well as perhaps – according to the path that we have tried to outline in this contribution – even in a post-colonial perspective: in an attempt to acquire keys of interpretation that help us ‘be/inhabit’ in a pedagogically oriented way in the complexity/uncertainty that characterises today’s educational contexts.



## Endnotes

1. See for example Z. BAUMAN – A. PORTERA, *Education and Intercultural Identity*, Routledge, London 2021; M. CATARCI – M. FIORUCCI (eds.), *Intercultural Education in the European Context. Theories, Experiences, Challenges*, Ashgate, Farnham 2015; M. FIORUCCI, *Educazione, formazione e pedagogia in prospettiva interculturale*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2020; M. FIORUCCI – F. PINTO MINERVA – A. PORTERA (edd.), *Gli alfabeti dell'intercultura*, ETS, Pisa 2016; S. NANNI – A. VACCARELLI (edd.), *Intercultura e scuola. Scenari, ricerche, percorsi pedagogici*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2019; M. SANTERINI, *Pedagogia socioculturale*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2019; M. TAROZZI, *Dall'intercultura alla giustizia sociale. Per un progetto pedagogico e politico di cittadinanza globale*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2015.
2. See for example L. McCALL, *The Complexity of Intersectionality*, "Sign" 30 (2005) 3, 1771-1800; G. VALENTINE, *Theorizing and Researching Intersectionality: A Challenge for Feminist Geography*, "The Professional Geographer" 59 (2007) 1, 10-21.
3. Cf. A. APPADURAI, *Modernità in polvere* (1996), trad. it. Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2012<sup>2</sup>, 21-22.
4. See for example VALENTINE, *Theorizing and Researching Intersectionality*.
5. *Ibid.*, 19.
6. See for example on this last point the various work carried out by Save the Children starting from the proposal to identify a specific Index of Educational Poverty (see SAVE THE CHILDREN, *La lampada di Aladino. L'Indice di Save the Children per misurare le povertà educative e illuminare il futuro dei bambini in Italia*, Roma 2014, as well as the various works that the same organisation has promoted on these issues over the following years).
7. Cf. U. HANNERZ, *Transational Connections. Cultura, People, Places*, Routledge, London – New York, NY 2001.
8. Cf. A. MBEMBE, *On the Postcolony*, The Regents of the University of California – University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA 2000 and G.C. SPIVAK, *Etics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee e Certain Scenes of Teaching*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2019.
9. Cf. M. SANTERINI, *Educazione interculturale e strategie contro il razzismo*, in EAD. (ed.), *Processi educativi e integrazione culturale*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 1996, 65-67; M. FIORUCCI, *Narrazioni tossiche e dialogo interculturale*, "MeTis. Mondi educativi. Temi, indagini, suggestioni", 9 (2019) 2, 15-34.
10. Cf. P. GILROY, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double-Consciousness*, Harvard University Press – Verso, London 1993.
11. Cf. M. DE CERTEAU, *L'invenzione del quotidiano* (1980), trad. it. Edizioni Lavoro, Roma 2000, 220ss.
12. Cf. M.A. MELLINO, *La critica postcoloniale*, Meltemi, Roma 2005.
13. Cf. E. SAID, *Orientalismo. L'immagine europea dell'Oriente* (1978), trad. it. Feltrinelli, Milano 1999.
14. Translated from the italian original: MELLINO, *La critica postcoloniale*, 42.
15. *Ibid.*, 44.
16. Cf. DE CERTEAU, *L'invenzione del quotidiano*, 225-226.
17. Cf. HANNERZ, *La diversità culturale*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2001, 110.



18. Cf. B. ROGOFF, *La natura culturale dello sviluppo*, trad. it. Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2004, 355-358.
19. Cf. G. CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK, *Righting Wrongs*, in N. OWEN (ed.), *Human Rights, Human Wrongs*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003, 168-227.
20. *Ibid.*, 181.
21. Cf. C.E. SLEETER, *Afterword. Culturally Responsive Teaching: A Reflection*, "Journal of Praxis in Multicultural Education", 5 (2010) 1, 116-119.
22. Cf. *ibid.*, 117.
23. Cf. *ivi*.
24. Cf. *ivi*.
25. Cf. P. FREIRE, *Pedagogia degli oppressi (Pedagogy of the Opressed, 1968)*, trad. it. Edizioni Gruppo Abele, Torino 2002<sup>2</sup>, 60.
26. *Ivi*.
27. Cf. SLEETER, *Afterword. Culturally responsive teaching*, 117.
28. For a more in depth attempt at reflection in this direction, cf. D. ZOLETTO, *A partire dai punti di forza. Popular culture, eterogeneità, educazione*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2019, as well as – with explicit reference to teacher training in highly complex school contexts. Ricerca-azione e collaborazione fra docenti, in P. FLOREANCIG – F. FUSCO – F. VIRGILIO – F. ZANON – D. ZOLETTO (eds.), *Ricerca-azione e trasformazione delle pratiche didattiche. L'esperienza del Piano pluriennale di formazione per le scuole ad alta incidenza di alunni stranieri*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2019, 66-74.
29. SLEETER, *Afterword. Culturally Responsive Teaching*, 117.
30. *Ivi*.
31. *Ibid.*, 117-118.
32. Cf. *ivi*.
33. See in this regard F. REMOTTI, *Noi primitivi. Lo specchio dell'antropologia*, nuova ediz. accr. Boringhieri, Torino 2009.
34. Cf. A.M. PIUSSI, *Il senso libero della libertà. La posta in gioco di una civiltà desiderabile*, "Encyclopaideia", XV, 29 (2011) 33.
35. Cf. C. BOVE, *Pensare con metodo e logica dell'indagine: la ricerca-azione per la formazione e l'azione nella scuola multiculturale*, "Educazione Interculturale. Teorie, Ricerche, Pratiche" 17 (2019) 1, 67.
36. *Ibid.*, 68.
37. *Ivi*.