Chapter 7
Multiculturalism in Educational Practices: The Italian Case

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Abstract

The anthropological lens suggests a deconstruction of multicultural education: it cannot be pursued if we do not critically unpack the meaning of culture. Drawing on some ethnographic cases in the Italian context, we identify three potential pitfalls associated with a naive misconception of culture: generating excesses of culture, reifying culture, and overlooking differences within cultures.

Policy discourse in continental Europe has recognised the need for a dynamic and constructivist conceptualisation of culture to replace the "multicultural" educational model with the "intercultural" one. Italian school policy has embraced the latter, which can enable promising educational practices if practitioners share a critical understanding of its theoretical and axiological assumptions.

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Overview of the Italian educational context

The Constitution of the Italian Republic (1948) established the principles of the Italian education system, mandating compulsory education for a minimum of eight years (art. 34), later extended to ten years (Law 296/2006), covering the ages from 6 to 16. Compulsory education includes five years of primary school (*Scuola primaria*), three years of middle school (*Scuola secondaria di I grado*, commonly referred to as *Scuola media)* and the first two years of secondary school (*Scuola secondaria di II grado,* also known as *Scuola superiore*). The following years can be completed either in general or vocational upper secondary schools or within the regional training system. Figure 1 illustrates the structure of the Italian education system, spanning from early childhood education and care (ECEC) to post-secondary non-tertiary education.
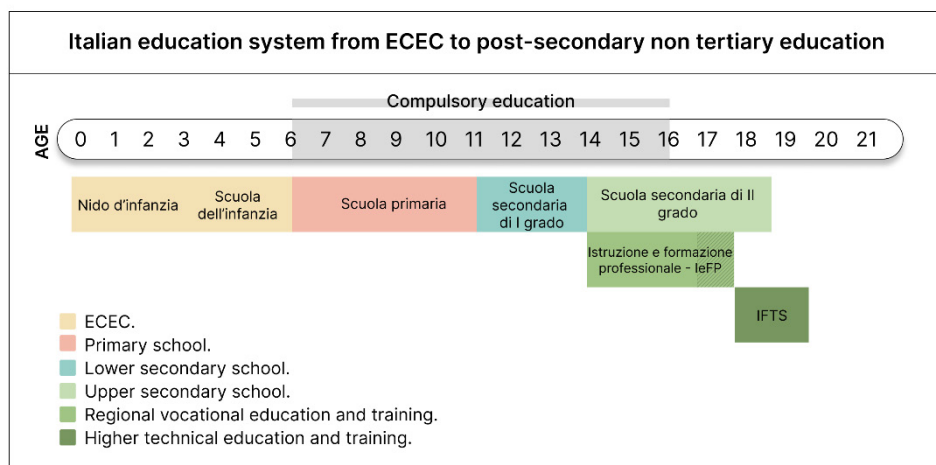

Figure 1 Italian education system from Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) to post-secondary non-tertiary education. Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Italy has historically been a country of emigration and more recently, since the 1970s, a country of significant immigration. In recent decades, the Italian population has become more linguistically, culturally, and ethnically diverse, impacting the social fabric of schools and related policies. According to the data collected by the Ministry of Education, in the school year 2020/2021 there were 865.388 students of non-Italian nationality enrolled in the public education system, i.e., 10.3% of the total school population, unevenly distributed across the national territory. Students with non-Italian nationality are predominately located in the northern regions (65.3%), followed by the central regions (22.2%) and finally the south (12.5%). Students with migrant backgrounds statistically face

higher levels of poverty, academic risk, and dropout rates (MIM, 2023). Despite a recent decline, possibly due the European economic crisis and socio-economic developments in emigration countries, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity remains a structural aspect of the Italian school system.

School policy regulates the distribution of non-Italian pupils, setting a 30% threshold for each class (MIUR, 2014). In multi-ethnic areas, the high percentage of migrant students has been associated with the phenomenon of "white flight" (Cordini et al., 2019), where many Italian families relocate to more homogenous areas.

The Italian educational policy adopts an inclusive approach to categorising special educational needs (*bisogni educativi speciali*, often abbreviated as BES), encompassing not only students with disabilities or specific developmental disorders (e.g., specific learning difficulties, ADHD, language deficits), but also students with socio-economic, linguistic, and cultural disadvantages. Consequently, students with migration backgrounds often fall into this category—a controversial issue as this may inadvertently perpetuate processes of micro-exclusions (Migliarini et al., 2020).

All categories of learners within the SEN spectrum are educated in mainstream settings: there are no special schools or classrooms. In instances where students with disabilities require extra support, dedicated teachers are assigned to promote inclusive practices, typically within the classroom setting. According to the current policies, however, all teachers are expected to collaborate and promote inclusion through personalised and/or individualised strategies for SEN pupils.

In the "superdiverse" landscape of contemporary Italian schools (Vertovec, 2007; Zoletto, 2023), teachers are tasked not only with mastering their respective discipline but also with a nuanced understanding of cultural diversity. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss how the multiculturalist approach can insidiously manifest if it lacks grounding in anthropological reflection.

Multicultural round dance

When my son Giovanni was four, he attended kindergarten in the centre of a small town in northern Italy, in a district recently repopulated by immigrant families; about eighty per cent of the school population consisted of migrant families: Romanian, Moldavian, Chinese, Moroccan, Indian. Daily life in nursery school was the same as in any other nursery school: the children played and fought, and the fights were settled, without any difficulty.

In the mornings the mothers would gather for coffee in a nearby café and discuss the typical challenges of motherhood: eating, sleeping, tantrums, tiredness. A friendship blossomed among us mothers, and little attention was paid to each other's cultural background. Of course, we were aware of our diverse

origins; references to our backgrounds occasionally crept into our conversations without much weight attached to them. We were Mariana, Cecilia, Linda, Jasmine, tall or short, nice or unpleasant, punctual or late, good cooks or not…

That year the director of educational policy decided to send her kindergarten teachers on a training course on multiculturalism. The high percentage of immigrant children worried the management, with rumours suggesting the presence of major and specific problems although neither my son Giovanni or I had noticed any.

A few weeks before Christmas, the teacher stopped some of us mothers and told us that, based on this multicultural project, the school had organised a multicultural round dance; some mothers were asked to represent their "ethnicity". So, the round dance would be made up of a Moldovan mother, a Romanian mother, a Chinese mother, an Indian mother, and I had been chosen as the Italian mother.

As soon as the teachers made this request and the mothers discussed the party, we were all surprised to ask ourselves a few questions: what ethnic group do I belong to? Am I an authentic representative of that ethnicity? And what ethnicity do you belong to? Who are you, really?

All of us mothers found ourselves asking these questions, and where before we were mothers, with typical problems of mothers dictated by many variables, we suddenly began seeing ourselves as representatives of a culture and our children began to ask us which culture their partner came from, what they ate in their culture, what customs they had, and the cultural difference entered our coffee conversations.

Where before there was Marianna, a beautiful blonde with two children, a cleaner, we now saw a Moldavian woman; where before there was Kleta, we now saw a Greek woman, and for a long time the discourses of cultural belonging entered our everyday lives.

In this context, I have always wondered whether multiculturalism has created differences where there were none before or has improved our understanding of cultural differences.

It certainly taught us to look at ourselves differently. But, *has it created unnecessary differences or has it increased our sensitivity and understanding of diversity*?

The traps of multiculturalism

While presenting an improvement over ethnocentrism, the metaphor of multiculturalism as wealth, which affirms the value of cultural differences and the need to understand and communicate with them, is not exempt of its own challenges.

The most problematic outcome of the multiculturalist metaphor (represented visually by the mosaic world, in which the different pieces of the puzzle are

the different cultures) is the reifying effect of different cultures that it implies, as well as the tendency to exaggerate the role of culture in conflicting interactions to the detriment of other dimensions that produce inequality and are instead obscured (such as those of gender, generation, economic and social capital).

This overestimation of the importance and cultural motivations of behaviours paradoxically ends up creating differences when they are emphasised.

In the same way the metaphor of development perpetuates notions of inferiority by categorising countries into a dichotomy of "first" and "third" worlds, and developed and less developed nations, *the metaphor of cultural diversity seeks and creates cultural differences where instead there exist fluid and dynamic everyday practices of social coexistence.*

Let us take as an example the story that concludes the book *Eccessi di Culture* (2004) by the Italian anthropologist Marco Aime:

> I would like to quote an anecdote told to me by Don Piero Gallo, parish priest of San Salvario, a district of Turin with a strong immigrant presence. In a nursery school in the neighbourhood, attended by many North African children, the teachers decided one day to prepare couscous. They searched for the "original" recipe to cook it according to tradition. The children were delighted. Then the teacher asked a little Moroccan: "Do you like it?"
> "Yes"
> "Is it like what your mum makes?"
> "My mum's is better because she puts a layer of couscous, a layer of tortellini, a layer of couscous…" (2004:136, translated by Angela Biscaldi)

In this typical example of multicultural education, an approach encouraged in many schools, culture is emphasised, and overvalued, taking it out of that natural process dynamics that characterises it. This attitude ends up creating differences where instead there are spontaneous practices of coexistence and social transformation: the Moroccan child is seen as the bearer of a different culture that takes the form of a different cuisine, while his family has already embarked on a process of transformation and hybridisation.

In the case of Giovanni's nursery school, the mothers had been engaged for years in a process of negotiation and dialogue that gave new meaning to the everyday practices of the country of origin.

In fact, the multiculturalist gap risks freezing cultures, favouring the idea that "stable cultures" exist over time and that the people who belong to them have an identity that is always the same.

As Marzo Mazzetti writes:

> We have a tendency to consider a foreigner present in our country as the same person they were before leaving their country... Well, that's not the case. The very act of migrating, coming into contact with a new world, to which it is necessary to adapt, modifies the person, transforms the way in which they see themselves,

in a word their identity''
(Mazzetti, 2003: 82, translated by Angela Biscaldi)

The anthropologist Marco Aime (2004) underlines how the events following 11 September 2001 have increased the tendency to associate peoples with cultures and religions, thus redrawing a map of the world on an ethnic or religious basis. We are witnessing, says the author, an excess of attention toward cultures, diversity, and identities. The problem is that the emphasis is always on the differences and not on the common elements, neglecting the fact that cultures are made up of all the elements that have passed through them over time, causing them to lose their original purity.

Thus, other causes of misunderstandings between individuals or groups – such as economic or gender differences –are underestimated in order to overestimate cultural differences.

Often a "cultural" classification of individuals is carried out, which ends up forcing an individual to wear the "uniform" of the culture of origin. The use of collective and including categories, which homogenise identities and histories, creates the unique identity of the "foreigner", "culturally different".
The anthropologist Marco Mazzetti (2003) recounts the following episode to illustrate this trend in schools:

> Lin is a Chinese child, he is 8 years old, and he arrived a week ago from his country, where he grew up with his grandparents, to re-join his parents. He is taken to school, where he sits politely at the desk indicated by the teacher. He does not speak a word of Italian and has a frightened look on his face. We can perhaps imagine how he feels. He left his home, the grandparents who had been his real caregivers and he is suddenly living with his mother and father, whom he hardly knows. He is being taken to a school full of children who speak a language he does not understand and who stare at him curiously. To Lin they may seem hostile, dangerous. At some point, during the lesson, he crouches under his desk, puts his head between his hands, and starts rocking back and forth. The teacher does not know what to do, she does not understand. She wonders what this behaviour might mean in Chinese culture. At the end of the class, the teacher discusses it with her colleagues, but no one can come up with an explanation. They regret the absence of a cultural mediator and wonder how they can find an answer. During the next lesson, the strange behaviour is repeated with another teacher and the discussion continues during the following break. The teachers understand that the child needs something, but they cannot figure out what it is. They do not know anything about Chinese culture. Luckily, the school doctor is present that morning and the teachers involve him in the discussion, which he becomes passionate about. After a few minutes, the colleague has a great idea and proposes to visit the child: he takes the stethoscope out of his bag and brilliantly diagnoses a mild case of otitis. The case is closed (Mazzetti, 2003: 52, translated by Angela Biscaldi)

The question is:

Could policies advocating for multiculturalism inadvertently contribute to these "cultural excesses"? Is there a risk that multiculturalism might impede the spontaneous processes of cultural coexistence and change?

Furthermore, another effect of the metaphor of multiculturalism is to present cultures as homogeneous within themselves. This is what anthropology defines as the fiction of cultural homogeneity. *Indeed, the multiculturalist metaphor seems to forget and obscure the fact that cultural differences operate within societies and not just between societies.*

As Susan Moller Okin (1999) pointed out, multicultural policies advocate for the protection of minority cultures through special group rights or privileges. Proponents argue that such groups have distinct social cultures that provide their members with meaningful ways of life in both the public and private spheres: "because social cultures play such a pervasive and fundamental role in the lives of their members, and because these cultures are threatened with extinction, minority cultures should be protected with special rights" (Moller Okin, 1999: 5-6).

However, multiculturalism is naïve in that it fails to recognise and address the fact that these communities are not homogenous, monolithic blocks. The defence of minority communities often coincides with the defence of the interests of the subjects who have the power to speak on behalf of the communities – the most powerful, the richest, the men... – and forgetting the weakest subjects within the same minorities.

Susan Moller Okin effectively draws attention to the tension between, for example, multiculturalism and women's rights.

What to do, Okin asks, when the demands of minority cultures clash with the norm of gender equality, at least formally promoted by liberal states?

If a woman from a more patriarchal culture comes to the United States, for example, why should she be less protected from male violence than other women? Because she belongs to a "protected minority"?

By deconstructing the concept of multiculturalism, cultural anthropology teaches us to look at the distribution of meanings present in each culture, and even more so between cultural groups, showing that the real problem is not how to defend cultural minorities, but rather how to understand – and practice – a commitment to equality and justice in a world made up of multiple differences, hierarchies of power, distribution of privileges, and inequalities in living conditions.

In this sense, Ugo Fabietti, echoing the concern already expressed by Arjun Appadurai (1996), invites us to be wary of the omni-explanatory use of the concept of culture today:

> If in the anthropological context, culture refers to a set of structured and learned mental and practical behaviours, that always need to be explained, that is, described and made coherent, "outside anthropology" culture has come to mean something different, not completely different, but different enough to sometimes overturn the purposes with which anthropologists have always used it.
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> In the non-anthropological context, for example, culture does not need to be explained; rather, it is something that "explains": it explains behaviour, tastes, political ideas, those relating to the relationship between the sexes, and often extends to aspects like economy, social organisation, and worldviews, both of the sensible and the super sensible one. It explains the ethnic wars in Africa and the Balkans, it explains the difficulties of integrating immigrants from poor countries into European and North American megalopolises, it explains the tensions between whites and blacks and Hispanics in the cities of the United States, it explains both the "economic miracles" of some Asian countries and their recurring crises. It explains 9/11 and, of course, the "clash of civilizations".
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> How is it, then, that a concept developed by anthropologists as a guide to ethnographic practice, i.e., for locally circumstantial descriptions and explanations of socially apprehended human behaviours and dispositions, has become a "catch-all explanation concept" outside anthropology? (Fabietti, 2004, translated by Angela Biscaldi).

Moving away from the metaphor of "cultural difference" therefore means moving away from culturalism, the representation of cultures as discontinuous isolates, using the concept of anthropological culture not in a constitutive but rather regulative sense, beginning to analyse in depth the complexity of social contexts and not simply dismissing problems as "cultural".

Towards an intercultural approach to education

From an international policy perspective, multicultural education has been the dominant response to the increasing diversity or "superdiversity" (Vertovec, 2007) of the contemporary scenario. Multicultural education is not a prescriptive set of pedagogical methods; on the contrary, it has been associated with different conceptualisations, perspectives, and practices. In the last decades, the principles of multicultural education have been developed along with the anthropological debate around culture, moving from a static and homogeneous conceptualisation to a dynamic one.

Since the late 1980s, the shift in the conceptualisation of culture has also generated a semantic controversy on "multicultural" education in the European academic debate. In order to better reflect the new concept of culture and a renovated ethos of dealing with cultural diversity in educational settings, the model of "intercultural" education model has been preferred. Encounter, dialogue, confrontation, and interaction are identified as key values of this approach (Portera & Milani, 2021). The emphasis is not only on reducing marginalisation

and fostering a peaceful coexistence of different cultural identities, but also on mutual exchange and interaction with different people.

The intercultural approach is said to move beyond the multicultural model: for many European policymakers and educational experts, multiculturalism evokes the descriptive and static idea of different cultural identities coexisting in a certain context, while interculturalism is associated with an agentic practice and intentional effort that better reflect the dynamic conceptualisation of culture. The intercultural approach should aim for a deeper transformation of pedagogy, foregrounding students' empowerment, and promoting social change (Faas et al., 2014).

While the concept of multicultural education still prevails in the Anglo-Saxon world and other countries, the intercultural approach is spread across continental Europe, including Italy (Tarozzi, 2012: 397). Despite the different labels, the conceptualisation behind them may or may not be the same across different national policies.

In Europe, migration policies are generally designed at the national level, but the supranational guidance of the EU institutions is becoming increasingly important. From the beginning of the 1990s, the Italian educational system has institutionally embraced the "paradigm of intercultural education" (Contini, 2017), as reflected in some policymaking landmarks (e.g., MIUR, 2007; 2015; MI, 2022), which adopts a constructivist perspective of cultural diversity, as made of hybrid and unstable identities constructed through social interaction.

The Italian way of intercultural education aims to foster integration, interaction, dialogue, and mutual transformation among students from different cultural backgrounds (Fiorucci, 2015b). Rather than focusing solely on interventions targeting specific social groups, it functions as a pedagogical overarching paradigm to the curricula for all students (Fiorucci, 2020). In this sense, intercultural education strategies should combat ethnocentric tendencies, also through a revision of existing teaching content. Addressing the "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970) embedded in curricula may involve exploring counter-hegemonic perspectives or, at least, ensuring that students are aware of the (perhaps inevitable) ethnocentric nature of the learning materials. As an example, As suggested by Fiorucci (2015a), including Italian emigration history in the curriculum could contribute to the development of an intercultural ethos among students.

Despite policy mandates, in many school contexts there remains a disparity between policy ideals and actual practice, which makes intercultural education a "ghost model" (Tarozzi, 2012), often limited to episodic activities and folksy and "traditional" representations of students' countries of origin (Portera & Milani, 2021).

Conclusions

Schools serve as micro-social contexts not only for comprehending but also for actively striving to improve the wider society (Bove, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). To achieve this goal, it is crucial to combat ethnocentric tendencies and promote an intercultural stance, beginning with educators themselves (Bove et al., 2023). Recognising the pivotal role of educational contexts, specific policies have been implemented across the world to regulate contemporary "multicultural" schools.

In our chapter, educational practices are analysed through an anthropological lens in order to highlight the potential pitfalls associated with the multicultural approach to education. While striving for equity and inclusion in educational settings, it is essential for practitioners to undergo training and be cognisant of the fact that culture is a heuristic concept. Thus, it is useful to comprehend patterns of behaviours of individuals, but it cannot be considered as an all-encompassing explanatory framework. A "constitutive" use of the notion of culture over a "regulative" and heuristic one is inappropriate as it perpetuates the idea of crystalised and reified cultures. This approach risks overlooking commonalities among people, while obscuring internal differences within societies.

In many countries, such as Italy, the critical discourse surrounding the concept of culture has prompted a shift from the multicultural to the intercultural approach in education. Regardless of the label, either multi- or inter-cultural approaches need to be grounded in meaningful theoretical reflections to consistently inform educational practices.

Cultural anthropology offers a critical lens for analysing multicultural processes, recognising them as dynamic and contextual phenomena. Through the anthropological perspective, educational practitioners can develop reflexivity and flexibility (Bove et al., 2023), enabling them to identify and address their own prejudices and thus avoid the pitfalls associated with a naïve and reified conceptualisation of culture.

For these reasons, we argue that cultural anthropology should always play a role in teacher education. By encouraging an attitude of cultural decentralisation and critical thinking, the anthropological perspective enriches the pedagogical gaze and contributes to its humanisation.

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