

Working in mixed classrooms: teachers' reactions and new challenges for pluralism

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Abstract. The paper aims to explore the effects of multicultural landscape within schools on the implementation of an effective pluralism, as required by the presence of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious demand. The issue is not new for Italy but until the nineties diversities in schooling were represented mainly by students with handicaps. The paper focuses on cultural attitudes towards immigrant pupils underlining how the cultural/cognitive pluralism hasn't been recognized notwithstanding the "institutional" pluralism displayed. A 3-years long regional study in the most multicultural area of Italy (Lombardia) makes evident: 1) teachers operating in mixed schools are aware that embedding the newcomers in our society is their proper task; 2) they devote all personal resources and feel "prepared" enough to the challenge. 3) they develop few professional skills to be more efficient and pluralistic, and 4) perceive a sense of discomfort when they think to end results of immigrants inclusion in both school and society.

Keywords: implicit racism – assimilation/integration dilemma –teacher's attitude - diversity management in schooling

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Cultural pluralism and multiculturalism: implications for the teacher's work

With no doubt, multiculturalism has grown up significantly in Western societies during the last two-three decades; this occurred in the European area as an effect in the increasing human mobility due not only to migration flows, but also to the political and economic push towards the free circulation among EU member countries. Many of these, i.e. the Mediterranean ones which in the past were only emigration places, in a few years have experimented the consequences to be turned into "immigration" destinations for many different people and this has represented one of the greatest challenge for their democratic institutions.

Politic, Law, Education, Religion, Language, Enterprise, and many other social institutions had to embrace quickly a more open configuration, abandoning their monolithic and homogeneous traditions, as to consider the multiculturalism inside them. In other words, each of the regulatory systems had to change in the direction of the heterogeneity and the diversity appreciation and management, as to avoid the risk of discrimination (both tacit and explicit) of minority groups, isolation of "weak citizens", implosion, lack of cohesion, etc., in the governance's wider order.

Among those cultural institutions that show more openness and commitment facing the multiculturalism, there is the school system. For its nature, as a fundamental value-centred institution (which creates culture as knowledge, transmits culture as norms and makes culture as an organization, see Besozzi (2005), educational establishments are guilty not only for the affirmation that cultural *plurality* exists (remarking that all other institutions must cope with this "new wave"), but also for the experimentation of the cultural *pluralism* as such, which consists in a normative way to combine differences, including requirements to obtain a positive co-existence between them.

The issue of multiculturalism, and of the ways to manage it, have not only been moved by the sole sociology, but also by converging philosophical, psycho-anthropological and political perspectives, particularly focused on the relationships between majority and cultural minorities, as well as on problems of social cohesion. According to a radical view, A. Touraine (2006) debates on the focus towards culture appears to have achieved the focus towards the society, in the sense that

any social problem is reframed as a culture or identity problem: “Now that we talk about ourselves from a cultural point of view”, which means that we define people and memberships on the basis of specific lifestyles, starting from native cultures, as it is clearly shown by the problems related to immigration and multiculturalism, and we are constantly dealing with struggles to recognition identity.

Amongst the various approaches to multiculturalism, a few of them must be considered so that to design the landscape for possible solutions in terms of differences’ combination. As it is widely acknowledged, *liberalism* (Kymlicka, 1995; Benhabib, 2002) points out that minorities should be recognised by rights and have necessity to continue enforcing their cultural practices, while however include the individuality in a framework of values shared by all the community members. Then, the *communitarian* approach (Gutmann 1994) debates that in the public sphere the recognition of special rights is necessary for the protection and support to the group and its different identity. Instead the critical approach disagrees about the possible pacific coexistence between majority and minorities, focusing on the cultural identification as an institutional mechanism regulating the dynamics of power (May and Sleeter, 2010) and disclosing the forms of implicit and non-intentional racism (*Critical race theory*) (Taylor *et al.*, 2009). Finally, there is the corporate or *neo-mercantilist* approach, which considers the transnational space as a ground for consumption and for market-driven relationships, while neglecting the factors related to rights and identities.

In the educational sphere, multiculturalism is often taken as a benchmark of other social problems, particularly those linked with the *inequality of opportunities* and it recalls the cultural and the systemic integration that the educational forces intend to reach in a framework of schools /society circular inter-relation (Besozzi, 2006). It’s clear that different degrees of *mixité* in the ethnical composition of a school context can make the difference: i.e. the presence of many communities who experienced migration within mono-cultural educational contexts draws a drastic line of social distinction based on new classification criteria, such as nationality, ethnicity, race, language, culture and religion etc. This “colour-line” (Giovannini and Queirolo, 2010) or “socially constructed chromatic scale” (Seeberg, 2003) works in addition to pre-existing discriminating attributes, such as social class, gender, personal characteristics, place of birth and previous education, etc. Such a multi-layered classification is

gradually incorporated in the social behaviours through values, norms, shared practices, and personally conducted by the key actors of the institutional context (executives and teachers), translated in a sort of “institutional racism” or, on the contrary, institutional anti-racism (Gillborn, 2000, 2002). The analysis on the social impacts of multiculturalism at school seems to have a deep concern within international literature (Persell *et al.*, 2004; Banks, 2009).

Within the school experience, multiculturalism as a result of migration is nowadays a visible phenomenon in quantitative terms, as incidence rates of immigrant students and as number of different nationalities within the same classroom or institute. Along with the increase of the mixed classroom rates, it is expected that also the ethnical basis of the school professionals’ group will change, with the entry among the staff of numerous teachers with ethnic minority backgrounds, supposed to be closer to the Otherness than native school teachers and more likely to adopt “cherished role models” dealing with ethnic minority students (Szalai, 2011, p. 26), more favourable to their achievement². This is not the case in Italy where by now all teachers and executives are requested to have Italian citizenship; may be in future more immigrants will gain the citizenship as a result of a long-term permanent residence in Italy.

Other visible tracks of multiculturalism at school are the normative dispositions in order to regulate the four main problematic issues (Colombo, 2004): political status required by immigrants for school access; equitable class composition and other measures for the best learning results; innovations of curricula in the sense of multicultural and intercultural education; teachers education for the diversity management. All these legal arrangements may operate being more or less coherent with one of the multiculturalism perspectives, or they may operate influencing social actors’ practice beyond their conscious agreement.

As a matter of fact, the indicators of multiculturalism design the landscape in which the school staff (teachers and executives) develops its action in order to make effective the cultural pluralism in solid forms. Focusing on the sole teachers’ action, many professional challenges

² The same result has been reached by the explanatory study by Dee 2001 focused on the teacher’s race and its influence on minority group student’s achievement: “... One year assignment of own-race teacher significantly increases the math and reading achievement of both black and white students by roughly three to four percentile points”.

deserve attention in this process: a) the dilemma between *tradition and innovation*; b) the dyscrasia between *equalitarism and differentialism*; c) the *scarce awareness of one's own attitudes* towards immigration and multicultural society and the likeliness to bring about a process of "labeling" in the treatment of their pupils.

a) It is generally acknowledged that school teachers work within a formal and institutional context, which requires adopting a set of norms and consistent responsibilities with a given tradition. However, such context is not exclusively devoted to the preservation of intrinsic values (i.e. the *curriculum* and the code of behaviour). On the contrary, it is involved in a process of innovation coping with patterns of contemporaneity, which requires it to implement specific forms of action and compliance that can lead to openness towards the Otherness or to a turn to oneself. The role played by the teacher is constantly reframed according to the circumstances, in due account for the specific work context (working in a highly heterogeneous class climate may reduce the innovation capacity and may lead the school teacher to reduce his/her expectations in terms of pupils' achievement), the age and educational path (the more older/more prepared is the professional and has more innovation that he/she can introduce), and the other cultural and political *inputs* which draw his professional profile and forge the predominant social expectations (i.e. social attitudes towards immigrants).

b) The professional culture of teachers, in line with equalitarian legislation, has widely supported equality, and therefore those political options and educational approaches aiming at socializing all groups and at promoting indiscriminating access to school and social mobility. This caused a dyscrasia, when not a juxtaposition, between egalitarianism and differentialism, which hampers any attempt to effectively conjugate the two views. The dilemmatic feeling comes from a misinterpretation of the two concepts – equality and difference – as they were in opposition, two poles of the same entity, while as a matter of fact they are just indicators of two incomparable dimensions: the former, quantitative in nature (equal/different in terms of access to a given quantity of a certain resource) refers to social exchange and distribution of resources across society (equity and justice); the latter, qualitative (we are similar or different in qualitative terms) pertains to the single human being, his traits, needs, interests and attitudes (Besozzi, 2006).

c) Generally school teachers, when facing the complexity and urgency of the challenges imposed by mixed classrooms, are not completely aware of such complexity and they are confused in identifying their own attitudes on migration issues as well as their role as mediators of inter-cultural relations. Furthermore, they tend to ignore the influence of their tacit judgments (bias) on school achievement and school orientation of foreign pupils (Stevens, 2007; Heckmann, 2008). This can be explained also by a *sense of uneasiness* due to it being impossible to handle the professional dilemmas. The scant ad hoc training they are provided with (intercultural education and management of diversity are not everywhere subjects that can be taught and are difficultly addressed by specific training modules – See Bertelmann Stiftung (2006), together with the passive acceptance of their duties as regarding foreign students – especially the newcomers who are *de facto* assigned to the classroom without often any previous agreement, training and support - may have negative impact upon the most deep-rooted beliefs on rights and opportunities and provoke *refusal* and *sense of distance* (someone speaks of “democratic racism”, see Dovidio and Gaertner 1998; Gillborn and Delgado 2008 or “racism without racists”, see Bonilla-Silva 2006). As a result, teachers generally deny most of the differences that occur in the classroom, by applying an assimilative model of diversity management. Other implications of this attitude may be the dogmatic acceptance of institutional communication procedures (even when they are implicitly discriminating), recourse to formal communication with foreign students and their families, lack of decentralization and of ability in “active listening” of their difference (Sclavi, 2005).

It is noticeable that all these points of attention are obstacles to the pluralisation of the education supply and work. People invested with tasks of diversity management, if subjected to dilemmas and are not aware of reactions, are likely to neglect the existence of the three levels of implementation for pluralism³: actions, interpretative frames, sets of values. In such a confusing situation they might act in a contradictory way, making the pluralistic perspective even more obscure and improbable.

³ See the Introduction of the present issue, by M. Colombo.

The multicultural reality of the Italian schools: effects of an uncertain public policy

In the last twenty years, the Italian system of education has faced much pressure towards opening in a global and multicultural dimension, mainly due to the increase of immigrant students' presence. Generally, the Italian education system does not implement evident forms of discrimination towards immigrant pupils (ECRI Secretariat, 2012), at least not in the sense that they are present in other EU states where prejudices on Muslim people are reinforced by the action of public schools (Amnesty, 2012). Nevertheless, there is a common opinion among Italians that people of foreign origin are *de facto* discriminated and have much less chance than native people to realize their goals (Eurobarometer, 2009; ISTAT, 2012).

Two points appear to have characterized the public debate on multicultural schools in Italy. The first is promotion of *equality and equal opportunity*: how to respect the constitutional egalitarian principle and the democratic profile of education despite the unequal levels of social and economic background among pupils. The second is the "right to be different": how to appreciate *cultural and religious differences* avoiding in the meantime discriminations among schools, classrooms, and pupils based on these differences. Pressures that derive from the combination of the two processes, sometimes perceived as opponents, have numerous consequences on educational practices. For instance, at a *symbolic level* the presence of foreign born students challenges the transmission of a national cultural heritage, based on a supposed uniform shape, because this kind of homogeneous curriculum tends to marginalize or make the non-Italian pupils invisible. It's also a matter of equity: ethnocentric learning objects and methods for learning lack to fit in and reach the potential of foreign students. The focus of public debate is also centred on the curriculum's renewal in the direction of a wider multicultural and intercultural sensitivity, so as to mirror more adequately the reality of local communities, already transformed in mixed social aggregates especially in the metropolitan peripheries (Pastore and Ponzo, 2013).

At the *organizational level*, the presence of foreign students could require unexplored organizational solutions for receiving, supporting them in learning, giving all equal opportunities of school-to-work transition, and many others. This kind of extra-support have much to do with the general investment on structures, equipments and staff that is sustainable by the

Education Ministry at a given moment. In times of economic downturn, when financial resources are baked out, the policy of supporting foreign students gets under discussion by the native population and only creative adaptations to emergency situation are carried out at a local level. In the case of Italy, it's worth mentioning: the extra-funds to schools with over 10% of non-Italian students, which are distributed by regional negotiation; the receiving activities into public schools, which are often paid with private funds, the use of a huge proportion of precarious teachers and "on the spot" linguistic mediators in facilitating newcomers' learning, etc. All these solutions are expression of a contingent approach to problems, which is not efficient and unpromising as regards to the equity-difference issue (Landri, 2012). As a matter of fact, such organizational practices are likely to crystallize the mis-recognition of the cultural plurality, shaping attitudes and behaviour of social actors (principles, teachers, students and parents) around the common belief that emergency, whenever, will stop. In other terms "they manage diversity in an attempt to preserve the status quo" (Devine, 2013, p. 395).

For better designing the Italian scenario, let us give some basic statistics. The presence of students with immigrant background has increased in the last two decades with a mean average of 10% in the annual variation (with peaks of 30% during 2003/05 during the legal *sanatoria* for newcomers) and only since 2008 began to reduce its growth because of the effect of the economic downturn in Europe. The settlement of immigrant families on the Italian territory does not occur in a causal way, rather it follows the trends of the job demand. As a result, if the whole incidence rate of foreign students on the private and public schools is 7, 9% (756.000 students in S.Y. 2011/12; two thirds of roughly one million young people who are residents in the country without an Italian citizenship). This value is not homogeneous among the areas: in the Northern regions the incidence rate is around 12-14%, in the Central ones 8-10%, in the Southern ones 1-5%⁴. Only one third of foreign pupils enrolled in public and private schools

⁴ A distinctive trait of the phenomenon of foreign students in Italy is its varying distribution throughout the territory: there is a significant presence (both in terms of figures as well as percentage rates) in the regions of the North (incidence rates: 8-13%) and of the Central Italy (Incidence rates: 9-14%) compared to the South (Inc. Rates: 1.8 – 6.6%) and the islands (2-2.5%) (Miur, 2012). This heterogeneous distribution has been influenced by the unequal presence of economic initiatives and, as a consequence of this, of occupational opportunities for foreign workers over the last two decades.

are born in Italy, particularly well represented in pre-primary (75% of all students with non-Italian citizenship enrolled) and primary schools (42%), whereas the vast majority are foreigners that were born out of Italy (61%).

The greatest number of foreign students are based in Lombardia (over 175,000 students with non-Italian citizenship enrolled in schools, who represent $\frac{1}{4}$ of the whole population of foreign students in the country), followed by Veneto, Emilia Romagna, Lazio, Piemonte, and Tuscany; in all these areas a little less than half of foreign pupils are of second generation. Students that have recently arrived in Italy are based prevalently in the South, where percentages often exceed the national average (8.4% sch.y. 2011/12, Miur 2012). In Molise, Campania and Basilicata, for instance, the percentage incidence of students of recent migration exceeds that of those born in Italy (Santagati 2010, p. 126). Primary schools continue to be the school institution which receives the greatest number of migrant students (incidence: 9.5%), followed by lower secondary schools (9.3%), pre-primary schools (9.2%). Within upper secondary schools only 6.2% of students are enrolled with migrant background are but in this school level it is registered the highest increase in the last 5 years as a consequence both of continuing flows of adolescent newcomers and of the access to secondary education by second generation pupils.

Because of the recent history of immigrant inflows, Italian teachers are not socialized and trained at the same time (and with similar intensity) to the reality of multicultural student's population. The territorial location of school, the type of institute and the professional background make the difference. Although the normative frame, which regulates both private and public schools, underlined since the early nineties the role played by teachers in preventing intolerance, xenophobia and racial discrimination, not all school professionals deserve similar attention to issues of social justice and equality, nor the arrival of immigrants put under scrutiny. As a matter of fact, the unstable policy implemented by the Italian government during the different phases of immigration to Italy from Third Countries citizens, has not helped school teachers to orient their efforts to deal with differences and cope with problems occurred by migration. In the period 1990-2012 the Ministry of Education has promulgated different documents

reflecting the alternative political lines which have dominated in the migratory regulation field⁵.

1) The Circular Letter CM 22/07/1990 n.205 (with normative weight) “*Compulsory education and foreign students. Intercultural education*” established the principle of involving Italian students in an interactive relationship with foreign ones as a means for reciprocal enrichment, and highlights intercultural education as the highest and most comprehensive form of prevention and struggle against racism and all other kinds of intolerance.

2) The subsequent directive of the CNPI of 24/03/1993 (with only advisory weight), “*Racism and anti-Semitism today: the role/responsibility of school*” stresses the need to create – through a proper/adequate interaction between school and society – a suitable social network to make peaceful coexistence a realistic objective and to work as a natural barrier to the emergence of xenophobic trends.

3) The circular letter CM 15/2/2006 n.24 (with normative weight) “*Guidelines for the reception and integration of foreign students*” provides the most complete overview of actions and measures to be implemented for the integration of foreign students. The emphasis is clearly placed on foreign students and their families: instructions regard administrative procedures, guidelines for effective relations with unlitary parents (relational-communicative area), and rules for the composition of mixed class groups. It’s worth stating that the receiving policy of Italian Ministry of education, expressed by this directive, is clearly in favour of language learning for students within the mainstream classes, in opposition to any special/starting/preparatory classes’ policy.

4) A subsequent document produced by the national observatory of MIUR “*The Italian way to intercultural education and the integration of foreign students*” (2008), with only advisory value, includes the anti-racist education within the broader framework of the intercultural approach (although the former does not coincide with the latter) and encourages educational agents to increase their level of awareness: “School must face these problems without hiding or underestimating them”. Among other

⁵ As G. Zincone points out: “In Italy, as in other European countries, a set of factors have moved and are moving immigrant and immigration policies in neo-assimilationist, neo-functional, security-oriented directions. These common trends are, more often than elsewhere, on a zigzagging path (...)” (Zincone 2011, p. 278).

instructions provided by this letter, there is the recommendation to implement training courses for head-teachers to learn the skills required for managing foreign students at school, and to organize classes where Italian is taught to foreigners. This has been disregarded until now.

5) The Circular Letter (CM) n. 2 8/1/2010 "*Recommendations and indications for the integration of students with not-Italian citizenship*", issued by the Ministry of Education, University and Research under the governmental mandate of Mr. Berlusconi (with normative weight), aims to ensure an adequate distribution among different schools and setting the limit of foreign students with limited Italian linguistic skills to 30% for each class. The issue raised by the limit on the ethnic composition of classes, over and above other issues, provoked arguments among politicians, civil society actors, public opinion leaders and teachers' representatives, receiving huge attention in the mass media during S.T. 2010/11 and 2011/12. Like previous Ministry circular letters and directives, it has taken into account the need to maintain a certain level of heterogeneity among schools, as an indispensable condition for a good level of integration and intercultural dialogue (Council of Europe 2008), and also because a high number of foreign students in the same classroom or institute have been considered to be an indicator of social and educational risk (Chaloff and Queirolo Palmas, 2006). But, as written by M. Ambrosini and E. Caneva (2011), in the country report of the 7FP "Accept pluralism" edited by the University of Milan, this directive symbolizes the political approach of Lega Nord Party and of Right Party to the issue of accepting pluralism in schools and reflects their narrow pedagogy applied to it. Also M. Santagati, by the ISMU Foundation of Milan, disagrees with the CM 2/2010 rationale, by arguing that: "The 30% threshold on foreign students is reminiscent of the notion of a "threshold of tolerance", developed in studies investigating the difficult cohabitation of migrants and natives in urban spaces and which debate that each society has a limited capacity to absorb foreigners that can be defined and expressed in percentage terms. (...) This notion operates as a sort of interpretative theory based on the existence of a statistical correlation between the density of immigrant families and levels of interethnic conflict" (Santagati, 2012a, p. 82). This is not been scientifically demonstrated; on the contrary, a recent study conducted in Italy verified an inverse relationship between the degree of integration and of the immigrant population density: where the number of immigrants was higher,

integration appeared facilitated (Cesareo and Blangiardo, 2011). Thus, “the concentration of foreign students in Italian schools is a very complex issue, that cannot be resolved with a single solution or strategy and without taking into account the generative mechanisms which underpin it” (Santagati, 2012, p. 83), such as housing, job demand/supply matching, discrimination at a local level. In conclusion, the threshold of ethnic concentration is not the only problem issued by pluralism in schools and the approach of the CM 2/2010 appears reductive and inefficient.

Besides law dispositions, the low level of public investments for supporting multicultural schools speaks more about the lack of a serious policy of pluralistic education in Italy. Despite the declaration of an inclusive policy, based on the “in-common school model”, few structural investments have been done for intercultural education improvement, and any systematic and widespread training to diversity management has been carried out for teachers and school directors. If every year the Ministry of Education gives extra-funds to the schools located in high-risk areas (where immigrants or drop outs are situated) to avoid student marginalization and early school leaving, however the principles and the purposes are ambitious and the concrete actions required are difficult to carry out⁶. There is little and inadequate investment, so the good practices tested and implemented in some schools could not be extended to other schools” (Ambrosini and Caneva, 2010, p. 4). In other words, on the one side the rhetoric of integration is not embodied on practice and inner values of school actors while, on the other side, tolerance and cultural change – experimented at local level – have little influence on the institutional discourses.

⁶ It is worth mentioning that the current disposition, held by the Italian Ministry of Education, in favour of schools located in risky areas has little to do with other national politics aiming at supporting suburban schools (ZEP in France) or at compensating the divide between “good” and “bad” schools (TIEP in Portugal). In Italy all schools that have more than 10% of foreign pupils receive funds in addition to the ordinary budget being asked to plan only a project of literacy and integration activities for the target groups. The amount of extra-budget does not depend from neither quality indicators nor student’s achievements, but only from the previous social negotiation among the Regional Education Office and the local representatives of teachers’ unions. In this way no assessments of what the schools and the teachers do are carried out.

Teacher's cultural attitudes towards immigrant pupils

In this unstable and confusing normative frame, Italian school teachers develop attitudes towards the contemporary multicultural scenario, which are not only influenced by the incidence rate of immigrant students or the legal dispositions but also by the evolution of personal and professional habitus, along with the direct experience of cultural diversity and intercultural exchange⁷.

It is meaningful to focus what has changed in Italy since the Nineties, when the number of foreign students was much lower and working in class with a concentration of immigrants was a rare event. Nowadays instead the probability to teach in a multicultural class multiplied by seven (only 1/5 of Italian schools do not enroll any foreign student and 4.3% enroll 30% and more) (Colombo, 2013).

Over this period several surveys have been carried out within the Italian context to assess the impact of multiculturalism on schools and teacher's work (Giovannini, 1996; Fravega and Queirolo, 2003; Colombo, 2010, Besozzi and Colombo, 2012; Caneva, 2012). The surveys highlight that the Italian teacher generally reacts to challenges of multiculturalism at two levels: at a *practical level* he/she feels to be committed in an inter-ethnic relationship, especially within the classroom, which render him/her a cultural mediator *de facto* between foreign students, immigrant family and school environment, being more or less recognised as such. Almost frequent is also a "problem oriented" approach by teachers, who complain the lack of support to cope with difficulties generated by immigrant parents and the social disadvantage of immigrant children. This kind of attitude may sometimes reflect a lack of willingness or discomfort, shared mainly by secondary schools' teachers, to uphold this new task. At a *theoretical* – or more precisely, *professional* - level the distress of teachers regards the selection of contents to apply in teaching and the didactic strategies to afford class heterogeneity: even in this field school teachers are requested

⁷There is no room here for going in depth on what is needed to observe when reconstructing teacher's attitudes on multicultural society. In my view there are seven areas of attention: 1) Relationship teacher-social context; 2) Relationship teacher-professional behaviour; 3) Explicit and latent attitudes; 4) Social distance; 5) Contradictory attitudes; 6) Resistance to change; 7) structural (sex, age, seniority, professional status, school level) and cultural variables (taught subject, cultural roots, experience of migration).

to have skills and dispositions (i.e. the capacity to renew the learning objects in a multicultural frame) that never have been formed by them.

The research entitled *Allievi in classe, stranieri in città* ("Students in the classroom but strangers in the city") was carried out in the '90s with the support of ISMU Foundation⁸ and directed by G. Giovannini (1996) and represents the first national survey focused on the attitudes of teachers towards immigration, thus it constitutes an important reference point for comparing two generations of professionals: those who worked in the mono-cultural school system, in which the "colored" schools were only exceptions (with low rates of immigrant's presence) and those who are facing everyday and everywhere the reality of a mixed school. It is possible to speculate that, compared to then, now there is a wider *social distance between teachers and foreign students*, expressed in explicit and implicit forms (an "hidden" or "latent" racism) especially in those territorial areas where there is a higher concentration of immigrants.

The ISMU's study, considering a sample of approximately two thousand teachers of primary schools in twelve cities, returned a picture of welcoming educational staff, largely immune from prejudices against foreign students (about 40% 'tolerant' and 12.1% 'enthusiastic'), although with already apparent narrow-minded attitudes (mostly in the North, in older and less-educated teachers) on the basis of clusters labelled as 'xenophobic' (15.7%), 'elderly' (10.3%) and 'indifferent' (20%). But despite the rates of foreign students were still low almost everywhere, it was already alarming the *ambivalence* found in most of the teachers, prone to welcome foreign students as such, but displaying a social distance towards immigrants seen as non-citizens and potential threats to the society. Therefore, the category of 'tolerant' teachers also seemed to adopt an ethnocentric teaching style and adhere to an assimilationist view of cultural integration, conceiving as a priority the defence of their own identity over other social objectives. The question then raised whether the teacher is willing to consciously play the role of 'intercultural mediator', of direct agent of social integration. The headline of the ISMU's study ("Students in the classroom but strangers in the city") shows how and how much school

⁸ Ismu Foundation (Institute for studies and initiatives on multiculturalism, Milan, Italy) is one of the most famous non-governative entities, which deals with migration issues at a scientific and social level. It operates since 1990 in co-operation with public and private agencies in favour on migrant people's integration. See at: www.ismu.org.

teachers belong to the wider social context: their duality of orientations reflects anti-immigrant sentiments and concerns shared in many local and regional cultures (Bonifazi *et al.*, 2012); despite their high level of education (but until 1999 primary school teachers were in large number non-graduated professionals), the socio-cultural consciousness was unavoidably bond up with their personal experience.

A few quantitative surveys carried out by the IARD Institute on the work conditions of the school team have confirmed the inclusive aim of Italian schools, in line with the norms and directives of the Ministry of Education (see the previous paragraph) although with a *few grey areas*. As the research in 1999 pointed out (Cavalli, 2000), the vast majority of teachers seemed to have internalized the need of working from an intercultural perspective, although a limited minority of school teachers (1/4 out of the national sample) felt themselves not prepared to do so, attributing inability to the lack of adequate professional tools. For the *IARD survey* conducted ten years after (Colombo, 2010), there is still one third of teachers who claim their total unawareness of the instruments employed and initiatives implemented in their schools for the integration of students having foreign nationalities. This means that an important sector of the staff considers multiculturalism as a special and separate issue with few impacts on their daily work. The remaining two thirds confirm that schools (at any level) willingly accept foreign minors even when they are enrolled after the year is started.

As to the criteria adopted for their inclusion, only one teacher out of five states that its school follows purely random parameters for the distribution of foreign students into the classes (mostly in the centre of Italy), while in all other cases shared criteria of equal distribution are adopted. Also the activities aimed at foreigners' inclusion and didactic support show a significant grade of pre-designing by the teachers' team⁹. Teachers of upper secondary schools or polytechnic and vocational schools are those who complain the more (with respect to lower-secondary, primary and pre-primary school teachers) about the adoption of necessary, but not sufficient measures for the improvement of their work conditions with respect to the inclusion of foreign students (Colombo, 2010).

⁹ Take note that generally speaking, Italian school teachers are used to adopt more "structured teaching practices" rather than of "student oriented" or "enhancing activities", as shows the TALIS enquiry (Oecd – Talis 2009, p. 98).

As a matter of fact, what lacks more in Italy is a serious training which should prepare school professionals to afford diversity management. It is what precisely results from the last *TALIS enquiry* on OCSE countries teachers (Oecd – Talis 2009) that reports: “In Italy the extent of high need of training is greater than average in all areas of teachers’ work”, and “Among European countries, teachers in Italy report the highest level of need for “Teaching in a multicultural setting” (Ibidem, p. 61). As they are weakly involved in self-promoting training, they don’t acknowledge the professional tools they need to overcome neither practical nor philosophical issues emerging in plural classrooms. Nevertheless, it seems that participation in any professional development activity is less widespread among Italian teachers, and only a minority does it regularly: “Teachers in Italy reported participation rates somewhat below average at 85%, yet among those who participated, the number of days was a relatively high average of 31. This may indicate a situation in which universal participation is forgone in favor of generous provision for those who have the opportunity to participate” (Ibidem, p. 54).

Very few surveys so far researched the cultural perspectives of teachers using qualitative methods, i.e. the attitude they adopt regarding the various models of socialisation (integration/assimilation), the deeply rooted openness/closure towards Otherness, and the different grades of consistency or dissent to the model of reception embodied in the State normative. This stems from the fact that the strategies of inclusion and integration employed by each single teacher not always result from options deliberately chosen, while instead deriving from choices *a priori* (i.e. from personal deep values or beliefs, see Cardona et al 2010; L lurda & Lasagabaster 2010) or from random factors related to the specific circumstances of the demand. For instance, their openness to the relationship with students tends to increase for newly arrived foreign students, fostering a sort of “paternalistic” acceptance of the students’ hard/poor condition, but the same tends to decrease when the teacher realizes what unequal levels of competence the foreign born students hold at entering school. Even the status of the service (institute project planning, pre-existing know how, collective nature of charge-taking, shared criteria of distribution, etc.) may bring about different teacher’s approaches to pupils with migrant background.

As some studies suggest, the subject taught is one other influencing the factor of the teaching practices within mixed classrooms, in terms of

appropriateness of the strategies not only for an effective teaching but also for conducting the classroom disciplinary climate: teachers of mathematics and science adopt more structured strategies, unlike human science and language teachers are more creative and student-oriented, as well as they seem more sensitive to intercultural issues (Ocse – Talis, 2009; Llurda and Lasagabaster, 2010). In the case of Italy, as Dreossi pointed out, dealing with diversity issues in the ordinary school life means to adopt a style of communication based on “education approach” (by which the definition of terms related to the “otherness” remains in the hands of the teacher/expert, as well as the moral distinctions between positive and negative meanings) rather than a “testimony” approach. As a consequence of this, the prevailing form of teacher-students communication reinforces the pupil’s observation of cultural belonging instead of being focused on personhood within inter-cultural exchanges (Dreossi, 2006).

Despite of the abundance of normative recommendations, it seems that school teachers lack of clear cultural guidelines while they are aided only by procedural directions; therefore, when analysing their professional behaviour, it is firstly evident the discomfort in dealing with intercultural tools and methods, and the fact that it remains relatively obscure (or either hidden behind stereotyped answers) which conception of the social integration guides the acts of welcome and inclusion of migrant background’s students. Furthermore, there is evidence of relevant cognitive gaps in teachers with regards to their own original culture, hence the tendency to “ethnicize” differences (that is, dealing with immigrant’s differences with curiosity and explaining foreign students’ behaviour culturally, see Caneva 2012, p. 54) and formulate prejudices towards those cultures mostly resisting to stereotypes. From this also comes the potential clash between different visions of the ‘Other’, more or less optimistic and conflicting, and the sense of discomfort particularly emerging in the relationship with foreign families (Vincenti, 2007).

Then, it’s still valid the hypothesis – formulated by Giovannini (1996) - of an existing discrepancy between the teachers’ way of perceiving external socio-cultural reality (the teacher as a citizen and as a member of a work-group who can experience resistance and rejection towards immigrant people) and internal socio-emotive reality (the teacher as an educator and a person who addresses students in the classrooms and controls his/her resistance while trying to promote openness, also due to the contact-theory effect). This discrepancy might represent the guide-criterion underpinning

the daily practice of teachers and a possible factor of failure in implementing pluralism as a normal, democratic option to manage cultural diversities in the classroom.

At the end of this short review of previous studies on the teacher's work in mixed classrooms, it is worth summing up the main findings: 1) Italian teachers show a relatively high level of commitment in welcoming activities with newly arrived migrant students, whereas they lack enthusiasm during the further phase of social and scholastic inclusion, including continuous support for their achievement and the prevention of school leaving; 2) because of the scarce training about diversity management they have been given, the consciousness of the importance of a proper acting to avoid implicit discrimination and not-inclusive effects is very little (i.e. they underestimate the negative feedback of teacher's low expectation on pupil's result, as Brind, Harper & Moore 2008); 3) their attitude towards integration of immigrants and inter-cultural issues is fairly ambivalent, due to two factors: on the one side embedded in the wider social and political frame (relatively reluctant at the welcoming of foreign citizens), on the other side reinforced by shared cultural stereotypes on "under-civilized" foreigners and the shared tendency to "ethnicization" inter-personal differences¹⁰. 4) For school teachers, the main difficulty facing the classroom heterogeneity remains combining the equalitarian principle and the right to be different in the school environment.

Working in a mixed classroom: teachers' preoccupation and pluralism of action

Taking into account all the previous findings from social enquiries on Italian teachers, a three-years long study carried out in Lombardy in 2010/2012 explored the multicultural reality of schools, with a specific focus on the school units with over 30% of foreign students (according to CM 2/2010, are foreigners all children who have non-Italian citizens

¹⁰ As above explained, I assume "ethnicisation" like a process of social evaluation which considers the ethnic belonging as the basis of all kinds of difference and inequality among people. Similarly Coretta (2011) uses the term "racialization" referring to UK situation in which at any level (micro, meso, macro) it is not recognized the agential element of individual action, rather the individual is embedded in, and confused with, its racial and cultural belongings.

wherever they were born¹¹, see previous publications of the study at Besozzi & Colombo 2012; Colombo M. 2012). The topic of *inter-ethnic relations in mixed classrooms*, which includes teachers' attitudes towards immigrants and teacher-student relations, has been preliminarily researched (year 1°) by a series of focus groups and individual in-depth interviews to school professionals at different school levels¹². In year 2°, in a sample of lower secondary school classes were given a questionnaire to all students (both native-born and students with immigrant background) for a total of 1,040 respondents (39% were the non-Italian citizens and among them 1/3 born in Italy). The sample includes 14 school establishments with over-30% foreign students for 56 classes total; in each of the selected classes, the assigned teachers have filled in a brief questionnaire for a total of 71 respondents. In year 3°, the data of students' questionnaire have been elaborated according a multivariate analysis in order to test the hypothesis that inter-ethnic relations and students' achievement levels are influencing the level of integration of each school unit (Besozzi *et al.*, 2013).

As to the teachers' feelings and opinions, although the majority of teachers who filled out the questionnaire (93%) agree with the item "Multiculturalism is a chance for students to open their minds", a similar proportion (87%) of them claim for an "equal distribution of plurality among the classes". Less than 60% think the multicultural reality of schools might be a chance for renewal one's own teaching method, and about 20% agree that multiculturalism makes an increase in the charge of teacher's work. The range of professional attitudes towards the cultural heterogeneity of classrooms mirrors adequately the variety of feelings and experiences that characterizes the teacher's force as a point of weakness. Among the focus group participants this opinion is widely shared: over a given number of different nationalities in a single classroom there is the serious risk to lose the control of discipline and to facilitate the formation of separate

¹¹It's worth to underline that in Lombardy there is a quarter of the total amount of foreign students enrolled in Italian schools. In S.Y. 2011/12 the incidence rate is 13,2% in the school system and 15,7% in the VET regional system. As to the concentration, 34,2% of schools in Lombardy include at least 1 classroom with more than 30% of foreign students (vs. national average of 18,9%) (Miur, 2012).

¹² In-depth interviews are 6 and 24 are the participants to 3 focus groups. In total the schools/training centers involved in the exploratory study are 21, located in 8 of the 13 provinces of Lombardy.

groups of students¹³. This risk decreases if the number of second-generation students grows: in this case the habit to make group with co-nationals (very frequent among Chinese, Pakistani, Indian and Arab youth) is not interpreted by teachers as a menace to classroom integration but as a self-defense and self-protection strategy carried out by minority group members to avoid tension with majority-group members. Teachers are very sensitive to the peer influences within the class and worried both for the presence of a predominant ethnic group and for the arrival of “*newcomer*” students (who can arrive to Italy in every period of the S.Y.), the latter becoming problematic if the classroom climate changes meaningfully.

“The Latin group is the largest one, so they make their small groups; they go out together, etc. They behave very badly sometimes: for example a girl invited everyone for a party and that day nobody went to school because all were at the party. Sometimes the situation is quite out of control. It is a very large group and all members are very bonded. Those who are in minority must be submitted to them”
(Upper secondary school teacher at a Technical Institute, Pavia)

This preoccupation for the “everyday integration” is only partially justified by the objective situation of the classes, because – according to students who responded to the questionnaire - 83% of natives and 74% of foreigners never got into a brawl; 90% of natives and 79% of foreigners have never been discriminated or suffered for racism provocations; 75% of natives and 66% of foreigners have never been victim of bullying or peer provocations. There are a range of critical incidents based on ethnic tensions, especially directed to/by foreign born students (see Richardson, 2005), but many of teachers deeply acknowledge that a peaceful climate in the classroom (although welcome) does not implement the “real integration”. This is a long term process requiring an individual tutoring, a wider co-operation of school, families and local community, but at the moment it’s difficult to realize because of the lack of supports for the one-to-one approach.

“It’s not the concentration (of foreign students in the same class) that’s worrying, but what they have behind the shoulders, this

¹³ This is what Szalai calls “the island culture”, the factual ethnic separation within the walls of the school (Szalai 2011, p. 24).

become problematic within the class, because at this point there are so many foreigners that we feel it is hard to follow each one individually....” (Primary school teacher, Milan)

Preoccupations and claim for supports may be linked once again with the general social climate which surrounds the teacher’s work. According to the witnesses, schools and local community are going in two different directions as regards to pluralism and migrant integration: the school’s message is for tolerance and positive living together, while the wider local society goes for separation, rights reclaiming and stress on cultural conflicts. What is more worrying for teachers are the youngsters viewed as passive agents, who simply repeat within the classroom the sentiment of closing/intolerance they perceive outside (Bergamaschi 2010; Santagati 2012b). School professionals hardly fear the possibility of a circular reinforcement of ethnical prejudices among peers both inside and outside the school. Facing all these weaknesses, there is more than one reason to justify the teachers’ perception to be not well prepared to work in mixed classes.

The scarce preparation of teachers is thus confirmed: among those working in a over-30% class more than 1/3 of them during the last two school years have not attended any specific training for teaching L2 or intercultural education; 1/3 participated at one; less than 1/3 participated at two or more training activities. The reasons undermined the low commitment in self-training for diversity management are various: a) the decrease of public resources devoted to the teachers’ training and the lack of personal willingness to support it by oneself; b) the widespread delegation to other professionals (although temporary and less educated) such as linguistic mediators, assistants, special needs teachers, etc. of the main tasks with foreign students (welcoming, social helping, learning help, tutoring), so the teacher does not need to be updated about specific methods or tools, and c) the explicit refuse to play a wider set of roles, as the Ministry strategy seems to require by teachers:

“It’s not true that one of the criticisms is the concentration of bad situations like this one. If it would be all the resources that schools are able to mobilize, there wouldn’t be big problems. The fact is it lacks many much help...” (Lower secondary school teacher, Milan).

The current policy of the Ministry (of education) is to add classes... that is... the appearance of the teacher is that on which shoulders they have been put many things, many things....” (Upper secondary school teacher, Brescia).

In some cases, not attending a training course represents a personal strategy in opposition with the normative frame and against the way problems of cultural plurality are managed at a national level. In this frame, the majority of school professionals stand in a “duality of orientation” (Maitzegui *et al.*, 2012): on one hand they claim for support but on the other hand when they are asked whether they feel more or less prepared to receive foreign students, they say that they feel prepared enough in themselves, that is to say, we don’t need further efforts or investments for pluralism. They have been asked, in a 1-to 10 ranking, how much they feel prepared to cope with the challenges of multicultural reality of school (N = 66; Mean: 7,0 – Median: 7,1). This perception varies by years of service, subject taught and foreign students’ incidence rate and level of activation of the workplace although not very significantly (Tab. 1) but it remains surprising what duplicity of attitudes teachers show. Thus the existence of the above mentioned “discrepancy” between an internal and external thought regarding migration issues is confirmed.

Most of the teacher’s anxieties have been explored better, and partially justified, through the focus groups. Along with the increasing of foreign students’ incidence rate, and with the sudden arrivals of immigrant pupils, teachers experience a sort of decreasing of cohesion within the work team, like a “*struggle for scarce resource*”: linguistic mediators, social assistants and even spaces for separate group working, all supports have to be requested, pretended, negotiated by teachers with the teaching staff and the administrative one. As a result, in most schools, the first step of inclusion (welcoming activities) is well organized and almost always shared among the teacher’s forces; but for the further ones (when foreign pupils are assigned to classes and the diversity management is in charge of the class team) few resources are devoted by the institute, so the single teacher limits his/her intervention to the normal, “universalistic” approach to support the immigrant through an ordinary teaching plan. In a feeling of isolation, some class teachers react with lack of interest, others with criticism and others more with a face of indifference. As a very sensitive teacher said: “There is much indifference by the side of somebody among us and the

indifference is not racism, it's much worse than it" - (Upper secondary school teacher at Technical Institute, Brescia).

Table 1. Means of the 1-to-10 scale of self perception about adequacy to afford multicultural reality of schools by years of service, subject taught, foreign students' incidence rate and level of activation of the workplace; Sig. values.

	Media	St.Dev.	Anova F (df)	Sig.
<i>Years of teaching service</i>			6,306 (2)	,003**
2-5 yrs.	6,39	1,720		
6-15 yrs.	6,23	1,668		
Over 16 yrs	7,81	1,569		
<i>Subject taught</i>			,907 (2)	,408
Literature	6,35	1,641		
Special needs teacher	7,06	1,389		
Other subjects	6,87	2,029		
<i>Foreign students' incidence rate</i>			,582 (1)	,448
Almost high (30-50%)	6,89	1,895		
Very high (over 50%)	6,56	1,553		
<i>Level of activation of the workplace</i>			1,198 (2)	,308
Few measures of integration – LOW	6,37	1,305		
Enough measures of integration - MEDIUM	6,87	2,096		
Several measures of integration – HIGH	7,14	1,878		

Source: ORIM Research (s.y. 2010/2011), Lombardy, Italy.

Then, it must be stated that schools often lack an “inclusive strategy” as such, rather they carry out individual practices depending from single teacher's reaction facing the newcomers. When a teachers' team shows a good attitude towards the inclusion-integration of immigrant students, the school management may decide to assign the main part of foreigners to those classes. Unfortunately, in some cases this may appear a way to avoid the purpose of creating a shared culture of hosting and a pluralistic education environment.

What was above reported must not give a representation of an Italian teacher as insensible to *inter-ethnic relations* in the classroom, or so disturbed by the immigrants presence to refuse to be touched by

multicultural issues. It is worth looking at the general climate in the mixed class, as reported by the student's answers to questionnaire. Pupils declare they are treated by teachers "well" (48%) or "well enough" (30%), only few claim to be treated badly (5%) or with indifference (18%): strangely, in such perceptions there isn't significant spread between natives and immigrants; some differences emerge only accounting for gender (females are more positive than males) and level of school achievement (achievers are more positive than underachievers). In the following table (Tab. 2) it can be highlighted that occurs a significant correlation between the student's citizenship and their perception of teachers' behaviour only regarding: perception of favoritism, perception of collaborative acting, and perception of distance/closing to pupil's needs. In all these cases, foreign students show a more positive attitude towards their teacher than natives, while for the other items it might be confirmed that teachers do their own best in order to keep on a satisfying degree of equalitarianism with respect to ethnical differences.

Table 2. Thinking about your teachers, how many are those who? By citizenship. V. %

	Almost all		Only someone		No one		Chi-q Pearson
	ITA	Non-ita	ITA	Non-ita	ITA	Non-ITA	Sig. asint. (2 ways)
Are enthusiastic in teaching	30,4	29,5	63,3	66,2	6,3	4,3	,368
Show partiality/favoritism in pupils' treatment	20,5	16,2	55,2	50,5	24,4	33,3	,006 **
Inspire trust	36,2	37,3	53	52,7	10,8	10	,902
Listen to pupils who have problems	44,1	42,1	47,2	46,9	8,7	11	,475
Think only to the subject to teach	22,5	23,8	47,2	47,6	30,3	26,8	,826
Make their pupils more collaborative each other	39,1	44,4	55,5	45,9	5,5	9,6	,003 **
Have the authority to be respected	61,6	56,5	35,7	39,2	2,7	4,3	,160
Are sensitive to the pupils' needs	38,2	49,2	51,8	41,1	10	9,6	,002 **
Are fair in evaluations	41,5	46,2	50,7	44,9	7,7	8,9	,195
Are fair in punishments	36,2	36,4	50,5	50,6	13,3	13,0	,986

Source: ORIM Research (s.y. 2010/2011), Lombardy, Italy.

As to the type of problems students have with their own teachers, while foreigners more than natives feel anxiety and awkwardness in asking the teacher to explain the lesson better (19,7% foreigners vs. 10,1% natives) and feel themselves unable to learn (31,1% for. vs. 23,4% natives), no other difference emerges between the two. Rather, immigrants feel themselves helped more by teachers than natives do and they evaluate teachers' actions as equal and right more than natives do. This late evidence makes a new hypothesis arise in the explanation of teachers' attitude towards the multiculturalism: in the direct relation with students with foreign background there is a sort of "reversal ethnocentric view" that makes teachers more patient and supportive, so as to meet their needs and overcome distress problems (but the same attitude appears not to be applied to native students).

In conclusion, teachers operating in mixed schools in Lombardy seem aware enough that embedding the newcomers in our society is their proper task; for this aim they devote all personal resources, including sensitivity and trust in an equalitarian principle and for that they feel "prepared" enough for the challenge. Nevertheless, they develop few professional skills to be more efficient and pluralistic, and perceive a sense of discomfort when they think about the results of immigrants' inclusion in both school and society. As a matter of fact, they act with a *pluralism of actions*, which may collide with their cognitive frame and neglect to support practices and discourses by a set of values coherent with the cultural pluralism. The research clearly shows that it is time to provide school professionals with a serious plan of training in which pluralism issues should be deeply focused and, hopefully, interiorized by them.

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