



The evolution of multi-ethnic schools in Italy: research pathways on social integration

Chiara Pattaro*

How to cite

Pattaro, C. (2014). The evolution of multi-ethnic schools in Italy: research pathways on social integration [Review of the books *Nelle scuole plurali: Misure di integrazione degli alunni stranieri*, by M. Colombo and M. Santagati; *Che razza di scuola: Praticare l'educazione interculturale*, by R. Serpieri and E. Grimaldi and *Nuove generazioni nella società multi-etnica: Una ricerca nelle scuole d'Abruzzo*, by R. M. Contini]. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 6 (3), 270-282. Retrieved from http://www.ijse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2014_3_12.pdf

Author information

* Department of Political Science, Law and International Studies, University of Padova, Italy.

Contact author's email address

* chiara.pattaro@unipd.it

The online version of this article can be found at

http://www.ijse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2014_3_12.pdf

Article first published online

October 2014

Additional information of [Italian Journal of Sociology of Education](#) can be found at:

[About IJSE](#)

[Editorial Board](#)

[Manuscript submission](#)

The evolution of multi-ethnic schools in Italy: research pathways on social integration

*Chiara Pattaro**

Immigration is a relatively recent issue for Italy. Since the late Seventies, Italy has progressively changed its status from a country of emigration to one of immigration. Immigration flows have indeed been steadily increasing between 1995 and 2010, with a significant increase declining only after 2011 because of the economic downturn. In the past three decades, the presence of immigrants in the country has changed not only in quantitative but also qualitative terms (Colombo & Sciortino, 2004). The immigrant population until the Nineties was composed almost exclusively of young, male workers, while today a significant portion of the immigration flows to Italy is motivated by family reunifications (Ambrosini & Molina, 2004; Azzolini, 2011). The increasingly stable and permanent migration plans have also been reflected in Italian schools, since the rapid growth in the number of pupils with a migrant background has brought about profound modifications in the educational system. Their incidence rate has grown as well. It can be observed that, while the native population reduced progressively over the last three decades, the foreign student population has grown and is still growing (particularly in some Northern regions with a low nativity rate) due to the constant presence of immigrant families.

Data from the Italian Ministry of Education (2014) reveal that the number of immigrant students enrolled in school rose to 786,630, 8.8% of the total. Another peculiar characteristic of Italy is the very differentiated

* Department of Political Science, Law and International Studies, University of Padova, Italy. E-mail: chiara.pattaro@unipd.it

composition of foreign students in terms of nationalities represented (almost 200), of diversified migratory experiences, of the level and type of school attended, and finally, of the territorial distribution. Thus, Italy performs differently if compared to other European states and to the United States, where the presence of foreign students in the educational system lasted longer than in Italy and has less ethnic heterogeneity and more concentration of national groups in local contexts (Chaloff & Queirolo Palmas, 2006; Colombo & Santagati, 2012).

Despite these recent immigration flows, the impacts of migration on the Italian education system are still not well known within the international debate. The results of Italian studies on this issue are still neglected in international scientific journals, because they are often limited in space and time. Consequently, there is little international analysis. Only recently has this topic started to be of interest to the international audience (Barone & Azzolini, 2013; Pattaro, 2013, 2010; Santagati, forthcoming).

Despite these limitations, Italian sociologists have long been studying the multicultural transformation of the education system, with the aim of understanding and interpreting the lived experience of foreign students as well as their pathways and study careers. A recent literature review examined 50 sociological investigations carried out from 1990 up until now (Santagati, 2012).

State-of-the-art research in Italy shows that some issues have been widely studied, while others have been less investigated by sociologists.

The main research fields are:

- immigrant families and their relationships with school systems;
- the impact of multiculturalism on teachers' professional actions;
- students' school experiences in multi-ethnic classrooms, especially with more than 30% non-Italian citizenship (NCI) students. About this issue, there are few in-depth studies focusing on identity construction and well-established research attention to educational achievement. More attention has recently been devoted to inter-ethnic relationships; there are also few studies about vocational training.

As Santagati noticed, there is a case for carrying out specific studies in Central and Southern Italy and making more transparent methodological enquiry procedures for greater comparability between the local studies. Alongside the increase of migrant pupils in school, there is also the need for more shared knowledge on the role played by the formal education

system in the integration process (of foreign students as well as the native ones).

What is the evolution of the multi-ethnic schools in Italy? Which policies and practices contribute to the successful integration of migrant children into school and society?

To answer these questions, it is necessary that the social sciences – and sociology of education in particular – increase and broaden the perspectives of empirical research, paying attention to the representations and conditions that help or hinder the social integration process. Particularly, researchers should also develop significant indicators of school and social integration.

The three recent works that are taken into account in this book review focused on different geographical contexts in Italy – Abruzzo, Naples and Lombardy – clearly illustrating the scientific effort to respond to these needs. They follow different theoretical and methodological approaches, all arriving at a dynamic and complex reading of these processes with important outcomes at different application levels.

The work of Rina Manuela Contini explores emerging tendencies about integration, construction of social ties, identity development and multiple belongings among the new generations in her *Nuove generazioni nella società multi-etnica: Una ricerca nelle scuole d'Abruzzo (New generations in multi-ethnic society: A study in the Abruzzo schools)* (FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2012). These processes are explored via the analysis of the personal experience of a sample of 1,300 students (native, immigrant or children of inter-ethnic couples), who attend low secondary schools in Abruzzo, in low Central Italy, which is still not much studied with respect to these issues.

The experience of the new generations is investigated with reference to the intercultural model (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). A questionnaire investigates the family dimension as well as the sociality and intercultural relationship construction through the school context.

The originality of this work particularly lies in the empirical study of the social identity dimensions as well as in the research section, in which the author investigates the development of either the feeling of national identification or multiple belongings in preteens who are daily living in a society and in a school increasingly characterised by a plural coexistence.

The main research results show that the school is the main context in which social capital is generated (mainly within peer group relations) and a sense of plural citizenship is developed. Results on identity and

membership are very interesting: among preteens living in plural settings, feelings of multiple belongings and culturally mixed traits as well as composite and plural identities start to emerge, “even if the research results show that the pathway is just at the beginning” (p. 116). The empirical applications provide a useful contribution to interpret self-integration, especially regarding the recent debate on the so-called *hyphenated identities* (Portes, 1999), and suggest the need to go beyond the binary categories and the opposition of theoretical models (i.e. assimilation and multiculturalism) to understand the cultural changes in contemporary societies.

This research contributes to the study of immigration in Central-Southern Italy; the research methodology, hypothesis and research tools are discussed well. The hypothesis that the author aims at verifying (well supported by the theoretical framework and by previous research findings) is consistently investigated and achieves good evidence. The limit of this study can be identified in the statistical analyses, which are only univariate and bivariate. More detailed statistical analysis and the construction of statistical indexes (e.g. regarding the topic related to the construction of sociability) would have let the author investigate the results more deeply. The sample is local, so it is not representative of the entire population, but the search is likely to be compared and replicated. Therefore, the research paves the way for complex and multidimensional reflections and gives suggestions that deserve further in-depth analysis. On that topic, it would have helped to support the survey with qualitative methods also, to better understand the research context and to emphasise the voice of the key participants, providing a deeper understanding of the concepts.

The research work of Roberto Serpieri and Emiliano Grimaldi is highlighted in *Che razza di scuola: Praticare l'educazione interculturale (What kind of school? Practising intercultural education)* (FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2013), which is focused on the risk of racism at school.

The book provides a critical reading of the cultural impacts of a multi-ethnic school, focusing on the turbulence provoked by the presence of foreign students within the ordinary, but also complicated, educational settings in some of the poorest area in the centre and the suburbs of Naples. This work is made up by the authors together with a large group of in-field researchers, and it constitutes one of the first, complete and significant works on this issue at a local level.

The book opens with Emiliano Grimaldi (First Section - Politics), who addresses the analysis of the discourse on intercultural education.

The second section addresses issues of debate, contexts and practices. It includes a chapter by Roberto Serpieri concerning (self)-representation by the schools; a chapter by Titti Romano, where the qualitative research methodology is presented; and a chapter by Emiliano Grimaldi, focusing on the 'de-construction' of curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation in intercultural education.

The third section concerns the core actors of in-field research: teachers facing difficulties, contradictions and emotions in multicultural settings (two chapters by Titti Romano). Emanuela Spanò traces the biographical histories of two headmasters.

In the fourth section, the schools involved in the research are presented in detail (Three chapters deal with the following establishments: Bovio-Colletta, by Emanuela De Torres; Ilaria Alpi, by Pamela Pilato; and G. Fiorelli, by Marina Dello Russo).

The research was carried out with the aim of demonstrating that the risk of racism is always lurking "also, and perhaps even more, in those difficult school contexts where the teachers' and other school operators' work always has been forced to cope with the social effects of class disadvantage" (p. 13).

The first part of the book offers a serious analysis of intercultural education. After an accurate comparison between Italian and European legislation about integration in educational contexts, the authors rigorously contextualise and analyse the 'Italian path to intercultural education'.

Empirical research has two main objectives: first, understanding how the selected schools face the intercultural issue in different conditions and ways, and second, addressing cultural differences from a 'critical' perspective that allows the identification of transformative and emancipatory actions. The research style is close to ethnomethodology and ethnography and uses many techniques of data collection: in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, video, and video interviews, as well as the systematic collection of documents.

For each data collection related to a case study, a thematic analysis was conducted. The interpretation of the research data continued with a grounded analysis approach, which aims to capture elements from various sources.

In outlining the first part of the empirical research, in the fourth chapter, Emiliano Grimaldi refers to a well-established tradition of critical studies regarding education in multicultural contexts (Gillborn, 2006, 2008; Youdell & Gillborn, 2009), which focus on the issue of institutional racism and examine it in relation to a number of school practices. The author sustains the apparently progressive and difference-wise rhetoric, which may have intrinsic masking effects with regard to intercultural education; those effects may contribute to the reproduction of ethnic and cultural inequalities. Grimaldi explores the empirical data (collected by observations and through the analysis of group interviews with teachers and headmasters) via a deconstructive logic, examining how the three message systems of schools (curriculum, pedagogy and assessment) are mediated, implemented and also creatively circumvented with multiple outcomes and effects on school population.

The intercultural education elements are, therefore, carefully deconstructed with an analysis of curricula, pedagogy and evaluation practices, which highlight a set of tensions, paradoxes and contradictions that characterise the daily educational practice. The problems and contradictions explored are, for example, guilt and worry vs care as well as curiosity and interest vs stereotypes. Such problems, as notes Titti Romano, arise in educational settings where insecurity can transform the school environment into a 'non-place' where seemingly tolerance reigns, but there is no recognition or sharing of community and sense of belonging.

Through analytical deconstruction, the research then shows the use, both in the classroom and in the establishment, of *discursive rationalisation*, which aims to enhance either the ethnic category (paradigm of cultural deprivation) or omit it (pedagogy of indifference). It identifies all the difficulty and the ambiguity that teachers have to deal with in daily practices. They are in the middle of a tension between the need to denounce social inequalities that have an impact on students' achievement (both native and immigrant) and the temptation to 'find arrangements that minimise what happened and slap a bandaid on potentially conflicting situations' to avoid being accused of failure and incompetence. The dilemma between the need for performativity and demand for students' empowerment is still unresolved.

In the second chapter (Roberto Serpieri), the original research methodology emerges more clearly, where the interviewer has a mediating

role: the schools themselves interviewed each other, and the interviewer only managed the turn-taking.

How do schools structure their educational discourses? How do they interpret their changeable contexts? How do they describe their practices of intercultural education? From the descriptions of settings, interactional dynamics, discourses and teaching/managing practices, the researchers categorise three kinds of schools:

- *The pioneer school*, where there is a steady gamble on social and cultural as well as pedagogical and didactic innovation, and where the practice is a continuous and complex translation, not just a linguistic activity;
- *The refuge school*, in the difficult suburbs of Naples: in this school, the issue of foreign students, mostly Roma people, is considered only the tip of the iceberg of an upstream problem. The school is situated in a context characterised by many social disadvantages, including poverty, crime and disruption. In this area, the sense of institutions is weak, and all families, Rom or Neapolitan, add little value to the school. In this context, the practices are carried out in projects that aim to promote expressiveness through the arts and arouse interest in the parents;
- *The respectable school* in the centre of Naples: this school gives the idea that the diversity does not exist, that is the diversity itself should not be considered the focus of the problem. The fault of the unsolved problems with respect to the intercultural issue is attributed to the city, and the activities of multicultural education are included in the usual educational practices. In addition, immigrant children are distributed among all classrooms.

Serpieri offers something more than a basic analysis: the description of the three schools, full of literary references and metaphors, looks heartfelt and deep. The reader almost feels he is opening the door of those schools, feeling the mood and living the emotions of that setting. This is the expression of the theoretical sensitivity gained in the research path, and it feels successful and consistent with the purpose of this research methodology. The volume also refers to a DVD that collects, reprocesses, organises and returns through multimedia support (and thus in a way that is easily accessible even to a non-expert audience) the most significant research results that may indicate good practices to be disseminated among

school operators to reflect and deal with emergencies and common problems.

The research's results are well supported by the theoretical framework and find good evidence. The book offers a very detailed description of the features and size of the enactment and discourses of school policies that the schools under consideration express in the practice of 'their' intercultural education. A limitation of this study is that the research tools and procedural operations, although initially presented in the third chapter, have not always been recalled and discussed in-depth during the research. As suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990: 20), "...researchers using grounded theory procedures should discuss their procedural operations, even if briefly, especially in longer publications. They should include a listing of any special procedural steps..." so the reader can better understand the direction taken by research. For this purpose, a methodological appendix would have been very useful for other researchers who wish to replicate the study in different contexts, given the great interest of the results.

The recent work of Maddalena Colombo and Mariagrazia Santagati, in their *Nelle scuole plurali: Misure di integrazione degli alunni stranieri (In pluralistic schools: Measures for the integration of foreign students)* (FrancoAngeli, 2014), with a broad introduction by Elena Besozzi, focuses on the complex issue of school integration. Integration is examined by the authors: 1) as a process (as it evolves over time), 2) multi-dimensionally (as it takes place on the economic, social, cultural and political level) and 3) bi-directionally (as it results from the willingness to have a mutual approach between native and immigrant citizens). The book is based on a theoretical background that uses interpretive models developed in several studies and research on the 'school and immigration link' since the Nineties (see, among others, Besozzi, 1999; Besozzi & Colombo, 2007; Besozzi, Colombo & Santagati, 2009). It starts with an updated analysis of international studies regarding the link between education and integration as well as a well-documented review of the sociological surveys carried out in Italy on this topic. Above all, it offers an interesting empirical investigation, showing the results of the first survey in Italy on the classrooms with a high incidence of foreign students (the classrooms that, according to CM 2/2010 of the Ministry of Education, should not be created, being at high risk of becoming 'educational ghettos'). The survey was carried out in 14 low secondary schools in the Lombardy Region by the Orim Observatory (Regional Observatory for the Integration and the

Multi-ethnicity of Lombardy). The survey identifies and develops significant indicators of integration in multi-ethnic classrooms, related not only to NIC students but also to the native ones. It is based on a measurement and analysis system that highlights the two cornerstones of school integration: the cognitive dimension (the learning process and its outcomes) and the relational dimension (given by the set of relationships and inter-subjective connections creating a school community and generating its atmosphere).

The volume presents a well-structured research design, which aims to investigate the extent to which a process of mutual integration between native and foreign students and between students and teachers is carried out in heterogeneous classrooms according to the social, cultural, linguistic and religious conditions of members. After an initial exploratory step based on qualitative methods (interviews and focus groups) investigating the adults (school operators and trainers), the second research phase consists of a survey with a structured questionnaire administered to 1,040 Italian and foreign students.

Statistical analyses are very detailed, going in-depth about the complexity of the 'integration' concept with several statistical indexes – i.e. index of relationships with peers (horizontal) and with adults (vertical), index of friendship, index of school satisfaction, index of well-being at school, index of school achievement, index of tensions among peers etc. The last two indexes are, thus, explored via regression analysis, like dependent variables that can lead to the roots of school integration.

The added value of this work lies in an analysis of integration that considers multiple pathways, with a focus on micro and meso dimensions.

The research highlights very well the differences in attitudes and behaviour between Italians, foreign students born abroad and foreign students born in Italy, reasoning the first and the second generations are distinct social categories. As a matter of fact, second-generation foreign pupils are more integrated than the first generation's, both in the school achievement and the social inclusion dimension.

Despite any alarmist expectations, data show that many students express a full integration. (The cluster analysis – provided by Maddalena Colombo in the fifth chapter – counts almost one out of two pupils as completely at ease in the classroom). But the data also confirm the presence of clear vulnerabilities among low-income or disadvantaged cultural background students, both at the cognitive (i.e. disadvantage in educational attainment

and weak achievement) and the relational level: a form – although little recognised and rationalised – of institutional ethnocentrism practised by teachers emerges, even despite their intentions to be egalitarian. Peer relationships also raise a higher risk for cases of discrimination and racism, to the detriment of first generation students. The less integrated among the pupils are males, first-generation students and Italians with a low family background attending classes with more than 50% foreign students.

The survey clearly confirms the complexity of school integration as a ‘social construction’ and, therefore, the visible and verified interplay between relational and cognitive dimensions as well as between personal and institutional dimensions. Suggestions for a policy of educational success and school integration are also provided by Mariagrazia Santagati in the last chapter:

- School policies should be planned to take into account the interplay between gender and ethnic dynamics: “peer relationships should be taken care of especially on the male side”, because those students are more vulnerable at the outbreak of tensions. Schools should put effort into creating a project capability in the students, which should not be restricted to the initial reception, but support long-term life paths.
- Above all, the challenges for policies concern the prevention, the counteraction and the overcoming of implicit or explicit forms of selection in the classrooms' composition, encouraging not only an ethnic mix, but also a socioeconomic one.

The research also identifies many good practices strongly related to a higher probability of school integration and success for all (independent of nationality): school-based initiatives that promote the development of a sense of belonging and attachment to the classroom and to the educational institution in general, leadership training for foreign students to increase their reputation within the peer group, the training of teachers aimed at the development of reflexivity regarding their knowledge and the communication style adopted with students and with immigrant parents to increase the school operators' expertise in the management of multicultural groups (a matter almost neglected by the recent teachers' training policy in Italy).

The whole work is well supported by the theoretical framework and by an extensive presentation of previous research results. The dimensions of integration proposed by the authors are the most ambitious aim of the

research. This aim is fully achieved and effective: the result is an analysis that clearly highlights the different dimensions of the multidimensional and bi-directional process of integration.

The mixed-method approach, based on the integration of quantitative and qualitative data, provides effective answers to the research questions. Moreover, the survey structure can be replicated in other national and international contexts. The limit of this study can be identified in the sample selection: only schools with a high incidence of foreign students were selected for the sample (although four classes were chosen for each school, three had the highest rate of NIC students, and one was shortlisted according to a causal procedure, among others). Yet, to further verify the index of school integration proposed by the authors, it would help validate the main findings in a wider school sample if researchers analysed schools with different characteristics. Similarly, it would also be interesting to validate the reading of the results, which suggest the encouragement of not only an ethnic mix but also a socioeconomic one to promote educational success and the well-being of all pupils in the school.

The analysis of these three books shows that the contribution of the sociology of education to school integration can and must improve the understanding of this issue. But it is also useful for social planning, and not just in the educational field, to promote the integration of all students in the school system, based on strong empirical evidence that highlights current representations, contexts, discourses and practices.

The works under consideration start from partially different theoretical and methodological approaches, go through the same path, refer to each other and provide a good example of being able to do research and sociology in a useful and constructive manner, even in the face of undeniable difficulties and contradictions hidden behind the best measures and devices for integration. All of them aim at proposing empowerment strategies to sort out the current, turbulent and non-transparent situation of change, with the result of social cohesion in the multicultural community in progress.

References

- Ambrosini, M., & Molina, S. (Eds.). (2004). *Seconde Generazioni. Un'introduzione al Futuro dell'immigrazione in Italia*. Torino: Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli.
- Azzolini, D. (2011). A new form of educational inequality? What we know and what we still do not know about the immigrant-native gap in Italian schools. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 3, 197-222. Retrieved from http://www.ijse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/2011_1_9.pdf
- Azzolini, D., & Barone, C. (2013). Do they progress or do they lag behind? Educational attainment of immigrants' children in Italy: The role played by generational status, country of origin and social class. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 31, 82-96.
- Besozzi, E. (Ed.). (1999). *Crescere tra appartenenze e diversità. Una ricerca tra i preadolescenti delle scuole medie milanesi*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Besozzi, E., & Colombo, M. (Eds.). (2007). *Tra formazione e lavoro. Giovani stranieri e buone pratiche nel sistema della formazione professionale regionale*. Milano: Osservatorio Regionale per l'integrazione e la multietnicità.
- Besozzi, E., Colombo, M., & Santagati, M. (2009). *Giovani stranieri, nuovi cittadini. Le strategie di una generazione ponte*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Chaloff, J., & Queirolo Palmas, L. (Eds.). (2006). *Scuole e migrazioni in Europa. Dibattiti e prospettive*. Roma: Carocci
- Colombo, M. & Santagati, M. (2010). Interpreting social inclusion of young migrants in Italy. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 4, 9-48. Retrieved from http://www.ijse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/2010_1_2.pdf
- Colombo, A., & Sciortino, G. (2004). Italian Immigration: The Origins, Nature and Evolution of Italy's Migratory Systems. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 9, 49-70.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, 13 (1), 3-21.
- Gillborn, D. (2006). Critical Race Theory and Education: Racism and anti-racism in educational theory and praxis. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 27 (1), 11-32.
- Gillborn, D. (2008). *Racism and Education: coincidence or conspiracy?* London: Routledge.
- Gillborn, D., & Youdell, D. (2009). Critical perspectives on race and schooling. In J.A. Banks (Ed.), *The Routledge International Companion to Multicultural Education* (pp. 173-185). New York: Routledge.
- Levitt, P., & Glick Shiller, N. (2004). Conceptualizing Simultaneity: a Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society. *International Migration Review*, 38 (3), 1002-1039.
- Ministry of Education – ISMU Foundation (2014). *Alunni con cittadinanza non italiana. Rapporto nazionale a.s. 2012/13: l'eterogeneità dei percorsi*. Milano: ISMU (Guest editors: M. Colombo, & V. Ongini).
- Pattaro, C. (2010). *Scuola & migranti. Generazioni di migranti nella scuola e processi di integrazione informale*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Pattaro, C. (2013). I figli delle migrazioni: socializzazione e identità. *Salute Persona Cittadinanza*, 1/2013, 45-64.

- Portes, A. (1999). Conclusion: Towards a new world – the origins and effects of transnational activities. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22 (2), 463-477.
- Santagati, M. (2012). Scuola, terra d'immigrazione. Stato dell'arte e prospettive di ricerca in Italia. *Mondi migranti*, 2, 35-79.
- Santagati M. (forthcoming). *Researching integration in multiethnic Italian schools. A sociological review of studies on educational inequality.*