



ITALIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Editor-in-Chief: Silvio Scanagatta | ISSN 2035-4983

# Cultural Diversities Among Primary School Teachers: a Comparison Between Italy and Austria

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## Article first published online

October 2019

## HOW TO CITE

Cavaliere, A.L. (2019). Cultural Diversities Among Primary School Teachers: a Comparison Between Italy and Austria. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 11(3), 85-108. doi: 10.14658/pupj-ijse-2019-3-5

# Cultural Diversities Among Primary School Teachers: a Comparison Between Italy and Austria

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*Abstract:* This research aims to understand whether, in which sense and to what extent the category of primary school teachers working in culturally and religiously diverse European schools and societies is itself internally diverse. Processes of globalization, migration and identity building represent the theoretical landscape of this comparative study, promoting the dialogue between Central and South European contexts – beyond political and epistemological relations of hegemony – in the face the contemporary global challenges. The research carried out in Graz (Austria) and in Milan (Italy) between 2016 and 2017, was based on semi-structured interviews, participant observations and immersive ethnography. A representative sample of 47 subjects including ongoing and future primary school teachers shared their opinions and representations about the existing and conceivable range of diversity – intended in accordance to the paradigm of complexity – in the teacher category. Tertiary teacher education emerges as featured by reflexivity and flexibility in Italy, by a stronger connection to schools and in-service teachers in Austria. Religions confirm their character of bright boundaries in both de-secularized, surprisingly still strongly Catholic societies, while the role of languages in incoming and outgoing mobility varies significantly between the two inquired contexts. Finally, we outline the advantages of diversity in teacher category.

*Keywords:* complexity, European diversity, educational policies, primary school teachers

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## Introduction

A heterogeneous population attends today's European primary schools and classrooms. Alongside diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, we are witnessing a stunning increase in the number of children with special needs and with origins, cultures and mother tongues different from those of native pupils. In school year 2015-2016, 10,6% of primary school pupils had immigrant background in Italy (MIUR, 2017); in school year 2013-2014, immigrant pupils made up 12,7% of the student population in Austrian primary schools (Statistik Austria, 2015). The percentages in Milan and Graz – the two cities involved in the present study, each being the second-biggest urban contexts respectively in Italy and Austria – exceed the national average of the country of reference. This composition of the classroom is largely influenced by the ongoing processes of globalization, migration and acceleration investing European societies. Temporary and long-lasting fluxes of people, artefacts and ideas in a global and “runaway world” – as Giddens calls it – make people and things more and more frequently “out of place” (Dal Lago & De Biasi, 2000, p. 43). As an Austrian teacher pinpointed, increasingly diverse schools mirror these processes of social change.

“Especially in our school, being different is very present because each person is really different from the other and because, in this school, we have many cultural groups the pupils and the parents come from. The situation cannot be different but everyone is different<sup>1</sup>”. (AT2<sup>2</sup>)

The professional category of primary school teachers does not display the diversity representing the distinctive mark of contemporary societies and schools, at least if we consider the widespread social representation of a primary school teacher. It seems that almost exclusively middle-aged monolingual women (Cavalli & Argentin, 2010; Schizzerotto & Barone, 2006) constitute role models for female and male pupils with diverse cultural, linguistic and religious background. We wonder how almost just individuals born and grown up within the national borders of the state where they teach can be called to prepare future generations for life in a globalized, diverse world. Are we sure, despite the apparent paradox, that the examined population is as internally homogenous and constant in time as it might seem?

The present research aimed to investigate, from a sociological and pedagogical perspective, the existing internal range inside the category of primary school teachers in Austria and in Italy and the effects of an increased variety in the teacher work force.

<sup>1</sup> The German original sounds like a word game “Es kann nicht anders sein, als anders zu sein.”

<sup>2</sup> “AT2” stays for: Austrian teacher n. 2. We refer to the second interviewee in the subsample of Austrian teachers.

A scientific debate on opening up the teacher profession to a broader variety of subjects was already ongoing in the '80-'90 and led the Texas State Board of Education to the implementation of concrete measures to increase the number of minority teachers, mostly Hispanics and Afro-Americans, programmatically. The interventions regarded teacher education and support at the beginning of the career (Kirby, Berends & Naftel, 1999).

Kroon, Sjaak and Vallen (1991) pointed out the paradox, recognizable in several European high school classes, of multilingual youngsters from various cultural backgrounds being taught by monolingual teachers from the sociocultural majority group.

The European Commission underlines in the passage below that teachers represent role models and invites its member countries to facilitate, through national education policies, a better correspondence between the composition of European societies and that of teachers category.

“Teachers act as role models. It is important for pupil attainment that the profession fully reflects the diversity of the society in which it operates (in terms for example of culture, mother tongue, and (dis)ability). Member States could take measures to ensure that the composition of the teaching workforce fully reflects the diversity of society, and in particular remove obstacles to culture and gender balance at all levels.” (European Commission, 2007<sup>3</sup>).

A German report (Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration, 2013) describes the positive effects of an increased presence of teachers with immigrant background on the learning climate and the quality of teaching-learning processes in highly segregated school environments. The authors do not hide that hyper-selective access processes make it difficult to achieve this goal, adducing the sobering example of just 13 out of 234 applicants who managed to have their foreign degrees recognized and to become entitled to teach in German schools in Hamburg in 2011.

Looking more closely at the countries involved in the present research<sup>4</sup>, the Austrian country report of the study ‘Teacher Education for Inclusion’ (p. 5) raises questions on national admission requirements for teacher edu-

<sup>3</sup> Paragraph 2.3.6. – Teaching in society

<sup>4</sup> Brief sociohistorical contextualization: Even though Austria is a federal republic composed of nine *Bundesländer* (federal states), the national school system is highly centralized. The Italian school system is also rather centralized, despite the school autonomy reform of the Nineties. The Austrian primary school lasts four years, the Italian five. Afterwards, Austrian kids are have to choose between different types of higher school, whether their Mediterranean neighbours reach this crossroad three years later, after the common *scuola media* (middle school). Special education still persists in Austria, where the right for children and teenagers with disabilities to attend regular classrooms and schools was recognized just in the Nineties. In Italy, the first pioneering experiences of inclusion took place after the approval of Law 118/1971. It was the beginning of the historical path towards inclusive schooling, which made Italy to a point of reference worldwide.

cation, deemed responsible for hindering the access and the completion of the studies to persons with poor physical competences and lacking a perfect command of the German language. The excluded candidates, among which we can find subjects with physical and sensory disabilities and with migrant backgrounds, are appraised as potentially valid “role models” in the current inclusive (at least in the intentions) settings.

The article ‘Institutional mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in Austrian pre-service teacher education’ (Döll & Knappik, 2015) discloses the forms of institutionalized discrimination endured by teachers with migrant background in the transition from higher school to Pädagogische Hochschule and from university to work as a school teacher. For example, through arbitrary, non-standardized language entry tests, not based on prior analyses of actual necessary and sufficient language requirements for school teachers or students. The tests would mirror, according to the authors, forms of “new racism” (Balibar in Döll & Knappik, 2015) and scepticism on the language “aptitude” of students labeled as “migrant Others”, partly imputed to Austrian media discourse on migration and multilingualism.

Professor Klaus-Börge Böckmann, Austrian expert for multilingualism and German as a second language, introduces several arguments to explain why we would need plurilingual teachers and pedagogical counsellors (Böckmann, 2008).

Concerning interventions, we signal the nationwide project ‘Diversity and multilingualism in pedagogical professions’, implemented by the Austrian government in order to incentivize – on the wave of several similar initiatives implemented in German speaking countries in the same period – qualified people with a migration background start pedagogical training (Döll & Knappik, 2015).

In the Italian context Argentin, Serpieri and Viteritti (2019) invite us to consider less frequent individual pathways as a possible source of innovation for education environments. They argue that uncommon trajectories in educational professions, like the ones of male teachers in early childhood education, display high potential of change.

The problems posed by the present research are not completely new, though also not mainstream. The originality of the work lays in the adoption of the scientific paradigm of complexity, inherent to contemporary societies, comprising a vast spectrum of diversity facets as well as their stratification and intersections, even when isolating a single variable for study purposes. The paradigm of complexity is also an ally in the attempt to understand identity and identity-building processes over space and time, considering the multiple spheres of participation of the same individual and the similarities between individuals and groups situated apparently far away from each other. Interviews are opportunities to tell something “about yourself and to

yourself, to the others and about the others” (Kaufmann, 2009). We tried to locate these narratives on the continuum between the pole of “weak” identity in liquid societies (Bauman, 2002) and the pole of identity as a (re)invention of the tradition with defensive purposes (Melucci, 2000; Giddens, 2000).

The main diversity variables investigated in the two cities of Graz and Milan were:

- Initial and ongoing teacher training;
- Gender (female and male teachers);
- Diverse cultural, linguistic, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds;
- The interplay between global and local , including the consideration of geographical origin, sense of belonging and mobility experiences.

We investigated different models of explicit (official curriculum) and implicit (hidden curriculum) teacher training under a critical light in order to understand how they influence teachers’ representations and practices on diversity. We hypothesized that professional education respects and preserves the internal diversity existing within the pool of aspirant teachers over time, rather than levelling it. Moreover, we expected it to increase awareness of diversity and to support teachers in dealing with it (Argentin & Cavalli, 2010).

The first empirical outcomes highlighted the need to pay more attention to religious pluralism among pupils and between pupils and teachers, not included in the initial research design because considered as a particular aspect of cultural diversity. In the last three decades, scholars have been analysing secularization and de-secularization processes in European societies (Gorski & Altinordu, 2008; Habermas, 2015; Sciolla, 2009; Sekulić, 2017). The scientific community, with Habermas in a prominent position, invites to re-focus on religions based on empirical evidence about their role in identity building processes and in contemporary conflicts in Europe, alongside with historical reasons. Religions are still active in Europe, like the general-bass in the orchestra (Bellah in Sciolla, 2009).

Given the wide array of inquired aspects and the limited space available in this article, we deliberately choose to focus on three key areas where we found the most interesting results: teacher education, religions and mobility.

## Methods

We aimed to put different educational and sociological traditions and perspectives into communication, beyond political and epistemological relations of hegemony, believing that a fruitful dialogue between the North and the South, the West and the East is necessary to face the existing global challenges (Burawoy, 2016). In doing this, we adopted a constructivist approach to grounded theory and a comprehensive method inspired by Weberian sociology.

The comparative study involved the two urban areas of Milan and Graz in this timeframe:

- the pre-fieldwork took place between June and October 2016;
- the fieldwork between November 2016 and May 2017;
- the post-fieldwork between May and December 2017<sup>5</sup>.

More in detail, the empirical part was conducted prevalently in Italy between November 2016 and February 2017, mostly in Austria in the following three months.

The qualitative methods employed encompassed not just semi-structured interviews, but also participant observations and immersive ethnographic investigation in four primary schools, two in each city, over the course of three academic and school years. Two of the four abovementioned internships took place in school year 2016-2017, parallel to the conduction of the research presented in the present paper.<sup>6</sup>

The representative sample included 47 subjects in total and was built according to criterion of internal differentiation (Bichi, 2002), described as “an effective criterion to document the differences and point out recurrences related to particular aspects or dimensions or features considered as interesting” (Bichi, 2002, p.84). The method released to be coherent with the topic of the research – diversity can most suitably be explored through a socioculturally variegated sample. Differentiation as an operative criterion derives from the concept of intersectionality, first developed in feminist studies in relation to the paradigm of complexification (Leonelli, 2011). Intersectionality means considering the interconnections between divisions like gender, socioeconomic status, ethnic features, generation and age cohort. This holistic perspective privileges no particular “category of difference” (Crul, 2016, p. 56-57).

Alongside differentiation, atypicalness served as a sampling criterion: we deliberately looked for subjects presenting “different” sociological traits and life experiences relative to the average future and ongoing primary school teachers and who thus not matching the social representation of a “typical teacher” in different respects. For example, a teacher coming from Serbia in the Austrian subsample; four former Erasmus students in Austria and one in Italy; two students belonging to a second generation in Italy and the daughter of a mixed couple in Austria. This allowed us to explore several articulations of the concept of heterogeneity and to draw correlations between the considered dimensions and the opinions expressed.

<sup>5</sup> The three phases were not rigidly separated, but partly overlapped each other and merged instead, mirroring the recursive nature of research processes.

<sup>6</sup> School year 2016-2017: Volksschule Engelsdorf (Graz), Scuola Primaria Carlo Pisacane (Milan). School year 2015-2016: Volksschule Hirten (Graz). School year 2014-2015: Scuola Primaria Antonio Scarpa (Milan).

The sample was not just selected by the researcher but partly also collected through snowball technique. This gave us the chance to explore the field beyond our own pre-knowledge, representations and prejudices. Notably, also the interviewees selected “from above” surprised, raised doubts and showed new research directions through their accounts, as the emergent need to include religions and disability in the research design during the fieldwork phase attest.

The perceived similarities and differences between the interviewer and each interviewee, for example generational differences and the associated disparities in social status, led to a continuous interplay between empathy and decentration, pushing the researcher to redefine her position as being between two poles of outsider and insider. We deliberately tried to apply this ethnographic research principle: “deal with the obvious as if it were strange and with what appears strange as if it were obvious” (Dal Lago & De Biasi, 2002).

Here is the most relevant information about the composition of the sample:

- 27 subjects in Milan, 20 in Graz, with different geographical and cultural origin not just being from Italy and Austria, but also coming from urban and rural areas. The interviewed teachers in each city worked in three different primary schools chosen according to particular traits: a school where the majority of pupils presented migration background in each of the two cities; a school famous for special competences<sup>7</sup>; and a school presenting neither particular features in the student composition nor particular issues;
- Roles related to the current occupation (students and teachers), often associated with generational differences:
  - 15 students in Milan, 10 in Graz<sup>8</sup>;
  - 12 teachers in Milan, 10 in Graz;
  - Both genders: three male students from Milano-Bicocca and four from PHSt; four male teachers in Italy and three in Austria.

The interviews aimed to comprehend how social actors represent and tell about themselves and the others in the society and in the school, who they perceive as more or less (dis)similar from them.

The general interview guideline, built on sensitizing concepts according to the principles of grounded theory, was declined in four different models for the four subsamples (Italian teachers, Austrian teachers, Italian students,

<sup>7</sup> Scuola Primaria Antonio Scarpa (Milan) is particularly competent in dealing with special needs, especially disabilities. The partner school connected to the PHSt (Graz) and located in the same building presents experimental approaches.

<sup>8</sup> We have chosen the students from the last year of studies (with a single exception), the fifth in Italy and the third in Austria.

Austrian students). The indexes defined within each thematic area were later operationalized into variables represented by the single interview items. The interview materials were interpreted from a critical perspective by using variables and indexes as orienting categories. Relevant background data about research participants<sup>9</sup>, collected directly from the subjects through a form filled in immediately after the end of the interview, represented further aids to shedding light on the inquired issues.

It has been opted for an illustrative model and writing style (Demazière & Dubar, in Bichi, 2002), including quotations of participants' words, in order to respect the dialogical and co-built nature of the interviews. Reporting the interviewees' words, we deliberately decided to maintain filling words, repetitions and even "mistakes". We also tried to reproduce, as far as possible, the rhythm of the speech, its speed and (lack of) pauses.

More in general, all phases, from the design of interview guidelines to the analysis of collected materials, were meant as reciprocal communicative and transformative processes involving the *emic* – the Weltanschauung of the interviewees and the sense they attribute to things – on one side; and the *etic* – the researcher's conceptual framework as a member of scientific community and the categories she/he derives from the theory – on the other side (Bichi, 2002, p. 150).

The wide range of aspects embraced can be seen both as a point of strength and originality as well as a point of weakness, raising the need for further studies in order to move from the explorative to the in-depth phase. The short time available and the limited workforce imposed further limitations.

## Main results

### *Teacher education*

The research outcomes confirm the importance of professional education in shaping teachers' representations of heterogeneity and how they cope with it in the classroom (Kroon, Sjaak & Vallen, 1991). Interviewees showed a big appreciation of the initial teacher training offered by University of Milano-Bicocca, outlining its role in promoting the development of openness, reflexive attitudes and critical thinking.

"I found myself in this faculty with the whole psychopedagogical part missing, coming from Physical Education, in the sense that we had

<sup>9</sup> Age (students)/ years of experience in the school (ongoing teachers); attended higher school; second degree or previous university studies (also not completed); work experience of any kind; father's educational level, mother's educational level; father's occupation, mother's occupation; place of origin (name of the place, big city/medium sized city/town/village); current place of residence.

been given “recipes”. That is, the child from 0 to level 10, let’s assume, has to do: level 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. When I changed, I arrived in this faculty, I realized that from 1 to 10 you could do 1, 5, 3, 7, 8, 10, 0... [or] 1, 10, 7, 3...” (IS3<sup>10</sup>)

However, some students complained that such an open approach would not provide future teachers with concrete, precise instructions about what to do in the classroom and how to do it. They would need more lead and more practical orientation in the studies. Eleven out of twelve subjects in the subsample of Italian teachers entered the job prior to 1998, year of publication of the decree which ratified the foundation of faculties of teacher education, mainly thanks to a relevant higher school degree<sup>11</sup>. Thus, they did not have any direct experience with university teacher education. Nevertheless, one in three criticized university programs as theory-centred and detached from practice, seen as the best way for teachers to acquire professional competences. A long-run teacher proposed to reverse the structure of university curriculum, scheduling a school practice module prior to theoretical courses.

“Israelis, both in educational and in medical field, set first practice and then theory. So, for example, doctors spend the first two years in hospital wards. If they pass the first two years in hospital wards, being basically a nurse’s assistant, then they start the theoretical part.” (IT10)

Unlike Italian teachers, Austrian students mostly criticized practice-orientedness, marking the difference between universities and para-university institutions such as Pädagogische Hochschulen. They charged PHSt<sup>12</sup> with a reductionist approach to educational professionalism, accusing its courses of sometimes just providing with “recipes” to apply acritically, without any adaptation to the school and class context. An Austrian student, recalling her Erasmus semester in Sweden, drew a comparison between universities and Hochschulen:

“And then I attended a University there, not a Hochschule, and there you are responsible for your learning. At the Hochschule you get everything served and you have to do everything like this, without reflecting too much, while there I had to think.” (AS9)

However, the situation may change in the future as a consequence of the educational reform implemented in academic year 2015-2016, modifying

<sup>10</sup> Key to interpret the labels used to respect the interviewees’ right to anonymity: IS – Italian student; IT – Italian teacher; AS – Austrian student; AT – Austrian teacher.

<sup>11</sup> However, four Italian teachers held university degrees not related to education and other five teachers attended specialization courses related to education at university later, while already working.

<sup>12</sup> Pädagogische Hochschule Steiermark

both the duration<sup>13</sup> and the structure of the studies at Pädagogische Hochschulen.

Teacher education varies not just between countries but also within the same country among different cohorts. The phenomenon of the split between “old” and “new” teachers, marked mainly by professional training, though widely overlapping with a generational divide, emerges as an Italian peculiarity. All interviewees in the subsample of Italian university students depicted a fight between newcomers and long-run teachers.

“I think it’s a good approach [Bicocca’s approach]. It’s a bit different when they hire you, if they hire you, because it’s twenty against one. You propose something innovative, particular anyway, which “old” teachers have never heard about, anyway, and you risk to be crushed.”  
(IS9)

Another future teacher hopes to find a university colleague in the schools, somebody “on her level”<sup>14</sup>.

Interns are able to improve the situation spurring both teacher-tutors and university tutors, and thus building bridges between universities and schools. Their presence activates the professional development *in itinere* and the lifelong learning of experienced teachers, helping them keep up with the changes in schools and societies. However, being universities usually located in urban areas, their impact on rural peripheral areas is often not strong enough. Regarding the two inquired urban areas, the primary schools in Graz have more chances to host a practice student than the ones in Milan. In fact, there are two institutions for teacher education in each city but 54<sup>15</sup> primary schools in Graz and 225<sup>16</sup> in Milan.

There was no sign of a fault line between “old” and “new” teachers in Graz, also thanks to the stronger connection between Pädagogische Hochschulen and the single schools facilitated by the medium size of the city and to the more practical character of the studies. This is visible in form of widespread participation to further and permanent education initiatives. A former engineer who changed to the teacher profession in his late thirties praised the opportunities available to teachers throughout their career.

“Further professional development has always been very valuable for me and before, as a professional in the technical field, I used to pay from my own pocket to get this professional update; instead now, as a

<sup>13</sup> Before the reform, initial studies to become a teacher lasted 6 semester in total. After the reform, they last 10 or 11 semesters: 8 semesters of bachelor and 2 or 3 semester of master.

<sup>14</sup> IS15

<sup>15</sup> 40 out of 54 are public primary schools, the other 14 are private. Retrieved April 11, 2019, from the website of the Municipality of Graz, <https://www.graz.at>

<sup>16</sup> Retrieved April 11, 2019, from <https://www.tuttitalia.it/lombardia/18-milano/39-scuole/scuola-primaria/>

teacher, I get in-service courses offered for free, served on a tray, and I can choose freely, so it's a wonderful situation." (AT2)

The support of tertiary institutions can help primary schools to keep up with the society and its rapid changes, for example with respect to migration processes, new family patterns or technological advancements. Moreover, only the teachers who are able to learn to learn can provide the children with the competences they need to face present and future life.

"The competence of learning to learn is extremely valuable for me. Some years ago there was a study which discovered that the children who were 6 years old back then would have had to change their job – not just their position but their job – up to six times in their life, because some jobs would have disappeared and some others would have appeared, because they [the children] would have been forced to. And this works just if you are able to learn and you do it with pleasure." (AT2)

Teachers are also learners: stated in the Austrian guidelines for primary school education, this principle shapes widespread practices of further development on-the-job in Austria.

Italian teachers lamented instead that further education often consists of isolated, decontextualized initiatives and that the offering is too wide and dispersive. They partly attributed this weakness to the lack of investment in further professional development.

University of Milano-Bicocca and Pädagogische Hochschule Steiermark differ not just in their success in retaining teachers in their sphere of influence in the post-training phase, but also in their entry policies. Our study endorses previous literature on strict selection mechanisms in Austria. Persons with speech disorders or with learning disability seem to be disadvantaged in, if not excluded from, the competition to access local teacher education programs. Several subjects in the Austrian sample mentioned the infamous German language admission test (Döll & Knappik, 2015). During the studies, a compulsory rescue swimming exam and several sports courses determine a further selection based on the criterion of physical fitness, to the detriment of low performers due to physical disabilities, old age or other conditions (Feyerer, Moser & Niedermair, 2010).

Italian students display, thanks to university courses, better knowledge of learning disabilities than their Austrian colleagues do. They believe in the importance of teacher education over ascribed characteristics and know that also persons with learning disabilities can become teachers within inclusive systems providing with compensatory tools and dispensatory measures.

"Well, it could be a further difficulty for the teacher, but not for the children, because I think that an educated teacher, who is fully aware of his/her difficulties, will not have any problem to teach others." (IS12)

### **Religions**

Religious diversity represented a “white zone” (Bichi, 2002) in the research design. Surprisingly, it emerged that also young generations accord great importance to religions, considered as a constitutive element of local culture, mentality and traditions in both countries. The first interviewee argued that religions strongly influence school life, even if they should not, as following.

“Well, considering how religions are, let’s say that religiosity contributes to building a *forma mentis*, a way of approaching things, a way of behaving. A set of moral rules, social norms come to us largely from religion. Anyway, we are in Italy...so I speak about the Catholic religion, because that’s the one I know.” (IS1)

The presence of the Catholic religion is particularly visible in the Austrian school space. In every classroom and in some entrance halls there is a crucifix hanging on the wall. All pupils, irrespective of their confession, produce objects for Christmas, Easter and Carnival<sup>17</sup>. In addition, the school year officially starts and ends with pupils and teachers attending a mass in the nearest Catholic church during the school time, while children with other religions, excluded because of the confessional character of this ritual, stay in the school with pedagogical staff. Only two interviewees mentioned efforts to find a more inclusive way to celebrate the start and end of the school year. Austrian teachers especially insisted on the importance of transmitting the Roman Catholic religion also in the school, as it is deeply rooted in the society and part of everyday life, most patently in small towns and in countryside villages. AT8 showed concerns about the abolishment of religious education from the French school curriculum. The passage below illustrates that cultural protectionism may represent a fertile ground for assimilatory discourses and practices to thrive, often behind social actors’ backs.

“We also have a good mix: Orthodox, Muslims, Catholics, Evangelicals. Most of them are quite open, and even parents of Muslim children sometimes don’t even send them to Islamic religion lessons. They have somehow already adapted to our culture. At least in my class. It always depends on the school where you teach.” (AT10)

Anthony Giddens pointed out that traditions are essential to the existence of any society, since they shape and give continuity to life, and that thinking to sweep them away in the name of the Enlightenment is unrealistic (Giddens, 2000). Dissimilarly, some Italian teachers expressed their wish to put the tradition aside in school space, arguing that Christian Catholic symbols like the nativity scene or the crucifix are out of place in highly diverse

<sup>17</sup> Handicrafts is a subject in the Austrian school system.

urban schools. Without neglecting the role of the Catholic religion in their own biography and identity, a teacher motivated the option of excluding the crucifix from the school space referring to the composition of the school class where she taught:

“I have 10 children, 11 children who don’t attend religion classes. Why shall I put a crucifix? [...] I have a great respect for the symbol. I grew up in a Catholic family, went to school at the nuns and have a great respect. I am not religious but I have a great respect. Still, I think that the crucifix should peacefully stay somewhere else and not in the public school.” (IT1)

Next to the diffused form of religion objectified in the school space and marked by annually recurring rituals, we find religious education as a school subject. The degree of appreciation of the organization of religious teaching varies largely between the two countries. Nine out of ten Austrian teachers expressed satisfaction with the local confessional model (Pajer, 2015)<sup>18</sup>, while just one Styrian interviewee wished for a reform introducing ethics lessons for all pupils. By contrast, just two out of twelve consider it suitable to the needs in Italy, where a hybrid model, mostly academic-curricular in the intentions and confessional in the practices is widespread. Two third of Italian teachers would rather prefer a model of religion education based on history of religions or on ethics/values.

Interestingly, future teachers in both countries share a more secular conception of the school curriculum than ongoing teachers. Three out of the ten Austrian university students invite to radically rethink religious education in the school, another one would even cancel it. AS1, reflecting on the separation of State and Church in Austria, proposes to turn religious education into an optional afternoon course<sup>19</sup> held at schools. Similarly, most of the Italian students think that the public primary school should be a secular and “neutral” context, even if more than the half declared themselves as practicing Catholics and attend/ed Catholic environments such as oratories. Italian students reported a higher degree of religiosity than their Austrian colleagues, while the situation is reversed among ongoing teachers.

Scholars attribute the school systems a central role in the co-construction of shared secular values which can be recognized as “sacred” in post-secular societies (Giddens, 2000, p. 66). This is viewed as a precondition for the second and third generations of Europeans to elude the “condition of the eternal stranger” (Simmel in Sékúlic, 2017, p. 10). We believe that religious education – even in its confessional variant – does not necessarily stand

<sup>18</sup> We refer to Flavio Pajer’s classification of three different models of religious education in schools.

<sup>19</sup> Half-day schools, usually offering afternoon care services, are still by far the most common model in Austria, while whole-day schools are still rather rare.

in contradiction with the construction of secular and democratic values. If open for interaction and exchange, it can give value to the existing religious and cultural diversity while promoting social cohesion. Nonetheless, the results of the field study suggest that the Austrian model, splitting the school class into confessional groups during religious education lessons, could foster phenomena of labeling and prejudice, widening social distance among peers and between teachers and students.

“On one side, I find it important that children get religion passed down also outside of the family. On the other side, I don’t want my school class to be so fragmented because of this, and I don’t want even more divisions – I don’t want to say “walls” – whereas you have a certain picture in your mind: ok, this a group, this is another group, that’s still another group, and I don’t like this one. [...] My impression is that, even if they do well, they will always be separated.” (AS3)

It is worth mentioning an experimental, inclusive project realized in Graz, introducing lessons held by religion teachers of different confessions together in front of the whole classroom (AT6).

20 interviewees out of 47 spoke unpromptedly about the role of Muslim religion and Islamic culture in the school and in the society. Most of the utterances had negative connotation and can be categorized as prejudices, fears or as episodes of closure, or even a kind of extremism on both sides in everyday life.

In the field of dietary practices, Muslim children are sometimes victims of institutionalized practices of exclusions, some other times censors with Muslim and non-Muslim schoolmates. Despite the evidence in scientific literature (Giorda, 2015; Hover-Reisner et al., 2017), just one subject in each country reported episodes of dietary discrimination against Muslim children and their families. The interviewees rather informed us about dietary discriminations practised by Muslim children against their schoolmates and, ultimately, also against teachers from the majority group. These religious “accidents” are particularly frequent in the so-called *Brennpunktschulen*, super-diverse schools where the traditional majority-minority ratio, represented by children of native parents and of immigrant parents, is inverted and everyday dynamics often seem to “work the other way round” (AS4) as well<sup>20</sup>. Here is an episode of religious intolerance during the school break:

“It all starts from small things. If Muslim children say “We don’t eat pork.” during the school break, and the child sitting next to them is eating pork, than it [religion] can become a problem. The Muslim child says “This thing is not fine, why are you eating it? It’s dirty!” It is necessary to work on it and say “Everybody has the right to eat what

<sup>20</sup> The school segregation rates in Milan are lower than in Graz.

he/she would like to.” In my opinion there are a lot of things connecting religions, but children still can’t recognize them.” (AT6)

At this point, we need to remind that the views expressed by the interviewees, almost all coming from the group of the natives in the respective countries, are biased by prejudices, cognitive filters and other observation traps (Ziglio & Boccalon, 2006). Accusations of intolerance on Muslim pupils and parents, for example regarding the presence of the crucifix in the class and the celebration of religious holidays, presumably often hide the feeling of being threatened. As Glifford Geertz (1999) argued, individual and collective identities would be still and increasingly built “in negative”, basing on differentiation from “the others” and classification, rather than on similarities or common values.

“Whatever defines identity in borderless capitalism or in the global village, it is certainly not a deep harmony on fundamental issues. It is rather something resembling the return of familiar differences, the persistence of conflicts and the residual presence of threats – the belief that, whatever it happens, the order of differences must be kept.” (Geertz, 1999, p. 62)

Muslims appear in the words of our respondents as the strangers *par excellence* also because a fundamentalist, politicized version of the Islamic religion dominates the social representations among European natives. We found fears and hostile attitudes also in school environments where the presence of Muslims is very small, which tends to confirm our hypothesis of a reductionist perspective on plural Muslim worlds. In opposition to the abundantly imaginary, politically-fed vision of the “Islamic civilization” as a compact block, a scientific look imposes to identify a wide range of practices and behaviours among Muslims (Schiffauer, 2004), whose countries of origin display different political and cultural contexts, each of them often changing over time with strong consequences on culture and on daily lives. The educational level and the urban or peripheral origin of individuals also influence their way of living religiosity.

Establishing a culture of dialogue is useful to overcome binary views and to promote a positive school climate. IS4, who absolved her teaching practice in a super-diverse primary school presenting high percentages of Catholic and Muslim pupils in Milan, told that it was absolutely necessary to discuss in the classroom immediately after the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015. Religiosities, as powerful social and cultural implicits, can interfere in the relationships between peers and between pupils and teachers, as well as in the didactics. The interviewee insisted that, first of all, teachers should become aware that religiosities represent (mostly unaware) interpretative lenses. Our inquiry indicates that teacher education, especially didactic modules

about diversity, is a key factor in fostering cultural awareness, representing a vaccination and as an antidote against the formation of defensive-offensive positions based on ideological stiffening.

Finally, it is worth recalling that prejudices, fears and conflicts are relational and mutual phenomena. For a deeper comprehension, we would need to spend much more time in Muslim communities in Graz and in Milan and to conduct observations and interviews with Muslim primary school teachers and parents. More in general, studies on diversity especially benefit from the synergic integration of different perspectives.

### ***Teacher mobility***

Shared educational policies represent a way to promote convergence between European countries. For instance, most of our respondents believe that the agreement on the eight Key competences for Lifelong Learning (European Commission, 2018) is a necessary step to contrast the divergence they perceive between national school systems in Europe. In particular, they insisted that citizen education should not be neglected in favour of disciplinary teaching.

Those teachers who develop a European or global sense of belonging, through study and work experiences abroad, would be particularly suitable for accompanying children on the way to multiple sense of belonging and nested citizenship. However, some subjects warned that the acknowledgment of the existence of a common cultural background and the agreement on fundamental competences to pursue in all European countries might generate the risk of overlooking the national peculiarities and needs.

“This, of course, shouldn’t be at the expense of the specificity of each country, because they [the eight Key Competences for Lifelong Learning] are a reference frame, but then they need to be declined in the specific school context. And the school [system], also just having a look at these declarations<sup>21</sup>, is the historical and cultural sediment of a nation and of its path.” (IT9)

These ambivalent attitudes towards the convergence of school systems reflect the paradoxes of globalization, most evident in the European Union, where diversity and unity, cosmopolitanism and localism represent two constitutive, dialectically coexisting aspects (Gasparini, 2000, p. 267). The question, for both South and Central European countries, is therefore:

“How can education be at one at the same time embedded in and ‘speak to’ local specificities, yet connect individuals to wider national, regional and global communities?” (Sultana, 2012, p. 30)

<sup>21</sup> Passages from the Italian and the Austrian guidelines for the primary school curriculum.

Teacher mobility constitutes a complementary, bottom-up approach to build bridges between apparently very different and isolated national school systems. Relevant experiences in different institutional and cultural contexts, as well as intercultural exchanges within the country of socialization, do not automatically produce cosmopolitan attitudes (Roudometof, 2005), but often promote the awareness and the relativization of the own interiorized frames. This makes it possible to imagine different possible worlds, to tell it with Jerome Bruner. Teachers, in particular, get the chance to take distance from consolidated pedagogical and didactic patterns and consider new possible ways of seeing and doing things.

We discovered that Austrian students are well informed, certainly partly thanks to the efforts of PHSt International Office, about the Erasmus+ Program and the opportunities it encompasses not just for university students, but also for schools and employed teachers. Most of them think that the Erasmus program ‘makes sense’ and could not imagine somebody questioning its validity. By contrast, Italian students suffer from a lack of information on and have negative prejudices against the Erasmus program. They recurrently expressed fears about studying in a foreign language and about “missing” the teachings offered at their home university during their stay abroad. Consistently, mobility practices are more common among university students and employed teachers in Austria than in Italy. However, Italians seemed to be more open than their transalpine colleagues to long-term or permanent teacher mobility, both outgoing and ingoing. They think that anybody, independently of her/his cultural and linguistic background, can learn the teacher job and lay great importance on professional studies to acquire competences to a “standard” level. A university degree in teacher education, accomplished in Italy or elsewhere, represents for them an unquestionable seal of quality.

Dissimilarly, most Austrians are skeptical towards long-term incoming mobility, since the complete mastery of the language of instruction represents a “must” in teaching professions, in their view, and they doubt that aspirant teachers from other countries would be able to reach the top language level in German. Second generation teachers seemed to find better acceptance and were often cited even as a resource, also due to their supposed perfect mastery of the language of instruction (attribution of perfect bilingualism). Linguistic “perfection” (Döll & Knappik, 2015) is considered a necessary requirement in the Styrian main city, unlike in Milan, as we demonstrated before. The fieldwork confirms the presence of institutional procedures complicating the access to teacher education institutions and the recognition of teaching qualifications acquired abroad.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> AT5

The passage below illustrates how linguistic protectionism – a component of cultural protectionism and of localist attitudes and identity claims (Roudometof, 2005) – can slide towards nationalism and xenophobia.

“I think it would work but...it always depends on where [“where” is stressed in the speech] it happens. There is a lot of hatred towards foreigners, I have already realized it [low volume of voice], and...I think it is even difficult for that person to get through. What do I mean? It’s already so difficult with the parents! I think there is no problem with the kids. I think that this, teachers, kids, that will always work. But the pack<sup>23</sup> of parents... It’s already very hard if you master the language, and you master it perfectly.” (AS10)

AS10, who grew up in a small village and later lived in middle-sized and big cities as well, highlighted the role of the context in influencing the degree of acceptance or rejection towards a teacher from another country. Other interviews as well suggested a correlation between the attitudes towards “foreigners”, on one side, and the continuum between the two poles of urban context and rural peripheral context, on the other side. The results confirmed that global and local, experimental and “traditional” coexist and continuously tangle (Giddens, 2000) through processes of “glocalization” (Robertson in Sciolla, 2009). Globalization has contradictory effects: it destroys traditional bonds, but it also brings to the formation of new hybrid identities and more or less invented communities (Sciolla, 2009). A future Italian teacher described the political climate in Europe and attributed xenophobic cultural attitudes to complex processes involving identity.

“Because I think we are really closing up on the political level. I think that we are really scared. In fact, politicians – starting from England, France and America – I think there are really... But also the latest events in Italy are terribly showing us that we are actually frightened about meeting what is different from us. And it’s not just the immigrant.” (IS4)

In this frame, meeting the “Other” in primary school age, when the mindset is still very flexible, can make the difference. A second generation university student with Egyptian parents explained that her presence in an internship classroom was a resource not just for a newly arrived Egyptian pupil, who found somebody speaking his mother tongue and being “like him”, but for all children. The interviewee – who describes herself mainly as an Egyptian Copt, despite being born and growing up in Italy – refers to teachers’ function as role models triggering both processes of identification and of cognitive-affective dissonance.

<sup>23</sup> The same terminology is used as for a group of dogs.

“Even if her/his own culture is not represented in the school class, among its members, still, when the children see that there is not just a teacher like them but also a different teacher or, anyway, that also the teacher can come from different countries, from different cultures, I think it’s a positive thing, because children take us as points of reference.” (IS15)

Favourable attitudes towards the presence of teachers with different cultural backgrounds are dammed not just by nationalist closures but also by reasoning on “workable diversity” (Pitzalis, 2009) – considered by the majority of the sample as just partly achievable through common professional studies – and by attributions of ascribed “cultural distance”. According to the latter stance, if the cultural distance between the environment of socialization of a teacher and that of his/her colleagues is felt as too big, than the relationship is likely to fail. What is seen as culturally distant? According to our study, individuals with lower socioeconomic status, like immigrants from the countries of the Global South, represented as a uniform category, raise fears (‘aporophobia’) and even repulsion. Especially in times of economic crisis, the creation of new boundaries based on socioeconomic conditions threatens inclusive attitudes (Colombo & Santagati in Daher, Leonora & Gamuzza, 2019).

More generally, Austrian interviewees do not just expect immigrant teachers from any country to receive a warm welcome to Austria, but could also not see themselves moving abroad for a long period of time. The interpretation of collected materials allows us to hypothesize an inverse correlation between the sense of rootedness and belonging to the national and, even more strongly, to the Styrian local context<sup>24</sup>, expressed also through the attachment to natural elements and landscapes, on one side; and the willingness to move abroad for long periods, on the other side.

## Discussion

The first research results induce us to endorse a paradigm shift towards the pluralization of teacher profiles, similarly to what has already happened regarding student population. For educational policies, this means opening the teacher profession to a wider range of aspirants presenting variegated background traits and biographical trajectories (Argentin, Serpieri & Viteritti, 2019). A stronger presence of teachers from minority groups should not be seen as a politically correct concession to tolerate but as a strategical move to “update” the school systems starting from the individuals, their as-

<sup>24</sup> Most of the interviewees in Graz are not even open to move to Vienna.

pirations and their agency. Here are some reasons to see minority teachers under a positive light:

1. As various role models, they can trigger processes of identification and emulation in children from minority groups;
2. Early contacts with embodied Otherness during childhood could contribute to preventing/tackling negative prejudices in all children.

Moreover, teachers experiencing significant contacts with other cultural and social systems are likely to:

3. Develop strong soft skills, like learning to learn – crucial in the knowledge society and in the era of lifelong learning – and flexibility, which they can teach children directly or indirectly, being themselves living examples;
4. Reach above-average competences and meta-competences in language teaching and learning processes<sup>25</sup>. Some of them being bi- or plurilingual, they can help children and colleagues improve teaching-learning processes in a reflexive way.

We believe that ministries of education neither need to set a predetermined quote of teachers from minority groups nor to create incentives, but just to eliminate the hurdles on the way of candidates with heterogeneous background. A more democratic access to teaching professions would allow a better correspondence between the composition of the category of primary school teachers and that of contemporary societies. The pursuit of this horizon requires the combination of top-down (policy level) and bottom-up (social and cultural level) interventions. Without ignoring the persistence of high disparities in learning and occupational outcomes, we can conclude that the Italian, South European educational system could represent a model to emulate for its mid-European neighbours on the way to reflexive, inclusive practices. It emerged that teacher training can give a fundamental contribution to creating a common ground based on professional competences and standards, which allows to comply with the principles of “workable diversity” (Pitzalis, 2009) and “controlled diversity”. We are convinced that the two different models of teacher training outlined in this article would benefit from mutual learning. University of Milano-Bicocca, with its social constructionist approach to educational professionalism, could show the way to key competences like autonomy, reflexivity, flexibility and learning to learn – *passpartouts* in the area of globalization, acceleration and social change. In turn, Pädagogische Hochschulen could share their hands-on approaches with the aim of reducing the fault-line between “old” and “new”

<sup>25</sup> We refer to all categories of languages: first languages, foreign languages, languages of instruction as first or second languages.

teachers, often causing open and underground conflicts between colleagues in the Italian system.

Increased mobility and exchanges would promote mutual knowledge, a precondition to learn from each other. Para-university studies in teacher education in the DACH area (i.e., in German speaking countries) are still largely unknown or ignored in the Mediterranean world. Similarly, DACH countries tend to look up at Scandinavian school and educational systems rather than at their Mediterranean neighbours. The Mediterranean – representing an ‘in-between’ space where the global North meets the global South and the meeting with the ‘other’ takes place – has a great transformative potential, since it offers the opportunity to think through the complexities of our contemporary world (Matvejevitch & Chambers, in Sultana, 2012).

However, we warn that no model can be imported and transplanted successfully *in toto*, no matter how valid and promising it might seem. Especially in comparative studies, researchers need to adopt a critical attitude and become aware that long-lasting processes of improvement take time and require an accurate analysis of the specific context(s) involved.

Our study confirms that religions work rather as barriers than as bridges to social inclusion in post-secular – and, at the same time, still deeply Catholic – European societies (Alba & Foner, 2008; Woon & Zolberg, 1999). Co-constructing a set of secular values beyond the bright boundary (Alba, 2005) of religiosities, starting from the school, represents an unquestionable goal, especially thinking of second and third generations of Europeans (Sekulić, 2017, p.10). Both in Milan and in Graz, Muslims were depicted as the strangers *par excellence*, but we need to note that the perspective of the subjects involved in our study, most of them identifying themselves with the majority group, should be integrated with other points of view.

The results indicate that Austrian universities set a strong emphasis on language “perfection” as a prerogative of “native-speakers”, constructed as superior speakers and opposed to “non-natives”, considered as a homogeneous category (Döll & Knappik, 2015). Evidence for it that, both in everyday discourse and in newspapers, adults and children in Austria are labeled as “immigrants” mostly in relation to their linguistic background, rather than basing on citizenship. As a consequence of this biased perspective, aspirant teachers with migrant background often remain “dormant resources”. In conclusion, reconsidering the current performance-oriented entry requirements and the procedures for the recognition of foreign degrees are necessary steps to make teaching profession more inclusive and democratic (Feyerer, Moser & Niedermair, 2010, p. 5).

Languages are seen as a barrier to short- and long-time relocation of people and ideas also in Italy, with the difference that Italians rather have concerns about their own competences in foreign languages. Possible mea-

asures to contrast negative attitude towards linguistic diversity, a hallmark of Europe and a feature of school classes, could be:

1. The extension and intensification of mobility experiences for future and ongoing teachers;
2. Supplementary up-to-date professional education on the topics of linguistic diversity, multilingualism, foreign and second language acquisition.

We propose to invert the perspective: advanced foreign language and intercultural competences – essential items in the toolbox for life in a globalized, interconnected world – should not be viewed as preconditions to go abroad but rather as products of life experiences and education.

Cultural exchange contributes to making our own cultural and social frames, interiorized through processes of socialization, visible<sup>26</sup>. This makes it also possible to abandon crystallized approaches and unreflected practices, the “cultural rail”<sup>27</sup>, and to explore new possible ways as a teacher and as a person. It could also prevent and contrast defensive identity-building processes in individuals who are role models for diverse children.

To conclude, we report the words of a teacher from Serbia who had been living and working in Styria for ten years. With her, we believe that a more “international atmosphere” would make it easier to reduce the distance between the school and the society.

“After all, the school should also bring the world closer to the children. That is, to help them build this idea. Nowadays we have different media: mail, through skype we can communicate with people from different countries of the world, work together. Why is it such a big problem in the school to create an international atmosphere, also regarding the teachers? Because people coming from the technical field work everywhere, study everywhere, work together, study together, research together...” (AT9)<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Sclavi (2003) describes how the meeting between diversities, through an initial phase of surprise/shock, brings to awareness of frames.

<sup>27</sup> AS4

<sup>28</sup> Her Serbian teaching qualification has been recognized about a decade after she moved to Austria.

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