Race and Class in Educational Inequality in Italy: What Role Do Teachers Play?

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Abstract. The paper argues the relevance of studying racism in education in Italy. Structural and institutional racism are difficult to monitor and counter effectively when there is a lack of official data and specific analysis. Educational inequalities affecting students with a migrant background need to be studied by paying attention to race *and* class. Our literature review examined "school choice" policies, which, rooted in neoliberal market ideologies, have deepened inequalities, privileging market-driven competition and favoring socially advantaged schools and families. This exploratory study in Veneto contributes to the Italian debate on 'downward orientation' (Romito 2016; 2024), questioning teachers' roles, experiences, and views on school orientation for migrant-background students. Do class and race (not) matter in their approach? On the one hand, the research has shown teachers' prejudices against racialised students as non-white/non-legitimated Italians. Teachers therefore contribute, often unintentionally, to the racialisation of education. On the other hand, teachers also act as the last bulwark against inequalities, often voluntarily supporting disadvantaged students in navigating school orientation and fostering opportunities for upward social mobility. The role of teachers is relevant and ambivalent. Further research needs to be done to include a broader sample at a national and European level.

Keywords: race, class, downward orientation, Italy

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Why Researching Racism in Education?

Racism is not only made up of ideology, prejudice and stereotypes, but (above all) of discrimination linked to hierarchies between human beings that have structural and institutional roots. The division and hierarchisation of human beings can be constructed through various racial markers. The best known racism is anti-black racism linked to the 'colour line' (Du Bois 1903/2007), but actually ethnicity, language, culture and religion can also become racial markers of superiority/inferiority 'along the human line' (Grosfoguel 2016). Those who are racialised as inferior/subhuman are systematically disadvantaged from a symbolic and material point of view, while those who are considered white/fully human (because they are considered to belong to the dominant group) are advantaged as they are racialised as superior. The privileges associated with whiteness are the result of asymmetrical (colonial) power relations, which are made to appear natural so that they are more difficult to question and transform.

Racism is inseparable from European capitalist modernity. According to C. Robinson (2023) capitalism and racism did not break away from the feudal order but evolved from it to produce a modern world system of 'racial capitalism' dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism and genocide. Capitalism was 'racial' because racism had already permeated western feudal society. The first "European proletarians" were racial subjects (i.e., Irish, Jews and Roma) who were victims of dispossession, colonialism and slavery in Europe (Bjelić 2022)..

The structural and institutional dimensions of racism are difficult to monitor and counter effectively when there is a lack of official data and analysis with an explicit focus on racial injustice. For this reason, the *European Network Against Racism* (ENAR) tries to fill this gap in official data with research reports by experts from all EU member states. Racial discrimination in education is present at European level in different ways, according to the ENAR 'shadow report' (2024, 26-27). The most dramatic ones still concern Roma people, taking the form of school segregation, or arbitrary demands for Roma children to be enrolled in 'special schools/classes', or (micro)aggressions. All of this negatively affects school results and increases school dropouts. In the Italian context, Bravi and Rizzin (2024) clearly showed the historical and political roots of racial discrimination in education concerning Roma people.

Recognising and addressing different forms of racism in Italian schools is a line of research that has involved primary and secondary school students and teachers in recent years (Frisina, Farina and Surian 2021; 2023). However, much work remains to be done to counter the widespread denial of racism in Italy and to understand the different ways in which it is repro-

duced (and can be challenged) at school. For instance, there is the issue of textbooks which offer an often 'innocent' history of European colonialisms (in which the dispossession processes and racist/sexist violence of the colonisers are downplayed and the supremacist ideology of the white civilising mission is still at work) and books which convey racial prejudices towards Africans and Afro-descendants, starting with how the history of slavery is (not) addressed.

The present study aims at exploring the structural and institutional dimensions of racial discrimination in education, reflecting on the role of the teachers in the process of "school choice" and focusing on students with a migrant background and students racialized as not white/not legitimated Italians (Frisina 2024). In the first part of the paper (paragraphs 2, 2.1 & 2.2) we introduce our literature review, while in the second part (3, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 & 3.4) we introduce the research process and discuss the main results. As we will show, teachers simultaneously act as the only barrier against racial inequality in education, while also becoming part of a more and more classist and racist system under the pressure of difficult material circumstances.

2. The racializing of educational inequalities and of secondary school choice

The European Union has made significant progress in reducing early school leaving rates among students aged 18 to 24 (9.5% in 2023, Eurostat 2024a). However, significant variations exist across different regions and population groups within Europe. Of particular concern are rates of early school leavers among children racialized as not white and students bradley defined with a migrant background which are significantly higher compared to their white and "native"[2] counterparts. In 2023, the share of early school leavers from education and training among young non-EU citizens stood at 25.2%, significantly higher than the 8.2% observed among young "nationals" (Eurostat 2024b). Italy has one the highest rates of all European countries, with 26.8% (just after Spain and Germany; Eurostat 2024b). INVALSI data for 2024 confirm that school dropout rates are high among students with a migrant background and students racialized as non-white. However, implicit dispersion, that is completing school without acquiring fundamental compe-

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[2] In Italy, official data on the race of students is not collected, as the concept of "race" is generally excluded from regulations on personal data collection, in accordance with Italian and European privacy and data protection laws. However, data is collected on other characteristics, such as citizenship, country of birth, and migratory background of their families, which classify some students under the migrant category, even when they are born and raised in Italy, just like their "native" peers. This inconsistency in the data and the absence of data on race reflect a political and cultural agenda, which ultimately hinders the ability to identify and address specific forms of discrimination and inequality.

tencies, is lower among first- and second-generation students compared to their "native" peers (INVALSI, 2024). This indicates higher levels of motivation and resilience that awaits to be acknowledged and considered too.

Students with a migrant background have consistently demonstrated lower levels of academic achievement (Colombo et al, 2011) and have been disproportionately represented in vocational secondary schools compared to their "native" peers (Queirolo Palmas, 2002; Colombo and Santagati, 2017; Gabrielli & Impicciatore, 2021; Argentin et al., 2017).

School guidance and teachers' attitudes play a key role in this respect. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and migrant origins are disproportionately channeled towards vocational and technical schools, what Romito calls "downward orientation" (Romito 2016), a choice which limits their educational and occupational opportunities.

These patterns intersect with school choice dynamics, which, over the past two decades, have aligned with the so-called "choice agenda" (Musset, 2012), embedded in numerous educational reform initiatives in Italy and Europe. These reforms have been imbued with neoliberal market criteria of competitiveness and performance, aimed at increasing the providers' diversification and the role of parental choice in the education market (Reay, 2008; 2022; Ball, 2017). Steeped in private-business ethos, the market-driven educational reforms were initially embraced as tools to enhance quality and efficiency, aimed to standardize education quality by fostering competition among schools, granting parents greater choice (as argued for the Italian context by Ribolzi, 2003 and Grimaldi and Serpieri, 2013). However, implementation of these reforms revealed significant drawbacks, particularly for disadvantaged and marginalized groups - as the persisting of high dropout rates among students with a migrant background above demonstrates.

2.1. The nexus of race and class in the (challenges to) choice agenda in education

While the new education neoliberal reforms resulted in greater school diversification and autonomy, they failed to reduce educational social inequalities (Reay, 2022). Instead, these reforms exacerbated educational stratification and segregation (OECD, 2019) and fostered fragmented education markets. These markets, promoted through mechanisms like open days, fairs, and private agencies (De Feo & Pitzalis, 2018), disproportionately benefited certain social groups while further disadvantaging others[3].

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[3]   Moreover, these reforms have accelerated the process of individualism of students, positioned as recipients of a testing-driven "normality" benchmarked against a system of "certification" that perpetuates and institutionalizes differences (Pitzalis, 2021).

In the European context, educational policy frameworks have undergone significant adjustments in recent years (Eurydice 2020). One of the key challenges has been that the concept of choice, as framed by market theory and neoliberal ideology, operates within a context of unequal resource distribution, wealth and capitals, making the decision-making process for students and families inherently complex and unequal. Research that critiqued this model, often grounded in Bourdieu's framework, focused on the role of social and cultural capitals within the class system. It showed how affluent and highly educated parents rely on class-specific capitals, and often look at socio-demographic indicators, like neighborhood characteristics, to choose schools that align with desired peer groups for their children, engaging in residential mobility and enrolling in schools outside their catchment areas (Rowe & Lubienski, 2017). This phenomenon has been widely conceptualized as a "white flight" (for the italian case see Mantovani et al., 2021), wherein "native" families, particularly those with higher socio-economic status, deliberately opt for schools with fewer students racialized as non-white. As race has been emerging from these analyses, it has often been conflated with class and has largely lacked critical examination.

While Bourdieu's framework has been instrumental in understanding class dynamics in educational inequalities, critiques have emerged regarding its limited engagement with race. Recent postcolonial scholarship has challenged the perception of Bourdieu's work as class-conscious but colour-blind, arguing for greater recognition of the intersections of race and class in educational inequalities (Wallace, 2017). Race has become increasingly relevant in discussions of social educational disadvantages and school choice, particularly in understanding how families navigate institutional educational systems in ways that intersect not just with their classed experiences but also with their migrant and racialized backgrounds. Byrne and De Tona (2019) have expanded this analysis to show that "anxieties" around school choice and the pursuit of a "good mix" are not exclusive to white middle-class parents seeking the right schools for their children's socialization. Parents racialized as non-white also engage in school choice, albeit with different motivations and constraints. Non-white parents seek the "right mix" often as a means of escaping racism and marginalization (Byrne, 2009; Byrne & De Tona, 2019). Moreover, racialized imaginaries and "ethnic expectations" can function as a "cultural trap", influencing students' performance and outcomes in ways that reinforce existing inequalities (Wallace, 2017; 2024). In the Italian context, Bonini highlights a concerning trend of the "ethnicization of educational challenges" (2017), where the educational challenges faced by students racialized as non-white are attributed to their presumed cultural roots and family circumstances, rather than to systemic and institutional inequities rooted in racism.

2.2. Teachers in Italy and the Role of Career Orientation in the New Reform

In Italy, the "choice agenda" in education continues to hold significant influence, reflecting a lag in the critical reevaluation seen in some other European contexts. Recent reforms, such as the emphasis on school orienteering (*Linee guida per l'orientamento*, December 2022), have instead demonstrated an ongoing prioritization of policies promoting parental choice and educational diversification. While these policies aim to empower families and foster competition among schools, factors such as socioeconomic status, regional disparities, and the stratified nature of the Italian educational system mean that the benefits of choice are unevenly distributed.

This is particularly critical in an education system that exhibits a notably high level of inequality compared to other economically advanced European nations (Ballarino et al., 2009; Pensiero et al., 2019). In Italy, social origin continues to exert a substantial influence on educational attainment, independent of prior achievement (Contini and Triventi, 2016). Despite the formal openness of the education system and university access, which does not depend on the secondary school track attended or prior performance, significant disparities based on social background persist in the transition from lower secondary education to upper secondary education, and eventually to higher education and in the selection of fields of study (Triventi et al. 2016). Tracking effectively occurs before the end of compulsory education and acts broadly, across branches that differ significantly in curriculum, and within branches through differentiated curricular pathways.

At the age of 13, upon completing lower secondary education, students in Italy must choose between four different school branches: *licei*, *istituti tecnici*, *istituti professionali*, and *formazione professionale*. This decision is mandatory, as the school-leaving age is 16. This early selection creates distinct educational pathways that vary substantially in terms of curriculum focus, perceived prestige, and opportunities for further education or employment. This results in a rigid division between tracks, with *licei* generally leading to higher education and *istituti tecnici* and *professionali* directing students toward specific vocational sectors or technical employment. This structure exacerbates social and educational disparities, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately represented in vocational tracks, which often have fewer resources and lower prestige (Romito 2016; 2024). Moreover, while formal within-school tracking is prohibited - selecting students based on ability or social origin is illegal - informal sorting practices persist (Facchini et al., 2019).

Although racial stratification is a fundamental aspect of this system, much of the existing literature has focused on how tracking and sorting reinforces class-based inequalities, with access to academic and resource-rich

tracks typically favoring students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and those with parents of higher educational attainment - as elucidated above. This emphasis has overlooked the critical role of race as a mechanism in reproducing social stratification and limiting social mobility. Similarly the role of teachers in this process, and particularly in virtue of their key roles of school advisors, has been largely overlooked.

The responsibilities of teachers in Italy have long been central to the functioning of the educational system, but they are increasingly fraught with challenges related to training, professional development, and the fair delivery of education across a highly stratified system (Romito, 2016; Raimo 2024b). The recent reform launched with the *Guidelines for Career Orientation* has expanded the responsibilities of teachers, emphasizing their role in guiding students toward informed educational and professional pathways. However, there is no indication of what training teachers would get to fulfil this important task. Teacher training in Italy is often criticized for its limitations, particularly regarding practical skills necessary to address the realities of contemporary society (Mortari and Silva, 2020). This gap is problematic in regions where teachers must navigate increasingly diverse student populations, including those with racialized and migrant backgrounds and special educational needs. Furthermore, the absence of a robust system for continuous professional development leaves many teachers ill-equipped to adapt to a rapidly evolving teaching context and methodologies (Magni, 2024).

The racialized and class-based stratification outlined above presents significant challenges for teachers who are left to navigate these inequities within the classroom and beyond. Teachers are situated at the intersection of these structural inequalities, often serving as mediators between the systemic stratification of schools and the diverse needs of their students. They do so largely without any specific training and professional recognition.

The scholarship has brought some evidence on how teachers, already burdened with an excessive number of roles and responsibilities, often act as gatekeepers in school choice and tracking systems, whether through implicit biases or institutional constraints, thus perpetuating existing disparities but also helping to challenge them. For instance, Bertozzi shows that for some students, teachers' guidance serves as crucial encouragement to pursue further education despite their challenges. However, for others, this advice is systematically geared toward "downward" options for vocational training, reflecting societal prejudices (Bertozzi, 2018; Bozzetti, 2018; Bonvini, 2023). As mentioned earlier, Marco Romito has also drawn attention to this phenomenon in his study on secondary school orientation practices in Milan, which he terms *orientamento al ribasso,* downward orientation (Romito, 2016).

The recently introduced reforms in Italy, emphasizing school autonomy and orientation (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito, 2023), have placed

additional pressure on teachers. The reform emphasizes the role of teachers as orientation specialists, tasked with guiding students through pivotal educational choices. These reforms respond to a growing demand for information and orientation in school choice and labour market opportunities and characteristics (Cordini, 2024; Ricucci, 2015). However, many teachers currently lack the specialized training needed to perform this role effectively, a gap that undermines the very core of the reform's objectives and may reduce its impact to a bureaucratic formality rather than a transformative intervention.

The skills required for orientation specialists extend beyond traditional teaching competencies. Effective orientation requires a deep understanding of the diverse social, cultural, and economic factors influencing students' educational choices. Teachers must also be equipped to identify and mitigate systemic barriers, such as racialized and class-based inequalities, that can shape student trajectories. Yet, existing teacher training programs in Italy often neglect these dimensions, focusing instead on pedagogical techniques without addressing the broader socio-cultural context in which education operates.

3. An exploratory research on Race, Class and "school choice" in Veneto

Our research was a pilot study in the Veneto Region (specifically in the cities of Verona and, to a lesser extent, Padua) aimed at exploring the nexus of race, class and school choice at a local level, with the pragmatic goal to prepare a broader research proposal[4]. It was a qualitative research, based mainly on discoursive interviews (which includes "narratives and arguments", Cardano, 2011) to understand the experiences and views on school advising of different social actors (teachers, orientation counsellors, intercultural mediators; students and parents racialized as not white). The research also included two focus groups, with the goal to create a relatively safe space for reflexive discussions, where the social actors have the opportunity to transform their individual experiences into a more collective understanding of a social issue (Frisina, 2010). The first focus group with a small group (5 participants) of teachers from Padova (mainly middle-aged white men) was not successful, despite the interest and support of some teachers belonging

to a local COBAS union and the organisational help of CESP (Centro Studi Scuola Pubblica, based in Padua). The participant did not engage with the specific topic, deeming it non entirely relevant. For them, downward orientation was not at the core of the racialization of school choice, but rather was a consequence of other difficulties faced by the students. The teachers' discussion concerned mainly their work difficulties (which we did, however, take into account, as will be seen below). The second focus group with a small group (5 young women in their twenties) of racialized students and educators was really rich and offered important insights on school advising (and it will be the topic of a forthcoming article). Finally, the research included some (short) experiences of observant participation during events and meetings concerning school orientation (such as the ExpoScuola 2022 and 2023 in Padova e in Verona, both "exhibitions" with the goal of advising "students and families"). Those experiences were important to grasp "the spirit of the time", which is to say the strong cultural influence of neoliberal trends, with the emphasis on "entering into work fast" and the protagonism of many private actors in the advising process.

In this section, we focus our analysis on the role of teachers and on school orientation counselors in the process of "school choice", to explore the ways in which they contribute to reproduce or/and challenge social inequalities within the educational system, taking into account class *and* race.

What are their experiences and ideas about school orientation, in particular with students with a migration background? In their view of orientation, (how) do class and race (not) matter? (How) do they try to counter growing inequalities? What constraints do they come up against?

We used discursive interviews (with 10 women, aged between 35 and 55) and field notes collected with middle school teachers, orientation counselors and one cultural mediator. All of them, except for the cultural mediator, are racialized as white.

The research highlighted two main dynamics. On one hand, systemic shortcomings in the educational framework place a disproportionate burden on teachers, who find themselves addressing structural gaps with personal resources and unpaid time. On the other hand, teachers themselves, through biases and not always intentional practices, contribute to the racialization of educational pathways. In this context, teachers play an ambivalent role: on one hand, they are the only barrier against systemic dysfunctions that amplify material and symbolic obstacles based on class and race; on the other, they become obstacles themselves that new generations must overcome to achieve true emancipation.

We will analyze the main issues that emerged from the research: the link between social class and educational choices, the implicit biases of teachers, the chronic lack of resources, and the work-overload of the teaching staff.

The reflection begins with the centrality of class in downward orientation, in line with an educational system recognized as structurally classist, based on a hierarchy of differentiated educational pathways that direct students according to their socioeconomic background. However, implicit biases among teachers also emerge, contributing—consciously or unconsciously—to reinforcing racial stereotypes and barriers for marginalized students. The discussion then focuses on the chronic lack of resources, particularly concerning cultural and linguistic mediation. This shortfall not only penalizes students with immigrant parents but also exacerbates the workload of teachers, already overwhelmed by administrative tasks and responsibilities that exceed their educational mandate.

Teacher overload, therefore, appears to characterize the educational crisis and fundamentally relates to educational marginalization.

3.1. Class

Among the interviewees, one participant, Nando, held a dual role as both a History and Italian teacher, currently serving in a high school with prior experience in middle schools, and as an expert in the history of education. A white Italian man in his fifties, Nando has long been dedicated to the social and political critique of transformations within the school system—a commitment that inspired him to pursue a doctorate focused on these issues.

During the interview, Nando highlighted how the structure of the Italian school system reproduces inequalities rather than counteracting them, an observation that aligns with several studies (Bourdieu, 2006; Pitzalis, 2012; Bonini, 2012).

Nando stated that he has long questioned *the intersection between classism and racism and how, in some way, racism is embedded in the classist project that the Italian school system has always pursued.* According to him, *the most important book […] to understand […] the ideology of power within the Italian school system is Lamberto Borghi's 1951* "Education and Authority in Modern Italy". In the text, Nando explained, the Italian school is described as an institution that has maintained certain fundamental elements across various political regimes: authoritarianism and classism. Borghi, therefore, demonstrates that the school was never conceived as a means to overcome inequalities but rather as a tool to reproduce ideologies of inequality and social control. In Nando's words: *Even though there have been liberal schools, Giolittian schools, fascist schools, and Republican schools, certain elements remain unchanged: authoritarianism and classism.*

Nando also spoke of the *Gentilian framework of the school,* under which there are *first-class licei* (classical studies), *second-class licei* (scientific studies), and then technical and vocational tracks. *The school is supposed to provide opportunities for everyone, but it does not radically challenge the system of*

class distinctions, he lamented. He further stated: *Racism is not investigated as a separate parameter, but I believe it is fundamental to understanding certain aspects of discrimination and inequality.*

According to Nando, *there is a correlation between students' ethnic backgrounds and the educational/career paths they follow [...] for example, students of [foreign] origin are often directed toward educational tracks that replicate their parents' jobs.*

Among the narratives regarding teacher orientation, the theme of social class emerged repeatedly. Most of the interviewees share the assumption that immigrant families push their children to pursue studies that lead them into the workforce as quickly as possible. This narrative, however, finds little space—except when described as prejudice—in the interviews conducted with young people from migrant backgrounds and with immigrant parents. At the same time, all participants reported difficulties tied to social class that were evident throughout their educational journeys.

During the exploratory phase of the research, while the design was still being developed, another interview was conducted with the director of a career guidance association active in Verona and one of his collaborators. This association, like others encountered during the research and as mentioned by the teachers interviewed, reported lacking tools to provide orientation for people from migrant backgrounds. The research highlights the absence of specific pathways for the children of immigrants, as well as guidelines or other tools aimed at raising awareness among teachers about education and orientation issues. While acknowledging they had not undertaken specific projects or reflections on the topic, the two professionals clearly articulated some points echoed in interviews with teachers and other school career guidance professionals, identifying the need for families to secure additional income as a key reason why many young people from migrant backgrounds are directed toward vocational paths.

There are many problems related to language when communicating with parents, but it's primarily because they need their children to work (Fieldnote)*,* as the director stated. This rather generic observation was not elaborated upon with detailed stories or examples during the conversations held during the fieldwork with professionals and teachers. However, it appears to reflect both the perceptions of the professionals involved and a well-established, commonly shared narrative.

3.2 Teacher Biases and the Reproduction of Educational Inequalities

Teacher biases play a central role in reproducing educational inequalities, even when they operate unconsciously. While many teachers express a commitment to equity and inclusion, findings demonstrate that implicit biases

often influence their actions and perceptions, particularly toward racialized students and those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.

An illustrative case emerges from Claudia's interview, a lower secondary school teacher in Verona, where she recounts her initial teaching experience:

"I was thrown into classes during the second semester without attending any prior meetings. [...] I knew nothing about the students, how they performed in other subjects, and, to some extent, I wanted to remain completely objective. However, some colleagues were surprised when I mentioned that a particular [racialized] student was exceptionally skilled in technical drawing. It's not just about manual skills; understanding technical drawing requires critical thinking. Yet, the math teacher dismissed her proficiency in technology, saying that if that was the case, it would have surfaced in mathematics."

This specific case involved an Afro-descendant student, described by Claudia as having "quite high grades." However, the math teacher (who also served as the class coordinator) deemed her unsuitable for sciences and technical subjects. Claudia expressed frustration about the incident, as her colleague not only undermined the student's abilities but also questioned Claudia's judgment and expertise.

This example echoes findings from critical race studies in the United States, which document pervasive stereotypes about Black students' aptitude for mathematics (Riegle-Crumb & Humphries, 2012; McGee & Martin, 2011). Such stereotypes are performative and negatively impact student outcomes (Wang, Henry, Wu, Del Toro, Huguley, 2024; Nasir et al., 2017; Rowley et al., 2007). Similarly, in this case, despite the student's high overall grades, she was guided toward a sports-focused high school. This aligns with a broader pattern where physical activities—associated with the body—are seen as a "positive" domain for Blackness, while areas linked to intellectual rigor, like sciences, are less accessible (Morning and Maneri, 2022).

Critical and specific examples, such as Claudia's, are rare among the teachers interviewed, particularly those with greater experience. Interestingly, Claudia, as a novice teacher, seemed more willing to recognize and critique these dynamics. More often, teacher biases emerged involuntarily during interviews, particularly around two themes: perceptions of bilingualism and language use.

In interviews with Giulia and Caterina, two teachers in lower secondary school in Padua, these issues became apparent.

Giulia: *"Language is the main obstacle."*

Mackda: *"...but you said they are all Italians, born and raised here."*

Loretta: *"They don't speak Italian at home. They don't have any problems with spoken language, but they struggle with writing. So, I can't recommend*

that they attend a school where writing, studying, and theory are the main focus."

In this instance, bilingualism was framed as a deficit rather than an asset, perpetuating the stereotype that students from immigrant families are less capable of excelling in academic tracks. In general, across multiple interviews and the focus group, the idea emerged that it might not be advisable to recommend a school perceived as too demanding, as the difficulties encountered could lead to a higher dropout rate compared to pathways considered less complex. This perspective reveals a limited appreciation for technical tracks, which, despite being oriented toward applied knowledge, include challenging subjects that require aptitude and dedication.

Giulia and Caterina, interviewed on the same day, repeatedly used outdated and inappropriate terminology, referring to their students (born and raised in Italy) as "foreign children." This choice of language not only reveals that they perceive them as foreigners, but also a lack of awareness about the social - and subsequently psychological - challenges faced by these students, ultimately reinforcing their exclusion and marginalization.

Similar issues arose during the focus group with five male teachers in lower and upper grade schools Padua, where one participant - a lower grade teacher - spoke of a colleague that referred to Afro-descendant students as *"moretti"* ("little Moors") - an outdated, racist, and paternalistic term that is especially inappropriate in educational settings.

What stands out across these interviews and the focus group is the reluctance among educators to acknowledge their own role in the systemic overrepresentation of students with migrant backgrounds in vocational tracks. Despite the contradictions and challenges raised by the researcher and addressed during the interview itself, teachers repeatedly expressed skepticism about the relevance of the study. As Caterina remarked early in her interview: *"I don't really understand the purpose of this research."*

At the same time, all participants confirmed—like the staff from the orientation association—that they had received no training on anti-racist pedagogy or on the inclusion of students with migrant backgrounds. This lack of preparation underscores the structural neglect of equity and inclusion within the educational system and its failure to equip teachers to address these critical issues.

3.3. Lack of Resources and teachers' overload

The absence of tools to address systemic racism in educational pathways is consistent, on one hand, with the denial of systemic racism in the country (Ghebremariam Tesfau' & Picker 2021), and, on the other, with what teachers describe as a chronic lack of resources in the Italian educational system. This structural deficiency exacerbates existing inequalities and places a sig-

nificant burden on both teachers and students. To the insufficient availability of resources within schools themselves—such as funding for projects and initiatives—is added the absence of adequate territorial support, particularly in the form of cultural and linguistic mediation.

Cultural and linguistic mediation - a crucial resource for schools with diverse student populations - is often inaccessible due to a shortage of mediators and a lack of structured support. Several participants remarked how *It's becoming increasingly difficult because cultural mediators are either too few or in high demand. A few years ago, we organized presentations of local schools with linguistic mediators for migrant families, but we've been unable to sustain such initiatives.* (Sara, lower grade teacher in Verona). This shortage leaves schools struggling to engage with families who do not speak Italian fluently, further marginalizing students from migrant backgrounds.

Teachers frequently organize and participate in projects despite the lack of financial resources. An excellent example of this is exactly Sara, who has been running an orientation project since 2018, working without any economic compensation.

> *This year, I was the coordinator for a third-grade class, so I took care of this aspect. I personally called the parents who I knew were struggling, even if they hadn't reached out to me first. I arranged meetings with them and their child present, trying to explain things clearly. Sometimes, a few days later, they would send me messages like, "Is this how it works? Is this true?" It's not simple. It requires an investment of energy, willpower, and time—resources that are not accounted for in the standard framework of school activities. This is the case for many of the school's responsibilities as well.*

Sara is perhaps the most dedicated teacher encountered in the interviews. In the orientation project she manages, her contributions are neither quantified nor compensated, further demonstrating her commitment. When asked why there are no dedicated funds to support such activities while also recognizing her labor, she responded:

There are no dedicated funds, which is why, for instance, regarding the PNRR[5] initiative on school dropout prevention, we didn't receive any funding until the very last tranche. Moreover, the spending guidelines are extremely

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[5] The PNRR (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza or National Recovery and Resilience Plan) is a comprehensive strategy adopted by Italy as part of the European Union's Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). Funded by NextGenerationEU, the PNRR aims to support economic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic while addressing long-standing structural challenges. It includes investments and reforms across various sectors, including education, to promote sustainability, digital transformation, and social inclusion. In the education sector, PNRR funds are intended to address issues such as school dropout rates, digital infrastructure, and modernization, although rigid spending guidelines and bureaucratic hurdles often limit their effective implementation.

rigid, making it difficult to allocate these funds effectively. […] We end up do-
ing everything and more, despite having no money—because the money simply
isn't there. […] Teachers are constantly patching gaps that should be addressed
by other entities or resources. On the one hand, there's an assumption that we
can manage no matter what. If you manage, it means you can handle it, which
reinforces the idea that no extra support is needed. On the other hand, this
diminishes the value of teachers' work—if you can make do with so little, it
implies that your work isn't worth much.

Such comments highlight a systemic reliance on the goodwill and un-
paid labor of educators to compensate for institutional deficiencies. Research
highlights that burnout among educators negatively impacts their ability to
engage in reflective practices and participate in initiatives aimed at improv-
ing systemic inequities (Jomuad et al., 2021; Kyriacou, 2001). This exhaustion
may also explain some resistance encountered during the research process,
as teachers often lack the time and energy to explore and challenge their
own practices.

3.4. The potential of school

> *Cultural and linguistic mediation was introduced in Verona because*
> *schools needed it. It was the teachers who organized themselves and*
> *eventually, gradually, created a network and pushed for policies related*
> *to language (both as a second language and as mediation). We start-*
> *ed having classes for unaccompanied minors and even for parents who*
> *needed them... Now the situation has changed.*

This excerpt from an interview with Jamila, cultural mediator involved
in the public services, is particularly significant in light of what has been
discussed so far. In the extended interview, the professional explains that
her journey began specifically in schools, driven by the initiatives of teach-
ers who, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, spontaneously started organizing
second-language courses for newly arrived children and their parents. These
experiences revealed the need for mediation, which was gradually extended
from schools to other areas. The teachers' efforts were instrumental in estab-
lishing a right - one that is now recognized, albeit underfunded.

One of the most evident issues emerging from the interviews is the diffi-
culty faced by teachers in increasingly complex classrooms. This complexity
does not concern only students with migratory backgrounds but also the re-
newed focus on a range of psycho-cognitive-relational differences that make
today's classrooms spaces of great diversity. However, it is precisely this
condition that positions teachers as the frontline in inclusion processes. The
theme of "ghetto classes" is particularly revealing of this ambivalent role.
Claudia explained:

*It's a real fear for teachers. And I understood that there is also a fear of...
a complaint from parents because they don't want their child to be in a
class where there are too many children who are not of Italian origin,
or too many with special needs, because they fear that the level of the
class will drop and that the education will be inferior to what it should
be. But there are pedagogical studies... that show that where there are
difficulties, the students implement strategies that will help them face
future challenges.*

This excerpt highlights how teachers must navigate between different actors and interests: the school, parents and students. They are aware of the risks of de facto school segregation but also recognize the potential of collaborative inclusion efforts shared with the students themselves.

As per the project brought on by Sara, as well as the individual engagement of several of the teachers interviewed, it is apparent that, despite the lack of resources and tools, teachers remain the primary actors engaged in facilitating inclusion processes and they are best positioned to make an impact on multiple levels: structural (within their institution and local networks), individual (through direct interaction with students), and social (in their relationship with families and as a bridge between the world inside and outside the school).

Concluding remarks

This article is rooted in a theoretical post-/decolonial sociological framework which states that the nexus modernity-coloniality is fundamental to critically address race/racism in contemporary society. If capitalism is inevitably racial (Robinson 2023), it is not possible to study class-related inequalities without considering how race still matters.

The work we have presented here is part of a broader line of research investigating the relevance of racism in education in Italy. As we argued, the structural and institutional dimensions of racism are difficult to monitor and counter effectively when there is a lack of official data and specific analysis.

In the Italian context, this means distancing ourselves from the Italian State racial thought that makes the children of migration non-legitimated Italians (Frisina 2024). Educational inequalities affecting students with a migrant background need therefore to be studied by paying attention to race *and* class.

Our literature review focused on studies that critically examined "school choice" policies. Founded on neo-liberal market ideologies, such policies have often deepened existing inequalities, privileging market-driven competition strategies and parental decisions, and favoring schools and families with greater social and economic capital. As Romito (2016; 2024) has shown

in the Italian case, such measures end up perpetuating the structural inequalities inherent in school tracking and orientation practices, directing socio-economically disadvantaged students, including those with a migrant background, with a 'downward orientation', towards less prestigious educational paths, thus limiting their access to opportunities for upward social mobility.

With our exploratory study in Veneto, we aimed at contributing to this debate by questioning the role of teachers. What are their experiences and ideas about school orientation, in particular with students with a migration background? In their view of orientation, (how) do class and race (not) matter? (How) do they try to counter growing inequalities? What constraints do they come up against?

Our research shows that the role of teachers is both relevant and ambivalent.

It is relevant first of all from a historical point of view, as a teacher involved in our research pointed out not only because of his experience in secondary schools, but above all as a privileged witness as an expert of school history. The Italian school is (still) a tendentially conservative (classist and racist) institution, but it is challenged by movements of teachers committed (since the post-war period) to an anti-fascist and democratic education (Raimo 2024a). But what does it mean to fight for a democratic school (Raimo 2024b) in a historical-political conjuncture marked by growing social inequalities and authoritarianism and in an increasingly culturally diverse society?

From what we have discussed (see 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 & 3.4), the role of teachers ends up being ambivalent.

On the one hand, there are the pressures of the market influencing school orientation in which there are neo-liberal orientation figures, focused on the individual dimension and the choice of the 'deserving' students for the most prestigious educational paths. Teachers do not seem to have adequate anti-racist training to counter this dominant approach that is colour-blind and fails to recognise structural and institutional racism in Italian society. Our exploratory research has shown teachers' prejudices against racialised students as non-white/non-legitimated Italians. Teachers therefore contribute, often unintentionally, to the racialisation of education.

On the other hand, teachers find themselves to be the last bulwark against growing inequalities and engage, often voluntarily, in offering their support in the orientation processes of disadvantaged students (on the basis of class and race) in order to make emancipatory educational pathways more accessible and offer more opportunities for upward social mobility. Trying to fill structural gaps with one's personal resources and unpaid time places a dis-

proportionate burden on teachers, who are at risk of burn-out due to work overload and lack of institutional and social recognition for their efforts.

Since this is an exploratory work starting with a small sample and a pilot research at the local level, as future improvements of the study we hope to have the opportunity to expand the research including a broader sample across diverse Italian regions (i.e. taking into consideration the South-North divide in terms of resources) and with further work to investigate at the European level (i.e. considering the different educational policies against social and racial inequalities) how the role of teachers can challenge the growing inequalities linked to neoliberal school choice policies. In this regard, it will be useful to intersect the gazes of racialised students and parents with those of teachers who are committed to building a democratic school and experimenting with new ways of orienting educational paths, not merely responding to market demands, but equally promoting the capacity of all students to aspire a better future for themselves and for society as a whole.

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