

Tolerance In Discourses And Practices In Italian Public Schools

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The number of pupils of foreign origin in the Italian school system has increased dramatically in recent years. They constituted only 0.7% of the entire school population in the 1996/1997 academic year, while in year 2010/2011 7.9% of students were of immigrant origin. Almost half of them are second generation, i.e. children who were born in Italy to immigrant parents.

The main approach for dealing with cultural, religious and ethnic diversity in Italian classrooms is that of **intercultural education**. This approach is based on the idea that people with different cultures should engage into **dialogue and exchange** in order to get to know each other, solve tensions and live peacefully together. **According to this intercultural approach, integration can only be achieved when diversities are recognised, valued and discussed between people.**

Italian schools are in their vast majority public. Private schools are only about 18% of all Italian schools (2007/2008) and among them more than half are Catholic. They are mostly nursery schools. The demand on the part of linguistic and religious minorities of immigrant origin to establish their own schools is a minor matter in the Italian context, but it could become a central issue in the next few years as the number of first and second generation immigrant children is rising.

How is the intercultural approach concretely implemented? How is diversity accommodated in everyday school life? Are minority faith schools tolerated/accepted within this dominant intercultural approach. These questions are investigated in two case studies presented in this Policy Brief. CASE STUDY 1 focuses on the implementation of intercultural education in Italian schools, paying particular attention to the accommodation of diversities in curricula and in teachers' practices. CASE STUDY 2 focuses on religious schools concentrating on the case of the via Quaranta school in Milan.

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Evidence & Analysis (Key Findings)

CASE STUDY 1: the accommodation of diversities in school life

The enforcement of **intercultural education is considered necessary and unavoidable** by educational staff, who endorse the recommendations and directives issued by the Ministry of Education at the national level. Teachers pay careful attention to the initial reception of newcomers: the teaching of the Italian language, the introduction of references to the cultures of origin of foreign students in the curricula, the evaluation of their festivities, customs and tradition. Teachers are also responsive to the demands of foreign families, such as allowing Muslim children to fast during Ramadan, to be absent during traditional holidays not included in the Italian school calendar, to wear a headscarf in the case of Muslim girls, etc. Regardless of their personal opinions, so far they do not openly oppose different cultural traditions.

However, in everyday school life teachers face sometimes difficulties in translating the recommendations and the directives issued at national level into shared practices. **They lack the operational tools (multicultural and multilingual textbooks, books written by foreign authors, cultural mediators within schools, a shared database on good practices, funding for intercultural projects) required to achieve the proclaimed and desired universal principles of intercultural education.** In these situations the lack of practical tools forces teachers to act on the basis of common sense as well as respect for families and especially for children. The most sensitive issues arise in relation to some of the families' cultural needs which are an integral aspect of the daily life in the classroom: it is not difficult to manage the period of Christmas or the teaching of some subjects (e.g. religion), where there are now established practices aimed at respecting differences. It is more difficult though to respect the request for fasting for pupils, or to grant exemption from swimming lessons for girls, cases that teachers believe are bad for the children. In these situations teachers seek to find intermediate solutions between the well-being of the children, the needs of the parents, the guidelines and pedagogic style of school and lastly their own values and principles.

Although teachers do not manifest discriminatory thoughts, their attitudes and actions are often **influenced by culturally determined expectations**: they tend to explain the behaviour of the students (and of their parents) on the basis "it's their culture, because in their country

"Interculturalism is used especially in the vocabulary of teachers, and it is interiorized at theoretical level, whereas in many everyday situations teachers can not act referring to it" (Interview with a responsible for interculturality, June 2011).

they do that". They fall back on stereotypes, to justify or explain behaviours on the basis of supposed cultural differences.

Furthermore, the best practices successfully implemented in some schools are not shared and exchanged among all schools. **The enforcement of intercultural education differs among schools and teachers, who interpret and apply the concept of interculturalism in various ways**, according to their personal experiences and beliefs, individual circumstances and situations and the school's attitude.

Although intercultural education is a shared and well-intentioned approach to managing diversities in school life, the vagueness of the concept, its prescriptive nature and the lack of operational tools make it difficult to enforce in everyday practices. Thus in many cases it is minimal tolerance of difference that prevails rather than dialogue and mutual accommodation.

CASE STUDY 2: schools of minorities

Minority faith schools are not common in Italy. The difficulty of minority groups of setting up their own schools depends on the **traditional primacy of the state schools**. Private schools can now receive state funding (albeit to a very limited extent compared to other European countries), although the issue of financial support for private schools has been at the core of the public and political debate since the debate on the draft of the Italian Constitution (1946-47).

Can we allow schools to be built by immigrant minorities, even though the Italian educational system is traditionally based on state schools? It is right to give funding to private schools, and particularly to minority schools?

If a boy treats me badly, because he is a Muslim boy, I tell off him, I speak with his father: "if you behave with your wife and with your children in this way, ok, but...I am the teacher and so, if you decide to send your boy to school, you should do what I say. Muslim men are quite snobbish but personally I don't give a damn about their snobbishness. They should get over it. I tell him: "If you do things differently at your house, well ok. But here, that's the way it is. If you don't like it, tough" (responsible for foreign students).

The issue is still in its infancy, but it has become the subject of lively debate in the case of the via Quaranta school in Milan. The school's educational programmes were Egyptian and they were taught in Arabic. The aim was to introduce the children to their culture of origin and prepare them for a possible return to Egypt. By contrast, it was seen by Italian institutions as a potentially threatening environment and a base for Islamic fundamentalism.

The school responded to the **foreign families' need** to create a specific cultural and educational environment for their children, which was different from the universalist and secular environment of Italian state schools.

Nevertheless, **their demand was seen as a strategy for self-segregation** and authorities and the public opinion were concerned that students there were taught values that were incompatible with the mainstream Italian values. Some politicians and mass media exaggerated this image, describing the school as an **Islamic fundamentalist school**.

An attitude of **intolerance** spread in the public and political arena and this led to the closure of the school. The case study shows that Italian society has not yet developed the skills necessary to respond to immigrants' demands and to manage increasing cultural diversity. The prevailing attitude is in fact to consider the Italian public schools the best sites where to teach students, without thinking that foreign families could demand a specific cultural and educational environment. A mind-changing is needed and more attention to the spread of stereotypes and prejudices should be paid.

"The risk is the ghetto, in particular when the school has a strong religious orientation...because if you don't mix with others it might be because you don't want to be contaminated" (Interview with a teacher, May 2011).

Intolerance towards ethnic and religious schools in Italy is common. But there has so far been no public dialogue on the structure of the Italian educational system and on how this reflects the changing demographics of the school population.

Key Messages for Policy Makers

Intercultural education is a theoretically laudable approach but it is difficult to enforce in daily practices. However, there are ways to reduce the gap between shared, appreciated principles of intercultural education and everyday practices in the class room.

To include intercultural education in shared practices :

→ **at local level**, teachers should be trained to better understand the phenomenon of migrations. Moreover, their prevailing prejudices and stereotypes should be deconstructed, and the culturally-biased explanations that they attribute to foreign students' behaviour should be questioned. Networks should be created among teachers but also between schools and local extracurricular educational resources. After-school clubs should be a constant partner for schools. Immigrant families should also be involved in their children's school life.

→ **at national level**, teaching programmes and textbooks should be widely reviewed, with reference to the teaching of culturally sensitive materials (such as geography, history, ect.), in order to develop culturally inclusive teaching.

To be prepared to manage the future demand of foreign families to set up their own schools:

→ **at local level**, special rules or additional checks (i.e. Via Quaranta school) should not be applied. Excessive controls and restrictions may result in forms of institutional discrimination, increasing mistrust and conflict: for example, when programmes and textbooks in the so-called Islamic schools are controlled, whereas this does not happen in the schools of the Jewish minority.

→ **at national level**, appropriate rules and criteria for the opening and operation of schools sponsored by foreign consulates or associations of immigrant minorities should be defined. A balance between the freedom of authorized collective subjects to establish and manage their own schools and ensure equal learning standards for students should be found, and an assessment of the comparability of the programmes should be carried out.

Methodology

An analysis was made of secondary sources (newspaper articles, official documents, parliamentary documents, websites and blogs) and of the data collected during the fieldwork.

The fieldwork consists of:

- **Interviews** (n=21).

For Case study 1, 16 interviews were conducted between January and June 2011 with 3 head-teachers, 3 deputy head-teachers, 5 language facilitators, 3 teachers. An interview was carried out with the Head of interculturalism at the Provincial Education Office.

For Case study 2, 5 qualitative interviews were conducted between January and June 2011 with people who had key roles in several episodes related to the closure of the school in Via Quaranta: an Italian teacher who was involved for several months in the organization and management of the Italian language courses for students in the school; an Italian teacher who, for some months, carried out the role of head teacher in the school in Via Ventura, which was opened following the closure of the Via Quaranta school and which had similar aims to the previous one; the Italian head of an association who participated in the process of formal recognition of the school in Via Ventura; an Egyptian teacher from the Via Quaranta school and an Egyptian manager in Via Ventura.

- **A discussion group** was organized in June 2011 with people who for various reasons deal with immigration and / or students of foreign origin, in order to present the data collected and analysed, and gather advice, suggestions, views on the results produced and possible interventions to be developed in terms of policy. The focus group was attended by 9 people: 2 trade union members, 2 university professors who deal with immigration issues, 2 state school teachers, 2 members of private social service bodies and a member of a Muslim association.

Project Identity

Acronym:	ACCEPT PLURALISM
Title:	Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe
Short Description:	<p>ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups.</p> <p>Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition.</p> <p>In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority groups/individuals and specific practices.</p> <p>The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.</p>
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