Journal of Inclusive Methodology and Technology in Learning and Teaching
ISSN 2785-5104
Anno5 n.1(2025)

EDIZIONI UNIVERSITARIE ROMANE
editoria scientifica dal 1952

Multilingual Classrooms to 'Feel at Home': A Viable Approach in Iran and Italy?

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Abstract: As globalization accelerates, migration increasingly reshapes societies, particularly impacting children who must navigate new cultural and educational landscapes. Education serves as a crucial bridge between migrants and host countries, facilitating integration, reducing discrimination, and fostering intercultural understanding. However, linguistic and cultural barriers present significant challenges, leading to learning, behavioral, and emotional difficulties among migrant students. Teachers, as key figures in inclusive education, must employ strategies that promote a sense of belonging and active participation in multicultural classrooms.

This study explores strategies to overcome language barriers in multicultural classrooms. Iran and Italy are examined, considering their distinct geopolitical contexts, immigration patterns, and approaches to linguistic minorities. Through a comparative approach, the research examines the policies and practices that support migrant students' linguistic and cultural adaptation in two culturally diverse countries. Preliminary findings suggest that Iranian and Italian educators face similar challenges despite contextual differences. The study aims to provide insights that can be adapted to diverse educational settings, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable learning environment in both countries. It sustains the concept of an intercultural pedagogy, emphasizing the importance of promoting multilingualism and respect for diversity in classrooms.

Keywords: multiculturalism, multilingualism, teacher exchange, comparative study, diversity, inclusive education

1. Introduction

As migration continues to reshape societies worldwide, driven by personal aspirations as well as social, political, and environmental factors, schools and classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse. Among those most affected by migration and its social consequences are children, whose educational experiences and development are significantly influenced by the transition (Giani, 2006). The intersection of migration and education presents complex challenges, requiring a multidimensional approach to identify effective solutions (Alexander, Entwisle, & Bedinger, 1994).

Education serves as a crucial meeting point where cultures and identities converge, fostering an environment where the experiences of migrants and host communities intertwine. It equips individuals with essential skills for adaptation and in-

tegration while also playing a pivotal role in fostering a sense of belonging in their new country (OECD, 2006). Furthermore, education has the potential to reduce racial discrimination and prejudice by facilitating intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding (Abbas, 2002). By providing opportunities for individuals to express their perspectives and share their cultural backgrounds, education becomes a powerful tool for promoting inclusion (De Jong, 2000).

However, the challenges faced by migrant children extend beyond the academic domain. Adapting to a new language and culture can lead to significant learning, behavioral, and emotional difficulties (Andrade et al., 2023). Language barriers, in particular, pose one of the greatest obstacles, as migrant students must navigate the dual challenge of acquiring proficiency in the host country's language while simultaneously engaging with its educational system (Mousavi et al., 2019).

Effective communication across diverse cultural backgrounds is essential for fostering meaningful interactions and creating inclusive learning environments. In line with the principles of inclusion, educators must implement strategies that promote a sense of belonging, active participation, and holistic development for all students. Celebrating cultural diversity and fostering multilingualism in the classroom can contribute to an ideal school climate that nurtures intercultural awareness and respect for differences. In regions experiencing high levels of immigration, multicultural classrooms offer unique opportunities for enriching educational experiences. Teachers, as key agents of education, should embrace this diversity as an asset rather than a challenge. For this to be realized, they must be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and willingness to foster an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

This study seeks to answer the research question: *Which strategies can be employed to overcome language barriers in multicultural classrooms in Iran and Italy?* This inquiry is grounded in the premise that, despite differences in geopolitical contexts, immigration patterns, the protection of linguistic minorities, and education systems, existing literature offers valuable insights that can be adapted to both countries. The article presents the first phase of a comparative study aimed at identifying differences and similarities between the two contexts. In this framework, the concept of an *intercultural Mediterranean pedagogy* is introduced, encompassing the Western and Eastern Mediterranean regions as well as the northern and southern coasts. This approach seeks to address the challenges posed by globalization and cultural diversity by fostering an education that not only imparts knowledge but also promotes global citizenship, emphasizing respect for and appreciation of cultural differences (Pagano & Schiedi, 2020; Todino, Campitiello & Di Tore, 2021).

Given the specificity of this topic, an initial literature review was conducted to compare the two geopolitical and cultural contexts. Data sources included scientific literature, official reports from various observatories and ministries, and statistical data from national and international institutions. Preliminary findings suggest that, despite contextual differences, Iranian and Italian teachers face common challenges in managing multicultural and multilingual classrooms.

2. The geopolitical context in Iran and Italy

The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (2024) defines migratory routes as pathways used by individuals to move between locations, either across international borders or within a single state. While many people travel globally for business or tourism along established land, air, or sea routes, others migrate outside the formal

regulatory frameworks of their countries of origin, transit, and destination. The issue of immigration and geopolitical issues is important in Iran and Italy as two countries that historically welcome immigrants. In this work, it is crucial to present Iran by transcending the stereotypes frequently associated with this complex and ancient nation. The differences between Italy and the Islamic Republic of Iran in terms of individual, social, religious, and gender freedoms are profound and derive from the distinct political, legal, cultural, and education systems. Italy is a liberal democracy in which individual freedoms are enshrined in the Constitution. Citizens have the right to express themselves freely, participate in peaceful demonstrations, and enjoy privacy, freedom of the press is generally guaranteed, although limitations exist under defamation and privacy laws. In contrast, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocratic and militarized state, where individual freedoms are often limited. State surveillance is ubiquitous, and political dissent can lead to severe punishment. In Italy, citizens enjoy broad social freedoms, including the ability to choose their lifestyle, associations, and activities. Italian laws protect the rights of people regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity, and same-sex marriage is recognized through civil unions which is a taboo to talk about in Iran. The Italian society is generally tolerant towards different expressions of personal identity, promoting an environment of inclusiveness and respect. In contrast, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, social freedoms are strictly regulated. For example, women must adhere to a dress code (Hijab). People with sexual orientations other than heterosexuality face severe discrimination.

In terms of religious freedom, Italy guarantees freedom of religion, allowing all religions to practice their religions in a secular state that does not interfere with the religious practices of citizens. The Islamic Republic of Iran, however, is a theocratic state where Shia Islam is the official religion, and Islamic laws influence much legislation. Religious minorities, including Baha'is, Christians, Jews, and Sunnis, can practice their religion unlike other countries in the Middle East and this shows an interesting aspect of Iran, namely its natural predisposition to receive other peoples as happened in the times of the Persian Empire. Therefore, it is important to the role of religion in public life. The relationship between Iran and Italy has remained strong since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Despite international economic sanctions, the two countries have maintained cultural and diplomatic exchanges without interruption. Deeply investigating the cultural relations between the two countries can be a bridge for interaction in education. In 2017, Italy was honored as the guest of honor at the Tehran International Book Fair, becoming the first European country to receive this recognition. also, Italy was the first country to be visited by the President of Iran after the sanctions were lifted (Mobasher, 2018).

2.1. *Immigration and immigrant background*

Immigrants converge between Europe and the Middle East from widely divergent communities scattered throughout the world representing a great variety of local cultures and traditions (Profanter & Maestri, 2021). In its latest report published in 2016 by the Iran Statistics Center, the population of immigrants in Iran was discussed. It shows that people with citizenship from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan constitute the largest population of immigrants living in Iran. At the time of the 2016 census, about 1,584,000 people had Afghan citizenship, 34,500 people

had Iraqi citizenship, and 14,320 people had Pakistani citizenship. More than 95% of the population of immigrants in Iran are Afghan nationals.

Also, the population of Iraqi nationals in Tehran is not small. The age composition of immigrants to Iran shows different figures. The largest population of Afghan nationals is in the age groups of 5 to 14 years. For Iraqi nationals, the largest population in Iran is made up of 10–19-year-olds. Pakistani nationals have two spectrums of the largest population; the first range is people under 9 years of age, and the second is 25–29-year-olds (Iran Statistics Center, 2016). Currently, 560,000 foreign students are studying in schools across the country. The leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, has placed special emphasis on "covering the education of foreign nationals", enabling these students to enjoy educational facilities and services just like Iranian students. Furthermore, more than 500,000 Afghan children, including undocumented Afghans and those who have newly arrived in Iran following the Taliban takeover, are benefiting from Iran's education policies (Tehran Times, 2022). A special encyclopedia specifies the registration and presence of refugee students and authorized nationals in the country. This educational encyclopedia is prepared, edited, and published in cooperation with the Ministry of Education (Iranian Ministry of Interior, 2016).

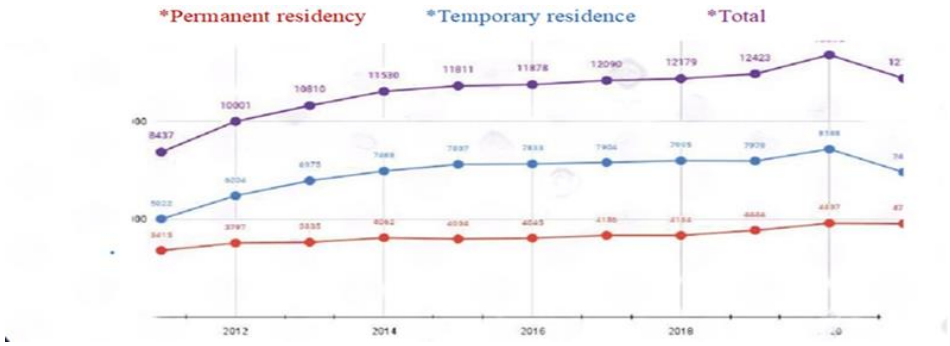
Figure 1: Migration routes. Source: Migration routes. Source: adapted from Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency[1]

In Italy, as of 2023, Romanians represented Italy's largest foreign population. Albania and Morocco followed with 417,000 and 415,000 people, respectively. From a regional perspective, the Northern region had the largest foreign population. Lombardy had some 1.1 million foreign residents, the largest in the country. According to the statistics of 2021, the number of foreigners living in Italy is 5,171,894 million, of

[1] https://www.frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-routes/migratory-routes/#:~:text=The%20Central%20Mediterranean%2C%20Western%20Balkan,the%20most%2Doften%20reported%20nationalities.

which 12,192 are Iranians living in Italy. It means that less than 0.24% of foreigners in Italy are Iranians (Iran Migration Observatory, 2021).

Figure 2: The number of Iranians living in Italy. Source: adapted from Iran Migration Observatory, 2021



In July 2022, the Italian Ministry of Education published a new report on immigrant minors in the Italian education system. The analysis addresses the situation of children with a migrant background (both national and non-national) in all levels of education and provides an overview of their presence across the country. Inclusion and integration policies in schools are assessed against the background of students' progress and the rates of early school leaving. Statistics show that - for the first time in several years - there is a decrease in students with no Italian citizenship enrolled in school: their number stands at 865 388 (11 000 fewer than the previous year; a drop of -1.3%). Despite the decrease, the percentage of foreign (without Italian citizenship) students remains unchanged (10.3 %) as the overall total number of children has also declined (by almost 121 000, representing -1.4%).

Most affected by the decrease are primary and middle schools, while the number of non-Italian students enrolled in high schools increased by 13,000. According to the authors of the report, these changes might only be temporary and reflect the impact of the pandemic on school attendance. Foreign pupils attend school at the same rate as Italian citizens from the ages of 6 to 13. However, the situation changes when it comes to 17- and 18-year-olds, when only 77.4% choose to continue with their education. As for geographical distribution, most minors (around 65%) with migrant backgrounds are found in the north of the country, and the Lombardy region is home to more than a quarter of the total number of foreign students in Italy (25.5%).

Two out of three foreign minors are born in Italy, and striking is the figure of students of Chinese origin who, in 86% of cases, are second-generation migrants. As for country of origin, there are more than 200 different nationalities recorded. Approximately 45% of children are European - a stable if slightly decreasing percentage -, followed by children of African and Asian origin (respectively representing 26.9% and 20.2% of the group), (Statista, 2024). The degree of difficulties in learning that migrant children face in school shows a great difference between national and non-nationals: 7.5% of native Italian students experience learning difficulties against 26.9% of foreign students. A gap between the two

groups is also observed in the overall early leaving rate; the European indicator of Early Leaving from Education and Training (ELET) for foreign students in Italy is 35.4%, compared to a national average of 13.1%. Unfortunately, this is the highest in Europe (European Commission, 2022).

3. A comparison of the Iranian and Italian Education systems

The education systems of Italy and Iran share some similarities, but also manifest several differences in structure, management, and educational goals (Mohajeri et al, 2024). In both countries, education is free and compulsory, but the duration and division of the educational path differs. In Italy, compulsory education lasts for 10 years and is divided into two cycles: the first, which spans from 6 to 14 years and includes primary school and lower secondary school, and the second, which extends from 14 to 19 years, offers the option to choose between high schools, technical institutes, and vocational schools (Official Gazette, DM139/2007). In Iran, compulsory education covers 12 years: six years of primary school and six years of secondary school, with further specialization in upper secondary school, which offers academic, technical, or vocational pathways. Preschool education, which is not compulsory, prepares children for entry into primary school. In Italy, religious education is optional, while in Iran, religious education is an integral part of the curriculum, with a strong emphasis on Islamic culture.

Another significant difference concerns the management of the education system. In Italy, the Ministry of Education and Merit (MIM) oversees the entire educational process, but the system is decentralized, ensuring equal opportunities across the country and promoting inclusivity, even for students with disabilities. In contrast, Iran's education system is centralized and managed by the central government (Behbahani, 2010), which can lead to slower decision-making and more rigid bureaucracy. However, there is an increasing delegation of responsibilities to local levels, aiming to make the system more flexible. In both Italy and Iran, students can choose between academic, technical, and vocational paths during upper secondary school, thus preparing them for the workforce or further study. Regarding inclusivity, Italy adopts a model that is particularly focused on integrating all students, including those with disabilities, into regular classes.

The Italian system promotes equal opportunities, ensuring quality education for all, including foreign students (Ministry of Education and Merit, MIM https://www.mim.gov.it/inclusione-e-intercultura). In Iran, education is free for all citizens, but a significant portion of students attend private or vocational schools, which reflects greater inequality in access to specific educational paths. All Iranian children at the age of six must undergo a mandatory national screening to assess their readiness for school, which includes health checks and an evaluation of their communication and educational skills. Children who do not pass the screening are referred for further professional evaluations. If developmental issues are found, they refer to specialists. More than 90% of children with delays or disabilities are then enrolled in special schools (Samadi & McConkey, 2018). Special needs students in Iran primarily attend specialized schools under the supervision of the Iranian Special Education Organization (ISEO, 2015-2016). Iranian legislation, including Law 118/1971 and the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2009, promotes inclusive education. In 2008, a pilot project was launched to integrate students with disabilities into regular schools, and the 2010-14

National Development Plan aimed to develop inclusive education, though challenges remain for full implementation. On the other hand, the Italian school system is one of the most inclusive in the European Union, with a long evolution from integration to inclusion. Law 118/1971 and Law 517/1977 were crucial in ensuring access for people with disabilities to regular schools.

Law 53/2003 introduced the personalization of education, while the Ministerial Directive of 2012 defined minors with special educational needs and categorized them into three groups: students with certified disabilities, students with neurodevelopmental disorders, and those with socio-economic disadvantages or behavioral difficulties. Unlike Law 104/1992, Law 170/2010 initiates a different discussion, emphasizing individualized intervention and considering the entire educational journey of the student. Along with the Ministerial Directive of December 27, 2012, this law marks an important step towards the full implementation of the inclusive model in Italy, introducing the concept of Special Educational Needs, which goes beyond the simple concept of disability (Aiello & Pace, 2020). In Italy, education is seen as essential for preparing students for future social and professional challenges, emphasizing the development of personal and social skills. In Iran, education plays an important role in transmitting national culture and shaping students in various cultural, scientific, and social aspects, with a particular focus on maintaining Islamic culture and education for defense.

In conclusion, although both education systems place great emphasis on compulsory and free education, the main differences lie in management, centralization, approach to religion, and emphasis on national culture. Italy favors a more inclusive and decentralized education system, while Iran tends to focus more on centralization and the preservation of local culture and religion (Bakhshalizadeh & Karimi, 2019).

3.1. The case of multilingualism in the education systems

Many nations instituted laws to preserve the languages of ethnic minorities and various international organizations have emphasized the importance of multilingualism in their documents and. For example, Article 27 of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966 [2](ratified by 167 countries) states that in countries in which racial, religious or linguistic minorities exist, people belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right to associate with members of their group and (also) to enjoy their own culture and to express or practice their own religion or to use their own language. Also, according to Article 30 of Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)[3], "[i]n countries in which indigenous, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such minorities or an indigenous child shall not be denied the right to enjoy the universal rights of his or her children."

Another important document prepared by UNESCO is the Mother Language Charter, according to which all schoolchildren should begin their formal education in their mother tongue (UNESCO, 2003). Iran has a heterogeneous population that speaks various languages, including Arabic and Baluchi Turkish. The official language

[2] https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights

[3] https://archive.crin.org/en/home/rights/convention/articles/article-30-children-minorites-or-indigenous-peoples.html

of Iran is Persian, and the term Persian is Farsi.Persian is the language of state and public education and has been the native language of more than half of Iran's population. The Parsis constitute the largest ethnic group in Iran. Persian (Farsi) is spoken by at least 65% of the people, mostly in central Iran, and is spoken as a second language by a large portion of the population. Other common languages are Azeri and Turkish dialects. Kurdish, Lori, and Arabic (Rashidvash, 2013). In Iran, according to the constitution and for access to fair educational opportunities for learners, many efforts have been made to facilitate the achievement of educational justice (Bahrami et al, 2020). Persian is the designated language for education in Iran. Nevertheless, Articles 15 and 19 of the Iranian Constitution permit the inclusion of local languages in the educational framework. In practice, some teachers integrate students' native languages, such as Arabic, Azeri, and Kurdish, to enhance comprehension (see Figure 3).

In areas where students and teachers have the same mother tongue, the use of the mother tongue in education plays a special role. Direct teaching in the mother tongue may not be justified for some reasons, but teachers use the mother tongue to deepen education. Is this a good practice and if so, why and for what purpose should it be used؟ (Bogotch, 2010). Educators of multilingual students are increasingly recognizing the importance of embracing the mother tongue as a personal and scientific asset. However, they often face challenges in combining the mother tongue with the language of instruction.

The inability to differentiate based on language does not imply that all languages hold the same status in Italy (see Figure 4). Nevertheless, the purpose of Article 6 of the Constitution, which states that the Republic safeguards linguistic minorities through appropriate measures would be incomprehensible, as it presupposes the existence of a majority language and its differentiated status (EPRS, 2024, pp. 60-61). Law No. 482 of December 15, 1999[4] , on provisions on the protection of historical linguistic minorities, establishes Italian as the official language while promoting the enhancement of minority languages (Ibidem). Highlighted within this law is that in the kindergartens of the municipalities referred to in Article 3, language education includes the use of the minority language alongside Italian for educational activities. In primary and lower secondary schools, the use of the minority language as a teaching tool is also provided (Carbonara, 2024; Favaro, 2024; Ferrari, 2024; Granata, 2011, 2024; Lorenzoni, 2024; Latrofa & Cantaro, 2024).

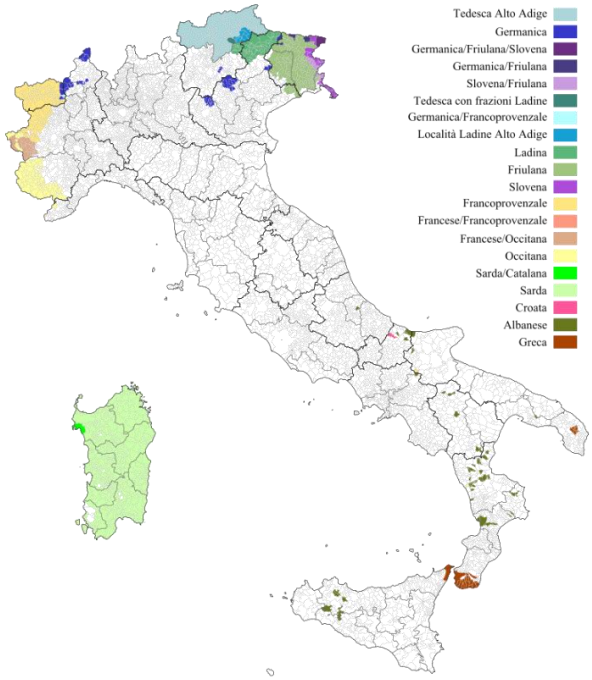
[4] https://www.mim.gov.it/lingue-di-minoranza

Figure 3: Languages spoken in Iran

(source: http://www.farsinet.com/farsi/linguistic_composition_of_iran.html)

Figure 4: The protection of linguistic minorities in 2013 (Italian Law n.482 of 1999)

Source: CC BY 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=27386068



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Multilingualism, as a dialectical way of facing the world, supports the exercise of individual rights and citizenship in multicultural societies, which must in turn guarantee social inclusion and equity (Muscarà, 2017). The analysis of the geopolitical scenario, immigratory trends, education systems and approaches to multilingualism in the two countries highlights the need to foster a more inclusive approach in schools. This has become political prerogative globally, especially sustained by the Sustainable Development Goals (UN General Assembly, 2015).

Inclusive education means acknowledging and embracing diverse cultures, appreciating the uniqueness of each and every student, and considering diversity as a fundamental principle. As will be argued in the following paragraphs, teachers need to develop a multicultural mindset, considered to be the most powerful device available to humanity for dealing with the complexity of interactions among individuals (Anolli, 2010). This entails being open to different perspectives and acknowledging that diverse cultures, languages, traditions, religions, philosophies, and social norms are not a challenge but an enriching learning experience for all the learning community (Aiello et al., 2023; Arsal, 2019; Aiello &Pace, 2020; Sibilio& Aiello., 2022).

4. Fostering openness to develop a 'multicultural mindset' in educational contexts

UNESCO has supported mother tongue education for half a century in early childhood. According to UNESCO (2003) the benefits of using the mother tongue are as follows:

1. when children have opportunities to learn based on their mother tongue, they are more likely to enroll and succeed in school;
2. their parents are more likely to communicate with teachers;
3. based on their mother tongue, education is especially beneficial for disadvantaged groups, such as rural and indigenous children;
4. in most of the world, language-oriented education can benefit girls, who tend to be less exposed to the official language and stay in another school, with better achievement, and less repetition of grades when they are taught in their mother tongue (UNESCO, 2003).

Studies have also shown that the use of mother tongue helps to maintain classroom discipline, build relationships and reduce social distance with students (Garcia et al., 2018). In essence, learning multiple languages offers a unique opportunity for self-understanding. Polyglots find themselves immersed in a linguistic richness that allows them to live in an intermediate space between languages, crossing different symbolic perspectives and seeking new meanings. The practice of employing language resources, also known as translanguaging, has emerged as a powerful

mechanism in enabling individuals to connect with others from diverse backgrounds, thereby strengthening social bonds and enhancing communication. Therefore, a focus on translanguaging in education can provide learners with skills in building meaningful relationships and promoting intercultural understanding (García, 2009 cited in Daniel & Pacheco, 2016). Hence, the deliberate selection and utilization of multilingualism can have profound implications for students' interest levels, attitudes, motivations, emotions, and insights, all of which foster stronger engagement in the classroom and enhance intercultural competence (Ghajarieh & Safiyar, 2023).

As students develop their abilities in two or more languages in primary school, they gain a deeper understanding of the language and how to use it effectively (Mousavi et al., 2019). If they practice more in the process of learning both languages at the same time, especially when they increase their literacy level in both cases, they can actually arrange and compare both languages. According to Bahrami and colleagues (2020, p. 45): "[m]ore than 150 studies over the past 35 years confirm what the German philosopher Goethe stated: one who knows only one language is not really fully acquainted with that language. Research also shows that bilingual students show more flexibility in processing information through different languages."

Pluralistic approaches help develop key knowledge, skills, and attitudes that address linguistic and cultural facts broadly (trans-linguistic and trans-cultural) and facilitate easier access to specific languages or cultures through skills acquired from others (inter-linguistic and inter-cultural). They are crucial for continuously developing and enriching learners' plurilingual and pluricultural competence, considering all linguistic and cultural knowledge from formal and informal learning. Pluralistic approaches are vital for achieving the educational goal of promoting plurilingualism in Europe (Favaro, 2024). Granata (2024) therefore introduces us to the concept of "intracultural balancers" and reminds us that schools can take on cross-cultural qualities by becoming attractive poles for parents of all origins and offer open and dynamic knowledge for their children.

In this scenario, the concept of teachers' beliefs in creating a cultural bridge is quite complex and open to interpretation. Rokeach (1970) proposed that all beliefs contain three key elements: a cognitive component that conveys information, an emotional dimension that can elicit feelings, and a behavioral aspect that is activated when action is required. According to Pajares (1992), teachers' opinions on education, teaching, and students, often referred to as teachers' beliefs, are relevant. Pajares argue that beliefs are difficult to change and influence their educational decisions. The attitude of teachers facing the challenges involving immigrants opens the way for a better relationship with immigrant students. Developing teacher competence is a fundamental principle of multiculturalism and teacher education is essential. Understanding the emotional and psychological needs of students who are dealing with trauma increases the need for psycho-educational support. Assessment is one of the main challenges in this educational process, which is often not fair. Designing assessments to consider differences in skills is essential. Certainly, managing classes with different levels of expectations becomes more complex and requires inclusive discipline practices that respect cultural differences.

5. Promoting bilingualism and the use of the mother tongue

Ferrari (2024) in one of her papers provocatively asks herself if there is 'a magic formula' for teaching a foreign language. Indeed, there are some useful ideas in literature. These include the use of convenient idioms to use in everyday life and writing or focus primarily on meaning (rather than understanding every single word). Another strategy is that of concentrating on the form in which one expresses oneself and providing opportunities for language production to test the assumptions made concerning the language being acquired (Ellis, 2005; Ferrari, 2024). Additionally, one should consider individual differences with regards to the student's learning styles and time needed to acquire new knowledge and skills (Cottini, 2017).

It is indeed worthwhile to reflect on the fact that even a small list of words in the mother tongue of migrant students, known to teachers and classmates, can make them feel welcome. Yilmaz's research has revealed that a student's mother tongue can enhance the learning of other languages, contribute to the development of content knowledge, and improve literacy. Furthermore, international research across various fields indicates that maintaining and developing bilingualism over time offers numerous scientific, linguistic, and cognitive advantages. Studies in the United States have demonstrated that students who seize the opportunity to nurture their mother tongue tend to outperform their peers in monolingual programs, excelling in both English and content literacy. Bilingualism is the outcome of a societal attitude that holds both the first language and the second language in high regard (Yilmaz, 2016). Teaching in a student's mother tongue makes words and concepts more tangible and familiar. This reduces the sense of alienation from the knowledge they are learning. Language and thought are closely connected, so students learn better in their native language. When primary school students first enter the classroom, they experience a linguistic and emotional shock as they transition from speaking their mother tongue at home to learning a different language at school. This can create stress and hinder the learning process. Therefore, it is important to establish principles and rules to support education in the mother tongue or an official language (Bahrami et al., 2020).

Various studies have shown that the use of students' mother tongue plays a significant role in the success and acquisition of a second language. This is particularly important for adolescents entering formal education (Grosjean & Pavlenko, 2015). In multilingual schools, participation in learning activities is a special goal. Self-esteem, motivation, critical thinking, curiosity, self-regulation, and problem-solving skills are among the achievements of this type of process, and the use of life experiences in the curriculum has an impact on learning (Bahrami et al., 2020). A study by Mohammadi et al (2016) recommended using local and regional examples such as poets to help students understand these differences. By citing well-known poets and writers from different cultures, educators can provide valuable examples to aid students in understanding the lesson. Additionally, the availability of books from different cultures can further enhance students' learning experiences by providing insights into various cultures (Mohammadi et al., 2016).

Mastery of the language is essential for integration, but language teaching can also act as a cultural bridge. Iranian teachers often adopt methods in which the student's mother tongue is valued and considered the starting point for learning a new language. This approach not only facilitates language acquisition but also strengthens students' self-esteem as they see their cultural identity recognized and valued. An Italian teacher, by following this philosophy, can incorporate elements of the student's

language and culture of origin into lessons and create intercultural dialogue that enriches the classroom environment and provides a multicultural context in the classroom.

Lorenzoni argues that devaluing or underappreciating a language that is the students' mother tongue in our classrooms constitutes a form of violence, is non-welcoming, and increases the risk of exclusion (Lorenzoni, 2024), as also described by Favaro (2024). These activities involve engaging both the student's mother tongue and the language to be learned, with a specific focus on primary education. It is essential to identify the specific objectives underlying these activities and reflect on which aspects of plurilingual or pluricultural competence are to be emphasized and developed.

Granata (2011) suggests that incorporating grammatical systems can validate the competencies of foreign learners by inquiring whether a particular grammatical rule in Italian also exists in their native language. This approach values their prior knowledge and includes simple aspects such as the existence of singular and plural forms, words in masculine and feminine, pronouns, adverbs, and verb tenses.

The creation of opportunities in which students can express their identity and experiences is crucial to promote inclusion that goes beyond the idea of hospitality. Iranian teachers often use storytelling as a pedagogical tool, allowing students to tell their own stories, and share traditions and experiences. This approach can be particularly effective in helping the Middle Eastern student 'feel at home' in Italy. An Italian teacher could, therefore, introduce moments of shared narration, where each student can tell their story, promoting a climate of respect and mutual understanding to bring out those points of contact and in this context, teachers play an essential role in cultural interaction and exchange.

Before closing this lengthy reflection, it is fitting to add another possibility offered to primary school education. The incorporation of singing and dancing into language learning activities can facilitate the acquisition of a new language by engaging Gardner's multiple intelligences, specifically musical intelligence, which enhances memory and pronunciation through rhythmic patterns and songs, and bodily-kinesthetic intelligence (Gardner, 2013), which makes the learning process more dynamic and memorable by providing a physical context for learning through movement and rhythm, thereby fostering a more inclusive and effective educational environment (Di Pietro, 2024, p.44).

The complexity of communicating with parents who do not speak the target language or who have different expectations and goals is clear. However, parents who have good language skills have good relationships with teachers and better understand the school and multicultural environment. At the same time, they contribute to the development of their children's language skills and have a great impact on their literacy and learning (Schwartz, 2013). Other strategies that can promote engagement include focusing on different aspects of immigrant students' lives using specific content and stories and involving parents in school cultural and educational activities and encouraging parents to improve their language and literacy skills, which has a direct impact on their children's progress. Designing extracurricular programs that specifically address cultural issues (Ghasemi-Tafreshi & Lafortune, 2023). Lack of knowledge and lack of understanding of the cultural values of immigrant students on the part of the teacher can lead to their isolation in the classroom. Immigrant students

may receive the message that their culture is wrong in different classrooms compared to the majority culture (Nieto, 2002; Brown, 2011).

However, where the use of different languages is not widespread it is possible to adopt narratives through silent books (McGillicuddy, 2018), a very widespread practice in welcoming foreign students (Ibidem). This sensitivity translates into empathetic and personalized attention towards the migrant student. Welcome thus becomes an act of profound empathy, where the teacher not only listens to the words but perceives the silences, fears and hopes of the newcomer. An Italian teacher, inspired by this practice, could begin to see the student not only as a recipient of a "new" education but as an individual with a unique and precious history. Activities involving silent books require readers to be active participants, becoming protagonists in the storytelling process through collaborative and cooperative work (Sada & Di Pietro, 2024, p. 40).

6. Conclusion

The findings highlight the complexity of co-existence, integration, assimilation, and identity preservation within diverse sociocultural contexts. By adopting a transnational perspective that considers both destination countries and points of origin, this study moves beyond a Eurocentric approach to migration. Examining policies and cultural frameworks allows for the development of innovative scholarship that addresses the challenges of integration and inclusion. In this regard, fostering cross-cultural pluralism at the national level offers a pathway for facilitating dialogue between different cultural frameworks and promoting more compatible and inclusive approaches (Profanter & Maestri, 2021).

Effective cross-cultural communication is essential for meaningful engagement across societies and serves as a pedagogical strategy that enables educators to create learning environments where students can leverage their full linguistic repertoire (Wald, 2023). As Ghajarieh and Aghabozorgi (2024) emphasize, "Language and identity are intertwined, and denying the use of other languages in the classroom can be a form of linguistic and cultural oppression" (p. 638). To foster inclusive educational environments, educators must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to implement translanguaging practices that support the linguistic and cultural diversity of all students.

In culturally diverse societies, multicultural education plays a fundamental role in ensuring that national unity is achieved not through assimilation into a dominant culture but by recognizing and upholding the socio-cultural rights of all ethnic groups. A critical aspect of this approach is the promotion of mother tongue education, which serves as a cornerstone for identity formation and social integration. The mother tongue enables children to communicate with their families, shaping their personal and social development. It functions as a vital key that unlocks cultural heritage, self-expression, and cognitive potential (Bahrami et al., 2020). As societies continue to navigate the complexities of globalization and migration, prioritizing inclusive language policies and multicultural pedagogies will be essential in fostering equitable and cohesive learning environments.

Building on these principles, educational and methodological approaches must be tailored to accommodate the socio-cultural diversity within the classroom. Particular emphasis should be placed on fostering a welcoming environment, especially in classrooms characterized by multi-level and multilingual dynamics. In this context, the

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experience and pedagogical sensitivity of Iranian teachers can offer valuable insights into the reception and support of Middle Eastern students in Italy and vice versa. By fostering empathy, embracing shared narratives, and utilizing language as a cultural bridge, educators can transform their classrooms into spaces where every student truly feels a sense of belonging. This notion of feeling at home must extend beyond a symbolic aspiration to become a tangible commitment to building an inclusive and welcoming school environment, one where diversity is not merely acknowledged but actively embraced as an asset to learning and growth.

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