

EDUCATIONAL POLICY TOWARDS MINORITIES IN ITALY



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National Observatory on the Integration of Foreign Pupils
and Intercultural Education

The Italian Way to Intercultural Education and the Integration of Foreign Pupils

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Introduction

The development of an Italian model pursues the following objectives:

- highlight the circumstances, the choices and the actions distinctive to the Italian situation;
- identify the strengths which will lay the groundwork for the “system”;
- identify the weaknesses in order to develop new practices and resources;
- promote new objectives and projects.

The distinctiveness of the Italian situation does not mean there is a substantial difference with experiences in other European countries. It is rather a difference in the composition of structural data, choices and actions. The links of the Italian model with the European Union are unquestionably one of the model’s founding elements.

Developing a model means identifying a set of *principles, decisions* and *actions* to be adopted by a number of different players, in order to foster the integration of immigrant children in Italian schools and society. This is widely recognised as being an issue affecting society as a whole on which public institutions are called to act accordingly.

Elements of a Dynamic Scenario

The presence of foreign children in schools is a dynamic reality affected by the ongoing changes in school organization and in the social and cultural environment:

- globalisation,
- Europeanization and EU enlargement,
- transformation of local powers (decentralisation, autonomy, etc),
- transformation of languages and communication media,
- transformation of knowledge and the interaction between different areas of knowledge,
- school reform processes.

Accordingly, the Italian model is structurally dynamic, despite the progressive stabilisation of migration trends due to changes in the pattern of families migration projects and to the growing number of children of immigrant families who are born in Italy or start schooling in this country.

The dynamic nature of the model is also strictly related to the age group involved and to the need to understand and respect each child’s non- standardised pace of growth.

These ongoing changes present risks and opportunities for the new generations, therefore education institutions are called to provide meaning and offer tools which allow to combine individuality, sense of belonging, social responsibility and human condition.

The presence of foreign children in schools simply magnifies the challenges that the Italian education system is called to tackle in any case. A case in point are the new

ways of “understanding and making oneself understood”, the reform of the upper secondary school system, and last but not least, building new forms of social integration respecting people and differences.

The Principles

Four main principles underlie the best practises developed when foreign students first accessed the Italian school system, the Italian education legislation approved by central government and actions taken at local level. These principles are closely intertwined and reflect the many levels (personal relational, cultural, socio-economic and organisational) involved in the impact of migration on schools.

A Universal Approach

The adoption of universal criteria recognising the rights of children was introduced at the end of the 90s and is based on two key elements:

- the implementation of the provisions set out by the International Convention on the Rights of the Child approved by the UN in 1989 and ratified by Italy in 1991 – which were confirmed by the laws on the safeguard of children and adolescents adopted at that time;
- the tradition of safeguarding diversity in Italian schools, dating back to the seventies.

This has led to the recognition that: a) *each child has the right* to education – including children who do not hold an Italian citizenship – and bears rights not only as a child under parent supervision, but also as an individual, regardless of the parents position or presence in this country; b) school education is also an obligation that parents must comply with and safeguard, especially with regards to compulsory schooling; c) everyone should be granted *equal opportunities on access to education, school success and guidance*.

This vision was adopted by the European Union and is stated in EU declarations and directives.

Offering equal opportunities means supporting specific actions (“selective policies”) for immigrant pupils aimed at improving equality and reducing the risk of exclusion.

A Common School

Right from the beginning, the Italian school system, in line with its tradition of inclusion (gender and social differences, special educational needs), has opted for introducing foreign students in mainstream schools and classes to avoid the creation of two separate learning environments, in contrast with policies adopted by other countries. This is the practical implementation of the general principle of a universal approach, as well as the recognition of the positive impact of peer socialisation and daily contact with diversity. However, the adoption of this policy does not undermine

the common practice of splitting children into groups for short periods of time and in specific areas of learning, especially Italian language classes.

This principle is now being challenged by the new trends towards concentration and segregation, which are emerging in different school environments at all levels, and by the demand of families for separate schools. Law 62/2000 remains an essential reference point. According to such legislation, private schools which enjoy equal status and are formally included in the public education system (*scuole paritarie*) have to comply with the principles of freedom enshrined in the Italian Constitution and are obliged to grant access to all students – prior to their parents' formal application - provided they hold an educational qualification which entitles them to be enrolled in the course they wish to attend.

The Centrality of the Person

Contemporary pedagogy, although with differing degrees of intensity, is moving towards the enhancement of the person and the development of educational projects based on the uniqueness of each student's biography and relational background. This trend underlies Italian education laws, particularly Law 53/2003 on school reform and the New National Guidelines on pre-school and primary school. It is a principle which *applies to all students* and is all the more important in the case of migrant students because it emphasises diversity and reduces the risks of assimilation e standardisation.

Simultaneously, the attention brought on the *relational aspect* offsets the risk of exacerbating an individualistic approach and helps schools to recognise students' living environment as well as their social and family background.

Intercultural education

Italian schools have chosen to adopt an intercultural perspective by promoting dialogue and exchanges between cultures for all students and at all levels (teaching, curricula, subjects, relations and life in the class). Opting for an intercultural approach means going beyond the implementation of mere integration strategies and special compensation measures for migrant students. It means adopting diversity as the founding element of the identity of schools in pluralism while offering the opportunity to open up the whole system to *differences* (origin, gender, social background and school history). This approach is based on a dynamic idea of culture which avoids the risk of locking up students in a cultural prison and banishes stereotypes. Gaining awareness of the relativity of each culture does not mean adopting a neutral approach which bans interrelations between cultures. The intercultural approach prevents the separation of individuals into unrelated and inward-looking cultural worlds. In fact, it promotes exchanges, dialogue and mutual transformations which are needed to ensure coexistence and face the inevitable conflicts.

The Italian way to intercultural education combines the ability to recognise and appreciate differences with the search for social cohesion, thus leading towards a new vision of citizenship in line with today's pluralism where special emphasis is put on achieving convergence towards common values.