When schools silence diversity: The interplay between diversity othering and school belonging*

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Quando le scuole silenziano la diversità: l'interazione tra *othering*, diversità e *school belonging*

Nationalist and neo-liberal policies are limiting inclusion and marginalising diversity in many educational contexts, undermining the democratic aims of education. Based on these premises, this paper frames diversity as a critical lens through which to observe the (re)production of practices of school inclusion and exclusion and to rethink the role of schools as democratic and emancipatory spaces. In this regard, we will focus on the complex interplay between diversity, othering, and school belonging to observe how the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are developed in the classroom. Based on these theoretical frameworks, we propose a re-examination of the notion of 'school belonging' to identify new trajectories that can re-centre diversity in inclusion processes.

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Le politiche nazionaliste e neoliberali limitano l'inclusione e marginalizzano la diversità in molti contesti educativi, minando gli obiettivi democratici dell'istruzione. Sulla base di queste premesse, questo contributo inquadra la diversità come una lente critica attraverso la quale osservare la (ri)produzione di pratiche di inclusione ed esclusione scolastica e ripensare il ruolo della scuola come spazio democratico ed emancipatorio. A questo proposito, ci concentreremo sulla complessa interazione tra diversità, *othering* e appartenenza scolastica per osservare come le dinamiche di inclusione ed esclusione si sviluppano in classe. Sulla base di questi quadri teorici, proponiamo una problematizzazione della nozione di "appartenenza scolastica", al fine di individuare nuove traiettorie che possano ricollocare la diversità al centro dei processi di inclusione.

Keywords: Belonging; Diversity; Educational system; Democratic education; Othering.

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1.   Introduction

Given the many realms of our society that advantage certain groups of people and disadvantage others according to multiple socially diverse segmentation lines, the concept of *diversity* has become one of the most relevant issues of our time, framed either as a moral question or an opportunity to make society fairer and more just (e.g., Biesta, Wainwright & Aldridge, 2022; Festenstein, 2005). From a pedagogical point of view, reflecting on diversity plays a crucial role in restoring to educational contexts their emancipatory, intercultural, and democratic purpose. This purpose is currently threatened by restrictive policies, such as those recently adopted by the President of the United States Donald Trump, who on March 18, 2025 signed a memorandum removing radically *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion* (DEI) Core Precept from Foreign Service tenure and promotion criteria followed by the executive order to end funding any program focused on diversity, equity or inclusion on March 20, 2025 (for a consultation of the sources, please refer to the sitography).

In the Italian educational context, the situation is no more comforting. On March 1, 2024, the Minister of Education Giuseppe Valditara proposed the establishment of separate *support classes* for foreign students with linguistic or mathematical weaknesses. This initiative, supposedly aimed at facilitating integration, has been criticised by opposition parties and educational unions as potentially leading to segregation and the creation of *ghettoes* within schools (for a consultation of the sources, please refer to the sitography). Furthermore, in the same month, Minister Valditara emphasised the necessity to form group classes with a majority of students of Italian descent, arguing that this composition would better promote the assimilation of constitutional values and prevent societal fragmentation (for a consultation of the sources, please refer to the sitography). Through these proposals, the policies promoted by Minister Valditara in 2024 reflect a conservative and neo-liberal orientation aimed at revitalising concepts such as *national identity* and limiting multiculturalism within the boundaries of a Eurocentric vision. This approach, in contrast to the factual reality of Italy as a highly stratified, multilingual, and multicultural country, disrespects this diversity, thus being an authoritative form of identity politics. In this framework, bringing the philosophical reflection and pedagogical approach back to diversity offers a fundamental critical counterpoint, helping to redefine the presence of diversity not as a threat to be contained but as a resource for the construction of fairer and more democratic societies and as an opportunity for the redistribution of existing resources and power (Bernstein, 2005).

Any reflection that does not consider power relations as connected to processes of either diversity recognition or its denial fails to understand the key processes and broader impact that exclusion, subtle or explicit, plays on students' well-being, belonging, and ability to act in the world. This reflection shows the contradictory aspects of recent ministerial proposals, which hinder the acknowledgment of certain identities while prioritising others, therefore undermining the basic principle of democratic education. Additionally, it advocates a critical pedagogy that engages with the essential and interconnected relationship between *school*, *society*, and *democracy*. Indeed, in examining how diversity is experienced and theorised in the role and functions of schooling, the three fundamental premises proposed by Giroux in his work *Theory and Resistance in Education: A Pedagogy for Opposition* (1983) are essential:

1. Schools cannot be analysed without considering the socio-economic context in which they are embedded.

2. Schools are political sites contributing to construct and control discourses, meanings, and subjectivities.

3. The values and beliefs that structure educational practices are not an *a priori given*, but are social constructions based on specific norms and political assumptions (Giroux, 1983, p. 46).

The scientific discussion and debate on diversity as a value and belief within school contexts is complex and far-reaching (e.g., Biesta, 2019; Festenstein, 2005). In this paper, we particularly refer to scholars such as Banks (1995), Ghosh and Abdi (2004), and Davis (1983), who argue that diversity is a positive value when it calls for structural change. They claim that diversity is desirable and holds social, political, and educational meaning, especially when interconnected with issues of social justice and democracy.

The right to exist and be heard, which should belong to every individual, is the foundation for an inclusive, participatory, and democratic society. However, as Davis (1983) argues, without structural change, inclusion merely integrates previously excluded individuals into a system that remains as racist and misogynistic as before. Adopting this perspective, the valorisation of diversity becomes a radical opposition to totalitarian regimes, which deny such rights to individuals, undermining the democratic structure of the society (Biesta, 2005).

In this context, schools as *political sites* emerge as crucial spaces where diversity—and, along with it, identities—can be recognised and nurtured, developing in students a sense of *belonging* or, conversely, marginalised and suppressed, activating a process of *othering* that stigmatises those students who are not norm-conforming. In the former case, diversity as a potential source of otherness is recognised and valued as a possibility to be *different*, promoting a sense of belonging and individual identity.[1] In the latter case, *othering* is activated by a standardised approach to teaching and learning categories, according to which students who do not conform are exposed to an othering process, potentially leading to their marginalisation or exclusion.

According to some social psychologists (e.g., Asch, 1956; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), this phenomenon would also manifest through processes that organise diversity according to those criteria of school conformism encouraged by standardised educational structures (for example, students interact with the same curriculum, take the same tests and exams inside the same evaluation system). The same authors states that this phenomenon would be helpful to explain, for example, how teachers identify the *good student* based on certain standardised characteristics (*good* marks, *good* punctuality, *good* exam preparation...) while excluding others (Asch, 1956; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1990). Furthermore, other psychosocial dynamics based on teachers' expectations can affect learning processes (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) while producing exclusion, stigma, and discrimination. All these perspectives interacting with the studies of critical pedagogy proposed by Giroux, focus on school as the space in which students' diversity is viewed as a request for inclusion within existing educational cultures, structures, and practices, rather than as an opportunity to modify or renegotiate educational structures or for a new recognition of diversity in the school (for example, by redistributing power) (Biesta *et al.*, 2022).

In this regard, it becomes crucial to consider how mechanisms of inclusion often coexist with subtle forms of exclusion. This has led to the development of concepts such as *othering* and *school belonging*, which help to understand how certain students, especially those who deviate from the normative expectations, are constructed as *others*. These processes contribute to the reproduction of marginalisation and hinder the development of a genuine sense of school belonging (Devine, Kenny & MacNeela, 2008), particularly for groups traditionally excluded due to cultural, social, or linguistic differences (Devine *et al.*, 2008).

Recognising the urgent need to support diverse student populations, we argue that it is time we offer a more critical insight into the processes of *othering* and *belonging*, highlighting how the perception of diversity interacts with the multiple possibilities of school belonging or school exclusion, depending on students' position within society. Neglecting the dialectical interaction between *othering*, *diversity*, and *belonging* poses the risk that schools become spaces of alienation for those students who do not align with the dominant norm.

In line with these initial considerations, the paper starts with an overview of the concept of *othering*, clarifying the many meanings that interdisciplinary studies have attached to it and identifying the variables that entrench lines of exclusion and undermine the sense of *school belonging* by students perceived as *other*. The second section highlights the necessity of interpreting processes of *othering* and *belonging* through the critical lens of *diversity*. Attending to the voices of students who perceive their *diversity*

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1. According to the educational prospective calls *Problematicismo pedagogico*, the term *difference* is to be understood as the individual's right to be recognised in its existential uniqueness. In contrast, "diversity" refers to traits associated with our socially given biopsychological and social condition (Contini, 2006). In the Italian educational contexts, the term *difference* is often preferred over *diversity*. While *diversity* can imply deviation from a perceived norm and may unintentionally reinforce exclusion or marginalisation, *difference* emphasises uniqueness without hierarchy or judgment. Pedagogically, *difference* promotes a relational and inclusive approach: it values each individual as a contributor to the learning environment, recognising that differences enrich rather than separate. This perspective supports educational practices that are respectful, intercultural, and aimed at inclusion and mutual growth (e.g., Fiorucci, 2007; Portera, 2013; Tarozzi, 2014; Zoletto, 2012).

as peripheral rather than central to school life underscores the urgency of responding to contemporary *demands for diversity* (Biesta, 2020), namely, students' calls for voice and recognition. In this regard, we argue that *diversity* must be re-examined through a new lens in order to understand how schools persist in reproducing *lines of othering* in terms of exclusion, marginalisation, and the refusal of diversity. Addressing this issue, the final section fosters a pedagogical trajectory intended to counteract *othering* as a marginalisation process. In particular, it advocates reconceptualising *belonging* in its plural form, *belongings*, to extend inclusion to the whole, plural, and ever-evolving *reality of diversity* that characterises educational contexts.

2.   Creating space for diversity: between othering and belonging

Educational institutions do not exist in a vacuum; they are deeply embedded within specific historical, cultural, and political contexts, and as such, they often reflect and reproduce dominant societal norms and values (Giroux, 1983). Far from being neutral, they operate as both symbolic and material spaces where diversity is continuously interpreted, classified, and evaluated, and where cultural, social, and ideological hierarchies are actively produced and sustained (Cassese *et al.*, 2017). Schools, in particular, are nowadays shaped by prevailing neoliberal paradigms that inform what is deemed normative or legitimate within the educational environment (e.g., Baldacci, 2019). How schools interpret and manage diversity gives rise to a broad range of outcomes, both in terms of processes and effects (Gurin, Hurtado & Gurin, 2002), which can be positioned along a dynamic and relational continuum between the opposites of othering and belonging.

Othering has been originally theorised in postcolonial studies to describe the symbolic and institutional practices that sustain binary divisions such as *us/them* (Said, 2003; Hall, 1992). Then, it has been adopted across multiple disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, and education, to analyse broader mechanisms of social exclusion (Borrero, Yeh, Cruz & Suda, 2012; Gokar, Pillar & Kathard, 2010). This interdisciplinary engagement has moved beyond its initial colonial framework to explore how othering operates in contemporary societies marked by ethnic, cultural, linguistic, gendered, class-based, and ableist segmentation lines. On its side, belonging is widely recognised in social psychology as a fundamental *human need* and *motivational driver* (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Maslow, 1954). The importance of feeling a sense of belonging is particularly salient during adolescence, a key development period in which the identity-building process is closely tied to the perception of social inclusion and recognition (Abdollahi, Panahipour, Tafti & Allen, 2020; Arslan, Allen & Ryan, 2020; Yeager *et al.*, 2018). This assumption is supported by several studies that link the sense of belonging to individual well-being in terms of mental health, self-concept, and life satisfaction (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema & Collier, 1996). Within the educational domain, *school belonging* has emerged as a key topic of inquiry, focusing on students' emotional connection to the school environment, relationships with peers and teachers, and their perceptions of being valued members of the school community (Allen, Vella-Brodrick & Waters, 2016; Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie & Waters, 2018; O'Brien & Bowles, 2013; Slaten, Ferguson, Allen, Vella-Brodrick & Waters 2016). Goodenow and Grady (1993) have developed the most accepted definition, conceptualising school belonging as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 80).

These phenomena become especially relevant considering the school's role as a primary agency of socialisation. As the earliest institutional context where young people engage with peers and teachers as significant adults, schools are foundational public spaces for building social identities and intergroup relationships. Therefore, when educational environments fail to recognise and affirm the diversity of migrant students, queer youth, learners from economically marginalized backgrounds, or those with non-normative linguistic and gender identities (Kumashiro, 2000), they reinforce the homogenising logic that marginalise them (Borrero *et al.*, 2012), contributing to perpetuate mechanisms of exclusion, invisibility, and social hierarchy (Batini, 2010). In school settings, where diversity is not only present but also actively interpreted and classified, boundaries between *us* and *them* are constructed institutionally and negotiated in everyday interactions (Jacob, Gagnon, Perron & Canales, 2021). This process operates both in overt ways—such as exclusionary practices, racialised bullying, or biased disciplinary

measures—and in more subtle forms, including lowered teacher expectations, cultural misrecognition, and the implicit centering of dominant norms in curricula and classroom discourse (Devine *et al.*, 2008; Pica-Smith, Contini & Veloria, 2019; Popkewitz, 2001). In particular, these processes are mirrored in peer cultures, where youth continually negotiate diversity (so, the identity), legitimacy, and belonging in ways shaped by broader societal discourses on ethnicity, language, class, and gender (Devine *et al.*, 2008). Some of the most dangerous exclusionary practices consist in the neutralisation of diversity and the spread of an assimilationist model of integration in the school (Nieto, 2002; Nasir & Saxe, 2003). In this case, students are denied recognition of vital aspects of their identity, with serious consequences for their sense of belonging (Abdollahi *et al.*, 2020; Arslan *et al.*, 2020; Yeager *et al.*, 2018), together with full access to the academic and social opportunities that school can offer (Yeh, Borrero, Tito & Petaia, 2014). When this kind of discrimination happens, a lot of social minorities may be misinterpreted or institutionally devalued, impeding their capacity to demonstrate academic success and undermining their educational trajectories (Yeh *et al.*, 2014; Nasir & Saxe, 2003). In this way, educational spaces may hinder the active participation and full development of marginalised students' potential, reinforcing existing social inequalities (Alvarez, 2009; Vaught, 2012).

Nevertheless, this dynamic is not immutable. As highlighted in the introduction, diversity can be approached as a source of enrichment rather than a problem to be managed. When educational environments promote a non-hierarchical recognition of individual and cultural differences, they create the conditions for authentic belonging and development of plural, resilient identities. From this perspective, othering does not necessarily lead to marginalisation: it can be reoriented into a dialogic, relational process of learning, where diversity becomes a site of encounter and transformation (Canales, 2000). In this light, diversity is best understood not as a fixed or isolated characteristic but as a dynamic continuum. Along this continuum, experiences of diversity can lead either toward inclusion, producing a genuine sense of belonging, or toward exclusion, often experienced as othering. The direction depends largely on the interplay between *structural factors*, such as institutional policies, norms, and cultural frameworks, and *relational factors*, including interactions and relationships between peers as well as between teachers and students.

3.   Diversity as a lens to understand the lines of othering

As already mentioned, the interconnected process of othering and belonging can be read through the lens of diversity. Since it is almost impossible to avoid confrontation with diversity, as well as with how our current *Zeitgeist* thinks and feels about it, we must consider a suitable educational approach for such an issue. In doing this, the attention of educators and researchers should refocus on what Biesta *et al.* (2022) define *demands of diversity* within the everyday dynamics of othering and belonging in school settings. In particular, exploring diversity may inform about who is—or feels to be—represented (sense of school belonging) and who is—or feels to be—marginalised (othered by others). By carrying out observations and listening to stories and representations of diversity (What does *diversity* mean to you? Have you ever felt diverse?), we can gain a picture of the current state of affairs in Western schools. Finally, observing the *reality of diversity* and how schools handle it should become an essential critical practice, dismantling the democratic or anti-democratic trends that shape contemporary educational structures. According to Biesta *et al.* (2022), this aspect is even more relevant if we consider that diversity implies a demand for voice, recognition, and belonging to a community:

> The issue at stake in discussions about diversity is that of representation and presence. It is about who is visible and who isn't visible, who has a say and who doesn't have a say, who plays a part and who doesn't play a part, who sits at the table and who is absent. It is, in short, about who is included and who is excluded. Jacques Rancière has coined the interesting phrase 'le partage du sensible' (see Rancière, 2006) to describe the particular way in which, at a given point in time, in a society some are visible and some not, some speech makes sense and other speech is seen as "noise", some are included and some are excluded (p. 1).

This perspective is particularly relevant, but not without its challenges. Efforts to promote inclusion of diversity often risk being superficial if they rely solely on the goodwill of those in dominant

positions to grant access to marginalised groups. While such efforts may increase representational diversity, they fall short in challenging the deeper power structures that govern educational and social institutions. True transformation requires more than integrating individuals into existing systems; it demands a critical rethinking—and reshaping—of the very structures, norms, and cultures into which people should be included. From this standpoint, the call for diversity goes hand in hand with the call for power redistribution and structural change (Biesta *et al.*, 2022).

This issue is manifest both in the broader organisation of society and in the daily life of school classrooms, where there is often limited space for critically addressing class privileges, confronting discrimination sustained by pedagogical practices, or questioning the institutional structures that favour some and disadvantage others (hooks, 1994). The absence of a reflective and critical approach to these dynamics contributes to the presence of *othered*, often reduced to administrative or pedagogical labels like—*at risk*, *to be integrated*, *with special needs*,—which essentialise their identities, obscure the complexity of their lived experiences, and reinforce their marginalisation within the educational system (Fine, 1992; Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). When these processes are not critically observed and problematised, classrooms continue to function as spaces that fail to recognise or value the different social, cultural, and identity positions that students bring with them (Nieto, 2010).

As bell hooks (1994) states, this absence of critical space produces exclusion, marginalisation, and the refusal of diversity. Rather than serving as spaces for emancipation and dialogue, classrooms often silence diversity while rewarding conformity. Alternatively, they incorporate diversity into the fabric of existing structures without challenging their underlying logic (Giroux, 1983; Devis, 1981). Students from non-dominant backgrounds are implicitly expected to adopt the behaviours, values, and perspectives of more privileged groups to be accepted. This pressure to conform is not limited to interpersonal dynamics. As Borck (2020) demonstrates, there is often a profound cultural dissonance between institutional expectations and students' lived experiences. Those whose ways of being and expressing diverge from dominant school norms are frequently misread as *disengaged* or *disruptive*. This mismatch not only leads to alienation, but it reinforces the message that school is not a space meant for them. Although schools often claim to promote democratic participation and inclusive education, they frequently reproduce normative systems that suppress dissent and overlook the potential richness of diverse voices. Diversity, in this sense, is not merely a question of representation or access; it is fundamentally about *power* and *belonging*: about whose knowledge, identities, and voices are recognised as legitimate. Without a conscious and critical effort to reflect on how diversity of class, culture, and institutional norms shapes the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion, the transformative potential of education is significantly undermined. From this perspective, exploring how students experience and conceptualise diversity becomes a key entry point for understanding how processes of othering and belonging work. Furthermore, field research on students' perspectives may also provide valuable insights into those implicit and often invisible structures, such as procedures, dominant discourses, language use, curriculum, and behaviours, that shape how schools recognise, express, or silence diversity and the uniqueness of individuals (Ilardo, 2022).

The pedagogical vision advanced by bell hooks (1994) and the broader tradition of critical pedagogy carries concrete implications into educational practice. By re-centering students' voices as a pivotal dimension of teaching and learning, transformative pedagogy moves beyond theoretical or philosophical propositions to articulate a practice-driven framework in which *diversity* is actively reclaimed as a foundational principle for fostering, sustaining, and enriching democratic education.

In this pedagogical framework, the classroom is conceived as a space where *diversity*, understood as a multiplicity of perspectives, serves as an opportunity to transform and renegotiate teacher–student power relations (hooks, 1994) and obliges resolution of the *teacher-student contradiction* through the creation of a non-hierarchical learning space in which educators and students become co-investigators in a shared pedagogical pathway. To better understand how these concepts can be interpreted across different contexts, recent qualitative studies have examined the meanings of *student voice* and the representations of *diversity* and *belonging* in various European settings and at different school levels. These works discuss the implications of multiple interpretations and their impact on processes of school inclusion (Bosse, 2015; Fernández *et al.*, 2023; Messieu *et al.*, 2022). Their findings suggest the need to move beyond approaches that reduce *diversity* to isolated and ideological categories, and instead to develop

concrete interventions such as co-created curricula, participatory assessment practices, or institutional policies that embed student voice representation in decision-making bodies. Overall, fully embracing the transformative potential of education requires moving beyond superficial or symbolic gestures toward diversity and inclusion. It calls for a conscious effort to interrogate and uncover diversity (about who is visible and who isn't visible), power dynamics, institutional norms, and cultural assumptions that shape who is recognized, valued, and heard in schools.

4.   Sense of belonging(s)

If we understand diversity as situated along a continuum between othering and belonging, we also need to consider *how* schools can position themselves along this trajectory. Specifically, we need to explore how educational practices and school interventions can be oriented toward belonging, rather than contributing to processes of exclusion and othering. The question then is not so much *whether* it is fine to make room for the *demand of diversity* in education contexts, but rather *how* to do so. Some practical directions may emerge from a reconceptualisation of the notion of belonging already introduced in the second paragraph.

Literature affirms that students who feel they belong in school, that they are important to their classmates and that they are important to them, that they have established real caring relationships in the school environment, are overall more motivated and engaged. Scholars have also demonstrated that they are less inclined to truancy, less disruptive and stressed, perform better in tests, and complete school at higher rates (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Hughes, Im & Allee, 2015; Ma, 2003; OECD, 2017; Osterman, 2000; Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Sánchez, Colón & Esparza, 2005). As *relationships* seem to be the central tenet of belonging, research has traditionally focused on them independently from the context in which belonging is established and experienced, failing to consider the systemic aspect of belonging (and othering) in schools or to unpack how belonging develops across communities.

In this vein, attention should be set on questions focusing on what/whom students belong to, their role in defining and constructing belonging, and how the macro dynamics of alienation or othering influence their school experience. Answering these questions would help to reveal the sociocultural roots of group identity, the role of space in the dynamics of belonging, and how belonging can become a driver of social change (Fataar & Rinquest, 2019; Rosaldo, 1997; Yuval- Davis, 2006).

Data collected from the OECD (2019) show that school belonging is steadily decreasing worldwide: nearly one in three students affirm that they do not feel they belong. Moreover, data also point out significant in-country belonging gaps between the wealthy and non-wealthy, boys and girls, and migrants and native-born students. To understand more in-depth this worrying scenario, further research on internal experiences of students—their *sense* of belonging and connection within the school community—as well as the individual and school-level elements that sustain or impede it, is needed to shed light on the institutional and systemic factors alienating students from their school environment (othering) and on the action that can be taken to create schools that welcome all the identities and conditions students bring with them in schools (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Allen & Kern, 2017; Allen, Slaten, Arslan, Roffey, Craig & Vella-Brodrick, 2021).

While recognising the subjective experience of belonging, it is important to point out that it is also materially grounded, patterned, and structured in society. Without this awareness, research risks failing to document or identify the contextual or situational factors determining the material conditions impacting the experience of belonging. As school represents a complex societal sub-system "embedded in social structures providing individuals with different resources and opportunities" (Tikkanen, Bledowski & Felczak, 2015, p. 299) (see *Introduction*), fostering belonging in school as a right for all students is not a shared principle in the neoliberal education system and therefore not an easy task. Without promoting inclusion and de-tracking policies that allocate resources equitably and challenge assumptions of who can and cannot succeed in school (e.g., Banks & Banks, 1989) and teacher training that supports educators in confronting biases and developing intercultural and intersectional orientations (e.g., Riley, 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Vavrus, 2002), belonging risks working as a privilege that coheres with other structural privileges and not as a fundamental educational right for all students. This is

in line with the words of Powell and Menendian, recognizing that "the term *belonging* connotes something fundamental about how groups are positioned within society, as well as how they are perceived and regarded. It reflects an objective position of power and resources as well as the intersubjective nature of group-based identities" (2016, p. 22). According to these perspectives and recognising the urgent need to support diverse populations of students, we argue that it is time we make a more critical reflection on belonging, revealing how students experience and create multiple belongings (agency) according to their position within society (structure). Neglecting the dialectical interplay between societal structure and individual agency, schools risk becoming sites of othering and alienation for those students who do not conform to the dominant culture.

This redefinition stems from the awareness that traditional conceptions of belonging, as a static and individual experience, fail to account for how systemic structures shape the conditions under which belonging is granted, negotiated, or denied. As highlighted in earlier sections, prevailing definitions often reduce belonging (and othering) to interpersonal relationships (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Libbey, 2007), neglecting the broader cultural, political, and institutional frameworks within which such relationships are embedded. In contrast, reframing *belonging* as *belongings* invites a pluralistic, critical, and situated understanding of the term. It acknowledges that students bring multiple and intersecting identities into school—linguistic, cultural, spiritual, racial, and gendered—and that these identities interact with school structures in ways that are not always affirming. According to Powell and Menendian (2016), belonging reflects not only subjective perceptions but also "an objective position of power and resources as well as the intersubjective nature of group-based identities" (p. 22). Therefore, belonging is not only about *feeling* included but also about being recognised and positioned as someone who *has the right to belong*.

5.   Conclusions

To sum up, in this paper we argue that schools, rather than serving as spaces of emancipation and democracy, often tend to reproduce the very socio-cultural and political inequalities they claim to overcome. This occurs not only through explicitly exclusionary policies—such as separate classrooms or ethnic-majority criteria, as mentioned in the introduction—but also through everyday practices, standardised curricula, and implicit expectations that assign value to specific forms of behaviour, language, or achievement, thereby marginalising others. In this sense, school becomes a site where not only knowledge is transmitted, but where one's position within the social order is also learned. This logic, extensively theorised in the work of Bourdieu & Passeron (1990/1970), Bowles and Gintis (1976), and widely addressed within the field of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1983) produces a symbolic order that distinguishes what is recognised as legitimate—and therefore included—from what is excluded or made invisible.

The development of dynamics of inclusion—framed in terms of belonging—and exclusion—conceptualised as othering—, highlights that the trajectory between these two opposites is far from linear. As affirmed in the literature (Abdollahi, Panahipour, Tafti & Allen, 2020), belonging represents a pedagogical pathway/trajectory able to challenge processes of marginalisation and othering. However, if the global trend and neoliberal paradigm, which also affects schooling, deny the appreciation of diversity, then this is precisely the starting point of our pedagogical and critical reflection. This issue calls for a substantial rethinking of the relationship between these two phenomena, and for the exploration of many diversities that remain excluded and *othered* within this continuum.

In this direction, we assume diversity as an analytical lens to question not only the conditions that make school belonging possible, but also what remains peripheral—misunderstood, overlooked, or neutralised from the outset. Class, cultural, normative, and value-based diversities (often invisible) deeply shape how schools include or exclude. Reflecting on these dimensions means decentering the pedagogical gaze and focusing on what escapes dominant frameworks: that which has not yet been fully recognised and therefore lacks genuine representation, presence, and the possibility of belonging.

Finally, we argue that belonging, if reconceptualised within the structural and systemic complexity it entails, may offer a critical pedagogical and political response to othering. However, to operationalise this response, we should first consider the multiple forms of exclusion that currently permeate the school system. Promoting diversity is not enough: we also must acknowledge the crisis in which the recogni-

tion of diversity is undergoing. As many perspectives cited have shown (Devine *et al*., 2008; Pica-Smith *et al*., 2019; Popkewitz, 2001), the barriers to belonging are often invisible—silent norms, implicit expectations, and judgmental gazes that daily determine who is *inside* and who remains *outside*.

If we wish schools to become spaces of plural belongings, we have to rethink inclusion and belonging by deconstructing the emerging categories of exclusion. For example, referring to the work of bell hooks (1994), we all know that a *good way* to build a sense of community in the classroom is to recognise the value of each voice. This might mean, for example, creating space for a student who speaks a non-dominant language at home to share their experiences or perspectives, not as a token gesture, but as a meaningful contribution that reshapes the conversation and challenges the assumed norms of participation. Similarly, it could involve acknowledging the perspective of a student who does not feel represented in gender-binary frameworks, allowing their lived experience to question implicit curricular norms and to expand the community's understanding of identity, recognition, and belonging.

This kind of pedagogical trajectory requires investigating the many forms of diversity already present but misrecognised in schools, allowing students themselves to redefine the boundaries of their belonging(s).

Last but not least, it may be urgent to question which forms of diversity are still excluded in contemporary school environments. Are we truly attuned to the emerging demands for recognition, representation, and belonging surfacing in classrooms? Who are the students nowadays labelled and positioned as outsiders and *the other*? These questions point to the need for further research into how diversity is represented in educational settings, by collecting and examining students' experiences that reveal how certain diversities are made visible while others remain unacknowledged and how such representations shape their sense of recognition, inclusion, and belonging in the classroom.

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