

Intersectionality in educational research in Italy

A systematic literature review

Barbara Gross*^{1D} ^aGiulia Filippi^{1D} ^a^a Libera Università di Bolzano (Italy)

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L'intersezionalità nella ricerca educativa in Italia: una revisione sistematica della letteratura

Intersectionality, conceived as a critical theoretical paradigm and a methodological approach to reveal systemic inequality and inequity, enables the analysis of interdependences and power dynamics of relationships and processes in educational contexts. It opens a transformative perspective that indicates differences and forms of belonging within educational settings. International scholarship increasingly calls for intersectional approaches to inform both educational research and policy, while simultaneously noting a marked scarcity of empirical studies within pedagogical settings. Against this backdrop, this study explores how intersectionality has been received within the Italian educational debate. A systematic search was conducted across 36 Class A educational journals (ANVUR, 11/D1), identifying six pertinent contributions published between 2020 and 2025. Results show that intersectionality is mainly mobilised as a theoretical lens for reading differences and educational processes. The study sheds light on the current state of the art of intersectionality in education in the national context and discusses its implications for educational research and practice.

L'intersezionalità, concepita come paradigma teorico critico e approccio metodologico per rivelare ingiustizie e disuguaglianze sistemiche, consente l'analisi delle interdipendenze e delle dinamiche di potere nelle relazioni e nei processi nei contesti educativi. Essa apre una prospettiva trasformativa che evidenzia differenze e forme di appartenenza all'interno degli ambienti educativi. La comunità accademica internazionale richiama sempre più all'adozione di approcci intersezionali per informare sia la ricerca educativa sia le politiche in ambito educativo, pur rilevando contestualmente una marcata scarsità di studi empirici nei contesti pedagogici. Sullo sfondo di questo scenario, il presente studio esplora come l'intersezionalità sia stata recepita nel dibattito educativo italiano. È stata condotta una ricerca sistematica su 36 riviste pedagogiche appartenenti alla Classe A (ANVUR, 11/D1), identificando sei contributi pertinenti pubblicati tra il 2020 e il 2025. I risultati mostrano che l'intersezionalità viene principalmente utilizzata come lente teorica per leggere le differenze e i processi educativi. Lo studio mira a contribuire a fare luce sullo stato dell'arte sull'intersezionalità nel contesto nazionale e sulle possibili implicazioni per la ricerca e la pratica educativa.

Keywords: Intersectionality; Diversity; Educational research; Italy; Systematic literature review.

* ✉ barbara.gross@unibz.it

1. Introduction

1.1. Intersectionality as a critical pedagogical paradigm and research methodology

Intersectionality has been widely recognised as a key theoretical and analytical framework for understanding how multiple dimensions of social identity shape experiences of oppression, marginalisation and discrimination. The concept has its roots in *Black feminist* thought, stemming from a legal case brought by a group of African American women against General Motors. These women argued that they had been discriminated not merely because of their gender and *race*, but specifically because they were Black women, whose social position simultaneously combined *race* and gender. However, the legal system at that time recognised the categories as separate and independent. Courts did not typically recognise discrimination by considering an intersection of different categories, and the case was consequently dismissed. Based on this experience, the scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw used it as a starting point for her foundational work on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), aiming to draw attention to the specific disadvantage that arises when multiple factors of discrimination act simultaneously. The intersection of these axes generates a qualitatively distinct form of oppression that cannot be reduced to a summary of its parts. Based on this idea, the concept has evolved into a central conceptual, methodological and analytical framework for understanding how multiple dimensions of social identity—such as gender, socio-economic status, (dis)ability, skin colour, nationality and language(s)—coexist and reproduce social inequality. The theoretical idea is that individuals cannot be understood through isolated attributes but through the dynamic interrelations among them. Additionally, Crenshaw (1991) distinguishes structural, political and representational intersectionality, illustrating how inequalities emerge through institutional arrangements, political discourses and cultural representations. This insight introduced a non-additive logic, according to which these social categories must be examined as mutually constitutive and inseparable. While Crenshaw articulated the legal and political roots of intersectionality, Patricia Hill Collins later expanded the concept and its theoretical scope, developing a critical social theory concerned with interlocking systems of power and inequality (Collins, 2019). Her work offers a guiding reflection on the core characteristics and epistemology of intersectionality. Following this tradition, Collins and Bilge (2020) emphasise that intersectionality is rooted in the analysis of interlocking systems of power, highlighting how forms of oppression and privilege co-construct one another within specific social, historical and institutional contexts. They also stress the possibility of a depoliticised and superficial approach, which may cause limited efficacy. Specifically, they illustrate six core ideas of intersectional frameworks through three cases: the 2014 FIFA World Cup, the global economic inequalities, and the experience of Black Brazilian women. The case of the 2014 FIFA World Cup, for instance, reveals how global sporting events are shaped by intersecting relations of skin colour, gender, class, and nation, which structure access, visibility, and labour in unequal ways. Similarly, global economic inequalities are shown to emerge from the interaction of capitalism, racialisation, and geopolitical power, rather than from isolated economic factors. Finally, the experience of Black Brazilian women is illustrated through the case of the Latinidades festival, showing how intersectionality operates as a collective political practice within Afro-Brazilian feminist activism. It brings together decades of struggles against the racialised and gendered exclusions produced by Brazilian racial democracy. Latinidades articulated gender, *race*, and class together by organising intergenerational spaces that combined political mobilisation, cultural production, and knowledge-making, explicitly challenging the myth of racial democracy and the exclusion of Black women in Brazil.

Collins and Bilge (2020) underline how these cases are linked to six core ideas identified as: a) social inequality, b) intersecting power relations, c) relationality, d) social context, e) social justice, and f) complexity. They appear in different forms within the concept of intersectionality, tracing how multiple systems of power co-construct differentiated forms of advantage and disadvantage within specific historical and institutional contexts (Collins & Bilge, 2020). These core ideas provide a conceptual framework for analysing how institutions and societal contexts impact power, privilege, marginalisation and access.

Following this perspective, intersectionality offers a powerful analytic lens—one that can be applied in educational contexts—to illuminate how the different phenomena, such as racism, sexism, classism,

linguistic hierarchies and ableism, operate simultaneously within everyday practices, shaping individual opportunities and experiences. Consistent with critical pedagogy, such as Paulo Freire's theory of oppression (Freire, 1968/1993) and bell hooks' engaged pedagogy (hooks, 2014), education is understood as a space that can reproduce or challenge power relations, and therefore requires critical reflexivity. From this perspective, intersectionality provides a valuable lens for illuminating structural inequities and the ways they are sustained within educational contexts. It is strictly linked to the idea of challenging the structures through which privilege and oppression are sustained. In this sense, intersectionality does not merely describe overlapping identities; it constitutes an epistemological stance and a pedagogical orientation aimed at advancing equity within educational systems. Over the past decades, intersectionality has therefore evolved into a central methodological and analytical paradigm used across disciplines. In education, it has gained increasing relevance for analysing how overlapping structures of inequality shape learners' opportunities, institutional practices, and pedagogical discourses. However, despite its conceptual relevance, a document published by the OECD (Varsik & Gorochovskij, 2023) notes that research adopting an intersectional perspective in education remains "unbalanced, limited and fragmented" (p. 29) with most studies focusing on North American and Western European contexts. Additionally, Varsik and Gorochovskij (2023) show that a significant gap between theoretical debates and educational practice persists. This aligns closely with the scoping review presented by Pham Xuan (2025), which confirms most intersectional studies in education remain theoretical, with limited empirical grounding and an intense geographical concentration in Western contexts.

In education, intersectionality is increasingly being taken up within intercultural education (Gross & Portera, 2025; Portera, Balloi & Salvadori, 2025). As noted, intercultural educational research has traditionally tended to work with single categories and isolate variables. These approaches struggle to capture the complexity of lived differences and may inadvertently (re)produce exclusion rather than inclusion. Several studies using an intersectional lens show how everyday institutional practices and interactions—such as language use, categorisation processes, and norms of belonging—contribute to processes of intersectional othering, (re)producing differentiated and often unequal forms of inclusion and exclusion among different educational actors (Gross, 2025; Ndura & Bukuri Kambaye, 2025).

Overall, the intersectionality paradigm emerges as a theoretical and methodological framework that enables to analyse how educational disadvantages are developed and perpetuated across different contexts and processes.

1.2. Rationale and purpose of the study

Despite its increasing international relevance, as outlined in the previous section, educational research on intersectionality remains characterised by a predominance of theoretical contributions and a relative lack of empirical studies. To the best of our knowledge, conceptualisation, methodological use and operationalisation of intersectionality within research published in educational journals in Italy has not yet been systematically examined. This gap provides the rationale for the present study, which adopts a systematic literature review approach to examine the presence, distribution and conceptualisation of intersectionality within the educational context in Italy. Mapping this emerging area allows to study national trends and potential convergences and divergences with international scholarship. This study is thus guided by the following research questions:

- RQ.1. What theoretical roots and conceptualisations of intersectionality emerge within educational research when the concept is explicitly addressed?
- RQ.2. What methodological approaches are employed to study and operationalise intersectionality in educational research?
- RQ.3. How do the results contribute to the theoretical development of intersectionality and/or to its empirical application in educational research?

2. Research design and method

Our systematic review was informed by Newman and Gough (2020), whose framework supports a transparent account of the systematic literature review strategy and process. Additionally, the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page *et al.*, 2021) were adopted to develop the analysis of the selected studies, as will be explained in the following section.

2.1. Review design

The aim of the present research is to develop a systematic synthesis of the existing research evidence on the use of intersectionality as both a pedagogical paradigm and a research methodology. To address the research questions guiding this study, we conducted a systematic review following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page *et al.*, 2021; see Figure 1). Accordingly, the existing body of research on intersectionality in education was systematically reviewed through a structured and evaluative synthesis of evidence. This approach adopts a replicable analysis of the available evidence on a determined topic, using explicit methods to identify, select and screen relevant studies (Ghirotto, 2020; Newman & Gough, 2020; Pellegrini & Vivanet, 2018). The review process thus followed the core methodological stages outlined by Newman and Gough (2020), including: (a) formulation of research questions and conceptual framework; (b) construction of explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria; (c) development of a structured search strategy; (d) systematic screening of titles, abstracts and full texts; (e) coding and data extraction; and (f) synthesis and reporting of findings.

This methodological approach is particularly appropriate when the aim is to identify how the concept is used within a specific field, to evidence convergences and differences, and to highlight existing gaps in the current state of the art. This is especially relevant in the present study, as no systematic examination of how intersectionality has been used within Italian educational research is currently available.

2.2. Identification of sources

The identification of research journals to be included was the first step in the process. All journals classified as *Class A* within the list of the National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR) for the Academic Recruitment Field 11/D1 (General and Social Pedagogy and History of Pedagogy) were initially considered. In total, we identified 178 journals that met this criterion. Because our aim was to examine the national embeddedness of intersectionality within the educational discourse in Italy, we did not include journals with head offices abroad, as these would likely reflect a stronger international perspective. Therefore, we focused exclusively on journals with their head offices in Italy. Among the 178 journals, 36 met this requirement, and these constituted the reference sources for the present review.

We inspected the 36 selected journals across their online catalogues and websites. Given the lack of a comprehensive national database for educational research publications in Italy, sources were identified manually. The manual screening process consisted of a systematic examination of the journals' digital archives to retrieve all the available contributions published between 2020 and 2025 ($N = 9.350$).

To capture the broadest possible range of conceptual variations, keyword searches were conducted in all the languages observed during the screening of the selected journals. Across the examined corpus, articles were published in Italian, English, and Spanish. Accordingly, the keyword string 'intersect*' in the title search was used in the respective languages within the selected journals and for the specific time frame (2020-2025). As a result of the initial identification process, 9.338 articles were excluded prior to the formal screening stage. The criteria for inclusion and exclusion applied during the identification phase are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 – Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria	- Articles published between 2020 and 2025 - Journals with head offices in Italy and listed as Class A for the Academic Recruitment Field 11/D1 - Presence of ‘intersect*’ in the title of publications - Articles in all languages observed within the journals (Italian, English and Spanish)
Exclusion criteria	- Articles not published between 2020 and 2025 - Journals with head offices abroad and not listed as Class A for the Academic Recruitment Field 11/D1 - Presence of ‘intersect*’ in the paper but not in the title

2.3. Screening process

Following the identification of potentially relevant articles ($N = 12$) from the journals’ online catalogues and websites, all article abstracts and full texts were systematically screened to determine their relevance to the concept under investigation. Articles that focused primarily on concepts or terms not directly related to intersectionality—despite employing associated terminology such as “*intersezione*” and “*intersezioni*” ($N = 5$)—were excluded, as they did not explicitly present intersectionality as either a conceptual or analytical framework. Additionally, any book reviews ($N = 1$) were also omitted from the analysis. Eventually, six papers met all eligibility criteria and were included in the final corpus for data analysis. The complete selection procedure is illustrated in the PRISMA 2020 flowchart displayed in Figure 1.

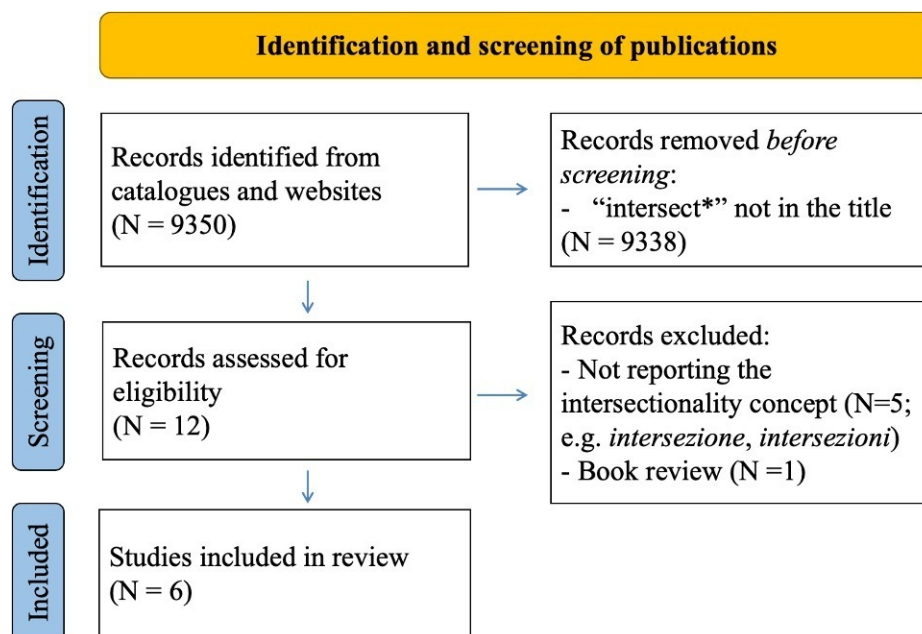


Figure 1 – PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Page et al., 2021)

2.4. Data charting and analysis

Charting, an iterative and descriptive-analytical technique, was used to organise qualitative information according to key issues and themes. In line with this approach, we followed an analytical framework applied to all six included studies, allowing us to identify emerging patterns. Extracted data included (a) authorship and year of publication; (b) journals in which they were published; (c) language; (d) theoretical roots and conceptualisations; (e) methodological approaches; and (f) main results presented by the authors in the publications. These data were organised into a comparative table to facilitate cross-article analysis (see Table 2, in Appendix). Subsequently, a qualitative descriptive synthesis was performed to identify how each article addressed intersectionality, and which theoretical traditions informed its use. Specifically, this inductive analysis led to the identification of three analytical dimensions that guided both the reading of the corpus and the organisation of the results section. The first section (3.1) presents the conceptualisation and the theoretical traditions informing the intersectional concept within the contributions. Section 3.2 focuses on the (methodological) approaches adopted in the selected papers to study or operationalise intersectionality. The last section (3.3) presents the results and implications addressed within the reviewed contributions.

3. Results

This section aims to illustrate the results identified from the study across the 36 Italian journals classified by ANVUR as a Class A journal for the Academic Recruitment Field 11/D1¹ and screened for the present systematic literature review. After the process of screening presented previously, six articles published between 2020 and 2025 explicitly addressed intersectionality or employed it as a central analytical lens. The number of papers with ‘intersect’ included in the title is limited within the national educational landscape. Moreover, these papers were published across three journals only, with three papers in the journal *Educazione Interculturale*.

Although the review focused exclusively on national journals, only one contribution was written in Italian. The remaining were written in English (four articles) and in Spanish (one article). The core corpus identified is summarised in Table 2, along with insights into the three analytical sections across which the results are structured.

3.1. Conceptualisations and theoretical roots of intersectionality

In relation to conceptualisation and theoretical roots, the six articles included in the final corpus display different degrees of theoretical depth. Following a chronological order as represented in Table 2, the first study under analysis is published by Ferritti and Guerrieri (2020) adopting a critical perspective through the *Disability Critical Race Theory* (Annamma, Ferri & Connor, 2018) within the context of inclusive education, particularly drawing on the adoption experience. They thus considered multiple forms of discrimination: “The intersectional lens allows us to take into consideration discrimination as generated by the connection among the multiple categories of individuals’ identities allowing to think diversity as based simultaneously on the relation between similarities and differences” (Ferritti & Guerrieri, 2020, p. 60). The authors highlight how pre-adoptive identities, roots, and biographical discontinuities intersect in shaping students’ educational experiences, stressing that “[s]tudents with multiple intersections are at risk of micro-exclusions which can cause marginalisation and dispersion” (Ferritti & Guerrieri, 2020, p. 66). The study thus gives an exploratory framework to investigate multiple and overlapping forms of vulnerability in educational contexts.

The contribution published by Colli Vignarelli (2023) presents an analytical reflection on intersectionality as a heuristic competence within pedagogical inquiry. Recalling critical pedagogy, together with Crenshaw’s theories and Foucault’s concept of *dispositif*, the author develops an interpretative lens to shed light on power relationships in the educational contexts. He thus explicitly frames intersectionality as a critical and transformative theory, stating that “[i]ntersectionality can be considered

1. Under the classification in force during the period considered; following the 2024 reform of academic disciplinary classifications, this field is now incorporated into Scientific-Disciplinary Group [GSD] 11/PAED-01.

as a critical theory of society in constant evolution, deeply rooted in social action and driven by the desire for change and transformation towards the achievement of social justice [...]”² (Colli Vignarelli, 2023, p. 78). Furthermore, intersectionality is described as capable of “subverting normative power and politically rethinking education as transformation rather than as a tool for conforming to normalized imperatives”³ (Colli Vignarelli, 2023, p. 79).

Moreover, in Piras (2023), intersectionality is conceptualised as “a theoretical and methodological tool to analyse the political discourse behind European policies on ecological transition, with the aim to investigate whether and how they consider the gender dimension and the interaction between multiple social categories” (Piras, 2023, p. 55). Drawing on an ecofeminist and critical framework, the author frames intersectionality as a lens capable of revealing the non-neutral nature of ecological transition policies, particularly regarding gender and social inequalities.

With some similarities regarding the theories considered, the contribution by Zimmermann (2023) analyses intersectionality through an ecofeminist and socio-environmental perspective situated in the Global South. Drawing on Latin American feminist and decolonial theories, the author examines women’s conditions and practices in relation to socio-environmental inequalities, framing intersectionality as a critical lens to understand the interrelation of gender, class, territory, and environmental justice. As the author affirms, “[i]ntersectional feminism recognizes that there is not just one axis of oppression and that it does not operate in layers, but rather intertwined” (Zimmermann, 2023, p. 79), highlighting how racism, patriarchy and class oppression jointly structure inequalities.

Mena (2024) draws on Crenshaw’s theorisation of intersectionality and Black Latin American feminist perspectives to illustrate how dynamics of exclusion related to racialised identities are produced and reproduced in educational contexts. The study is developed within the Colombian and broader Latin American context. It is grounded in theories of early childhood education and employs an intersectional lens to examine how *race*, gender, class, and age intersect in the construction of racialised childhoods. As stated by the author, “[t]his fulfills the demand made by Crenshaw (1991) in the sense of articulating an intersectionality through *race*, gender, age, and social class as the focus that helps unveil the systems of oppression” (Mena, 2024, p. 29).⁴ This perspective challenges Eurocentric and colour-blind approaches to both racism and childhood studies.

The last contribution, authored by Santiago and colleagues (2024), shows a conceptual framework that positions intersectionality as a theoretical-methodological approach for research in the field of early childhood education and in intercultural contexts. The contribution is rooted in Black and Latin American feminist epistemologies and draws on the thought of Collins, Crenshaw, and other scholars to define intersectionality as a critical and relational perspective. The authors describe intersectionality as “a theoretical-methodological contribution, like a living and changing kaleidoscope (Pereira, 2020), articulated in the operationalisation of research with/for/about children and childhood in intercultural contexts” (Santiago, Pereira & Ernst, 2024, p. 7).

As shown, the contributions analysed and discussed in this section refer to intersectionality mobilising the concept in different ways, shaping a variety of pedagogical approaches and epistemological orientations. Beyond this variety of dimensions and concepts explored, the contributions can be further distinguished according to how intersectionality is theoretically framed and mobilised in these studies. Through an inductive qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023), three main conceptual orientations were identified as developed within the articles: a) Transformative orientation; b) Descriptive-additive orientation; c) Politicised orientation.

- a) A transformative orientation was identified in two contributions (Santiago, Pereira & Ernst, 2024; Zimmermann, 2023), where intersectionality is explicitly framed as a political and epistemolog-

2. Original text: “L’intersezionalità può essere, quindi, considerata come teoria critica della società in continuo divenire nel suo essere strettamente radicata nell’azione sociale e mossa dal desiderio di cambiamento e trasformazione verso la realizzazione della giustizia sociale, svolgendo a tutti gli effetti le funzioni di una pedagogia sociale.” (Colli Vignarelli, 2023, p. 78).

3. Original text: “[...] di sovvertire il potere normativo e di ri-pensare politicamente la formazione come trasformazione e non come strumento di conformità o conformazione a imperativi normalizzanti.” (Colli Vignarelli, 2023, p. 79).

4. Translated by the authors from the original text in Spanish: “Así se cumple la demanda que Crenshaw (1991) realizó en el sentido de articular una interseccionalidad a través de la raza, el sexo, la edad y la clase social como el foco que ayuda a develar los sistemas de opresión” (Mena, 2024, p. 29).

ical framework aimed at challenging coloniality, patriarchy, and structural injustice. These articles develop a theoretical perspective grounded in transformative and decolonial understandings of intersectionality, drawing on *Black feminist* thought, decolonial approaches, and perspectives from Global South feminists. They draw on foundational theories such as Crenshaw's conceptualisation of intersecting forms of disadvantage. According to these theories, intersectionality is seen as a critical lens to understand and deepen the practice of oppression which permeates educational systems, knowledge and practices; intersectionality is conceptualised as a political framework which aims to engage with issues of power, coloniality, injustice and social change.

- b) Three articles (Colli Vignarelli, 2023; Ferritti & Guerrieri, 2020; Mena, 2024) adopt a descriptive-additive orientation. In these contributions, different social categories are addressed, such as: 1) adoption, disability, and ethnic difference as overlapping conditions, 2) racism in childhood, as an interpretive framework and not a tool for structural analysis, and 3) intersectionality as a tool for transforming educational research and teacher education, without explicitly engaging with a structural or decolonial analysis of power relations. In these cases, intersectionality is used to name and classify the social identities under analysis, although the intrinsic coexistence of the categories remains little explored.

Specifically, Ferritti and Guerrieri (2020) draw attention to overlapping conditions such as adoption, disability, and ethnic difference, emphasising risks of micro-exclusions within educational contexts. While highlighting multiplicity, the analysis does not develop a structured framework for tracing how these axes are mutually constitutive within institutional power dynamics. Mena (2024) adopts an intersectional paradigm, in which the empirical analysis primarily centres *race* as the structuring axis of exclusion with little attention to the structural interdependence of the categories. Colli Vignarelli (2023), by contrast, articulates a primarily conceptual framing of intersectionality.

- c) Finally, one article (Piras, 2023) reflects a politicised orientation to intersectionality. In this contribution, intersectionality is mobilised as an analytical tool to critically examine the political discourse underlying European ecological transition policies. Rather than developing intersectionality as a pedagogical framework, the author employs it as a political-analytical lens aimed at revealing and counteracting multiple inequalities, investigating whether and how these policies integrate gender and other social dimensions. Through this perspective, the study highlights how institutional discourses often fail to adequately address the interaction between multiple social categories. In this sense, intersectionality is used to interrogate policy discourse and to reveal the limitations of current ecological transition frameworks in addressing multiple and intersecting inequalities.

The orientations outlined above provide an overview of the theoretical roots and conceptualisations of intersectionality currently emerging and partially reflecting the national pedagogical landscape, which remains in an exploratory phase of development.

3.2. (Methodological) Approaches

The papers analysed predominantly represent conceptual works: one of the retrieved papers is based on participant-generated data (Mena, 2024) and another article adopts a document-based empirical strategy (Piras, 2023). The remaining contributions (Colli Vignarelli, 2023; Ferritti & Guerrieri, 2020; Santiago, Pereira & Ernst, 2024; Zimmermann, 2023) develop intersectionality primarily at the level of theoretical or critical-analytical reflection, where it functions as an epistemological orientation and interpretive framework rather than as a methodological tool.

Colli Vignarelli (2023), for instance, discusses intersectionality in its conceptual and heuristic dimensions, without direct empirical investigations. Similarly, Ferritti and Guerrieri (2020), as well as Zimmermann (2023) adopt a theoretical and critical approach in specific epistemological traditions. In a slightly different way, Piras (2023) adopts a qualitative critical discourse analysis of European policy documents; although not based on fieldwork, this constitutes an empirical analysis of document-based

data. Here, intersectionality is explicitly used as both a theoretical and methodological tool to analyse policy discourses and to investigate which dimensions are included or excluded in ecological transition policies.

The study published by Mena (2024) investigated the racial model of self-representation in early childhood, adopting a qualitative exploratory design of a quasi-experimental type, based on drawing workshops with children aged 6 to 8 in the Colombian context. The analysis is based on an interpretative framework that classifies chromatic representations of the body into three categories—identity realism, identity alertness, and atypical cases—interpreting the use of *skin colour* as an indicator of tensions in the construction of racial identity within the school context. While grounded in a critical and decolonial intersectional framework, the empirical framework tends to prioritise *race* as the main structuring axis, with limited systematic exploration of the interdependence between different social categories.

Overall, the methodological configuration of the corpus suggests that intersectionality is primarily articulated at the level of theoretical and critical reflection, while its systematic empirical operationalisation remains marginal within the analysed contributions.

3.3. Findings of the analysed articles

This section presents a synthesis of the main results and implications that emerged from each of the six articles included in the review. The results can be organised into three main dimensions: a) Conceptual and epistemological dimension; b) Practice-oriented implications; and c) Policy-oriented implications.

3.3.1. Conceptual and epistemological dimension

Three studies (Colli Vignarelli, 2023; Santiago, Pereira & Ernst, 2024; Zimmermann, 2023) primarily advance the theoretical development of intersectionality. Colli Vignarelli (2023) positions intersectionality as a heuristic competence and a critical tool for rethinking pedagogical research and teacher training in structural and socially situated terms. Santiago et al. (2024) make a proposal for a theoretical integration between intersectionality, childhood studies, and intercultural pedagogy, consolidating this paradigm as a critical method for analysing childhood as a space traversed by multiple axes of power. While Zimmermann (2023) contributes to the conceptual expansion of intersectionality in an ecofeminist and decolonial key, broadening its theoretical scope beyond strictly educational settings. While not exclusively focused on formal schooling, Zimmermann (2023) contributes to educational scholarship by foregrounding intersectional ecofeminist epistemologies and proposing counter-pedagogical perspectives rooted in Global South experiences.

3.3.2. Practice-oriented implications

The articles by Ferritti and Guerrieri (2020) and Mena (2024) provide practice-oriented implications. The first paper highlights the need for inclusive training based on an intersectional reading of the conditions of adoption, disability, and ethnicity, while the second points to the urgent need for anti-racist pedagogical interventions capable of challenging the neutralisation of racial hierarchies within early childhood education.

3.3.3. Policy-oriented implications

The policy-oriented implications emerge mainly from Piras' contribution (2023), which critically examines European ecological transition policies through an intersectional lens. The analysis highlights how policies often adopt additive or neutralised approaches to inequality, pointing to the need for a more structural analysis capable of questioning the systemic inequalities embedded in institutional discourses.

Taken together, these findings delineate the current epistemological and methodological positioning of the intersectionality paradigm characterising the national educational debate and prepare the ground for a critical discussion of its transformative potential and existing limitations. The contributions support the theoretical consolidation of intersectionality more than its empirical operationalisation, with practice and policy implications remaining mostly programmatic.

4. Discussion

Our findings suggest that intersectionality is becoming increasingly established as a theoretical and analytical framework within the national pedagogical debate. While the studies included in the systematic review emphasise its transformative potential at the theoretical level, its methodological systematisation and empirical operationalisation remain underdeveloped. Indeed, our analysis revealed that intersectionality remains quantitatively marginal within Italian Class-A pedagogical journals (2020–2025), with only six eligible articles across three educational journals. Moreover, the retrieved contributions predominantly address intersectionality at a theoretical level, drawing on Black feminist thought, critical theory, and decolonial epistemologies.

From an epistemological point of view, the analysis indicates that the use of intersectionality in educational research is not a mere terminological choice but implies different ways of conceptualising knowledge and pedagogical action within educational research.

Three main tendencies emerged: a transformative orientation, which frames intersectionality as a critical paradigm aimed at challenging structural inequalities; a descriptive-additive orientation, in which intersectionality is used mainly to name or classify multiple identities without fully analysing their interdependence; and a politicised orientation, where intersectionality is employed as an analytical lens to critically interrogate institutional and policy discourses.

In the Italian pedagogical debate, intersectionality appears primarily as an epistemological orientation rather than as a systematically methodological framework. The predominance of a theory-oriented approach regarding the concept has already been shown in international literature (Pham Xuan, 2025; Codioli McMaster & Cook, 2019; Varsik & Gorochovskij, 2023) that through the here presented study could be confirmed for the national context as well. Most studies included in our reviews are rooted in foundational intersectional literature, notably linked to Crenshaw's work (1989) and the analysis of power, assuming a profound critical perspective. Here, intersectionality functions as a tool for critically interrogating and potentially transforming educational practices and systems. This supports the agenda of scholars in relation to the deconstruction of epistemic oppression (Freire, 1968/1993) and the assumption of a decolonial approach. By contrast, when intersectionality is seen as a more "soft" (Andreotti, 2006) or tokenistic dimension, its critical and transformative potential is significantly reduced, leaving the analysis of systematic oppression underdeveloped. In such cases, intersectionality risks being reduced to a vocabulary of diversity rather than functioning as a structural analytic lens on power, capable of interrogating the production of inequalities within educational institutions. In line with this, within the analysed corpus, two contributions adopt a transformative orientation (Santiago, Pereira & Ernst, 2024; Zimmermann, 2023), while three studies reflect a more descriptive-additive use of the concept, with direct implications for the pedagogical approaches. One contribution (Piras, 2023) instead mobilises intersectionality in a politicised way, using it as a critical lens to analyse policy discourse and expose the limitations of current institutional frameworks. In this sense, the epistemological differences are not only reflected within the theoretical positionings but also in the use of the terms which determine the pedagogical choices. At the level of language and discourse, the analysis reveals a frequent use of metaphors and symbolic representations such as the reference to the intertwining, multiplicity or kaleidoscope (Santiago, Pereira & Ernst, 2024) aimed at representing the complexity of differences and overcoming a rigidly categorical view.

Although such discursive strategies help make the complexity of educational phenomena visible, the risk, highlighted for instance in the analysis of European ecological transition policies (Piras, 2023), is that institutional discourses may adopt abstract or depoliticised conceptualisations of inequality, failing to address the structural interrelations of power and discrimination.

Beyond its epistemological configuration, these patterns also reveal structural dynamics within the national field. Thus, this configuration suggests not only epistemological marginality, but also structural fragility in terms of academic consolidation. Intersectionality circulates within restricted editorial and disciplinary spaces rather than being fully institutionalised within the national pedagogical field. A further significant element is the language of publishing: the prevalence of articles published in English further indicates that intersectionality is more strongly connected to international academic debates than to consolidated national traditions. This is in line with international studies (Pham Xuan, 2025)

mapping a growing consolidation of intersectional pedagogy in Anglophone contexts, while on the contrary the Italian context appears to be at an early stage of methodological intersectional development. This is even more relevant considering the international recommendations (Varsik & Gorochovskij, 2023) advocating intersectional approaches in educational policies and institutions. The findings of this review show a gap between international discourse and translation within the national pedagogical orientation. One possible explanation may lie in the historical configuration of Italian pedagogical tradition, which has long privileged theoretical and reflexive inquiry over empirical consolidation. Within this trajectory, the evolution of intercultural education towards a postcolonial perspective has facilitated the introduction of the intersectional paradigm into the pedagogical debate (Zoletto, 2011; Burgio, 2022; Lopez, 2018). However, this reception has remained largely theoretical, with limited systematic methodological operationalisation. Overall, these elements help explain the marginal institutionalisation of intersectionality within Italian educational research. This confirms the limited translation of intersectionality into systematic empirical research practices within the national context, as shown by the present systematic review.

5. Conclusion and implications

This systematic literature review has provided a structured mapping of the presence and use of intersectionality in recent Italian pedagogical research, highlighting a complex and ambivalent picture. The findings reveal three main elements: the marginality of quantitative studies using an intersectional lens within Italian Class-A journals; its consolidation as a predominantly theoretical reference; and the limited development of systematic empirical operationalisation.

Across the analysed contributions, intersectionality predominantly functions as an epistemological orientation or interpretative lens rather than as a systematically operationalised methodological framework. In this sense, intersectionality is a significant resource for promoting a critical shift in pedagogy, capable of questioning universalistic or apparently neutral approaches and making visible the differentiated processes of inclusion and exclusion that operate in educational institutions. At the same time, the review highlights a significant gap between the growing theoretical centrality attributed to intersectionality and its actual translation into empirical research. In the contributions examined, systematic methodological applications of the intersectional approach are still limited, while theoretical or conceptual reflections prevail.

This gap calls for a critical examination of how theoretical paradigms are translated into research practices within the Italian educational context and underscores the need to incorporate intersectionality in a concrete and operational way.

A further element that emerged concerns the unresolved tension between a critical and transformative use of intersectionality and the risk of its descriptive, additive or depoliticised application. In some cases, intersectionality tends to be reduced to a mere enumeration of categories of difference, potentially losing its capacity to analyse the interconnected systems of power that produce and reproduce educational inequalities. This risk appears particularly relevant in the relationship between pedagogical research and educational policies, where formal references to inclusion or sustainability may not be accompanied by a real problematisation of the underlying social hierarchies. From a pedagogical point of view, the results of the systematic literature review confirm the potential of intersectionality to orient education towards social justice, equity, and the recognition of diversity. When approached critically, intersectionality allows us to understand the complexity of educational experiences marked by multiple forms of discrimination and to support the development of anti-racist, decolonial, and eco-social pedagogies capable of broadening the educational horizon beyond an individualising or compensatory vision of inclusion. This review therefore underscores the relevance of an intersectional perspective not only as an analytical framework, but also as a basis for pedagogical and policy-oriented action. By foregrounding the interdependence of multiple axes of inequality and inequity, such an approach can inform more inclusive educational practices (e.g., Ferritti & Guerrieri, 2020; Mena, 2024) and support the development of educational policies (e.g., Piras, 2023) that are better attuned to the complexity of individuals' lived experiences and structural disadvantages.

Overall, this contribution is a first exploratory step aimed at mapping a field of research that is still poorly systematised in the area of pedagogy in the Italian and international context. Despite the limited size of the corpus, the review highlights the need to strengthen empirically based research practices capable of translating intersectionality into tools for investigation and educational intervention.

In a context where theoretical reflections still tend to prevail over analytical and political operationalisation, descriptive, additive, or depoliticised uses of the concept may become more frequent. This further confirms the need to strengthen empirically grounded, methodologically explicit research practices that preserve the critical potential of intersectionality.

This review presents a few methodological limitations. First, by focusing exclusively on explicit uses of the term “intersect*” in publication titles within Italian Class-A pedagogical journals, the analysis could not capture implicit or conceptually aligned approaches that do not adopt the terminology directly in the title. This methodological decision to work with a title search only—and not to extend the string to an abstract and keywords search—was necessary due to the lack of a comprehensive national database for educational research publications in Italy. As a consequence, the manual identification of sources is especially resource-consuming. Second, the focus on the Italian context does not allow for systematic comparative analysis with another national panorama, an aspect that should be further studied in future research.

Strengthening intersectionality within Italian educational research therefore requires not only continued theoretical engagement but also methodological innovation, including empirically grounded designs and policy-oriented investigations capable of translating critical theory into analytical practice. In this sense, the present contribution highlights an initial step toward consolidating intersectionality as an epistemological and methodological framework within the national pedagogical field.

Future research should therefore explore the empirical operationalisation of intersectionality within educational research in Italy and beyond, particularly through Mixed Methods Research designs that capture the interwovenness of multiple disadvantageous factors and the relational dynamics of power. These results may be fruitful to both translating critical theoretical insights into pedagogical research practices, and, finally, to find their way into pedagogical practice.

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Appendix

Table 2 – Studies included in review.

N.	Authors	Year	Journal	Language	Theoretical Roots	(Methodological) Approach	Results
1	Ferritti & Guerrieri	2020	<i>Educazione Interculturale</i>	English	Disability Critical Race Theory (Annamma, Ferri & Connor, 2018); multiple discrimination	Theoretical-critical analysis; Disability Critical Race Theory; illustrative examples	Highlights how adoption, disability and ethnic difference intersect in shaping educational vulnerability; risk of micro-exclusion within school contexts.
2	Colli Vignarelli	2023	<i>Pedagogia e Vita</i>	Italian	Critical Theory and Reflexive Pedagogy; Crenshaw (1989) and Foucault's idea of "dispositive" (1975/1977)	Theoretical-conceptual analysis; heuristic function of intersectionality; epistemological positioning; pedagogical theory	Proposes intersectionality as a heuristic competence in pedagogy to analyse power relations and critically rethink educational practices and teacher education.
3	Piras	2023	<i>Professionalità Studi</i>	English	Collins and Bilge (2016); Ecofeminism and Climate Justice	Document-based empirical analysis	Critically examines European ecological transition policies, showing how institutional discourses adopt neutralised approaches to inequality, failing to integrate an intersectional perspective.
4	Zimmermann	2023	<i>Professionalità Studi</i>	English	Latin American ecofeminism and decolonial feminism; coloniality of power (Lugones, 2008; Ulloa, 2016)	Theoretical analysis; contextual interpretation; Global South perspective	Develops an ecofeminist and Global South perspective highlighting the intersection of gender, class, territory and environmental justice in socio-environmental inequalities.
5	Mena	2024	<i>Educazione Interculturale</i>	Spanish	Crenshaw (1989; 1991); Black Latin American and Afrocentric perspectives on <i>race</i> and childhood (Moore, 2020; Meneses, 2021)	Exploratory semi-experimental approach and design; reflective analysis	Shows how racialised identities are constructed in early childhood contexts, highlighting the role of <i>race</i> in shaping children's self-representation and experiences of exclusion.
6	Santiago et al.	2024	<i>Educazione Interculturale</i>	English	Black feminist epistemology and intersectionality (Collins, 1990); Childhood Studies (Prout & James, 2010); intercultural pedagogy (Zoletto, 2023)	Theoretical essay; qualitative orientation; conceptual framework application	Proposes an intersectional framework integrating Childhood Studies and intercultural education to analyse how multiple axes of power shape children's experiences in educational contexts.

Barbara Gross – Libera Università di Bolzano (Italy)

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3072-8081> | ✉ barbara.gross@unibz.it

Barbara Gross is Associate Professor in intercultural, general and diversity education at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano. She is Board Member of the national Phd in Peace Studies at the Sapienza University of Rome, the *International Association for Intercultural Education* (IAIE), and Managing Editor of the journal *Intercultural Education* (Taylor & Francis). Her research focuses on social, linguistic and migration-related diversity, social and educational (in)equity, intersectionality in education, and internationalisation of education.

Giulia Filippi – Libera Università di Bolzano (Italy)

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4453-7384>

Giulia Filippi is a Research Assistant at the Faculty of Education, Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Italy. She holds a PhD at the same institute in General and Social Pedagogy, with a focus on Initial Teacher Education and Global Citizenship Education (GCE) in Italy and Ireland. Her research interests include intercultural pedagogy; intersectionality; comparative education; and GCE.