Equity in educational systems and policies: a difficult social justice choice

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ABSTRACT

This article stresses equity and equality within educational systems, from a critical point of view. It analyses the educational policies of UNESCO, the OECD and the EU, with a particular focus on the academic achievements of students from migrant backgrounds, and highlights the urgent need to create a broad vision of intercultural education within a wider conception of politics which – crucially – includes social justice.

Keywords: _Equity – Educational policies – UNESCO – PISA Programme – Intercultural Education – Social Justice_

**Equità nei sistemi e nelle politiche educative: una difficile scelta di giustizia sociale**

Nel presente contributo[1], assumendo in modo critico una visione non neutrale di equità nei processi educativi, si analizzano le politiche educative dell'UNESCO, dell'OECD e dell'Unione Europea, in particolare riferite al successo scolastico degli studenti di origine migrante, evidenziando l'urgenza di allargare una visione di educazione interculturale in un quadro concettuale politico più ampio che includa la giustizia sociale.

Parole chiave: _Equità – Politiche educative – UNESCO – Programma PISA – Educazione interculturale – Giustizia sociale_

Heterogeneous contexts and emerging educational needs

Caritas-Migrantes' 25th Report (2016) paints a picture of Italy as a country "*shaped by immigration*". More than 5 million non-Italian citizens, of whom 52.7% are women, have been living here for a number of years – with an increase of only 1.9% from 2014 to 2015. 198 different nationalities (of the world's total of 232) are represented, most of whom (almost 60%) live in Northern Italy.

To put this in an international perspective, 243.7 million people globally no longer live in their country of birth, and according to the UN's *Department for Economic and Social Affairs*, in 2015 31.2% of all international migrants lived in Europe[2]. Italy has the eleventh highest number of migrants in the world, and in Europe ranks fifth, after Germany, the UK, France and Spain (Caritas-Migrantes, 2016).

Migration – both between European Union (hereafter EU) member states, and from non-member states into the EU – has profoundly changed the size and composition of the Union's population, as has the fact that Spain, Italy, the UK, Germany and France have all granted citizenship to a considerable number of people[3].

As well as the large numbers of fairly well-settled foreign citizens, Europe is now also dealing with a growing number of asylum seekers and refugees: a situation which must be solved with urgency, through the redistribution of new arrivals at the European and national level (Caritas-Migrantes, 2016). This humanitarian emergency has had a relatively small impact in Italy – contrary to local alarmism, often fed by the media – since many of the people who arrive here by sea move on to other European states as soon as they can (Carta di Roma, 2015).

In the current climate of political and economic uncertainty – marked by the complexity of cultural pluralism, by increasingly multiethnic environments and by continued market globalization – economies, social mores and cultural models, even educational

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[1] This paper is an excerpt from my doctoral thesis "*Pianificare percorsi di successo scolastico per studenti di origine migrante. Un mixed method study nella scuola secondaria in Italia*" (Malusà, 2017a), defended at the Doctoral Course in Psychological Sciences and Education, University of Trento, on March 9, 2017.

[2] I use the Eurostat definition of "*migrant*", which includes a variety of statuses: *immigrants in the strict sense*, i.e. people who have left their country of usual residence in order to come to the country in which they are now resident, regardless of their actual citizenship (defined as "long term" if they leave their previous country of permanent residence for 12 months or more); *foreigners*, i.e. people who are not citizens of the country in which they live (whether they were born in that country, or not), also called *non-nationals*; *second generation*, i.e. people from *mixed backgrounds* (born in their country of current residence, with one parent born abroad) or from a foreign background (born in the stare of current residence, with two foreign born parents) (Eurostat, 2011)

[3] Spain granted citizenship to the highest number of people in 2014 (205,900), followed by Italy (129,000), the UK (125,600), Germany (110,600) and France (105,600) (Source: Eurostat, data from 7 June 2016).

institutions, face new challenges in terms of inequality and social injustice (Banks, 2008; Gundara & Portera, 2008).

In the Italian school system, in particular, the growing number of students with non-Italian citizenship is a reality (ISMU-MIUR, 2016). This would highlight the need to encourage policies which welcome, respect and support diverse identities in an equal learning process in our public schools (Malusà & Tarozzi, 2016), "avoiding turning diversity into inequality" (MIUR, 2012b, p. 5), as highlighted also by the Ministry's *Guidelines* (MIUR, 2014c).

A "normal diversity" (ISMU-MIUR, 2015, p. 131) is thus developing in the heterogenous environments of Italian schools, environments which have experienced dramatic change in recent years. The steady growth in the numbers of foreign students born in Italy – the so called second generation – means that these are now the majority – in 2014-15 55.3% – of the total number of children born to migrant parents (ISMU-MIUR, 2016).

The shift to a "different normality" desired by the Ministry (ISMU-MIUR, 2015, p. 133) requires that the specific needs of these foreign students be discovered, understood and responded to – needs rooted in their individual life stories, experiences of immigration and socio-cultural backgrounds (Catarci, 2015). The parents or grandparents of these children may be foreign born – some in, some outside, Europe – or they themselves may have come to Italy – either recently or when very young – or, indeed, they may be second or even third generation migrants.

Neither national nor international studies have yet succeeded in presenting a detailed picture of the complex diversity of the current migrant population in Italy, or of their particular school trajectories (Malusà, Pisanu & Tarozzi, 2016; Malusà, Tarozzi & Pisanu, 2016; Tarozzi, 2017), with a distinction being drawn only between the first and second generations[4], and in a generalized manner.

In general, however, we see a learning gap between native born students and those from immigrant backgrounds (EU, 2008), revealed by standardized international literacy tests in primary schools (PIRLS) and by the OECD-PISA surveys of 15 year olds' academic skills and knowledge (in all the areas tested) (Dronkers, 2014), with a growing rate of school dropout among immigrant students in almost all of the countries surveyed in Europe. It is not therefore surprising that school success and social justice education are emerging as priorities in Italian schools, and across Europe (Malusà & Tarozzi, 2017).

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[4] Since 2007/2008 the Ministry of Education has been publishing separate data on foreign students born in Italy and on those who have entered the Italian school system within the current year, in the knowledge that the two groups represent – in some ways – two sides of the same coin (MIUR, 2012a, p. 45).

Academic failure as an elusive concept

What do we mean by academic success or failure? The latter has been described as:

> all those cases in which students, during their school career, are unable to find opportunities to fully develop their potential in a way which is meaningful for them. (Ventura, 2012b, p. 66/my translation)

Failure, in fact, is a particularly complex and ambiguous concept, and encompasses a range of phenomena: not just school dropout but also repeated or failed years, the avoidance – either with or without formal permission – of mandatory schooling, irregular attendance, being older than the class average, moving from one school to another, inability to settle, lack of interest, low performance, lack of trust in the school or maladjustment, and a failure to acquire the skills necessary for future academic success (Ghione, 2005; Santagati, 2015).

This question, however, should not be seen as a linear, deterministic phenomenon; it needs to be analysed systematically and processually, taking the personal, social, economic and cultural factors involved into account. If going to school and succeeding are considered essential conditions for a basic education in any rights-based State – according to the principle of equal opportunity – all students, regardless of their socio-cultural background, must be given this opportunity, in order to ensure that *formal* equality becomes *substantial* equality (Colombo, 2014, p. 79).

From this perspective, academic failure is seen not just as the failure of a student, but also that of the school system – since it demonstrates the system's inability to educate (Malusà, 2017b).

The perspective of solidarity and UNESCO's educational approach

Many international studies, and the independent NESSE reports , support the contention that educational systems are not functioning in the same way for the whole student population, and are still – right across the Western world – discriminating in terms of origin (native v. immigrant), gender (male v. female), socio-economic conditions and regional differences (North v. South).

In an attempt to develop education, some organizational and functional reforms have been instituted:

> […] Democratization was at first designed to give wider, more general, access to education and to prolong the period of schooling. It soon became apparent, however, that equality of access to education, although a necessary condition for democratization, was by no means sufficient to bring it about. If there is to be true democratization, effective equality of opportunity to succeed is just as necessary, and it calls for educational measures and, unquestionably, for social changes as well. This effort to equalize opportunities both of access and of success must be directed, in the first place, towards removing or reducing disparities between different countries or those which, within a country, penalize women, the inhabitants of rural areas, immigrants, certain ethnic or linguistic groups, certain socially underprivileged categories and, in the poorest nations, the large numbers of children, young people and adults who have received no education. (Malkova & Vulfson, 1987, p. 31)

The *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization* (UNESCO), in particular, from a "New Humanist" perspective (Plouin & Preis, 2014), has, for years, been proposing a paradigm change in education in order to encourage greater cultural development worldwide. Based on goals established at the *World Conference for Education for All* (1990) with regard to increasing primary school provision globally and sharply reducing illiteracy, ten years later, in Dakar, UNESCO – in collaboration with the UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and the World Bank – launched the ambitious programme of the *Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All (EFA, 2000),* with the aim of reaching six important strategic educational objectives by 2015 – for children, young people and adults. These were progressively monitored (EFA, 2015), had not been reached by the set date, and were urgently re-proposed for 2030 in the *Incheon Declaration Education 2030* (2015).

Although considerable progress has been made, the latest report (EFA, 2015) indicates that only 52% of countries have reached the goal of universal primary education; striking inequalities remain, based on income, gender and disadvantaged/vulnerable status, which hinder educational achievement; in Low Income countries only 1 in 3 adolescents completes secondary school (in Middle and High Income countries the figure is 5 out of 6); and a significant difference between more and less privileged student persists, not just in terms of access but also of learning, a distance which increases at the higher levels of education. Furthermore, progress has stalled in recent years and in 2012 there were still 121 million children and adolescents out-of-school (12% of the population) (*ibidem*, p. 3), so further effort is required to ensure inclusive, high quality, equal education for all.

And so the *Global Education First Initiative* (GEFI), instituted by the then UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in September 2012, recommitted to the millennium objectives, including – among the three priorities – primary education for all (Tarozzi & Torres, 2016).

The *Global Partnership for Education* (GPE, 2014) warns how at risk the idea of basic education for all is, pointing out the high levels of repetition and dropout (*ibidem*, p. 35), and reaffirms – among the strategic goals to be reached by 2020 (*ibid.*, 2016) – the need to improve equality in learning by increasing public spending on education, encouraging inclusion through more effective educational systems, which pay more attention to the most marginalized children and young people, including those affected by conflict or other unstable situations.

Impact on education policies

Although considered a "*global actor*" (Milana, 2014, p. 75) with regard to informing policy decisions, UNESCO's mandate to actually implement anything is extremely limited, particularly in education, defined by Singh as "*the Achilles' heel of the organization*") (2011, p. 46), not least because of its structure and ways of functioning. In terms of budgetary independence, in fact, the organization is on a par with the OECD (*Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*): its ordinary budget comes from member states, this is increasingly augmented from other sources, recently also including private donors, for whose beneficence the two organizations are in competition.

Given its rather inadequate budget, UNESCO, in order to implement its programme, maintains close relations with other *Non-Governmental Organizations* (NGOs), in accordance with its vision, which is grounded in a humanist philosophy (Milana, 2014, p. 76). Of these, the *Global Campaign for Education* (GCE) merits particular attention: seeing education as a fundamental human right, since 2000 the GCE has worked with the EFA to promote and attempt to ensure high quality inclusive, equal education globally, notwithstanding the continued asymmetry of transnational political power and the organization's own dependence on external funding *(Tota, 2014)*.

Within the framework of global *governance*, the politics of UNESCO are seen as "*soft*", some academics – Weiss and Wilkinson, for instance – have classified the organization under the rubric of "*low politics*" (2011, p. xviii), in contrast with other bodies considered key to social and economic development globally/in Europe, particularly the OECD and the EU (Milana, 2014; Mundy, 2007), whose influence on education policies we will examine below.

Monitoring quality in educational systems: the OECD's approach

The evaluation of education systems has become a characteristic theme in the intervention policies of government ministries and international organizations, concerned to monitor the

relationship between spending and results in relation to the levels of instruction (Carugati & Selleri, 2001). The goal is "*to promote policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world*" (OECD, s.d.).

In OECD countries over the last twenty years numerous recursive comparative evaluations have attempted to identify the literacy levels attained by students [5], such as those promoted by the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (OECD-PISA), or by the *International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement* (IEA) on reading (*Progress in International Reading Literacy Study - PIRLS*), on science and maths (*Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study - TIMSS*), and, since 2009, on citizenship (*International Civic and Citizenship Education Study - ICCS*)[6] and since 2013 on IT skills (*International Computer and Information Literacy Study -* ICILS).

The PISA assessment programme

The PISA programme, started in 1997, enables the monitoring of education systems within the OECD (other countries can also participate) every three years[7]. The programme focuses recursively on transversal skills, reading, maths and science, and is intended

> to measure how well students, at age 15, are prepared to meet the challenges they may encounter in future life. (OECD-PISA, 2006, p. 7)

It thus looks forward to the possibility of lifelong learning.

In the first assessment (defined as *PISA 2000* – the year in which the data were collected) reading was the main object of scrutiny[8], in the second it was maths (*PISA 2003*),

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[5] The first OECD PIAAC (*Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies*) was aimed at adults, and defined literacy as "the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society" (UNESCO, 2004, p. 13).

[6] The IEA assessments examined children in their fourth year of primary school (PIRLS), students in their fourth and eighth years (TIMMS) and in Year 8 (ICCS).

[7] 65 countries took part in PISA 2012, of which 34 were OECD members.

[8] In fact, more tests/questions are administered in the main area of the survey.

in the third, science (*PISA 2006*), then returning to reading in 2009, maths in 2012[9] and science in 2015. An analysis of the results reveals both any differences in the students' performance diachronically and possible correlations between results in the different areas of competence investigated.

The reference population of the study is 15 year olds attending school, since in most OECD countries this is the age at which compulsory schooling ends. The sample in each country is at least 5,000 students, taken from a sample of at least 150 schools[10]. In each skill area a reference framework defines dimensions for content, processes and complicated contexts, which are useful in designing the tests[11]. The data is collected through structured written tests, that include multiple-choice, closed constructed-response and open constructed-response formats[12], connected to a skill scale of increasing difficulty, which corresponds to increasingly high levels of capacity in the students. This is designed to enable analysis of average skill levels and the distribution of performance both within national samples and between countries, providing useful data – according to those running the project – for the evaluation of school systems and, by comparing countries, for identifying factors and school policies which foster high performances and/or limit the impact of students' socio-economic backgrounds.

In fact, in order to monitor equality levels in the various educational systems, data relative to situational variables are collected through a student questionnaire, a questionnaire about the school for head teachers, a parental questionnaire and – since PISA 2015 – a teachers' questionnaire. Analysis of these results allows the students' results to be interpreted in relation to their school, family and socio-cultural backgrounds (Index of economic, social and cultural status – ESCS).

The questionnaires cover[13]:

– *for the students,* their socio-economic origins (home and family, with information on the educational level and occupations of parents, income levels, country of origin and

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[9] In PISA 2012, *problem solving* (carried out on a computer) was added as another main area of data collection.

[10] In each of the participating schools a maximum of 42 students were sampled.

[11] The reference framework for PISA 2015 can be found at http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/pisa2015draft frameworks.htm.

[12] These are the tools, solely in electronic format in the main study, used in the last assessment, PISA (2015): Maths, reading and science tests; *Financial Literacy* tests; collaborative *problem solving*; Student Questionnaire; School Questionnaire; Parental Questionnaire; Teachers' Questionnaire.

[13] With reference, in particular, to PISA 2015 (http://www.invalsi.it/invalsi/ri/pisa2015.php?page=pisa2015_it_0 3).

language spoken in the home), study paths and motivations and attitudes with regard to school and learning;

– *for school principals*, information about the student body, the organization of the institution (programmes, evaluation procedures, school atmosphere, teaching policies and practices) and its resources (computers, laboratories, library);

– *for the parents of students participating in the assessment*, their family situation, attitudes and behaviour in relation to education in general and to the area tested, whether it was possible for them to choose their child's school and their immigration status;

– *for the teachers*, their study path, further training and professional development, beliefs and attitudes, collaboration with colleagues and parents, teaching methods.

Distinctive aspects of the PISA project

This ambitious project is the result of both national and international collaboration. Instigated by the OECD, which has overall responsibility for it, the project is managed by a *PISA Governing Board*, consisting of representatives of OECD members, who define the project's priorities. The project is actually run by an international consortium made up of a range of institutions with the necessary technical and operational expertise.

In Italy, in particular, the project is funded by the Ministry of Public Education (MPI), and also by the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR), which has delegated responsibility to the *Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Educativo di Istruzione e di Formazione* (INVALSI).

In recent years PISA has attracted increasing attention, not only stimulating public debate about schooling and the results obtained by different school systems, but also providing international data of great general interest, such as indicators of (un)successful educational policy (Grek, 2009, p. 26). Although PISA is involved in comparative research – unlike the IEA – it is to some extent innovative, involving: a concept of literacy aimed at ensuring that students are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills for life when they leave school; a dynamic model of lifelong learning; assessment every three years; free circulation of reports and data[14], and, above all, a closer relationship between research and policy (Siniscalco, 2011, pp. 6-7).

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[14] The free circulation of OECD-PISA reports is guaranteed by continuous on-line sharing: on the day of their publication all the relevant documents can be downloaded free from the PISA site: the reports on the research results, the different frameworks or the whole international database; for media consumption there is also a series of summaries, including, for example, *PISA in Focus, Teaching in Focus, Education Indicators in Focus*, intended to identify the particular characteristics of the most "high performing" education systems in the world. Numerous tweets also give public opinion almost daily information about specific aspects of the assessment.

Beyond economics: a critical view of PISA

PISA has focused on issues with a direct impact on educational policies, and the less satisfactory the results emerging from international comparisons have been, the more they have affected policy decisions[15], generating a great deal of press coverage, which sometimes degenerated – according to Miguel A. Pereyra – into "*a media circus*" (2011a, p. 2)[16].

A multidisciplinary interest in PISA amongst academics is also growing, as Antonio Luzón and Mónica Torres' study (2011) indicates;[17] its analysis of the academic literature reveals not only the predominance within the Social Sciences of publications on education, but also in other disciplines (Sociology, Psychology, Mathematics, History, Philosophy…) and – particularly – Economics[18].

Within this multiplicity of views, ample critical research points out the progressive and decisive influence of international agencies – like the OECD – on education, which is gradually being marketized in the context of a growing arena for *educational governance*[19] which follows the logic of comparisons between states based on standardized criteria (Martens, 2007; Martens & Niemann, 2010):

> […] In recent years, their influence [of international agencies on education] has become a generalized
> phenomenon giving rise to an increasing internationalization of education. In fact, the 'cognitive
> horizon' of these international agencies, such as the OECD, reaches beyond traditional borders and
> national and regional identities of its member countries […]. An additional distinctive feature of this

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[15] A reference, in particular, to Germany, whose PISA 2000 results – lower than the international average – caused a real "shock", as the superiority of German educational systems had been taken for granted. Germany subsequently embarked upon wide ranging educational reforms (Kerstin Martens & Niemann, 2010, p. 2).

[16] In the Luzón & Torres (2011) study, an analysis of the headlines in the main national newspapers revealed a considerable media impact: news based on analysis of the *PISA Report* was painstakingly circulated, with reference not only to 15 year olds' competences in reading, maths and science, but also with a range of polemics on education authorities, and their presumed failures and inefficient methods, with the aim of influencing national and European educational policies.

[17] The above study analyzed academic production from 2000 to 2010, using Thomson's database, *Web of Science*, *Scopus* from Elsevier and *Google Scholar*, entering [PISA*] and [PISA and OECD] into the search engines and cross-referencing the different records obtained with the support of *Pajek*.

[18] Particularly visible among the publications are: studies on Germany; the "G" factor of intelligence; different teaching methods; the possible implications and consequences of certain learning environments or social variance, such as immigrant status.

[19] *Governance* refers to operating mechanisms related to the procedures of "self-organizing, interorganizational networks characterised by interdependence, resource exchange, rules of the game and significant autonomy from the state" (Rhodes, 1997, p. 15).

'cognitive horizon' is its goal of generating policy-based *regulatory competition* on objective criteria, scientifically researched […] and presented in an easily accessible manner. (Pereyra et al., 2011a, p. 2)

The OECD is considered to have succeeded in legitimizing its own power and defining "what really counts" in education through a complex set of processes – literal *mechanisms of educational governance* – and, building on its past successes, to have made itself an increasingly authoritative voice; creating personal epistemic communities of skilled experts capable of spreading ideas (*soft policy*)[20], policy practices and analytical tools (*hard policy*); and capitalizing on its considerable bureaucratic resources in order to achieve its own organizational goals (Morgan & Shahjahan, 2014).

The logic underlying the construction of the PISA instruments is believed still to be influenced by the first assessments, carried out in 1994 by the *International Adult Literacy Survey* (IALS) – in collaboration with *Statistics Canada* – in 7 countries, on a target population aged between 16 and 65, the goal of which was to create literacy profiles comparable between different countries, languages and cultures (Morgan, 2011).

The results (OECD & Statistics-Canada, 1995) revealed a close connection between a country's literacy levels and its economic potential; a trend confirmed by further surveys (in 1996 and 1998) in 16 other countries and closely linked to Gary Becker's theory of *Human Capital* (1993), which considers education to be an investment for national economies and an aid to their economic growth[21].

According to Morgan (2011), while the IEA items were conceived to measure student performance in relation to the national curricula of their own countries, those developed by PISA are intended to monitor students' competences in the context of the global economy: instead of preparing the young for local labour markets, the task of schools is now seen as being to educate workers destined for an international labour market, and so

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[20] The idea is accepted that good results in a series of PISA exercises reflect the quality of education given by a school system.

[21] The concept of human capital has existed since the end of the 18th century, where it appears in the works of Adam Smith, but it had been little discussed until the late 1950s and 1960s when a number of economists, including Theodore Schultz and Gary S. Becker – author of *Human Capital* (1964) and winner of the 1992 Nobel prize for economics – began to use the metaphor of "capital" to explain how education could contribute to the economic growth of a country. "Human capital is defined by the OECD as the knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well-being" (Keeley, 2007, p. 29). The OECD identifies education as a key element for the creation of human capital, and believes it to impact in a range of economic and social sectors, and to benefit countries in the long term, at both the individual and the economic level.

> [t]he PISA in its current formation serves the needs of politicians, policymakers and international and regional organizations as an accountability engine for governing education in the 21st century. (Morgan, 2011, p. 57)

PISA's decision to evaluate the extent to which schools are preparing young people for tomorrow's world is thus placed within the OECD's broader neoliberal policy rationale, which considers education to be an investment in national economies and an aid to countries' economic growth (Krejsler, 2013; Morgan & Volante, 2016), a vision which is now having an alarming influence on the mission of the public school – which should be not only to provide high quality, modern education, but also – crucially – to be fair and democratic (Meyer & Benavot, 2013a).

In recent years the OECD has focused mainly on the existing relationship between education and strategic competences (OECD, n.d.) – with detailed empirical analyses of member countries' economic growth (OECD, 2015d) – notwithstanding the evident weaknesses now being revealed of an approach to human capital which does not take the current economic environment into account: the global mobility of the labour market (Lauder, 2015), un- and underemployment, growing income gaps, stagnant or low wages, poverty and inequality (ILO, 2016).

While it is true that education cannot solve our economy's structural problems, if education policies challenged the current paradigm of economic policy, they could help to build an alternative – fair and sustainable – future for all, a future based on inclusive social wellbeing (Morgan & Volante, 2016), and one which would have the greatest impact on the weakest segments of society.

PISA's potential to study "foreign" students

While the criticisms outlined above are clearly valid[22], the OECD's standardized testing of skills has nevertheless shed some light on the problems – which had, for a long time, gone unexamined – related to immigrant students' lack of success at school. This information

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[22] A reference to the consideration of academic success in terms of a country's economic efficiency. The declaration by Angel Gurría, OECD Secretary-General, during a press conference in Tokyo on 4 December 2007 at which the PISA 2006 results were presented, perfectly encapsulates this vision: "In the highly competitive globalised economy of today, quality education is one of the most valuable assets that a society and an individual can have. Skills are key factors for productivity, economic growth and better living standards". (The full speech can be accessed at: http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/launchofpisa2006.htm).

allows us to go beyond their intercultural recognition to address the challenge of ensuring their equal access to education (Banks, 2009).

The PISA assessments have, in fact, enabled a better understanding of the considerable educational disadvantages suffered by students from immigrant backgrounds, providing information not only on acquired competences, but also on environmental variables, such as the age at which a student came to the host country, the language spoken at home (L1) and learnt at school (L2), motivation, attitudes and aspirations. The factors linked to academic success/failure are then explored at different levels of analysis: the student, class, school, community, type of school, teaching methods, country, in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the various school systems included in the survey, and possible – short and medium term – intervention targets (Edele & Stanat, 2011).

The recent PISA 2015 (OECD-PISA, 2016) surveys, focused on inclusion and "fairness" – equal opportunity – provide a longitudinal (2006-15) analysis of the results achieved by 15 year olds and the educational opportunities offered them by the different school systems; there is also a section dedicated to an analysis (*ibid.*, pp. 241-262) of students from immigrant backgrounds (in which the first and second generations are differentiated), in which some factors associated with low performance are indicated: the language spoken at home, concentrations of immigrant background students in certain schools and the impact of immigration policies on school populations.

The PISA test, however, does not comprehend the whole variables' system that determines the academic performance of students from immigrant backgrounds, which cannot be explained only in terms of family, peer group, school or education system; Dronkers and De Heus (2013) highlight the need for more detailed multifactorial analyses, which include environmental factors related to, for example, country of origin, host country, and the community to which the student belongs. Critical research (Dronkers & De Heus, 2013; Edele & Stanat, 2011) also asserts the urgent need for cross-sectional designs to enable analysis of transition processes (before and after) – so crucial to academic success throughout one's life – and robust causal inferences.

Above all, it seems that to date analysis has failed to deliver clear proposals on intervention, particularly with regard to the problems faced by students from immigrant backgrounds.

The OECD has therefore alerted schools to the academic failure of immigrant students, not only with reference to the PISA assessments (OECD, 2010): further reports suggest concrete measures aimed at remedying the problems identified, within a conceptual framework of inclusion and equity[23].

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[23] Between 2006 and 2016 (June) 62 OECD publications in the educational field dealt with issues around immigration.

Equity, as understood by the OECD, is

[…] a matter of design and concerted policy efforts. Achieving greater equity in education is not only a social justice imperative, it is also a way to use resources more effectively, increase the supply of skills that fuel economic growth, and promote social cohesion. As such, equity should be one of the key objectives in any strategy to improve an education system. (OECD-PISA, 2016, p. 270)

Between the EU's strategies and education policies: what kind of equity?

OECD data from 2013 show that across the EU an average of 11.2% of the 15 year olds attending school were from immigrant backgrounds (*ibidem*, p. 248), a figure which is continuing to rise[24].

In Italy, too, the number of foreign students in the educational system has grown constantly and significantly: from 2.2% in the A.Y. 2001/02 to 9.2% in 2014/15 (of the total population), with a 20% increase in the last 5 years (ISMU-MIUR, 2016, p. 7).

Guaranteeing equal educational opportunity and promoting equity and social cohesion is one of the main challenges currently facing the European Union's education policy makers. In general, international surveys show that students from immigrant backgrounds do not perform as well as their native peers , a trend which the international standardized PIRLS literacy in primary schools tests confirm. The OECD-PISA assessments (OECD-PISA, 2010; OECD, 2013b) of standard academic competences at 15 confirm that immigrant students in this age group perform worse than students from the host country, in all the areas tested. Moreover, national indicators show that in all European countries, even the Nordic (considered to be more equitable), first and second generation students from foreign backgrounds are more disadvantaged in terms of the types of school they are channelled into (usually vocational); and their duration of study, attendance, achievement and qualifications.

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[24] The Commission pointed out that "net migration to Europe has tripled since 1960. Some countries have long histories of immigration; others have experienced an unprecedented increase in the last decade. Immigration is a global phenomenon, but there are large variations among countries in the size of migrant flows and the ethnic profile of immigrants. Teaching immigrant students is becoming an important part of reality in an increasing number of European schools. E.g. in 2009/2010 academic year there were 17.6% of students with the first language other than German registered in Austrian schools; in Flanders the number of NAMS enrolled in primary education has doubled in three academic years (since 2006/2007 to 2009/2010); in Greece the percentage of 'other language' students in pre-primary, primary and secondary schools for the school year 2010-11 has risen to 12%, while it used to be 7.3% in 2006-07" (CEU, 2013, p. 6).

The high dropout rate (numbers of early school leavers, henceforth ESL[25]) is also disproportionately high (Park & Sandefur, 2010).

This phenomenon was already so significant that the European Commission, during the Lisbon Conference, required the member States to implement intervention strategies to reduce the number of ESLs to below 10% by 2010; this goal was not met and was then re-proposed as a matter of urgency in the EU Agenda "*Europe 2020: the European Union strategy for growth and employment*" (EU, 2010)[26].

Almost two decades after the Lisbon European Council, despite the European ministers' statement that their basic goal was "*to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion*", little has actually been achieved, although

> the impact of that change on education systems and reforms all over Europe has been widely attested [. . .], with the priority of economic development, the emphasis on generating social capital, the dominant role of economic and industrial organizations in the definition of education policies. (Tarozzi, 2010, p. 5/my translation)

The strategy's principal aim was to turn the continent's educational systems into international beacons of quality, efficacy, and equity between European countries, giving education an important role in guaranteeing economic development and increased competition in a global environment characterized by social complexity, cultural pluralism, growing inequality and social exclusion.

Although education is one of its five strategic goals *Europa 2020* seems, in fact, to be more concerned with bridging the gap between education and the work place – defining the qualifications and skills most valued by the various professions and then – to meet these requirements - encouraging youth exchanges, increasing the use of digital technologies in schools, and making schools more efficient and competitive –than reducing inequality and social asymmetries (Malusà & Tarozzi, 2017).

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[25] The percentage of young people between 18 and 24 with, at most, the "licenza media", who are not participating in any form of education or training, a recently revised definition, given in *Early Leaver from Education and Training*.

[26] In the Preamble, José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, restated "five measurable EU targets for 2020 that will steer the process and be translated into national targets: for employment; for research and innovation; for climate change and energy; for education; and for combating poverty. They represent the direction we should take and will mean we can measure our success" (*ibidem*, p. 4).

A number of different authors subscribe to this thesis, including Klatt (2014), who, in a critical analysis of the EU's education policy describes the increasingly globalised logic underlying the construction of national and supranational policy. He highlights how educational processes are being driven by economic imperatives, and by a pressure to be globally competitive – a direction very much given by the OECD itself. The EU, in this interpretation, is thus conditioning the "*norm and standard setting for educational achievement*" within a neoliberal framework rooted in the theory of social capital (*ibidem*, p. 63), encouraging constant competition between the different systems of public education, but also providing a space for discussion and the exchange of ideas about "*best practice*" (Grek, Lawn, Lingard, & Varjo, 2009).

Europe, however, has not managed to become *the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy in the world* over the last twenty years: although investment in education has been increasing generally, the countries of the EU display different spending patterns, as can be seen in the recent Eurydice report (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013) on their education budgets. In Italy, for example, in 2012 public spending on education and training – according to ISTAT – was 4.2% of GDP, below the EU28 average of 5.3% and well below Denmark (7.9%) and Sweden (6.8%)[27].

The EU has also failed to increase social cohesion: typical of such inequality is the still significant number of students who leave school with no qualifications – thus with an increased risk of underemployment – and the strong correlation between a student's academic failure and their socio-economic conditions, particularly if they are from an immigrant background (Demeuse, Frandji, Greger, & Rochex, 2012).

The negative influence of globalization/s on education has been widely criticised in the literature . These authors believe that the goals of education policy should be informed by a vision of a better, more just, future for all: "*a determinist view of a knowledge society*" – says Thomson (Thomson, Lingard, & Wrigley, 2012), among others – should be replaced by a more long term vision which allows schools to return to their true mission – the provision of education and social equality to all (Tarozzi, 2015).

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[27] In the note on Italy in the OECD 2012 report, we read that "Between 2001 and 2010, spending per student grew in most OECD countries. During the same period, however, total spending per student from 6 to 15 years of age in Italy declined by 8% in Italy, with the greatest reduction occurring towards the end of that period. In the above period, only Italy, Iceland and Mexico saw decreased spending levels" (OECD-PISA, 2012, p. 4).

Intercultural education as the EU's official model: positives and negatives

Ensuring the academic success of students from immigrant backgrounds thus proves to be one of the biggest challenges for today's intercultural education (Catarci, 2015), an ethos now considered to be the EU's official educational model, as a means to integrate immigrant students and, more generally, to face the issues that arise in the multicultural classroom.

Intercultural education, which has been included in the educational guidelines of almost all the European countries for years (Allemann-Ghionda, 2008; Eurydice, 2004), was officially stated[28] to be the EU's agreed approach in 2008 – the *European Year for Intercultural Dialogue* – in the *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, "Living together in equal dignity"* (CEU, 2008). This text includes clear policy recommendations from the Council of Europe for the promotion and diffusion of new strategies for creating more inclusive societies.

Intercultural education has been the object of a widespread reflection and criticism . The concept is generally understood as

> an approach intended to facilitate relationships, starting with the recognition of difference, in order to encourage dialogue and exchange […], without attempting to assimilate those who are culturally different […], but trying to reorganize the public sphere in order to reflect the difference integral to contemporary society. (Tarozzi, 2011, p. 159/my translation)

Italy too – if somewhat later than other European countries[29] – has tried to address the issue of integration in a positive, systematic, manner, with detailed and precise legislation which culminated in the ministerial document *La via italiana per la scuola interculturale e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri (MPI, 2007)*, in which the Ministry's inclusive model is very precisely defined, making explicit the importance of promoting integration and intercultural initiatives, since

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[28] The Council of Europe introduced the idea of intercultural education in the mid-1970s, and has been developing and disseminating it ever since, initially assuming that immigrants would need help to develop culturally, then later broadening their vision to include the intercultural (Porcher, 1981).

[29] Italian schools must be credited with now following a coherent, focused legislative path to *intercultural education*: this definition officially entered the lexicon of the Ministry of Public Education with C.M. n. 205/1990 (MIUR, 1990), which states that "cultural diversity adds value to the meaning of democracy and should be seen as a resource in the complex processes involved in the growth of societies and people", and occurs "even in the absence of foreign students".

the Italian path to interculturalism unites the capacity to recognize and value difference with research into social cohesion, a new vision of citizenship adapted to the pluralism of today, in which particular attention is paid to enabling a convergence towards shared values. (ibidem, p. 9/my translation)

Considering the integration process of young foreigners from the point of view of the host societies, the different European countries have taken different approaches to their integration, approaches which are often in contradiction with EU guidelines; even within each country there are further divergences, owing to frequent inconsistencies between national norms and actual teaching practices (Tarozzi, 2012).

Between school policies and pedagogical models

According to the European network Eurydice (2004), which provides data on the educational systems of the member countries, the different methods adopted to manage diversity can be divided into two principal pedagogical models[30], both of which are sometimes present in the same country. On the one hand, we observe an *integrated model*, in which the student is placed in classes with his/her peer group and follows the same programme as native students; during school hours there may be support measures, centred on language acquisition, sometimes also involving extracurricular lessons. On the other hand, the *separate model*, sometimes only temporary, involves newly arrived students being placed in separate groups for a period of usually no more than a year, and receiving language classes and some parallel activities in the classroom; in some cases, special classes in the schools continue for a number of years (*ibidem*, pp. 41-42). Italy[31], Scotland and Ireland are examples of the integrated model; Germany and Romania of the separate; other countries combine the two approaches.

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[30] Using Massimiliano Tarozzi's definition of a pedagogical model as "a systematic, politically constructed frame of reference which can organize objectives and methods conceptually on the basis of (ideally) explicit assumptions" (Tarozzi, 2015, p. 25/my translation).

[31] Nevertheless, the Italian educational system still contains some contradictions in this regard, such as the composition of the classes at some school levels, including the primary. In 2010, the MIUR set out some organizational parameters (C.M. 8 gennaio 2010, n. 2), decreeing that the number of non-Italian citizens in a class, or school, could not "usually" exceed 30% of the total of pupils enrolled in each class and each school; this limit was to be introduced gradually, starting with the first class of each school level, from the A.Y. 2010/11. The measure, adopted in a period of heightened social and cultural tension, finally signals a stand taken by the Ministry on the integration of non-Italian students (more than 20 years after the flow of immigrants began to be an issue), in an attempt to start to plan and direct the flow of school enrolments, in order to "guarantee a balanced and functioning school structure, effective conditions of parity, and the general and full enjoyment of the right to study" *(ibid., art. 1 co. 3)*. The more recent C.M. 10 gennaio 2014, n. 28 (MIUR, 2014a), and the new *Linee guida per l'accoglienza e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri* (MIUR, 2014b) reaffirm the need for a

The different ways in which the member states have interpreted the EU directives have not just been shaped by the extent and type of immigration they have experienced, but also by the assumptions, and priorities, underlying the countries' dominant political culture (Allemann-Ghionda, 2009), linked, in some cases, to their colonial pasts. Different interpretative paradigms arise from these cultures (Castles, 2009): *assimilationist* (i.e. the French model in the 1970s) – which offered foreign students the opportunity to be completely assimilated into the French linguistic and cultural model – considered inherently superior; the *differential*, which creates separate educational environments in order to preserve students' original cultural identity, from an ethnocentric view within the host culture (characteristic of education for foreigners in the 1970s German model); *multicultural* (adopted chiefly in the UK and the Nordic countries), which sees cultural difference as a resource for a society, but can sometimes run the risk of exacerbating any problems related to difference; and – last but not least – *intercultural* (promoted by the EU, and adopted by Italy since the 1990s), a vision of cultural exchange rooted in cooperation and solidarity, with the school actually becoming a place of socialization (Tarozzi, 2012, 2015).

Taking on board some of the many criticisms directed at these models over the years, the various school systems have made considerable changes to their early approaches, while basically maintaining the spirit that inspired them: one example is the German "*bridging class*" which (although since the late 1990s its approach has been intercultural) uses this particular structure to provide temporary (for less than one year) separate support for immigrant students outside regular classes.

A study of the educational needs of newly arrived immigrant students, published in 2013 by the European Commission, reveals the extent to which their segregation in badly performing schools – often with fewer resources that those of their native peers – is still a serious problem in many countries (CEU, 2013). The study also identifies four different educational support policies which facilitate integration: linguistic support, academic support, outreach and cooperation with migrant parents and the community, and intercultural

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balanced distribution of non-national students across schools, respecting the 30% limit, in order to ensure equal access to education. The Regional School Boards are given an important role in the coordination of school policy, and can, when necessary, change the borders of school catchment areas: they are also responsible for informing parents about the available school provision. They also provide information relevant to the classes in which foreign minors are going to be placed, in order to facilitate the formation of heterogeneous class groups, in order to prevent the creation of ghettoized classes or schools and thus avoid school segregation, in accordance with the principles of welcoming and integration already adopted within the Italian (MPI, 2007) and European (Eurydice, 2004, 2009) pedagogical models. These principles are reaffirmed in the *Proposals* of the *Osservatorio nazionale per l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri e l'intercultura*, published by the MIUR (2015), which request action on the criticalities still present for students from migrant backgrounds during their school careers and they indicate ten possible "responses" to tackle school dropout, including placing them in school immediately – in their age group - and the adoption of "criteria of equal heterogeneity in the formation of classes, avoiding or reducing situations in which the presence [of foreign students] is concentrated" (*ibidem*, p. 4), since such situations have negative consequences – at the school, social and individual level – for the students involved.

education. Analysing the methods used by the various educational systems to implement these policies, the study also identifies five distinct types of educational support systems (*ibidem*, pp. 7-8):

– *comprehensive support* model, widespread in genuinely inclusive school systems (like Denmark and Sweden) which provide constant support at all levels, fostering linguistic skills, teaching and advising students on secondary school choices; the schools are open to parents and the local community and place great emphasis on the creation of a positive school environment, with well qualified teachers and a wide range of intercultural initiatives;

– *non-systematic support* model (found in Italy, Cyprus and Greece, among others), characterised by irregular interventions with – when they do occur – no effective follow through, and a lack of resources and clear policies at the national level;

– *compensatory support* model (Belgium, Austria), includes the four educational policies mentioned above, with weak – and essentially compensatory – educational support, aimed at correcting the "differences" between immigrant and native students, rather than dealing with the initial disadvantages experienced by the former;

– *integration* model (Ireland), the main objective is not so much providing linguistic support as evaluating students' previous schooling and providing support to weak performers. There is a system of organized exchange between schools, parents and the local community, and intercultural learning is integrated into the curricula and everyday classroom activities;

– *centralised entry support* model (France, Luxembourg), which concentrates on welcoming immigrant children – evaluating their initial schooling – and makes educational support the main focus of inclusion, alongside raising awareness amongst parents and in the community.

In the context of a general definition of intercultural education, the various European school systems include both formal and informal levels, related to implicit representations which are often incongruent with the declared model.

Allemann-Ghionda (2009) describes some of these: intercultural education and the inclusion of diversity in educational systems that are structurally inclusive (e.g. Italy) or structurally exclusive (e.g. Germany, Hungary); a focus mainly on migrants or ethnic minorities and on their specific educational needs, although policies declare that all students are concerned (most countries); a focus on all students, with the greatest prevalence of curricula that include a transversal intercultural dimension (e.g. Sweden, Germany); or where intercultural education is still not official policy, but is included within an alternative concept like citizenship education (e.g. the United Kingdom).

Between pedagogical models and school practice

As well as the profound contradictions mentioned above, there are also inconsistencies between officially-declarednational pedagogical models and the reality of the classroom : as Gorski (2008) pointed out, "*good intentions*" alone cannot guarantee the educational success of students from immigrant backgrounds.

Among the main reasons for this gap, which has resulted in a slide towards neo-assimilationist policies and practices, a large body of research (Allemann-Ghionda, 2009, p. 142) points to a number of factors, including the unresolved question of a serious monitoring and evaluating process in educational planning and some teachers' prejudices and non-inclusive views, along with highly selective educational systems which reproduce social selection.

Unsurprisingly, genuinely intercultural educational practice (Gorski, 2009) requires going beyond a simplistic relational model of intercultural education in order to adopt a more global and systemic vision, closely linked to the construction of a fairer, more just, world politics. Without these underpinnings, intercultural education risks becoming just another instrument of colonization, in which inequity and injustice are reproduced under the guise of interculturalism (Gorski, 2008).

From the intercultural education model to *Social Justice Education*

Recognizing the many inconsistencies and issues described above, mainly connected to the fact that the intercultural education model lacks a sound theoretical basis and has a limited concept of equality, some authors (Tarozzi, 2015; Tarozzi & Torres, 2016) have described the strengths and weaknesses that arise through a comparison of multiculturalism – the most common approach in North America – with interculturalism – prevalent in Europe – based on the hypothesis that integrating the two perspectives should contribute reciprocally to educational research.

Briefly[32], while "*multiculturalism […] relates to the politics of difference and the emerging social struggles over racialized, gendered, and classist societies*" (Torres, 2009, p. 99), interculturalism – which particularly focuses on issues related to the integration of

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[32] Although this question cannot be examined in detail here, by multiculturalism we mean "a public policy approach to the management of cultural diversity in a multi-ethnic society, more precisely, a policy which emphasizes mutual respect for and tolerance of cultural difference within a nation" (Donati, 2008, p. 3/my translation). Multiculturalism is based on a variety of political theories: some more radical, i.e. *critical pedagogy*, *critical race theory*; others less so, like John Dewey's (1916) liberal democratic approach.

immigrants – is an attempt to stimulate intercultural mediation rooted in a flexible concept of culture, in the quest for a new idea of citizenship (Allemann-Ghionda, 2009).

Of the two perspectives – both attempts to solve the problems that arise in relation to increasing levels of immigration – the intercultural approach is distinguished by its particular sensitivity in the welcoming of newly arrived immigrants and the management of emergency situations.

In the educational environment, this translates into numerous experimental teaching approaches and may involve the placing of immigrant students straight into classes at any point during the academic year, with their L1 being protected and the language of the host country being taught as an L2. The etymological root of "*inter*-cultural", in fact, tells us a great deal about the educational approach to which the word refers, an approach which values and promotes relationship, and the exchange of two or more elements (in contrast to the "*multi*" of "*multi*"-culturalism, which refers simply to the coexistence of people from different cultures).

These strengths, however, may be complemented by aspects of the multicultural North American approach, which – although in an inevitably limited way – emphasizes the importance of a conception of education which includes a political dimension, related to a vision of social justice which holds that multicultural education is, by its very nature, education for social justice (Nieto & Bode, 2008). It seems highly likely that the development in schools of educational processes designed to foster academic success for all would benefit from the meeting of all these perspectives.

Conclusions

The persistence of problems connected to the weak performance or academic failure of students from migrant backgrounds – notwithstanding decades of inclusive, intercultural policies (with the strong support of the EU (CEU, 2008) – demonstrates that the intercultural educational model cannot resolve questions of social injustice, which are being further exacerbated by the current neoliberal domination of European school policies (Tarozzi & Torres, 2016).

One of the reasons for this failure can be attributed to the seeming impossibility of actually putting the intercultural model into practice: it remains an abstract - impractical and almost romantic - idealization of social and cultural harmony (Donati, 2008). A wide body of critical research, in fact, reveals that intercultural education, while recognizing – in theory, at least – the equal value and dignity of all cultures (Gundara & Portera, 2008), has, in practice, undervalued issues of justice . However,

there's another idea of equality which should be pursued in a democratic society: one which guarantees all cultures the same rights. In other words, a concept of justice as equity. (Tarozzi, 2012, p. 400/my translation)

In education, while the current superficiality of some intercultural offers could possibly be avoided through better planning of teaching activities, the inherent limit of the concept of equality – central to an intercultural approach – will not easily be overcome without recognition of education's political dimension, and the assertion that academic success is a right for all in any would be democratic society (Tarozzi, 2015).

Taking a necessarily non-neutral position (Torres, 2011) – which considers the academic success of foreign students the parameter for the evaluation of any educational path's efficacy (Gundara & Tarozzi, 2012) – profound injustices are revealed in the Italian school system , seen in phenomena such as early school leaving and the ways in which immigrant students are channelled into certain secondary schools, influenced by the socio-economic position of their families and their previous school careers (Checchi, 2010; Colombo, 2015).

Education is continuing to reproduce social inequality (Noguera, 2004, 2014), instead of taking on a central role in facilitating processes of equity (Torres & Noguera, 2008), through the effective welcoming of immigrant students and the genuine pursuit of their integration and academic success (Smith, 2012).

These issues can be faced more effectively if the educational perspective is broadened to include not only the values of intercultural dialogue but also the political values of justice in education and – crucially – a necessarily Utopian vision of a better world (Freire, 2002), rooted in the more radical North American approaches of critical pedagogy (Gillborn & Youdell, 2009) and in the Italian tradition of Gramsci and Milani (Mayo, 2007, 2013; Reggio, 2014).

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