

# A Curriculum for Authentic Dialogue: Beyond Intercultural/Performance Schizophrenia in Italian and Spanish Education

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## Abstract

In recent decades, Italy and Spain have witnessed the development of documents with a normative curricular value with a strong intercultural sensitivity. This production is supported by a parallel national pedagogical literature, which has as its center the value of interaction between the actors of the educational process. In both Latin countries, the intercultural model coexists with the presence of ministerial documents or documents produced by international organizations such as the OECD. This different corpus of texts emphasizes the importance of performance and the ideal of the competitive individual for individual and collective development. Through a methodology inspired by Michel Foucault's theory of discourse, this work intends to deconstruct the two different languages both in the Italian and Spanish contexts to underline the contradiction of two types of subjectivation and educational purposes. Foucault's analysis can help form an epistemological model based on the relational and supportive bond for the curriculum. This must be inspired by a theoretical system rich in critical tools on the reality of the context in which it is applied.

## Keywords

Curriculum, Foucault, Intercultural Education, OECD-PISA, Relational Epistemology

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, in Italy and Spain we have witnessed the development of documents with normative curricular value with intercultural sensitivity. Among these sources, the Guidelines are significant, promulgated in 2006, 2014 and also in 2022, with the title Orientamenti interculturali (Portera, 2020). In Spain there

are principles of intercultural dialogue in organic laws, including the *Ley Orgánica de Educación* (LOE) of 2006 and its subsequent reform, *the Ley Orgánica para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa* (LOMCE) of 2013.

Within this corpus, *the Italian way for the intercultural school and the integration of foreign students* in Italy and *the Plan for attention to student diversity* in Spain stand out for their degree of systematicity and high level of reworking of the principles of interculturality (Portera, 2020; Vallespir Soler, 2011). Transformative interaction, aimed at all those who participate in the educational experience (students and teachers, students of any origin and culture), represents the common and central axis in both documents that aspire to be tools for changing the school and a model of respectful, comprehensive and open citizenship to the world. A thirty-year educational literature supports this intercultural normative production in both countries. These studies, on the one hand, criticize the assimilatory forms present in the school, on the other they promote the value of the person and an epistemology of the relationship as the heart of education. However, both the Italian and Spanish curricular language is also influenced by a different direction, promoted by international organizations such as the OECD and by the country's own ministries. This different direction is concerned with the development of individual skills, which can fit into today's complex world of work. Furthermore, this direction associates the achievement of scholastic results with individual opportunities and with the economic-social growth of the entire country.

Through a methodology inspired by the theory of discourse and the performative idea of language by Michel Foucault, this work intends to deconstruct the Italian and Spanish curricular language to identify a contradiction in the ideal subject of education, taken, on the one hand, by the value of solidarity exchange and on the other by competitive individualism (Foucault, 1994, 2017).

In this regard, we can speak of schizophrenia in the sense that, on the one hand, an educational language values solidarity and relationships. On the other hand, competition is the most highlighted principle.

The analysis of the complexity of language is a necessary path to form an epistemological model in which dialogue is truly the center of education without compromise and complicity with different epistemologies, in particular with the perspectives of individualistic performance. With this task, this work examines some significant testimonies within the Italian and Spanish curricular policy, without the claim of systematically reconstructing that discursive corpus. The research analyses the two national contexts separately, studying the subjectivation of the “foreigner” and the “native” and the educational value of their relationship through the study of curricular documents on interculturality, studies of national intercultural research, assessment tests and national and international relations.

## 2. Methodology and Literature Review

Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and archaeological analysis is the fundamental reference of this work. For the French philosopher, spoken or written

words, such as those contained in a pedagogical research or in an educational norm, are not only theoretical. On the contrary, they are real practical actions, as they move meanings, contributing to build the truths of a given society (Foucault, 1994, 2017). The certainties on which the latter is based heavily influence behaviors and ideas. People think and act within patterns that are sedimented in collective use. In his studies on madness, normality and sexuality, Foucault tried to delve into the underlying rules within which highlight a precise epistemology that gives order to reasoning (Bührmann & Schneider, 2008). Foucault's analysis of the recurrences of definitions, classifications, hierarchies, presences and absences of precise concepts are not valid as a linguistic study in themselves, but serve to reveal real practices with which the objects of discourse themselves are formed. These objects can concern all the components of the educational world starting from the subject being educated. In this regard, Foucault has deepened the study of the dynamics of subjectivation. He has analyzed the ways in which individuals become precise subjects within societies dominated by defined discourses. These, in their deployment of truth, are inextricably linked to the affirmation of a certain type of power. The subjects, therefore, take shape through the force of discourses and power.

Foucauldian research on education emphasizes the subjectivization power of discourses and studies educational language as a vehicle for specific visions of the world and purposes. The subject of education is never something absolute, but takes shape only from the normative forces that historically invest it (Dussel, 2003; Leite & Christofolletti, 2018). Starting from this Foucauldian theoretical framework, even specialists in curriculum studies have developed effective analysis techniques, which intertwine the power of discourses and subjectivization. Among these, Thoamas Popkewitz has highlighted how school curricula are not neutral, but serve to define and govern the subjects of education, the categories of subjects at risk, unmotivated children, adolescents and of reasonable students are creations that curricula institutionalize. In doing so, they form the profound meanings and purposes of education in the modern and contemporary era (Popkewitz, 2009). Barry M. Franklin also studied school curricula, inspired by Foucault's methodology, underlining in particular the assertions of power structures and social inequalities with an impact on student results and educational opportunities, particularly evident and dramatic in the case of poverty, hardship, and obstacles linked to the context of life (Franklin & Johnson, 2008).

With the same Foucaultian approach, applied to the study of the intercultural curriculum in the Italian and international context, Jamie Kowalczyk analyzes the distinction that emerges from the curricular definitions between an "integrated student" and a "non-integrated student". Between them, the researcher states, there is a dividing line, which is accentuated by the same general curricular objectives on the success of transformation of the "non-integrated student". This concept in fact increases the line of difference between the two types of human subjects (Kowalczyk, 2010, 2013).

Among the Italian studies, it is worth mentioning that of Davide Zoletto. Even though Zoletto doesn't only use the Foucaultian methodology, he also analyzes the concept of hospitality through curricular documents to propose a model that can go beyond the idea of helping the needs of "foreigners in the classroom", a concept that recurs in the analyses pages of this article (Zoletto, 2007).

Grimaldi and Roberto Serpieri adopt a Foucaultian approach and emphasize how intercultural education practices in Italy often have insurmountable contradictions (Serpieri & Grimaldi, 2013).

### 3. The Italian Context

In the Italian context, educational research has developed a very abundant intercultural literature for at least three decades. The concepts on which it is based are truly numerous, such as exchange, reciprocity, interaction, mutualism, mediation, communication. Very often these principles are reworked after being borrowed from other sciences, especially anthropology, psychology and sociology. The concepts of peace, justice and democracy are also very present and in recent years have fueled general educational themes, such as that of skills and citizenship. These concepts have therefore been reworked as intercultural skills and cosmopolitan citizenship.

Within this academic context, the concept of transformative dialogue is at the center of reflection to characterize the relationship between individuals of different cultures in education. The dialogical idea is accompanied by that of multiculturalism like wealth, of culture like dynamic mixing, of interculturality like general education and of rights (Boccacci, 2020).

Italian educational research supports the contents of a rich intercultural legislation, which has also been developing for three decades through recommendations and general indications, mostly in the form of texts called ministerial circulars. Among these sources, the *Guidelines* are significant, promulgated in 2006, 2014 and also in 2022, with the title *Orientamenti interculturali* (Portera, 2020).

Among the normative documents, the one that stands out for its richness of content and historical importance is *the Italian way for intercultural school and integration of foreign students*, a pamphlet published by the Ministry of Education through a circular text in 2007. *The Italian Way*, which still has normative value, is consensually recognized as the document that expresses the most complete form of intercultural education. For years, the Ministry has communicated on the official website by taking phrases from the pamphlet, including the expression "an Italian way to intercultural education", which has practically become a slogan.

Numerous researchers and experts, such as Massimiliano Tarozzi, Massimiliano Fiorucci, Marco Catarci, underline the value and the level of systematicity of the document to develop inclusion and respect towards ethnic otherness (Boccacci, 2020).

In *The Italian Way* the dialogical principle is the foundation of education,

which aims at the ideal of cosmopolitan citizenship. This thesis is developed through an argumentative path that begins by affirming the value of universal rights. To put them into practice, they must be experienced through interaction between people with different identities and cultures. Dialogue is that reality that makes us aware of and experience universality, that is, that common human basis, regardless of nationality, religion, sex, sexual orientation, language and culture. Living universality on an existential level through harmonious interaction makes human coexistence the effective protagonist of the inalienability of people's rights. In this dynamic, dialogue is fundamental because it allows us to discover different but shared interpretations of universal values, such as those on man, justice, peace, that all cultures profess.

From the concept of universality, the reasoning of the pamphlet continues by focusing on the value of diversity and the opportunity of multiculturalism: "The presence of foreign students can truly be an opportunity and a chance for change for the entire school (Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 2007: p. 3)."

This wealth can only be fruitful through "the promotion of dialogue and comparison between cultures" (p. 3). This thesis is opposed to *deficit* education, that is, the reflection focused on helping people who lack something because they are foreigners (for example, knowledge of the language and rules of the host country). In the thoughts of *The Italian Way*, not only must the foreign student aim like everyone else in education for cosmopolitan citizenship, but he or she contributes to enriching the growth of other classmates with his or her diversity. Therefore, the school must not "limit itself only to organizing strategies for the integration of immigrant students or compensatory measures of a special nature" (p. 3).

In this thesis, moreover, *The Italian Way* makes it clear that multiculturalism in itself is only a potential, that education must enhance and can do so, once again, through dialogue.

In the continuation of the reasoning, *The Italian Way* delves into the theme of the complexity and dynamism of culture and identity.

Becoming aware of the relativity of cultures, in fact, does not mean arriving at an absolute relativism, which postulates neutrality towards them and therefore prevents relations. Intercultural strategies avoid separating individuals into autonomous and impermeable cultural worlds, promoting instead comparison, dialogue and even mutual transformation, to make coexistence possible and to deal with the conflicts that arise from it. (p. 9)

In *The Italian Way* there is a strong affirmation of the principle of dynamic and multiple identity in the part that delves into the curricular aspect of intercultural citizenship.

History, geography, literature, mathematics, science, art, music, new communicative languages and other fields of knowledge constitute an unavoidable opportunity for training in diversity, allowing us to approach not only different "contents", but also different structures and ways of thinking. By

way of example, while waiting for further insights related to the New Indications and the revision of school curricula, we highlight the need to overcome the markedly identitarian and Eurocentric proposals in the field of history teaching, conceptualizing the history-citizenship nexus; to consider geography an ever more privileged opportunity for the formation of a globalist conscience. (p. 18)

*The Italian Way* ends, then, the reasoning on the horizon that is represented by the cosmopolitan citizen as rich in sensitivity and intercultural education. Here then this final ideal makes it clear how the proposal of the booklet and its contents are to be considered as a normative address for general and not sectoral education. The whole school must commit to a common project to be realized.

At the same time as this type of education and the reference of *The Italian Way*, which cultivate great ideals of solidarity and transformation, school policy and practice are characterized by the perspective of performance and individual development through the multi-year presence of the PISA-OECD and INVALSI tests. PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) is a worldwide test on the skills of fifteen-year-old students in Italian, mathematics and English; the second is a very similar test produced by INVALSI (National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education System of Instruction and Training), which is internal to the ministry and collaborates with the OECD at a formal level. The framework of their diagnoses develops a common “objective” description of the performance gap between Italian students and immigrant children or those linked to a migrant context. For example, the results of the 2012 PISA test state that:

In Italy, the average score [in mathematics] obtained by immigrant students is 48 points lower than that of native students, a gap that is higher than the OECD average of 34 points [...]. New immigrants to Italy are generally much more disadvantaged than immigrants already established in the country. The language barrier is also an obstacle to learning. Among students with an immigrant background, those who speak Italian at home obtain 19 points more than those who do not. (OECD, 2012)

Similarly, the results of the Invalsi test also underline the gap:

We now present the general results that emerge from the INVALSI tests for the 2014/15 school year, examining in greater detail the distinction between native and foreign-origin students (first and second generation) by school level and geographical area. [...] Although with specific differences and peculiarities in each context, overall a clear trend is confirmed: native students obtain scores higher than both the national average, at every school level and in both tests, and compared to their immigrant classmates. (Barbanti, 2016: p. 111)

Both OECD and INVALSI do not stop at recording data, but also publish reports in which they provide advice and school directions at a national administrative and educational level. Both the descriptions and the proposals contribute to

representing foreign students in deficient terms, in the sense that they have performance levels in the Italian language, mathematics and sciences well below their Italian peers. They are low performers, according to the language of the two institutions. The foreigner is synonymous with “disadvantaged”, as they record the performances, and therefore needy. The solutions they propose develop a pedagogy of the aid deficit, in which the foreigner is not an asset to be exploited by the school.

#### 4. The Spanish Context

Similarly to Italy, also in Spain intercultural pedagogy developed in the 1990s in relation to the growth of students from other countries. Social, media and even educational scholars’ interest grew around them. At the turn of the century, this research was essentially exploratory, in an attempt to understand the immigrant reality within the Spanish educational system. A more consistent theorization began to develop after the millennium through studies that criticized the educational models and practices of that time, which were attributable to a monocultural perspective. The concern for both the majority of theorists and educators was to develop paths to transform young foreigners into the majority national culture. In recent years, more theoretical studies have multiplied exponentially with a great variety of themes, such as the criticism of stereotypes, the complexity of the concepts of success/failure, the opposition to the concept of “collective” teaching, the universalization of intercultural proposals (not only for foreign students), the agreed construction of indicators of students’ well-beings, the attention to educational policies with respect to the intercultural focus (Pozo Llorente et al., 2015). Similar to Italy, the idea that iteration is the heart of intercultural pedagogy prevails over this complex of themes and that to be authentic it must lead to the transformation of all the actors involved in education. The change, determined by the encounter and the relationship, involves all the people of an educational community, including adults and all students without distinctions of ethnicity or culture. Indeed, similarly to Italian research, those who bring diversity have great possibilities to enrich others thanks to educational paths that know how to enhance pluralism, variety and multiplicity. Each person must therefore express their own person, characterized by unique experiences and culture. Intercultural logic can only favor mutual exchange, listening to others, empathy and non-transmissive learning for mutual discovery and help (Catarci & Fiorucci, 2015).

The literature and commitment of educational scholars in Spanish has also met with political interest in recent years. National and regional research funding has thus multiplied. In this country the Center for Educational Research and Documentation (CIDE) and the National Center for Educational Innovation and Research (CNIIE) were created within the Ministry of Education, annexed to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports. At the institutional curricular level, it is worth pointing out that Spain, unlike Italy, is divided into 17 autonomous regions, so we do not find the same measures in detail between the different

constituencies, even though there is a national regulatory system, guaranteed through the Ley Orgánica (organic law), provided for by Article 81 of the Constitution of the Spanish monarchy born in 1978. In the context of the educational system, the organic laws prescribe crucial aspects of education, establishing national standards for education and outlining the rights and duties of students, teachers and parents. Over the years, several organic laws have been passed, including the Ley Orgánica de Educación (LOE) of 2006 and its subsequent reform, the Ley Orgánica para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa (LOMCE) of 2013. The LOE, in particular, explicitly states the following among its educational purposes:

- Education for civil coexistence, peace, and respect for human rights.
- Training for respect for the linguistic and cultural plurality of Spain and recognition of the value of interculturality as an asset for society.

The CIDE publications have collected the measures that have been adopted in the Spanish regions in relation to the immigrant school population. From this documentation, it emerges that regional and local curricular norms support intercultural practices, practically in all regional realities, where schools practice activities of welcome, dialogue and mutual understanding (Vallespir Soler, 2011). Among these common actions, some are addressed to all students, both those born abroad and natives. Of this type, for example, there is the *Student Diversity Attention Plan*, present in all schools and referred to the involvement of all students (Pozo Llorente et al., 2015).

As in the Italian case, also in Spain schools are crossed by OECD tests and languages, together with the principles and plans for intercultural implementation.

This organization has contributed to creating concern also in schools and public opinion in Spain. This action has been carried out by highlighting a general worsening of student performance in science, mathematics and the Spanish language, data that can be seen from 2015 to 2022. Within these considerations, then, there is a clear divide between “top performing students” and “low performing students”, where the majority of foreign students or those with a migratory background fall into the latter category. OECD notes a general improvement in “low performing students” (OECD, 2023: p. 464).

In this regard, the PISA-OECD data on student performance in Spain has not only favored the formation of disadvantaged subjects as in Italy, but has objectified the difference between private schools, which are generally populated by high-performing students, and public schools that, instead, reach those levels.

First of all, there is the performance gap between “native” Spanish students and those linked to a migrant background. As in Italy, the results of mathematics, science and the Spanish language are constantly different over the years. In private schools, the number of students linked to immigration is much lower than in public schools. Here, there is a concentration of them, which according to the OECD has a negative effect also on other students.

Language and culture are objective elements of obstacles, which also influence the possible opportunities for growth and future social and professional deve-

lopment of individual students and of the class to which they belong.

The differences also concern foreign students between the first and second generation: Second-generation students (born in Spain to immigrant parents) tend to have higher performances than first-generation students (born abroad and immigrated to Spain). However, even among second-generation students, the gap with respect to native students can persist.

Even in the case of Spain, the OECD recommends targeted policies to reduce socioeconomic disparities in the territory and, especially at an educational level, directs education in favor of learning the Spanish language (Choi de Mendizábal & Waigrais, 2010).

## 5. A Proposal for a Radical Intercultural Curriculum

In general, intercultural education can be understood as the study of understanding, respect and dialogue between individuals of different cultures within the educational context. Inclusion, equity, and the valorization of diversity are the typical themes of intercultural sensitivity. Its development is fundamental in the globalized world, where people with different cultural, ethnic and linguistic characteristics coexist. Its message of justice and peace is even more urgent and necessary in these times, dramatically marked by violence and war.

In a highly diverse and dramatically conflictual society, intercultural education helps promote mutual understanding and respect, which are the basis of coexistence and social cohesion. Interculturality also develops thoughts and actions that counter discrimination by criticizing stereotypes and prejudices, and promoting equality and social justice. This training is very important to fight against practices of marginalization and racism, evils that unfortunately manifest themselves not only in the world in general, but also within the educational systems themselves, making the daily life of many young people unjust and difficult. Unfortunately, individuals or groups of people in ethnic and linguistic minorities are often segregated or considered unfairly, precisely through prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes.

The development of intercultural sensitivity prepares, instead, to be conscious citizens of existential interdependence, therefore orienting towards the positivity of social bonds that must be cared for both locally and globally. Many authors of interculturality, not by chance, delve into cosmopolitan education and also the world of work, which increasingly requires the ability to communicate and coexist with people of different cultures.

In general, intercultural education promotes the development of critical thinking, encouraging individuals to reflect on their own beliefs and values. This reflection leads to a better understanding of the bases of one's judgments and choices, to understanding the limits of one's beliefs, to discern opinions received uncritically from those thought and desired, to verify one's stereotypes. All these cognitive paths allow one to open up more to the complex interpretation of the world and allow one to recognize that personal vision and experience are not to be

absolutized. This exercise in flexibility promotes open-mindedness, empathy and intellectual curiosity, essential elements for understanding and appreciating cultural diversity and the perspectives of others.

The vast intercultural educational literature converges in believing that its method and its fundamental objectives are realized through interaction and dialogue. They are the center of the theories from which four related and equally shared principles radiate: multiculturalism like wealth, culture (and identity) like dynamic mixing, interculturality like general pedagogy, and fundamental rights.

Ethnic multiculturalism is a source of enrichment and this depends first of all on the value of diversity. The encounter with the “foreigner”, with the one who is “other”, represents an opportunity for comparison and reflection of self and the rules and values that form it (Portera, 2020). However, work on otherness is often internally removed at an individual level or not socially accepted due to fear of diversity, which can destabilize certainties (Canevaro, 1999). Therefore, one cannot hope only in a personal predisposition towards the other, but one must leverage the human attitude to openness and sociability through the intentional and organized intervention of education. Listening to each other, knowing each other, entering dialectically between otherness and identity is a demanding activity, which requires time and is full of obstacles. School is the fundamental place to promote a path of personal cultural development that is dynamic and open to continuous experiences. This perspective is very far from the idea that the culture and identity of an individual are always the same (Giusti, 2011).

Very often, intercultural education is considered a valid resource in particular and difficult contexts, as they are characterized by a strong multicultural presence and migration. It is precisely in these contexts that difficulties, misunderstandings and forms of discrimination frequently emerge, making it necessary to intervene and develop intercultural strategies. In this way, however, intercultural education would seem to satisfy the needs of certain groups of students or particular educational contexts. It would represent a sectoral education such as, training for work, health or a specific environmental theme.

As it is not special, intercultural education is not even a special education. Special education focuses exclusively on supporting students with particular educational needs, for example, learning and inclusion aimed at individuals with physical, cognitive, sensorial, emotional or behavioral disabilities.

Critically re-elaborating the forms and meanings that configure personal identity and culture, developing understanding through dialogue, and valorizing human unity in diversity, are not the objectives of a particular education, but represent essential components of every type of education.

In recent decades in Italy and in various countries, the intercultural debate has developed a lot in relation to the question of ethnic plurality and interculturalists rightly maintain that intercultural education coincides with the reflection on the mission of the school itself (Portera, 2020). In support of this thesis, we must recall the epistemological reflection that considers the interpersonal relationship is the

foundation of education. In this thought, otherness is a key concept. Furthermore, even historically we can consider education as a path in which the relationship between identity and diversity is constant. Differences, at various levels (gender, age, social class, faith, language, origin, ideology, cognition, etc.) have dotted schools over time, characterizing themselves now as assimilatory, now as disjunctive, now as interactive. Here then, at the heart of authentic intercultural pedagogy we can consider relational epistemology. This is the center from which to start to think and practice education. From this fundamental unity, ethical considerations on the good of all individuals and not just a part of them also develop. This good could be defined as the “good of the relationship” that reverberates in people simultaneously and with justice. Knowledge that does not believe in the relationship-good-education nexus struggles to see education and interaction in a unitary way, they consider them as “components” or factors among many other variables that can or cannot be combined with each other. This knowledge operates more than caesuras between sectors of educational research or any other discipline. They do not believe in the communicability of the fields and their languages.

The intercultural educational model, aimed at everyone, as a transformative relational proposal needs the support of the deconstruction of the languages of education today so that it does not remain an abstraction or is content to coexist together with other epistemologies, perhaps contradictory to its own principles.

It is no coincidence that the supporters of the solidarity ethic and the dialogic principle criticize the fact that the school curriculum is far from the full and substantial realization of its principles (Tarozzi, 2005; Benvenuto, 2011). Through the contradiction that emerges in the Italian and Spanish cases between solidarity interaction and competitive performance, it is clear that the effective future realization of the intercultural curriculum and pedagogy is linked to an existential commitment without compromises, which develops starting from a theoretical model already loaded with critical tools on the reality of the context in which to apply it. In this sense, a relational epistemology supported by the interpretative principles of Foucault and his interpreters in curricular research is a fruitful path to follow.

In this regard, to further develop intercultural education, schools and educational contexts should promote moments of meta-reflection on the key principles and purposes that animate their practices, which are not always in line with the dialogical and relational spirit. These times of self-criticism could be supported by training courses for teachers, guided in analysis of deconstruction of languages and history of education in a transformative key of the present. Towards students, then, the educational proposal can promote criticism of the excess of requests for performance through workshops of criticism and collective narration and through experiences of intense mutual knowledge.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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