

Rethinking interculturalism, deconstructing discrimination in Italian schools

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Abstract

Despite the public favour gained in Europe, interculturalism is often reduced to its theoretical abstractions or local implementations. There is scarce evidence to suggest that interculturalism mitigates the systemic discrimination of immigrant-origin people. Looking at the Italian case, the paper analyses the coexistence of interculturalism and discrimination into multicultural schools, examining school track choices for immigrant-origin students under the lens of interculturalism. We combine three theoretical perspectives—discrimination at micro level, critical interculturalism and school choice as a process—with an empirical analysis of qualitative data, focussing on the ambivalent relational mechanisms underneath the most discriminatory turning point in the Italian education system, the transition to upper secondary school. Different forms of student–teacher interaction, approaches to school track choice and discriminatory effects are highlighted in the research findings. Three different scenarios of interculturalism are identified and implemented through the negotiation of the school actors. Rethinking interculturalism by deconstructing discrimination appears as a collective task, to be undertaken together with teachers and students with immigrant background: intercultural policy guidelines must be combined with bottom-up actions.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the new century, interculturalism has gained public favour in European official documents (Council of Europe, 2008), international organizations (Unesco, 2006), public discourse and local governance (Wood, 2009), building upon the foundations of multiculturalism,¹ and giving emphasis to proximity, interactions, symmetric relations and dialogue between natives and immigrants living in global cities (Giménez, 2012). The new century is characterized by the so-called “intercultural turn” (Zapata-Barrero, 2015), with the diffusion of an approach of “governance through diversity” (Matejskova & Antonsich, 2015), rather than governance of diversity. This approach considers diversity a crucial resource incorporated into the political, civic and public culture, at the level of institutional structures and routines, and managed politically as a driver of social, cultural and economic development.

Despite this European trend towards the “institutionalisation of the intercultural” (Collins, 2018), some critics—inside and outside Europe—suggest that interculturalism has become part of the EU rhetoric, and see it as an ideological, unrealistic and illusionary view (Colombo & Gilardoni, 2021; Sousa Santos, 2018). Integration policies are designed within the receiving societies by the cultural majority and are very far from recognizing the possibility of participation for immigrant and minority groups, as envisaged by intercultural principles. Furthermore, discrimination persists, even in education, the most important setting for the application of intercultural principles.

Drawing from these ambivalent trends, the article aims to empirically analyse the persistence of discrimination and the contradictions of the intercultural model in its concrete implementations. The focus is on Italy, as a relevant research field, given the intercultural choice for the governance of the education system since the Nineties, showing at the same time persistent evidence of socio-economic, cultural and educational inequalities in its migratory regime.

We start from a theoretical discussion to rethink interculturalism through three analytical and interpretative steps: (1) moving from macro- to micro-level analyses, since discrimination operates at a system level but is the result of micro-mechanisms that mediate the relationships between school contexts and students' outcomes. Within these mechanisms, teachers assume the role of implementers, opponents or even “policy maker in practice” (Croll et al., 1994) in the field of antidiscriminatory and intercultural interventions.

Combined with this shift, our attention also moves (2) from considering a unique and general version of interculturalism to critically reflecting on diverse forms of intercultural implementation, distinguishing top-down strategies, in which interculturalism is superficially used in unequal contexts, from a bottom-up approach, promoting conviviality among people from culturally diverse backgrounds, in a normative frame guaranteeing equal opportunities.

Finally, we focus on the transition from lower to upper secondary education, since the selection of a vocational track instead of an academic one is a strong predictor of future educational and professional success (Azzolini et al., 2019: 735). We use this crucial passage as a lens to analyse discriminatory and intercultural trends as interconnected processes, moving (3) from a static vision of school choices differentiated by class, gender and ethnic background (Byrne, 2009; Byrne & De Tona, 2012) towards a more comprehensive analysis, providing an insight into the exchange between students, teachers and parents, considering them as active (re)creators of their social environment in a continuous interactive process.

Focussing on the Italian case, we use qualitative data to verify and operationalize the three proposed interpretative shifts: we aim to shed light on the ways teachers and students interact, reconstructing the relational micro-mechanisms between teachers and immigrant-origin students underneath the school track choices which can generate, at the same time, systemic discrimination, educational chances and intercultural dynamics.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Discrimination in intercultural schools: from macro- to micro-analysis

The persistence of discrimination in intercultural contexts questions the capacity of interculturalism to enhance social and cultural justice. As the sources of the discriminatory and racist treatment lie within the system, in our theoretical framework we introduce the term “systemic discrimination,” a broad concept that includes structural, institutional or systematic discriminations (Gynter, 2003). Systemic discrimination directly undermines the capacity of the intercultural environments to give effect to the principle of equality. Without equality, the benefits that flow from diversity are minimal and the quality of the interaction between people with different backgrounds is reduced, ultimately hampering the capacity of social sectors to realize the potential of interculturalism and its positive impacts. Systemic discrimination is the less visible institutional level of discrimination, which operates as a system-pervading pattern to exclude or disadvantage persons identified by membership of a group (Council of Europe, 2020).

By using this concept, the distinction between intentional and unintentional discrimination becomes less important: within the education system, for example, the systematic discrimination suffered by migrant students calls into question the normal functioning of educational institutions (Gillborn, 2003). Teachers do not have to exercise choice to operate in a discriminatory manner, but merely to conform to the operating norms of the organization, and the institution will do the discrimination for them. However, research traditions concerning the persistence of systemic discrimination within an intercultural governance of education are underdeveloped worldwide. At the same time, empirical research assessing intercultural policies and practices in terms of antidiscrimination outcomes is lacking (Hellgren & Zapata-Barrero, 2022).

Our proposal refers to the wider sociological literature on inequalities in education, which identifies multiple micro-mechanisms that may contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities. In the education system, these mechanisms are the effect of actions taken mainly by teachers within school organizations and they have been defined as “tertiary effects” (Argentin & Pavolini, 2020). On the one hand, teachers conform to the discriminatory functioning of the educational institution towards immigrant-origin students, reproducing disadvantages and considering diversity as a drawback. On the other hand, teachers show margins of independence, autonomy and discretion, and this is an essential element of their teaching professionalism to respond to the differentiated needs of their students (Lipsky, 1980). Teachers undoubtedly play a key role in reproducing ethnic inequalities in education, but they also use their agency (Heikkilä et al., 2022) to implement egalitarian interculturalism, acquiring awareness and minimizing and resisting routine discriminatory practice.

Of course, teachers are not the only people responsible for the implementation of antidiscriminatory practices in the framework of intercultural programmes, but they could increase their reflexivity to limit systemic discrimination: in our opinion, teachers need to be reflective practitioners, able to recognize, manage and share the discretion available to them, in order to strengthen equal opportunities. This calls into question the “intercultural responsibility” of teachers—a concept proposed by Guilherme et al. (2010) but not yet applied in social research—namely the responsibility to be interculturally committed in conscious and reciprocally respectful relationships, with a shared commitment to solidarity, empathy, coherence, critical cooperation and respectful dialogue across different languages, cultures, epistemologies and ethical principles. Therefore, a way to observe how systemic discrimination works or does not work could consist of reconstructing the processes in which teachers act in a discriminatory manner towards immigrant students although they refer to an intercultural framework, or in which they act with awareness and intentionality to resist the effects of systemic discrimination, fostered by intercultural sensitivity and a capacity to listen and communicate with students with a different background.

Critical perspectives on interculturalism: from top-down to bottom-up strategies

Since the 1990s, the intercultural paradigm has been seen as revolutionary, especially in education: for the first time, within the European Union, children of immigrants are no longer regarded as a problem or risk, but as resources. In Italy, the legal establishment and the dissemination of intercultural pedagogy can be seen as one of the strongest in Europe (Portera, 2008: 484).

In different European countries with more recent immigration (such as Spain, Italy and Portugal), however, interculturalism is part of the current educational discourse concerning cultural diversity, but more as a rhetorical element than an actual practice (Aguado & Malik, 2001). The main core of interculturalism—that is an open and respectful dialogue between culturally diverse individuals and groups—is inherently affected by differences in status and power among those participating to the exchange and thus rarely occurs on a equal footing (Barrett, 2013).

Interculturalism is also viewed as the product of Europe's colonial and hegemonic perspective, by several critical scholars in Europe (Sousa Santos, 2018) and Latin America (Mignolo, 2011): in fact, interculturalism does not eliminate discrimination and shows many ambiguities, coexisting with mistreatment, exclusion and intergenerational injustice (Gorski, 2008). The growing incorporation of interculturalism in the official discourses of states and international organizations is compatible with the socio-political and neoliberal model, because it does not question power relations between different sociocultural groups. Interculturalism in contexts such as most Latin American countries seems to assume the form of “functional interculturalism” (Tubino, 2013), a formal strategy designed to maintain the status quo, without intervening on the causes of structural and cultural inequalities. Functional interculturalism is not a strategy of change but a top-down process adopted to reduce tensions, minimize manifest and latent conflicts and assimilate subordinate groups to the hegemonic culture, without affecting current structural and power relations (Spivak, 1999).

In opposition to this sort of “fake interculturalism,” critical voices emerge in the debate, proposing the adoption of an intercultural approach as a “transformative strategy to unveil, question, and change historically rooted inequalities within society” (Dietz, 2018: 3). Walsh (2010) refers to “critical interculturalism,” a wide project conceived as an ethical, political and epistemic strategy, oriented towards the construction of democracies in which socio-economic equalization and cultural recognition are assumed to be essential for the realization of social justice. These goals need to be achieved through the deconstruction and removal of structures, conditions and mechanisms of power that foster inequality, inferiorization, racialization and discrimination (Walsh, 2018).

This critical perspective could contribute to rethinking the European configuration of the intercultural paradigm, recognizing its Eurocentric evolution, becoming aware of the persistence of unequal global relations between people, groups and cultures, to discuss the presumed univocal and universal character of modern Eurocentrism and Europe's imperial and colonial past. According to Quijano, “the liberation of intercultural relations from the prison of coloniality implies the freedom of all peoples to choose, individually or collectively, such relations: a freedom to choose between various cultural orientations, and, above all, the freedom to produce, criticize, change, and exchange culture and society” (2007: 178).

Adopting this critical perspective of interculturalism, we argue that interculturalism needs to be rethought in European societies, above all to strengthen critical awareness and empowerment of formerly marginalized individuals and groups, and to allow reciprocal, equal and fruitful cultural exchanges, through bottom-up strategies and horizontal relationality based on respect and dignity (Guilherme & Dietz, 2015). We need to translate this critical framework into operational instruments, in a research logic that is sensitive to the collective and interactive construction of cultures from experience, communication, exchange and reflection (Aguado et al., 2017; Márquez & García, 2014), to investigate how systemic discrimination works (or does not work) in the education sector and to identify the main characteristics of intercultural policies and practices that can be traced back to the various forms of interculturalism.

School choice as a lens to observe discriminatory and intercultural dynamics: from static to processual analysis

The persistence of educational inequalities and discriminations in national education systems oriented towards interculturalism is a fact. Empirical evidence has shown that systemic discrimination has a negative impact on minority students' school outcomes in many Western democracies. In fact, discrimination appears when observing grades (Triventi, 2020) or allocation to different classes and future tracks (D'hondt et al., 2021). Among others, tracking decisions clearly appear to be the most discriminatory point for the educational career of disadvantaged students: research in several European countries shows that socially disadvantaged pupils are over-represented in less demanding and less prestigious educational tracks (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013). Among them, a large proportion of immigrant-origin students is forced to opt for tracks, especially vocational ones, that they did not ask for and which will reduce their further opportunities (Felouzis et al., 2015). Consequently, systemic discrimination takes place if scarce attention is given to fair representation of diverse ethnic groups in decision-making around educational and vocational careers.

According to the theoretical model developed by Boudon (1973), cross-national studies have pointed to the key importance of families' socio-economic background as an explanatory factor of immigrant-native differentials on school choice. Quantitative and qualitative studies (Dicks et al., 2019; Heath & Brinbaum, 2014) have tried to evaluate to what extent the less demanding educational choices of children of immigrants can be ascribed to their poorer school performance (primary effects) rather than to different decision models of migrant and native families (secondary effects; European Commission, 2019). In many Western countries (including in Italy), immigrant-background secondary effects are residual if compared with primary effects, but they are nevertheless detected, with first-generation immigrants still displaying a significantly higher risk of enrolling in the vocational track (Barban & White, 2011; Contini & Azzolini, 2016). In Italy prior school performance plays a lesser role compared to other European countries (Cebolla-Boado, 2011; Jackson, 2012), while students' social background is quite relevant in explaining different school choices.

Research has also analysed the role played by schools and teachers, and by their guidance activities (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013). Teachers' advice does not appear to be exclusively determined by students' performance (Bonizzoni et al., 2016), but tends to discourage immigrant students from pursuing university-oriented tracks, emphasizing the lack of linguistic competences, the financial resources needed to fund a long educational career and presumed ethnic "qualities" that bias school orientation (Oakes & Guitón, 1995). The specific patterns of family-school interaction are considered another important aspect that can influence teachers' recommendations and therefore the school choice (Schnell et al., 2015). Different guidance activities are organized for students and their families to help them in making the "right choice," such as open days or parent-teacher meetings aimed at discussing the pupils' overall school performance and allow for a direct exchange of thoughts and views between families and teachers. Empirical evidence points to the migrant families' difficulties in actively taking part in school life and how they frequently assume that the teachers' recommendations represent an expert point of view, which need to be taken into careful consideration in decision-making choices (Michelson, 1990). This also implies, for some families, a limited capacity to challenge, resist and negotiate the guidance advice received. Some studies explore practices that perpetuate the educational disadvantage of migrant students by tracking them into non-academic routes (Pinson & Arnot, 2020: 838), considering the migrant students' lack of language proficiency and teachers' views that vocational schools are "a better fit" for such students since these schools are less focussed on Italian culture, more welcoming and, hence, a safer choice.

Although the focus on the ethnic variable highlights differences in school choices, focussing only on intergroup differences risks essentializing the approach to cultural diversity and failing to capture intragroup diversity, which is not necessarily linked to cultural variables. Overcoming an essentialist approach to cultural diversity, as Abdallah-Pretceille argued, "the intercultural reasoning emphasizes the processes and interactions which unite

and define the individuals and the groups in relation to each other" (2006: 476). Consistent with this statement, we propose moving from a static description of unequal school choices to an analysis of the micro-dynamics at work behind school track choices, focussing on the process of negotiation, communication and interaction between the actors involved (Potterton et al., 2020; Van Zanten, 2005). The ambivalent ways in which students and teachers interact and take decisions, on the one hand, have the function of confirming the "presumed" socio-economic and cultural inferiority of immigrant-origin students and their educational position. On the other hand, they could also serve for criticizing the status quo and increasing the educational chances of disadvantaged students. Therefore, various links and connections between different inequalities of a social and cultural nature (Verhoeven, 2011), forms of interculturalism and school track choices appear and need to be explored and investigated further.

THE ITALIAN INTERCULTURAL MODEL AND THE PERSISTENCE OF DISCRIMINATION IN EDUCATION

Since the Nineties, the intercultural option has been the reference model in the public governance of Italian multicultural schools, whereas in many other European countries, there has only recently been a convergence of institutional discourses towards interculturalism. Therefore, Italy is a relevant research field for verifying the three proposed interpretative shifts and the persistence of educational inequalities and discriminations in a national education system oriented towards interculturalism.

Although intercultural education aims to recognize and value individual diversity, and not only the cultural diversity resulting from migration, it is also evident that migratory phenomena can provide counter-evidence of the education system's ability to guarantee equal opportunities.

Italy, like the other Southern European countries, belongs to the group of "new immigration countries," which became destinations of large international migration flows in the late 1980s. From the 1980s, Italy has experienced a rapid and exponential increase in immigration, reaching 6 million immigrants on 1 January 2020, equal to 10% of the total population and 870,000 students with non-Italian citizenship (10.3% of total students: ISMU, 2021). The Circular 73/1994 of the Ministry of Education—*Intercultural Dialogue and Democratic Coexistence*—represented the first systematic effort to shape the Italian approach to interculturalism, defined as one of the most important strategies to combat discrimination and racism. In 2007, the Ministerial document *The Italian Way for Intercultural Education and the Integration of Immigrant Pupils* sets out in detail the Italian model, providing a list of actions addressing the school integration of foreign students and intercultural activities for all students (Azzolini et al., 2019). The interventions aimed to improve relationships at school with both teachers and peers and integrate intercultural perspectives in knowledge and competences. As set out in the Ministerial Document *Intercultural Orientations* (March 2022), they include: disciplinary and multidisciplinary intercultural teaching; revision of the curricula with eye on the contribution of non-European civilizations; citizenship education; cooperative and participative activities; conflict mediation and actions for improving interethnic relations and class climate; and intercultural training of the teaching staff.

These activities are not mandatory for Italian public schools and they are not linked to a stand-alone subject, but they developed throughout the curriculum or in extracurricular projects. Hence, educational institutions have not proceeded in a coordinated and cohesive way in intercultural implementations, but with many differences attributable to the attitudes of teachers and school leaders, local policies and funding availability (Santagati, 2016). The scarcity of professional, human and financial resources is counterbalanced in some cases by teachers' goodwill, although new emergencies often lead to stopgap solutions and improvisation. A segmented and differentiated approach prevails in the Italian education system (Giancola & Salmieri, 2018): students with immigrant background have suffered from unequal opportunities and discrimination from the treatment they received in the local school system by teachers (Mussino & Strozza, 2012), whose practices could lead (or not) to the implementation of equal and intercultural micro-environments in the classroom.

As a standardized intercultural model in education does not exist in Italy, intercultural policies should be observed through schools' and teachers' practices. Whereas systemic discrimination is not so simple to detect empirically, some discriminatory mechanisms clearly appear when looking at some important turning points, like the previously mentioned transition from lower to upper secondary school. The data show a significant difference in the school choices of Italian and non-Italian students at the end of the first cycle of education (ISMU, 2021). In this transition, students' origins—even for those who excel academically—make the difference, with immigrant students systematically oriented towards the less prestigious vocational and technical tracks, due to their social disadvantage and cultural diversity (Paba & Bertozzi, 2017). Among students with the best results, the rate of enrolment in general track (lyceums) is just over 70% for Italians, compared with 40% for first-generation foreigners (Koray et al., 2022). In this regard, the guidance advice is the only instrument used by all Italian schools, as a non-binding opinion that the class council communicates to the family. Although the family is free to choose, the guidance advice could be an instrument that filters, discriminates and selects students (Bonizzoni et al., 2016). Moreover, the guidance advice seems not to be neutral with respect to the migratory background, and there seem to be possible discriminations operated by teachers towards the most deserving immigrant students to whom they recommend lyceums and general tracks less frequently compared with native students with the same performances.

METHODS

From the theoretical discussion, the literature review and the analysis of the Italian context, some research questions emerge that suggest the need for further investigation into education, discrimination and interculturalism. What kind of micro-mechanisms are at work in the discrimination process that occurs in school choice? Do the ways in which students and teachers interact affect the implementation of the guidance process within the framework of intercultural policies? Consequently, what forms of interculturalism emerge from the field, deriving from the forms of communication, negotiation and interaction between teachers and students? How is systemic discrimination confirmed or countered within schools inspired by the intercultural model? What roles do teachers play in these dynamics?

To answer these research questions, we use data previously obtained from a qualitative study carried out in Northern Italy (the area with the highest percentage of immigrants), focussing on the educational trajectories of immigrant-origin students: the research involved a heterogeneous group of students attending upper secondary schools and training centres and investigated their success and emancipation through education (Santagati, 2021).² Teachers selected students differentiating the group by gender, place of birth, age of arrival in Italy, citizenship and type of school attended and using specific criteria drawn from previous studies and further discussed in a focus group that included teachers and other representatives of the educational institutions involved.³ These criteria were useful to identify “successful students with an immigrant background” and included good marks, high academic performance, high cognitive skills or good relationships with peers and teachers (Colombo & Santagati, 2017). Students were asked to remember their past, reflect on their present and imagine their future, analysing successes and failures. They wrote their educational autobiographies on their own, using a self-interview grid that helped them describe relevant experiences, encounters and choices.⁴ Students' autobiographies give an insight into their school choices, revealing their feelings about this transition, which aspects influenced their decision the most, at which points they felt discriminated or supported and when they perceived intercultural or discriminatory practices.

Considering the point of view of students and their perception of school choice, the aims of the empirical analysis are to:

1. explore the micro-mechanism underneath the transition from lower to upper secondary education, highlighting the discriminatory processes at work during the school track choices;
2. investigate the choice process and the ways in which students and teachers relate to each other, discussing and making decisions;

3. detect and analyse the combination between forms of discrimination and interculturalism, constructed through different strategies implemented by immigrant-origin students and teachers. In particular, look more deeply into the role of teachers in conforming to or resisting discrimination and their interaction, negotiation and communicative exchange processes with students and, indirectly, their families.

Among the empirical materials, we analysed 26 autobiographies written by a group of students, consisting of 20 female and six male students with 12 different citizenships (11 students of African origin and mainly from Morocco; 6 from Eastern Europe mainly Romania and Albania; and 8 of Asian origin mainly from India and Pakistan). These students are equally divided into two groups: 10 students belong to the second generation born in Italy (G2), and 13 students refer to the 1.5 generation (G1.5), including the ones who arrived in Italy during primary school (when aged 6–10: see Rumbaut, 2004). Only three students are part of the 1.25 generation, born abroad and arrived in their adolescent years, attending secondary school in Italy after their arrival. Among the participants, 11 went to vocational institutes, seven to technical institutes, six to lyceums and two to VET (Vocational Education and Training) courses; a minority (4) attended schools situated in the town, while the others attended schools in the wider province.

For the analysis, we focussed on some key points extracted from the autobiography grid: the choice of upper secondary school; the effect of immigration (or parents' migration) on the students' past educational career; positive and negative aspects of the upper secondary school; relationships with teachers; a success that the students have achieved; a failure that the students have experienced; episodes when the students felt fragile and disadvantaged; when they suffered from an injustice and felt discriminated; when they felt they had a chance at school; the effect of immigration (or parents' migration) on the students' current educational experience; when students believe and trust in school/teachers (Santagati, 2018: 321).

The empirical analysis was conducted by identifying common traits and specificities among the 26 autobiographies in view of the size of the group considered.

RESULTS

In the analysis, we went through different steps, in order to answer the research questions and accomplish the research aims. First, we developed a descriptive analysis, using each student's autobiography to explore the micro-mechanisms underneath the school choice and identify different ways of interacting and negotiation between students and teachers. We analysed the decision process, examining whether or not the school choice made by each student was congruent with the teachers' advice. Moving from the school choice dynamics, we deduced different approaches to school track choice (Table 1).

Second, we connected the different forms of student–teacher interaction to discriminatory effects or experiences of resistance to systematic discrimination in the school choice process. We carried out an interpretative analysis, among other things to recognize the teachers' role in conforming to or resisting discrimination and highlighting different forms of interculturalism at play (Tables 2–4).

Student–teacher interactions and approach to school choice

The following descriptive qualitative matrix (Table 1) deconstructs and summarizes the student–teacher dynamics, pointing out the congruence or incongruence of the choice with teachers' advice and the different approaches to school track choices. First, we examined these dimensions separately, matching them with students' characteristics and their areas of origin.

TABLE 1 Characteristics and school choice dynamics emerging from the analysis of 26 autobiographies of immigrant-origin students.

Students' pseudonym	Gender	Country of origin	Age	Generation	Parents' level of education	No. of family members	Attended school	Student-teacher dynamics	School choice congruence to teachers' advice	Approach to school track choice
Iker	M	Algeria	18	G1.5	High	5	Vocational Institute	Agreement	Congruent	Top-down
Krin	M	Mauritius	17	G2	Medium	3	Vocational Institute	Agreement	Congruent	Top-down
Aisha	F	Morocco	16	G1.5	Medium	7	Vocational Institute	Disagreement	Congruent	Top-down
Alunna	F	Morocco	17	G2	Low	6	Vocational Institute	Disagreement	Not congruent	Top-down
Aria	F	Morocco	16	G2	High	5	Vocational Institute	Agreement	Congruent	Top-down
Jenny	F	Tunisia	18	G2	Low	5	Vocational Institute	Agreement	Congruent	Top-down
Kalós	M	Albania	17	G1.5	Low	5	Vocational Institute	Agreement	Congruent	Top-down
Nur	F	Morocco	19	G2	Low	5	Vocational Institute	Agreement	Congruent	Top-down
Leila	F	Morocco	18	G1.25	Low	6	VET Centre	Disagreement	Congruent	Top-down
Aicha	F	Senegal	17	G2	Low	8	VET Centre	Disagreement	Congruent	Top-down
Fatum	F	Morocco	16	G2	Low	5	Technical Institute	Disagreement	Congruent	Top-down
Amna	F	Morocco	16	G1.5	Low	6	Lyceum	Disagreement	Not congruent	Bottom-up
Ravenclaw	F	Morocco	18	G2	High	6	Lyceum	Disagreement	Not congruent	Bottom-up
Eléna	F	Romania	19	G1.5	Medium	3	Vocational Institute	Disagreement	Congruent	Top-down
Annael	F	Romania	17	G1.5	Low	4	Technical Institute	Disagreement	Not congruent	Bottom-up
Trey	M	Romania	18	G1.5	High	4	Technical Institute	Agreement	Congruent	Top-down
Nina	F	Ukraine	16	G1.5	Medium	5	Technical Institute	Disagreement	Congruent	Top-down
Miriam	F	Albania	17	G2	High	5	Lyceum	Disagreement	Not congruent	Bottom-up
Alishba	F	Pakistan	19	G1.25	Medium	8	Lyceum/vocational	Disagreement	Not congruent	Top-down
Desi Girl	F	Pakistan	18	G1.5	Low	7	Vocational Institute	Agreement	Congruent	Top-down
Anita	F	India	17	G1.5	High	5	Technical Institute	Disagreement	Not congruent	Top-down
Malik	M	Pakistan	17	G1.5	Low	4	Technical Institute	Agreement	Congruent	Bottom-up
Quiantrelle	F	Philippines	19	G1.25	High	7	Technical Institute	Agreement	Congruent	Top-down
Deep	F	India	18	G1.5	Low	4	Lyceum	Agreement	Congruent	Bottom-up
Jessica	F	India	18	G2	Medium	5	Lyceum	Disagreement	Not congruent	Top-down
Tasfee	M	Bangladesh	17	G1.5	Medium	4	Lyceum	Agreement	Congruent	Bottom-up

Note: Qualitative matrix.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Student–teacher dynamics

Considering the aspects presented in the table, two main dynamics are identified, marked by agreement or disagreement between the actors involved. These ways of interacting are equally spread among the students and do not seem to be affected by gender, age, area of origin, migrant status and generation, or parents' education. We point out that agreement is expressed more during interactions that led to the choice of technical and vocational institutes, while disagreement appears linked to the same extent to different school choices (vocational, technical and general tracks).

Agreement is expressed through positive interactions between teachers and students. During the choice process, teachers were available to listen to and discuss things with the students, give them feedback and offer their opinions and recommendations. In the students' view, teachers were right because they knew their students very well and always proposed school choices suited to their characteristics, attitudes and interests. On their part, students sought the approval of their teachers and tried to respond positively to their expectations, avoiding arguments and disappointments:

I chose this vocational institute [social and health services] because thinking about my teachers' advice, I understood that they were right and that this would be the right school for me.

(female, Morocco, G2, vocational institute)

The quotation expresses an agreement between teachers and students that is taken for granted, due among other things to immigrant parents' lack of knowledge of the school system. Students rarely reported the active involvement of their parents in the school choice, as they were not able to help and support them during this process or their migrant background represented a weakness and an obstacle (as the research literature on this topic has highlighted: Macia & Llevot, 2019). Sometimes, however, students referred to the important role of parents as a source of support, motivation, strength, pride (Forsberg, 2022), teaching their children perseverance and the importance of working hard and transmitting high educational expectations (Schnell et al., 2015):

I am fortunate to have two very understanding parents who have always supported me in every choice; they helped me to face obstacles that I thought were insurmountable ... parents who gave me so much strength, especially the year I failed in eighth grade ... They gave me the strength to restart in a positive and motivated way.

(female, Tunisia, G2, vocational institute)

My parents have always helped me ... not so much because they help me with homework, I have always managed to study on my own. The fact that they are proud of me makes me try to do my best.

(male, Mauritius, G2, vocational institute)

Agreement in student–teacher interactions was also a consequence of a high level of trust in teachers by students and immigrant families typical of disadvantaged and migrant students (Azzolini et al., 2019)—maintained even when teachers advised talented immigrant-origin students to opt for low-profile choices in the education system (Bonizzoni et al., 2016). Teachers often suggested vocational institutes with programmes and projects for adequately integrating and supporting immigrant students, which did not fulfil students' high professional expectations. In these situations, parents' intervention was not able to support the choice of a high-profile school:

With the help of the Italian teacher, and of my mother who did not want me to choose a low-profile school, or one with poor educational value, and above all with my great interest in economics, we

concluded that the right choice was a commercial vocational institute ... After finishing this school, I would like to go on to university, to improve my skills ... I have high expectations ... I would like to have an important role in my career.

(male, Albania, G 1.5, vocational institute)

In a few cases, the agreement process involved teachers encouraging unexpected choices for immigrant students: these teachers supported the transition to lyceums and strongly recommended this kind of school or identified different sustainable but equivalent options and students trusted this advice (Daher et al., 2020):

The choice of upper secondary school was very difficult because two courses were recommended to me by my teachers: linguistic or scientific lyceum... I gave priority to languages, first of all because I really like English but also because I was curious to discover new languages and cultures. Now that I am already in fourth grade, I can truly say that I have not regretted choosing this school because I feel satisfied both with the curriculum and the facilities of the institute itself.

(female, India, G 2, lyceum)

Some students, who arrived during primary school, were not influenced by their migrant background (Rumbaut, 2004); in this sense, they felt neither advantaged nor disadvantaged. Rather, they were aware of the responsibility of being the children of immigrants—an incentive to study with commitment, enjoying public education without any discrimination:

I chose the lyceum of applied sciences, as the teachers had strongly recommended this track ... What helped me to be a successful student is being an immigrant and the responsibilities that this entails. Coming from a country where education is privatized from primary school and, consequently, requires a high expenditure by the family, the importance of education is greater if it is taking place in a country where the opportunities for work and average salaries are significantly higher than those of one's native country.

(male, Bangladesh, G 1.5, lyceum)

The second dynamic—disagreement—often occurs between students and teachers in the choice process. Sometimes, immigrant-origin students with high ambitions disagreed with their teachers in the school choice process, expressing their annoyance. This disagreement only emerges in the verbal discourse because, in practice, students with high aspirations were inclined towards low-profile choices (Kao & Tienda, 1998). These students are in fact enrolled in vocational institutes or VET centres and are characterized by various weaknesses (uncertainty about the future, confusion about their interests, recent arrival and so on):

I chose this school because my teachers suggested it to me. At first, I was not very enthusiastic about this choice, but afterwards I realized it was the right place for me.

(female, Morocco, G 1.25, VET course)

Moreover, disagreement emerges from an explicit criticism towards the guidance process and systemic discrimination operating in the school track choices, deriving from both students' and teachers' point of view. On the one hand, criticism emerges from students towards teachers' opinions about school choice, since they underestimate their skills and downgrade the student's chances, and is affected by stereotypes due to the foreign origin of parents. Students contested, claimed and sought alternative routes, denouncing the discrimination process and reporting teachers' words about their lack of confidence in students' abilities and possibilities:

My teachers kept telling me that I would not be able to sustain the amount of study required [by an academic school] ... they believed that I was not suitable from this type of school and that I would probably fail the first year ... if I am a successful student, it is thanks to those who did not believe in me Tell me that I am not able to do something, and I will prove to you wrong.

(female, Morocco, G2, lyceum)

My Italian teacher kept telling me that I wouldn't be able to go to a lyceum.

(female, Senegal, G2, VET centre)

On the other hand, criticism also comes from teachers, who suggested ambitious educational pathways to their immigrant students: the disagreement derived from teachers nurturing high aspirations for their students and students rejecting those options and showing low educational aspirations:

All the adults told me to carry on studying and go to a lyceum, while friends told me that it would be a choice that I would later very much regret. I decided to go against every statement that attested to my predisposition and aptitudes.

(female, Morocco, G2, vocational institute)

School choice congruence with teachers' advice

Regarding the school choice made at the end of those processes of negotiation and interaction, we found students' decisions that were congruent with teachers' advice on the one hand, and decisions that were not congruent with teachers' advice on the other. Most students (18) made choices consistently with their teachers' opinions, while a minority group (8) chose counter-trend educational paths, making choices contrary to the teachers' suggestions.

The most common dynamic among the cases analysed includes students who followed teachers' advice. The different micro-mechanisms behind the student-teacher interaction led to the choice of vocational institutes, confirming students' positioning in the less prestigious school tracks (in line with the findings of a consolidated research tradition). In this sense, children of immigrants are likely to share with their parents the same (subaltern) position in the job market (Zanfrini, 2022), whereas, over time, their cultural and linguistic diversities continue to be considered a drawback for their career and not a resource for their emancipation and professionalization. As highlighted in the literature review, the empirical analysis brought to the fore an emphasis on the differences between native and not native students that risk underestimating intragroup differences linked to parents' education, composition of families and generation of belonging (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2006: 476). Although in our analysis, we did not identify an explicit and clear association between low-profile choice and congruence with teachers' advice, some students' characteristics can be linked to school choices of vocational institutes, such as low parental education, recent migration and belonging to large families. In the guidance process, moreover, teachers actively led working-class female migrant students towards educational careers oriented towards jobs in care, health and social work, weak employment from the point of view of salary and suitable for women who can work well with disadvantaged users, consistent with the literature (Barban & White, 2011):

I chose this vocational institute because I would like to work with people, listen to what they have to say, and be able to get a smile from those around me and those who need help. My choice was approved by my teachers and by the psychologist who was in charge of our school advice, who

agreed with my choice: they saw that it is part of my character to be altruistic and I have always shown it in my school performances too.

(female, Tunisia, G2, vocational institute)

In other cases, teachers encourage school choices that seem more suitable and less risky for non-native Italian speakers. Furthermore, for recently arrived (good) students in secondary schools, it is not possible to think about attending a lyceum, without adequate Italian language skills: there is no possibility and no hope of studying in a lyceum or thinking of alternative options to vocational tracks (Archer, 2008). This points to the limitations of an inclusive model that grants only some types of secondary education, exacerbating language and age barriers:

After two years of high school in Pakistan, I moved to Italy and had to start high school again. In Pakistan I was doing science studies and I thought I would go on in the same direction. I enrolled in the science lyceum, where I did not think there was also Latin. It was too difficult, I was studying, but there were people who said to me: "Italians can't do it; you - who don't even speak Italian fluently - will never do it". With these harsh words I lost the little hope I had. My Italian teacher told me to either change school or study a lot. I preferred to change ... Now I am attending a vocational institute. Immigration has totally changed my school life.

(female, Pakistan, G 1.25, vocational institute)

Some students said they are aware of the constraints of a migrant background and accepted the opportunity to attend a vocational institute with a pragmatic attitude (also evident in Colombo & Santagati, 2017). Others showed a more critical attitude, but gave up with an acquiescent attitude, accepting a choice considered suitable to an immigrant student:

The hardest part of my life was choosing upper school. I had dreamt of becoming an artist since I was a child, but since I am not only an indecisive but also a stubborn girl, I threw my biggest dream into the bin. My Italian teacher kept telling me that I wouldn't be able to go to art school and so I chose the school she had recommended: the Advertising Multimedia Graphics School. I had the most difficult time in the first years when my parents and some of my teachers told me that I still had time to change schools, but the fear of being left behind and failing scared me. They also suggested other ways to solve the problem with art courses or with the university or the academy.

(female, Morocco, G 1.5, vocational institute)

A minority group within the sample made a choice that was not congruent with teachers' advice, at the end of the negotiation process. Sometimes students did not follow the more ambitious advice of their teachers, since they were self-protecting from school choices that could be excessively demanding and unsustainable for foreign students and they consequently self-excluded from those educational paths. So, at the end of the negotiation process, the result was the choice of vocational tracks. A student used a metaphor to describe her unrealizable ambitions: the education system is very selective for immigrant-origin students, "who risk breaking their wings if the flight is too long and too high for the possibilities of overambitious birds." Another student wrote about her parents' inability to help with studying (see again Macia & Llevot, 2019), identified as the main motivation of this choice:

My teachers had recommended a lyceum, but I preferred to go to an institute for accountancy without a precise reason. The fact that I emigrated or that my parents emigrated changed a lot in my school career: my classmates could return home and ask their parents in case of difficulty in

studying, while I could not because my parents did not know anything. Therefore, I had to fend for myself. Even today, when I need help from my parents, I get almost nothing, especially in Italian, not because they don't want to help me but because they don't know anything either. My parents have told me several times to find a private teacher, but I prefer to learn by myself.

(female, India, G 1.5, technical institute)

In other cases, the incongruence of the choice derives from teachers who suggested vocational or technical institutes, excluding lyceums, and students who wished to go to a lyceum. Parents' education does not seem to clearly affect this behaviour, but students belonging to the better educated families appear more critical and able to make choices far exceeding the institutional expectations of immigrant students channelled towards vocational tracks (Michelson, 1990; Santagati, 2021).

The choice made reveals that students ignore, refuse or challenge the teachers' proposal and are very critical towards the teachers' advice that directed their school choices "downward," highlighting stereotypes and prejudices spread across the education system. These students opposed teachers' "negative prophecy" about future educational failures, demonstrating that teachers were wrong in not believing in their abilities. This disagreement led students to react to this discriminatory treatment by choosing a lyceum with a choice that was incongruent with teachers' (and institutional) advice. Students' decisions implied a social and cultural change, because they chose an unexpected path for children of immigrants: these students felt pride for their good results, achieved thanks to freedom of choice, the support and the encouragement of their parents, in contrast to the tangible and symbolic obstacles created by teachers and classmates:

I completely ignored their advice and I chose a much more challenging school, namely the languages lyceum and I'm proud of it ... in this choice I was greatly helped by being "foreign".

(female, Albania, G2, lyceum)

Approach to school track choice

Finally, we highlighted two different approaches to school track choices, typical of decision-making processes featured by top-down or bottom-up orientations (DeLeon & DeLeon, 2002: 489). Most students (19) described a top-down approach to school choice, operating in a hierarchical way and inducing or forcing students (and families) to follow school and teachers' recommendations, in a more or less voluntary way, adhering to institutional expectations. Other students (7) reported a bottom-up orientation, useful to face an extremely complex decision, trying to reflect the interests of all the actors involved and to guarantee an open discussion through a more interactive and participatory approach.

The top-down approach to the school choice characterized the case of a student, who was aware that she would have been attending a language lyceum if her parents were natives, instead of a technical institute. From the institution's perspective, this choice was perceived as functional and totally suited to the student's abilities and potential (recalling previous criticisms towards the intercultural model: Sousa Santos, 2018; Tubino, 2013), but the student accepted it with complaints, as an unfair choice. In other cases, vocational tracks were presented as the only option and the best-equipped to respond to the educational and professional needs of immigrant-origin students. This approach is particularly widespread among the group with a Maghrebi (and African) background, which in Italy is characterized by high rate of low educational qualifications, female unemployment and low presence in higher education (Ministero del Lavoro, 2020). Undoubtedly, students belonging to the less educated families tended to be more passive, resigned and prone to renounce choices that challenge a social and educational order in which immigrant-origin were concentrated in vocational tracks and low-qualified jobs:

When I chose this technical institute, my brain was in the clouds. In the first year I wanted to change... I would have liked a language lyceum, but one of my teachers advised me to stay on. I followed his advice; I found his words reassuring and they gave me certainty... During the first year of high school there was a meeting with the psychologist from lower secondary school. When he saw my results he congratulated me, he told me that I had found my path. I did not want to deny it, I had a psychologist in front of me, I wanted to avoid discussion ... I went to the wrong school, but this does not mean giving up. High school is a small stage, there is still the university, and I will certainly not repeat the mistake. Maybe if my parents were natives, they would have sent me to a lyceum.

(female, Morocco, G2, technical institute)

The vocational institute I attend is an organized school and offers many opportunities to students... It has an excellent welcoming program for students with immigrant-origin. The professors offer many opportunities to students and organize extracurricular activities to support learning.

(male, Mauritius, G2, vocational institute)

A minority group of cases corresponds to bottom-up orientations towards school choice, in which a participatory and negotiated process occurred, with the involvement of all the actors. Students, for example, had the possibility to make unexpected choices, with the support of some enlightened teachers and their parents, especially those with a high cultural capital. Alternatively, students chose to go to lyceums in opposition to teachers and reacting to their discriminatory advice, thanks to the emotional support of their families and to an effective, open, tolerant and intercultural framework. This normative frame allowed them to have the concrete possibility to choose general tracks in which their cultural and linguistic competences were valued. Given the resistance of the families to systemic discrimination, and living within a democratic environment, the culture of origin of these students did not appear to be a determinant of behaviour but rather the way individuals use cultural traits in order to speak and to express themselves verbally, bodily, socially and personally (Abdallah-Preteuille, 2006: 480):

The school choice was very important for me, as it was for my parents. I'm a shy girl, with a great desire to help others; I had to consider these characteristics, but also the opinion of my teachers and parents. My teachers did not believe in me, and they proposed that I had to attend a VET centre. According to them, I was not considered capable of attending a lyceum... My parents, whom I respect and love very much, have given me the freedom of choice and support. I still remember my father saying to me: "make your choice and follow your heart, I will not interfere in your choice, you are now a mature girl and you know what you want, I will support you financially and morally, I will not demand anything from you, except to make me a proud father".

(female, Morocco, G 1.5, lyceum)

My teachers did not believe in me and advised me to enrol in a vocational training centre because, according to them, I was not capable enough to attend a lyceum, where I would have been left behind or rejected... After hearing the beautiful words of my parents and the ugly ones of the society I lived in, I decided, being a very stubborn person, to do my own thing and follow my heart by choosing a lyceum. I am very proud of myself, my parents, and my choices; God willing, and with the support of my parents, I will come to realize my dream, which is also my mother's: to be a doctor... Three years have passed since my choice and so far, I have never regretted it.

(female, Morocco, G 1.5, lyceum)

Intercultural mechanisms and teachers' roles in facing discrimination

Connecting the dimensions separately analysed in the previous paragraph (types of student–teacher interaction; congruence with teachers' advice; and approach to the school choice), we identified three different relational dynamics which substantiate the application of interculturalism in different ways during the school choice process. For each interactional mechanism, we pointed out the effect of the negotiation process between students and teachers and the teachers' roles in conforming to or resisting structural and other forms of discrimination.

Conforming to the social and cultural subalternity of immigrant-origin students

The first and most common dynamic connects the agreement between teachers and students to a consistent school choice of the vocational track, congruent with teachers' advice, sometimes because this track is considered more suitable and less risky for non-native Italian speakers. In some cases, immigrant-origin students disagreed with their teachers during the school choice process, showing outstanding qualities and skills, but at the end expressed a preference for low-profile choices that were congruent with the one suggested by teachers.

All these mechanisms can be ascribed to the interpretative category of “functionalist interculturalism,” defined theoretically at the beginning of the article (Tubino, 2013) and now interpreted in terms of concrete and operational indicators detected from the field research (Table 2). This kind of interculturalism, translated into practice, is only a formal setting of recognition of students with a different background, which coexists with systemic discrimination, automatically and (un)intentionally implemented by teachers, with no resistance or awareness by students of being discriminated against, or with only some complaints. In all these cases, the effects of the negotiation between teachers and students in the guidance process are always the same, resulting from a top-down approach confirming a discriminatory institutional functioning of the transition to upper secondary education, with students of immigrant origin mainly concentrated (or segregated) in vocational schools. These processes exemplify the link between “functional interculturalism” and systemic discrimination.

When systemic discrimination occurs despite the students' protests, teachers continue to adapt to the normal functioning of the education system, acting with automatism and showing scarce capacity to be reflexive practitioners able to recognize the discriminatory dynamics taking place. Sometimes students are aware of the

TABLE 2 Mechanisms at work referring to “functionalist interculturalism.”

Teacher–student interaction and negotiation about school choice	Negotiation effect	Roles of teachers and intercultural responsibility
<p><i>Agreement/congruent choice</i></p> <p>Teachers suggested vocational institutes → Students attend vocational institutes</p>	<p>Systemic discrimination without resistance and awareness by students</p>	<p>Teachers conform to discrimination reproducing disadvantaged conditions or protecting immigrant-origin students from possible educational failure</p> <p>Scarce intercultural responsibility</p>
<p><i>Disagreement/congruent choice</i></p> <p>Teachers suggested VET/vocational institutes, students preferred a lyceum → Students attend VET/vocational institutes</p>	<p>Systemic discrimination and only verbal resistance by students</p>	<p>Teachers stifle students' aspirations and conform to discrimination with inappropriate advice</p> <p>Scarce intercultural responsibility, despite the awareness of students with regard to constraints and limits deriving from immigrant origins</p>

Source: Prepared by the authors.

unfair constraints and limits deriving from their immigrant background, but they renounce their aspirations of emancipation and social mobility through education: this is another indicator of the functionalist version of interculturalism.

Being aware of and criticizing discriminatory practices towards immigrant-origin students

The second mechanism is criticism towards the guidance process and systematic discrimination, coming alternately from teachers and students with opposite visions in supporting a low-profile versus a high-profile school choice, reflecting a more dynamic process than the one deriving from the literature on immigrant expectations (Kao & Tienda, 1998). On the one hand, criticism emerges from students' reactions towards teachers' advice oriented towards downgrading the students' chances (Minello & Barban, 2012). On the other hand, criticism unexpectedly comes from teachers, who suggested ambitious educational pathways to their immigrant students, but the latter did not follow these advices, since they were self-protecting from school choices that could be excessively demanding: at the end of the negotiation process characterized by critical positions, the result was the choice of vocational tracks, but for different reasons and with different effects from the ones emerging within the framework of functional interculturalism.

These critical trends are linked to distinctive mechanisms based on two crucial aspects: disagreement between teachers and students and incongruence of the choice made by the students with respect to the teacher's advice (Table 3). In this perspective, we can identify the critical version of interculturalism (theorized earlier: Walsh, 2010), in which students and teachers act as opposing subjects. On the one hand, teachers consciously distance themselves from systemic discrimination and propose ambitious tracks to immigrant students, but the latter self-discriminated and preferred vocational schools. Although teachers do not want to reproduce systemic discrimination and show high levels of intercultural responsibility, they prove to be unable to convince and positively influence immigrant-origin students to invest in long-term educational plans.

On the other hand, an opposite mechanism works through a conflictual dynamic between students and teachers, when criticisms are expressed by students, as they try to resist the systemic discrimination confirmed by the guidance advice, changing their initial desires and looking for mediated choices. Teachers, as institutional actors taking the intercultural principles for granted, do not assume responsibility towards the educational careers

TABLE 3 Mechanisms at work referring to “critical interculturalism.”

Teacher–student interaction and negotiation about school choice	Negotiation effect	Roles of teachers and intercultural responsibility
<p><i>Disagreement/incongruent choice</i> Teachers suggested a lyceum, students preferred vocational institutes → Students attend technical/vocational institutes</p>	<p>Self-discrimination by students since they lack the necessary support and help in studying, they are unaware of their personal and family resources</p>	<p>Resist discrimination, proposing non-discriminating and non-reproductive school choice High intercultural responsibility and criticism from teachers, but unable to convince students in their self-protective, pragmatic, conservative choices</p>
<p><i>Disagreement/incongruent choice</i> Students wished to go to a lyceum, teachers disagreed → Students attend technical institutes or lyceums considered less difficult</p>	<p>Systemic Discrimination, moderated by students' reaction</p>	<p>Conform to systemic discrimination Scarce intercultural responsibility and criticism from students, who recognize the discriminatory actions implemented by teachers, giving wrong advice to children of immigrants</p>

Source: Prepared by the authors.

of these immigrant-origin students. Intercultural sensitivity to sociocultural obstacles does not appear in these teachers' behaviour, although students point to and denounce discriminatory actions emerging from cultural stereotypes and unfair advice that contradict their educational aspirations.

Supporting the school choice process without sociocultural restrictions

The third kind of negotiating mechanisms led to the unexpected school choice of a lyceum, which presupposes dynamics of resistance to discriminatory practices in the intercultural framework (Table 4). In some cases, the effect of negotiation is attributable to a disagreement about the choice, with teachers who suggested vocational or technical institutes, excluding lyceums, and students who wished to go to a lyceum. The choice made reveals that students ignore, refuse or challenge the teachers' proposal and are very critical towards the teachers' advice that directed their school choices "downward." This disagreement led students to react to this discriminatory treatment by choosing a lyceum with a choice that was incongruent with teachers' (and institutional) advice. These interactions are led by a bottom-up approach to school choice (Guilherme & Dietz, 2015) which allows students to make decisions more freely from the constraints of judgement and teachers' advice, and more on the basis of their desire to enhance their multilingualism and abilities, in agreement with their parents and shared aspirations.

In other cases, a process based on the agreement between teachers and students and the congruence of the choice made by students with the teacher's advice appears. In these situations, the approach adopted by teachers led to encouraging unexpected choices for immigrant students (Caneva, 2012): in fact, teachers supported the transition to lyceums and strongly recommended this kind of school or identified different sustainable but equivalent options. The bottom-up process of choice appears in these situations based on horizontal relationality and fruitful exchanges that strengthen respect and dignity (Aguado et al., 2017). These highlighted dynamics refer to a specific form of interculturalism (Table 4), that we would like to define as "transformative interculturalism," in which teachers could assume a high level of intercultural responsibility (Guilherme et al., 2010).

The actors involved in the guidance process resist systemic discrimination and generate a consensual transformation of the "mainstream" and discriminatory dynamics at work in the transition from lower to upper secondary education. This transformative approach produces a (collective) sociocultural change that considers guidance towards a lyceum for students with an immigrant background to be socially and culturally possible and acceptable.

TABLE 4 Mechanisms at work referring to "transformative interculturalism."

Teacher–student interaction and negotiation about school choice	Negotiation effect	Roles of teachers and intercultural responsibility
<p><i>Disagreement/incongruent choice</i></p> <p>Teachers suggested vocational or technical institutes, but not a lyceum</p> <p>→ Students attend a lyceum</p>	Resistance to systemic discrimination by students, perception of social injustice, condition for individual changes	Teachers conform to discrimination and stifle students' aspirations, but they remain unheard Scarce intercultural responsibility
<p><i>Agreement/congruent choice</i></p> <p>Teachers suggested a lyceum, students agreed</p> <p>→ Students attend a lyceum</p>	Resistance to systemic discrimination by teachers and students, actions for consensual transformation, possible sociocultural (collective) change	Teachers resist discrimination and support ambitious or unexpected school choices of their students High intercultural responsibility and margins of discretion and intentionality

Source: Prepared by the authors.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The empirical evidence presented in this paper confirms the persistence of discrimination in the concrete implementation of the Italian intercultural model in the educational field. The findings are consistent with the literature on these topics, even though the work combines three interpretative shifts in a way that has not been previously emphasized in the literature. Through qualitative data concerning the school choices of students with an immigrant background, the article translates these theoretical perspectives (discrimination analysed at micro level, critical interculturalism and school choice deconstructed as a process) into operational dimensions that were detected through the empirical analysis of the school track choices. The main strength of our work is to trace these back to the various forms of interculturalism, exploring the decision process and the school choice dynamics, as well as the effects of these negotiations, proposing some steps forward.

1. We moved towards a micro-level analysis of discrimination, deconstructing micro-mechanisms operating during the school choice process, identifying many details about dynamics of agreement (mutual listening, positive conversation, search for adult approval, influence of others' opinion, confidence in teachers, etc.), the most frequent way of interacting between teachers and students and disagreement marked by contradictions between teachers' and students' expectations, criticism, protest, teachers' lack of confidence in students and so on.

We then highlighted congruence and incongruence with teachers' advice in the process of decision-making carried out by students, with their family's support. We find that most students made congruent choices, confirming immigrant-origin students' position in less prestigious tracks, and teachers' bias in advising immigrant-origin students to choose vocational or technical tracks, a result consistent with the findings of the international literature. A minority group within the sample made a downward choice not congruent with teachers' advice, self-protecting from very demanding educational choices, while few students belonging to the better educated families appear more critical and able to make choices far exceeding the institutional expectations, with the encouragement of their parents.

We also profiled different approaches to the school track choice. Most students, especially those belonging to the less educated family, showed a top-down approach to the school choice, during which they were induced or forced to adhere to institutional expectations, considering the choice of attending a lyceum appropriate for natives and the choice of vocational institutes a pragmatic and orthodox route to respond to the needs of immigrant students. Only a minority reported a bottom-up orientation, useful to face an extremely complex decision, trying to reflect the interests of all actors involved and to guarantee an open discussion through a more interactive and participatory approach. These students had the possibility to make unexpected choices, with the support of some enlightened teachers and of their parents, especially those with a high cultural capital, reacting to discriminatory advice, within an open, tolerant and democratic school framework.

2. We subsequently focussed on the link between the different dimensions described above, reconstructing the micro-mechanism of interaction between students (and indirectly their families) and teachers and the process of decision-making. We found at least three different scenarios of interculturalism, inspired by the critical perspectives presented in the theoretical framework and translated into practical indicators through the field research. For each intercultural scenario, we pointed out the relational dynamics, the negotiation effects and the teachers' roles in conforming to or resisting structural and other forms of discrimination. Interactions based on agreement were found to be linked to choices congruent with teachers' advice, while disagreement appears in choice processes that led both to choices incongruent and congruent with teachers' advice.

Functional interculturalism, which does not change the substantially unequal relations between cultural groups and conforms to discriminatory dynamics, corresponds to a top-down approach to school choice aimed at reducing tensions assimilating subordinate groups to the hegemonic culture (Spivak, 1999), and not recognizing the cultural inferiorization of immigrant-origin students, and the added value of mixed groups in educational contexts. During the school choice process, dynamics of agreement and disagreement are combined with choices congruent with the recommendations of the teachers, who confirm discrimination towards immigrant-origin students, reproducing their disadvantaged conditions in the education system, also with the “good intention” of protecting them from possible educational failure.

Critical interculturalism, marked by disagreement between teachers and students and choices made in contrast with others' opinions, is an intercultural form where teachers or students criticize discriminatory practices even without being able to counteract the effects of systemic discrimination (Walsh, 2010). Critical interculturalism however remains at a formal level, as functional interculturalism, ineffective as a practice (i.e. equal guarantees of access and success in each school track, no cultural inferiorization of minority groups, no relationships based on contacts, openness, exchange and cultural mix). The very limited capacity of migrant families to challenge, resist and negotiate the guidance advice of teachers emerges, consistently with past research (Archer, 2008).

Only in the intercultural model we called “transformative interculturalism” are the discriminatory effects limited or eliminated, thanks to the resistance actions of teachers and students, in a relational perspective. This implementation of interculturalism produces a social change, giving access to lyceums to students with an immigrant background. This process, above all, effectively transforms interculturalism from a formal and theoretical principle of cultural equality into an experience of freedom and respect for different ambitions during the school choice, without penalizing cultural diversity. This experience is guaranteed *de facto* by the practice of intercultural learning and exchange, fostered by a bottom-up process and by some features of the Italian school system, namely being largely a public education system and providing freedom of school choice.

3. Finally, our investigation moved towards a more comprehensive analysis of the school choice process, giving an insight into the exchange between students, teachers and parents and focussing on the role of teachers in contrasting discrimination and promoting transformative interculturalism. The findings showed that the effects of systemic discrimination are not inevitable even in an intercultural framework, but they can be mitigated thanks to the actions of teachers and/or students. From the empirical analysis, an unexpected process emerges. When teachers resist the automatism of systemic discrimination in the guidance process, given their critical position towards the guidance measures and their recognition of the resources that students have, they exercise intercultural responsibility with effective actions. In this case, they achieve a transformative goal leading students to make ambitious choices, which in turn can generate upward mobility and create a fairer education system. However, it is not a single actor who has this transformative power, but both teachers and students can (and should) resist institutional discriminatory mechanisms. In some cases, students mitigate the effects of teachers' discriminatory advice and follow their inclinations and skills, determining whether the teacher's action has (or does not have) a discriminatory effect. Indeed, interculturalism in practice is transformative if it translates into effective mechanisms that raise awareness of existing discrimination, providing scope for actions that break down inequalities and promote greater equity.

From these findings, it is possible to gather indications for effective intercultural education policies. Due to the invisibility of the processes generating systemic discrimination within the educational organization, intercultural education policies have to contribute more to increase awareness of the potential and unexpected discriminatory practices contradicting intercultural guidelines. In this sense, education policies should better encourage the reflexivity of school actors on the impacts of their own behaviour and include more explicitly the objective of combating discrimination and racism, in all their forms, as a necessary step to implement an egalitarian interculturalism. It is about promoting a discussion in schools about values, such as dignity, inclusion and social justice, to

shape an organizational culture that motivates a commitment to equality, diversity and non-discrimination, which can be transformative of educational and social inequalities.

To this end, teacher training becomes a strategic social investment, to deconstruct formal intercultural practices and grasp the other values that the intercultural perspective can and must take on, strengthening the teachers' ability to be responsible intercultural actors and promoters of bottom-up participation in the frame of citizenship education and the idea of democratic school. As illustrated by the research results, the task of rethinking interculturalism through the deconstruction of discrimination must also be done together with students and families, and it is played out daily in school interactions. In this respect, top-down national guidelines must be combined with bottom-up actions that substantiate policies: it becomes necessary to monitor the impacts of intercultural interventions, by developing programmes' evaluations helping to capture the degree of implementation of the policy guidelines, alongside staff capacity to apply these effectively.

Rethinking interculturalism by deconstructing discrimination involves gathering evidence, engaging in dialogue with those affected by the issue and monitoring patterns of discrimination, to adjust the systems that create disadvantages and to provide drivers for new actions. Our analysis is only a partial contribution in this direction, and we recognize its limitations, such as the small group of students selected, the focus on a single point in their education (which in reality is part of a complex and longer lasting process of growth influenced by many factors) and the need, in future investigations, to take into account teachers' perspectives. Nevertheless, this is an initial contribution to assessing intercultural policies in terms of antidiscrimination outcomes, applying a critical theoretical framework to an empirical case. Further research and systematic analysis can highlight other relevant aspects of the contradictory coexistence of interculturalism and discrimination, in order to redefine how to apply the concept of interculturalism more effectively considering the issues of discrimination arising in different contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Vita e Pensiero - Open Access Publications at <https://www.vitaepensiero.it/scheda-ebook/mariagrazia-santagati/autobiografie-di-una-generazione-super-9788834340509-369573.html>.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Although this article does not address the relationship between interculturalism and multiculturalism, we are aware that the distinction between the two approaches is not always so clear. According to Barrett (2013), there are forms of multiculturalism, such as dialogical multiculturalism, which stress the importance of intercultural dialogue. However, we have noted a decline in the use of multiculturalism in political and policy discourse over the past decade in Europe and the appearance of the intercultural approach in the debate. In Southern European countries, moreover, multiculturalism policies were modest (in Portugal and Spain) or even weak (Greece and Italy: Banting & Kymlicka, 2012).
- ² The study was carried out in the province of Brescia in 2017/18, thanks to the collaboration with the Brescia School Office. Teachers from nine upper secondary schools and two training centres participated in the project, selecting 65 students.
- ³ Although teachers were directly involved in different phases of the research, since they belong to the educational institutions participating in the project, we decided not to conduct interviews and field research with teachers. In the Italian research tradition, surveys and ethnographic research have highlighted that some teachers showed

discriminatory attitudes in their advice. They often tend to minimize and underestimate problems and conflicts (such as discrimination, racism and so on: Medarić & Sedmak, 2012; Santagati, 2021) in multicultural educational environments and ascribed them to variables such as social class or gender, but rarely explained them in ethnic and cultural terms. In our research, we chose to emphasize the point of view of immigrant-origin students, their perceptions and feelings, to make explicit and provide evidence of perceived discriminatory dynamics, at work in the school choice and almost always denied by teachers.

⁴ The grid is structured into 34 points, with an introductory presentation and a final section on personal data (for the whole grid, see Santagati, 2018: 321).

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