

# DYNAMICS OF INCLUSION IN SCHOOL: A STUDY IN ITALY

Maurizio Norcia <sup>a</sup>, Antonella Rissotto <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies – National Research Council, Italy.

Corresponding author: maurizio.norcia@istc.cnr.it

Available at <http://www.ssrn.com/link/OIDA-Intl-Journal-Sustainable-Dev.html>

© Ontario International Development Agency. ISSN 1923-6654 (print) ISSN 1923-6662 (online).

**Abstract:** The paper focuses on the dynamics of inclusion and coexistence in School between Italian and foreign students, a particularly relevant topic in Italy. The data provided by the Department of Education in 2011 and for the past 15 years show, in fact, that from 1996/1997 to 2010/2011 foreign students have increased from 0.7% to 7.9 % of the total number of students.

The increased presence of migrant students in the schools of our country, however, does not automatically imply a change in the reciprocal representations of “foreign”: the only Contact (simply sharing the same living spaces) is not sufficient to reduce the level of stereotype and prejudice and to promote inclusion. The study examines which other factors could influence inclusion by creating a typological index aimed at observing students’ attitudes towards diversity/similarity, homogeneity/heterogeneity. Furthermore, Index is correlated with various social-demographic characteristics of the individuals involved and their families.

**Keywords:** Inclusion, Contact Hypothesis, perception of diversity, prejudice

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years the issue of immigration and integration of foreigners has spread rapidly, involving several European countries including Italy. According to ISTAT [1] foreign residents in Italy on 31 December 2013 is 4,387,721, 335 thousands more than the previous year (+7.9 %).

The increased presence of immigrants in our Country, however, has not necessarily implied a change in the reciprocal representations of “foreigner” or a positive experience of relational dynamics, often conflicting and influenced by prejudice. In fact, sharing the same living space per se is not sufficient to promote a real cultural inclusion. Studies conducted both in Italy and in other Countries [2,3] seem to agree that the contact between residents and migrants in itself is not sufficient to reduce the level of stereotype that leads to cultural bias. For this reason, having information

about the relational dynamics implemented by Italians and foreigners in the contexts of coexistence seems to be particularly important. Furthermore, these contexts show the concrete inter-personal experience not to the representation of how you would like the relationship to go, and this help researchers in the collection of reliable information. This way, it also helps to prevent phenomena of social desirability that is the comparison of one’s ideas/behaviors with what is considered socially acceptable.

Research that Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies has carried out in Italy mainly directed at better knowing dynamics of coexistence establishing among students in Junior High School. In particular system of relationship and mutual representations will be recreated with the aim of collect information about conditions which, coupled with mere contact, can promote inclusion or, on the contrary, conflict or division.

## Why school?

Junior High School represent an interesting setting for researchers, for three main reasons.

First, the presence of migrant students in Italian schools is very relevant and has greatly increased in the last 15 years [4]: since the academic year 1996/1997 to 2010/2011 foreign students have grown since 59.389 (0,7% of the whole number of students) to 711.046 (7,9% of total).

Second, Junior High School has a strategic role in studying multiculturalism: this happens because in Italy it is preceded by a level of schooling (Primary School) in which there are very few conflicts among different ethnic groups; it is, on the other hand, followed by a level of education (High School) in which these kinds of conflicts tend to emerge. Detailed information on relational dynamics experienced by students surely allow to better understand and thus to prevent face-offs.

Lastly, School is a sort of laboratory for studying dynamics of coexistence inasmuch it represents a well-defined and scaled-down setting compared to social context as a whole.

## RESEARCH

### Objectives

Main objective of the study presented in the following pages was understanding the dynamics of coexistence that are established in a context such as the Junior High School. In particular, researcher intended to retrace the system of relations and mutual representations of migrant students and Italian students, in order to acquire information on those conditions that, together with the sole Contact, can promote integration, or, on the contrary, conflict and division.

### Method

#### Sample

Taking into account the premises of the study – acquire information about multicultural coexistence – Junior High Schools with higher presence of stranger students (more than 20%) were selected. On the whole, 11 Junior High Schools were involved in the research.

Furthermore, in order to guarantee good levels of geographic, social, cultural and demographic heterogeneity, schools were selected considering their territorial position. It has been also considered their position: schools located in cities, towns and small villages have been included.

#### The questionnaire

To collect data, a structured questionnaire has been built. It included questions about school and family context, about representation of stranger and of inter-ethnic relationships, relational scholastic and extra-scholastic contexts (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Categories of questionnaire

Themes	Dimensions
▪ Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Composition</li> <li>▪ Education level</li> <li>▪ Family's occupational level</li> </ul>
▪ School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Composition of classes</li> <li>▪ Number of strangers</li> </ul>
▪ Representation of stranger in relational scholastic and extra scholastic contexts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Emotional reaction</li> </ul>
▪ Relational scholastic and extra scholastic experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Relationship with classmates</li> <li>▪ Relationship with schoolmates</li> </ul>
▪ Relational extra scholastic context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Group of peers</li> <li>▪ Activities with peers</li> <li>▪ Interactions with peers</li> </ul>
▪ Personal data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Sex</li> <li>▪ Age</li> <li>▪ Nationality</li> </ul>

During building of the questionnaire, researchers gave special attention to the cognitive complexity of the tool, to the understandability of its questions and of modalities of response. It has seemed necessary, considering the characteristics of the sample: the age of the participants and their nationality (and the resulting mastery of Italian language). Also control questions have been used in order to cope with social desirability bias. A pretest involving 70 students was also made with the aim of testing the understandability of phenomenon considered.

#### Educational context

Participants attend Junior High Schools located in the province of Rome in 26% of cases; schools were located in provinces of Frosinone and Rieti in 20% of cases; in provinces of Viterbo and Latina, respectively, 19% and 16% of cases. On average, classes are 20 students (with a minimum of 15 students and a maximum of 27). In 78% of cases, the students attend the last class (II and III) and the same percentage (78%) are aged greater than or equal to 12 years (maximum 16 years).

Most of the students said, moreover, that it had never changed section (94 %). This specific information is encouraging, considering the analyses are going to be carried out: it can be assumed that a longer stay in the same context enhances a clearer characterization, of relations.

#### Homophilia / Heterophilia Index

With the aim of studying relation among characteristics of respondent, his behaviors and the kinds of relationships he establishes, a Homophilia/Heterophilia Index was built.

This Index combines a group of items related to attitudes towards persons of different nationalities. Selected items regard quality of relationships established with classmates (“With whom [sex and nationality] have you established a [nice/habitual/funny/friendly...] relationship in your class?”), feelings engendered by presence at school or in the Country of people from different nationality (“Which feelings arise from having in your classroom/Country people from other Countries?”) and nationality of respondent’s key friends (“Could you specify 5 most important friends of yours?”).

Figure 1 helps to understand the way researchers combined the variables considered: this produced 4 categories ranging from a deeply openness to difference (“He++”, deep heterophilia), to “intermediate” levels (“He+”, slightly more heterophile and “Ho+”, slightly more homophile), to an attitude deeply open to whom/what has characteristics similar to ours.

		“My deepest friends are strangers”	“My deepest friends are Italians”
“In your classroom, with whom have you established positive relationships?”	Having in your classroom/Country people from other countries arouses positive feelings	<i>He++</i> <sup>1</sup>	<i>He+</i>
	Having in your classroom/Country people from other countries arouses negative feelings	<i>He+</i>	<i>Ho+</i>
“In your classroom, with whom have you established negative relationships?”	Having in your classroom/Country people from other countries arouses positive feelings	<i>He+</i>	<i>Ho+</i>
	Having in your classroom/Country people from other countries arouses negative feelings	<i>Ho+</i>	<i>Ho++</i>

**Figure 1: Building of Homophilia / Heterophilia Index**

**Analyses**

**Homophilia / Heterophilia Index crossed with sex of respondents**

**Table 2: Homophilia / Heterophilia Index \* Sex**

Sex		Homophilia / Heterophilia Index		X <sup>2</sup>	Sig.	
		homophile	heterophile			
Male	N	194	129	7,900	0,019	
	Δ % <sup>2</sup>	-8	14			
	Female	N	214			90
		Δ %	8			-15

Considering sex of the respondents, data show that male students are more homophile and less heterophile; on the other hand, females are more homophile and much less heterophile (p = ,019).

**Homophilia / Heterophilia Index crossed with age of respondents**

**Table 3: Homophilia / Heterophilia Index \* Age**

Age		Homophilia / Heterophilia Index		X <sup>2</sup>	Sig.
		homophile	heterophile		
Less than 13 y.o.	N	210	106	11,728	0,003
	Δ %	2	-4		
	13 y.o.	N	169		
Δ %		5	-9		
More than 13 y.o.	N	30	35		
	Δ %	-29	54		

<sup>1</sup> “He++” level: deep heterophile attitude; “He+” level: mainly heterophile attitude; “Ho+” level: mainly homophile attitude; “Ho++” level: deep homophile attitude.

<sup>2</sup> Δ %: variance (percentage) between observed frequency and expected frequency.

There seems to be a significant correlation between students' age and their homophile or heterophile attitude: it emerges, in fact, that as the age increases, the attitude of the respondents towards people of different nationalities significantly changes. The category of respondents aged more than 13 seems to be significantly more heterophile and less homophile compared to the other groups. On the other hand, students up to 12 y.o. result to be more homophile and less heterophile.

#### Homophilia / Heterophilia Index crossed with number of members of respondents' family

**Table 4:** Homophilia / Heterophilia Index \* Number of family members

		Homophilia / Heterophilia Index		X <sup>2</sup>	Sig.	
		homophile	heterophile			
Number of family members	Less than 5 members	N	301	134	10,032	0,007
		Δ %	6	-11		
	5 members	N	65	43		
		Δ %	-8	16		
	More than 5 members	N	39	36		
		Δ %	-21	39		

Data from Table 4 show a positive correlation between the number of members of the students' family and the attitude of the respondent towards multiculturalism: as the number of members increase, the heterophilia become grater and homophilia, on the contrary, reduces.

#### Homophilia / Heterophilia Index crossed with educational level of respondents' family

**Table 5:** Homophilia / Heterophilia Index \* Educational level of family

		Homophilia / Heterophilia Index		X <sup>2</sup>	Sig.	
		homophile	heterophile			
Educational level of family	Low	N	172	69	9,852	0,007
		Δ %	9	-18		
	Medium	N	167	98		
		Δ %	-3	6		
	High	N	33	31		
		Δ %	-21	39		

The children who belong to low-educated families tend to be more homophile and less heterophile than students belonging to high-educated families ( $p = ,007$ ).

#### Homophilia / Heterophilia Index crossed with professional level of respondents' family

**Table 6:** Homophilia / Heterophilia Index \* Professional level of family

		Homophilia / Heterophilia Index		X <sup>2</sup>	Sig.	
		homophile	heterophile			
Professional level of family	Low	N	94	55	2,249	0,325
		Δ %	-5	11		
	Medium	N	97	39		
		Δ %	7	-14		
	High	N	47	25		
		Δ %	-2	4		

If we take into account the professional profiles of the students' parents, trends seem to change compared with what emerged previously: those who have an heterophile attitude belong mostly to families with low professional profiles and, although to a lower extent, with high professional profiles.

On the contrary, students from families with average professional profiles, show a positive relation with homophilia and negative with heterophilia.

### Homophilia / Heterophilia Index crossed with proportion of stranger students in the class

Crossing the Homophilia/Heterophilia Index with the proportion of foreign students in the class, an increasing heterophile attitude emerges as the percentage of foreign students increases. On the contrary the homophile attitude seems to follow the opposite trend: the higher the percentage of foreign presence, the lower is the tendency to homophilia. These results seem to be coherent with the Contact Hypothesis [2]: positive (intimate and prolonged, people have equal *status* and equal goals) between members of different groups reduces prejudice.

**Table 7:** Homophilia / Heterophilia Index \* Proportion of stranger students in the class

Proportion of stranger students in the class		Homophilia / Heterophilia Index		X <sup>2</sup>	Sig.	
		homophile	heterophile			
Low	N	179	76	6,386	0,041	
	Δ %	8	-15			
	Medium	N	129			71
		Δ %	-1			2
	High	N	101			72
		Δ %	-10			19

### Homophilia / Heterophilia Index crossed with composition of groups attended by respondents

**Table 8:** Homophilia / Heterophilia Index \* Composition of groups

Composition of groups by...		Homophilia / Heterophilia Index		X <sup>2</sup>	Sig.	
		homophile	heterophile			
Sex	Homogeneous	N	104	43	3,567	0,036
		Δ %	10	-18		
	Heterogeneous	N	226	139		
		Δ %	-4	7		
Nationality	Homogeneous	N	322	80	24,385	0,000
		Δ %	5	-16		
	Heterogeneous	N	30	29		
		Δ %	-33	108		
Religion	Homogeneous	N	323	110	29,291	0,000
		Δ %	6	-14		
	Heterogeneous	N	26	37		
		Δ %	-41	98		

With respect to the composition of the groups in the classes attended by respondents, a significant increase of heterophile attitude emerges where students are part of a group heterogeneous as for nationality (although homophilia emerges with little significant effects in homogeneous groups), religion (also in this case, homophilia has little significant effects in homogeneous groups) and sex (in this case homophilia emerges in homogeneous groups with the most significant effects).

#### PROFILES OF HETEROPHILIA/HOMOPHILIA AND DISCUSSION

The main objective of this research, which complies with model of *action-research*, was to acquire knowledge and – together - promote inclusion within a so important context for youth's cultural and civil development. School, in fact, is a basin in which knowledge and socialization are intertwined with the

aim of promoting the development of those who will become tomorrow's adults.

A first "result" of this research was to verify *into the field* - and not through the media - the perceived relevance of multiculturalism. The centrality of this theme has emerged since the organization of the survey and during the data collection: it has been proved by the remarkable interest of principals and teachers; the helpfulness of parents to allow their children to be interviewed; the demand of the respondents to be updated about the headways of the research.

In particular, principals and teachers have deeply asked for a feedback of the results of the research with the aim of being enabled to improve educational and training activities .

A second result regards the knowledge acquired. The analyses confirms what Contact Hypothesis [2,3] affirms: simply being part of the same context is not

enough to reduce the influence of stereotypes in representing *the other*.

The outcomes of this research can also allow to identify *profiles* of respondents, that is specific groups of people which distinguish for different attitudes towards people of different nationalities.

Two main groups of respondents which was sampled are defined as “heterophile” or “homophile”: people belonging to the first group, as it emerged, are characterized by an attitude of openness towards people with different characteristics from their own; in the second case, the “homophile” are preferably characterized by an opening towards people with characteristics similar to their own.

Students showing a greater heterophile attitude are, mainly, male and aged between 13 and 14 years. It emerges that older students accrue more knowledge, maturity of judgment, and then open to people with different characteristics from their own. They are usually part of mixed groups in various respects: they attend groups wherein people are both masculine and feminine, are different as to nationality or to religion. Their perception of the presence of foreigners, finally, tend to be consistent with reality.

This first group of respondents is part of classes in which the presence of foreigners is medium or high (about 25%). This aspect can be connected to a greater habit to confrontation and – indeed – is coherent with the findings about number of family members: the attitude to heterophilia is positively correlated with a high number of members (more than 4).

The heterophile students also originate from more educated families: this fact can explain to a greater habit in this kind of families to know the outside (contexts, people, phenomena ...) through contact and study and not through prejudice.

Considering the professional levels of the parents, the debate becomes more complex: students belonging to families with low or with high professional levels are more heterophile. The first outcome may be related to the fact that a greater tendency to heterophilia was detected in the case of foreign students, whose parents, often incoherently with the levels of education, carry out low-profile professions.

Considering the group of homophile students, these are mainly females, Italians and aged less than 13 y.o.; they are placed in classes with a low proportion of foreign students (less than 25%) and prefer to be part of homogeneous groups, as to gender, nationality and religion. This group of students is mostly from families with a low number of members (they are mainly only children), a low educated but a medium level profession.

The weight of the proportion of foreign students in the classroom and the composition of the groups attended both confirm the role of the *Contact* as a

facilitator of a reduction of stereotypes. *Contact*, studied by various scholars [2,5,6,7], has specific characteristics and specific behaviors that can help or hinder its effectiveness: creating multicultural and cooperative contexts (Allport names these “color blindness”) and situations of cooperation within the group or among groups; one of the most important outcomes of this study, in fact, can be summed up by the sentence *cohabitation without interaction*: within the class the foreign student has its space and place but the interaction is weak; once outside the school, this lack increases in relation to other social circles, such as circle of peers, because it faces with difficulty of relating with diversity. The *Contact* should also support the equality of status through, for example, social norms that sustain tolerance, promoting knowledge on social groups and on different historical backgrounds [8].

*Last but not least*, another important outcome of this study is being able to acquire information not only on the positive aspects of the interaction with each other, but also on the difficulty to relate with those who are culturally different from us. It is not always possible to acquire information on what people, in this case teenagers, think, especially when the answers may be affected by the social desirability bias. The survey seems to have caught a *situation of transition*, where *de facto* we cannot speak of full integration: next to attitudes positive towards multiculturalism, seem to emerge “gray areas” or even negative attitudes which should be something to meditate on. This would allow to identify recommendation for the promotion of multiculturalism, and, this way, become the starting point for future research and interventions.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was financially supported by the Italian National Research Council and from the Regional Authority of Lazio.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] ISTAT – Italian National Statistic Agency, 2013. Information on <http://www.istat.it/it/archivio/stranieri>
- [2] G.W. Allport, *The nature of prejudice*, Addison-Wesley, Cambridge, 1954
- [3] Pagani, C., Robustelli, F. (2005) *Marek a scuola: Gli insegnanti e l'inserimento degli alunni stranieri nella scuola italiana*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- [4] MIUR – Italian Department of Education, 2011.
- [5] M. Sherif, *Group conflict and co-operation: their social psychology*, Routledge & K. Paul, London, 1967.
- [6] M.B. Brewer, W. von Hippel and M.P. Gooden, *Diversity and Organizational Identity: The Problem of Entrée after Entry*, in: D.A. Prentice

and D.T. Miller (Eds), *Cultural Divides: Understanding and Overcoming Group Conflict*, Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 1999.

- [7] G. Speltini, A. Palmonari, *I gruppi sociali*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1999.
- [8] C.D. Batson, M.P. Polycarpou, E. Harmon- Jones, H.J. Imhoff, E.C. Mitchener, L.L. Bednar, Klein, T.R. and L. Highberger, Empathy and attitudes: can feeling for a member of a stigmatized group improve feelings toward the group?, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72 (1997) 105-118.

