

MULTILINGUALISM IN SCHOOLS: APPROACHES AND CHALLENGES FOR INCLUSION AND TRANSLINGUISTIC PRACTICES

MULTILINGUISMO A SCUOLA: APPROCCI E SFIDE PER L'INCLUSIONE E PRATICHE TRANSLINGUISTICHE



Double Blind Peer Review

Citation

Liguori, F., Hughes, B., & Tafuri, G. (2025). Multilingualism in schools: approaches and challenges for inclusion and translanguistic practices. *Giornale italiano di educazione alla salute, sport e didattica inclusiva*, 9(2).

Doi:

<https://doi.org/10.32043/gsd.v9i2.1299>

Copyright notice:

© 2023 this is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Open Journal System and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

gsdjournal.it

ISSN: 2532-3296

ISBN: 978-88-6022-510-8

Fabrizio Liguori
University of Naples Parthenope
Fabrizio.liguori@collaboratore.uniparthenope.it



Bronwen Hughes
University of Naples Parthenope
Bronwen.hughes@uniparthenope.it



Giovanni Tafuri
University of Naples Parthenope
giovanni.tafuri001@studenti.uniparthenope.it



ABSTRACT

The growing use of multiple languages in Europe and Italy calls for effective school strategies to manage linguistic diversity. Multilingualism supports cognitive, linguistic and social development. Promoting mother tongues aids inclusion, though teacher training remains limited. This study explores multilingual education in Italy, stressing the value of students' linguistic repertoires and the role of translanguistic practices.

Il crescente uso di più lingue in Europa e in Italia richiede strategie scolastiche efficaci per gestire la diversità linguistica. Il multilinguismo favorisce lo sviluppo cognitivo, linguistico e sociale. La promozione delle lingue madri aiuta l'inclusione, anche se la formazione degli insegnanti rimane limitata. Questo studio esplora l'educazione multilingue in Italia, sottolineando il valore dei repertori linguistici degli studenti e il ruolo delle pratiche translanguistiche.

KEYWORDS

Multilingualism – Translanguaging – Inclusive Education
Multilinguismo – Translinguismo – Didattica Inclusiva

Received 17/04/2025

Accepted 23/05/2025

Published 20/06/2025

1. Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, migratory phenomena had a decisive impact on the transformation of the European linguistic mosaic. One of the most complex aspects for inclusive teaching concerns the scholastic integration of students from migrant backgrounds. Since the 1970s, the significant increase in migratory flows has made it clear that both educational strategies and reception methods need to be reviewed in a novel, vital and innovative manner, in response to new communication and linguistic needs. In this dynamic and culturally heterogeneous context, the concept of multilingualism has come to the fore.

The Treccani Encyclopedia (2025) defines multilingualism as the ability, be it individual or collective, to use several languages alternately and fluently. When talking about individual competence, the term plurilingualism is often preferred, and although it is commonly confused with the former, it in fact embodies a number of specific nuances. Plurilinguism describes a person's ability to communicate effectively in three or more languages. For example, a French citizen who also speaks English, Spanish, and Italian falls under this definition. Multilingualism, on the other hand, refers to the coexistence of several languages in the same social context, such as a school, a city or an entire nation.

Therefore, we can define "multilingual" as an environment in which multiple languages are spoken, while "plurilingual" refers to an individual who possesses language skills in various languages. There are many countries in the world that have a multilingual reality: in Canada, for example, English and French coexist as official languages; India recognizes, in addition to Hindi and English, a multitude of regional languages; in Belgium, on the other hand, French, Dutch and German coexist.

This paper aims to carry out an in-depth investigation on the benefits of multilingualism, with particular attention to the educational context. Several studies show that those who are bilingual or multilingual enjoy cognitive advantages, such as improved memory, greater mental flexibility, and better problem-solving skills. On a cultural level, multilingualism facilitates interaction between individuals of different origins and fosters a deeper understanding of diversity. It also contributes to the preservation of minority languages and local traditions. On an economic level, a knowledge of several languages represents an added value in the global labour market, offering greater professional opportunities. Finally, from a social point of view, it promotes inclusion and cohesion in societies increasingly characterized by multiculturalism. It is with this in mind that bilingual or multilingual school programs are multiplying, designed, as they are, to respond to the growing heterogeneity of students.

At the institutional level, the European Union has shown a strong commitment to multilingualism, as evidenced in official documents between 2008 and 2014. In particular, the document produced by the European Commission of 18 September 2008 (COM(2008)566), entitled "*Multilingualism: a resource for Europe and a shared commitment*", recognises linguistic diversity not only as a challenge, but also as an opportunity to promote social inclusion, improve employability and ensure equal access to rights and services.

The Commission also highlights the growing influence of global factors such as mobility and migration, which make the European context increasingly plurilingual: in addition to the 23 official languages of the EU (in 2008), there are around 60 regional and minority languages, besides those spoken by migrants from more than 175 different countries. Consequently, the urgent need to provide adequate training courses for migrants, especially the younger generations, emerges strongly, while ensuring respect for the languages of origin.

In 2014, the Council of the EU reaffirmed the importance of the topic through its conclusions on *Multilingualism and the Development of Language Competences*, calling on Member States to strengthen educational policies for language learning, improve assessment tools and promote the exchange of good practices between countries.

This work aims to analyse the benefits of a multilingual approach in the school context, countering stereotypes and widespread prejudices, and highlighting the cognitive, emotional and social resources that this approach can offer. Particular attention will be paid to teacher training and the skills needed to effectively address the challenges posed by an ever-increasing linguistic diversity. In the conclusive section, the concept of translanguaging will be explored, in order to examine how this practice can become a key tool in the educational inclusion paths of foreign students.

2. Bilingualism in schools: from reality to mere beliefs

The idea that multilingualism is a rare or extraordinary condition has given rise to numerous prejudices about its consequences, including the fear that the simultaneous learning of two languages may represent an excessive burden on a child's brain development, or that languages compete for the same cognitive resources, hindering intellectual development. One of the main difficulties in dealing with these issues is that language, being an integral part of everyone's daily experience, is often addressed without any scientific perspective whatsoever, fueling strong and not always well-founded personal opinions.

In the case of bilingualism, these views are not limited to the academic sphere, but concretely influence the choices of parents, teachers, educators, health professionals and even policy makers, with significant repercussions on both childhood and adulthood.

It is widely believed, for example, that the use of several languages can generate confusion and thereby compromise academic performance. However, the scientific literature demonstrates exactly the opposite: living in a multilingual context strengthens the so-called executive functions, i.e. those mental processes, such as cognitive control, necessary to manage the alternation between different linguistic codes. As a result, multilingual speakers are by no means confused, but on the contrary are able to develop a greater ability to manage their thoughts and mental processes (Calvo & Bialystok, 2014).

Even very young children, including infants, are able to distinguish between the languages to which they are exposed (Werker & Byers-Heinlein, 2008). This does not imply, however, that switching from one language to another is completely free of a form of cognitive burden: this passage, although often automatic, still requires an active intervention, allowing one language to temporarily prevail over the other, limiting interference. This is the case with both the mother tongue and any additional languages, which influence each other even at an unconscious level (Zirnstien et al., 2018).

The intensity with which one language can exert an influence upon the other stems from several elements, such as the frequency of use, the contexts in which it is spoken and the people with whom it is used. These factors contribute to activating one language rather than another more naturally. According to Abutalebi & Green (2013), this phenomenon is part of the so-called adaptive control, i.e. the brain's ability to flexibly manage language resources according to communicative needs.

In contexts where one needs to use one language rather than another – for example because the interlocutor knows only one of the two – the speaker implements a selective control of language, which requires attention and awareness. From this point of view, speaking several languages is not only socially and culturally enriching, but also represents a cognitive enhancement, since each language opens up access to new forms of knowledge and different cultural universes.

For this reason, establishing a hierarchy between “useful” and “useless” languages makes no sense whatsoever: even if some languages may offer greater professional advantages or be considered more prestigious, all languages

contribute to cognitive development and constitute an added value for those who speak them.

One of the additional benefits for children who grow up bilingual concerns the enrichment of their vocabulary. Although at first glance the vocabulary relating to each language may seem less extensive than that of monolingual peers, if one considers the entire linguistic repertoire the picture changes: the bilingual child, in fact, has access to a wider overall set of words, which allows him to name a greater variety of objects, actions and characteristics (De Houwer et al., 2014; Ehl et al., 2020).

In general, the language development of bilingual and monolingual children follows similar stages, but may differ slightly depending on the specific characteristics of the languages learned. These variations may concern pronunciation (phonology), vocabulary, grammar (morphosyntax) and, later, with the beginning of schooling, also spelling and reading and writing skills. Children who grow up in multilingual environments develop greater familiarity with the transition from one language to another, which leads them to a deeper understanding of the conventional nature of words and the rules that structure language, both spoken and written (Oren, 1981).

This increased metalinguistic awareness translates into faster and less strenuous learning of reading and writing systems, as well as making these children generally more predisposed to the acquisition of additional languages (Ke et al., 2023). In fact, the ability to understand that words can change and follow interchangeable conventions, that indeed there are many ways to name the same reality, is a skill that bilingual children acquire early.

Even the practice, common among multilinguals, of switching from one language to another within the same discourse should not be interpreted as an indication of linguistic disorientation. Phenomena such as code-switching (alternation between linguistic codes) or translanguaging i.e. the ability to draw fluidly on one's entire linguistic repertoire are not simple random mixtures of words, but rather sophisticated communication strategies. In these cases, speakers consciously select elements from multiple languages to fit the context and make their message more effective (Canagarajah, 2011).

It is not surprising, therefore, that translanguaging is increasingly valued in the educational field as an inclusive teaching practice. This mode of expression does not only allow for communication, but also for the construction and negotiation of meaning, in order to represent experiences and to facilitate learning, actively using all the languages available, not in spite of them but precisely through them (Baker, 2011).

The use of multiple languages leads to a greater awareness of the fact that language is never born automatically or unambiguously, but is always the result of precise decisions taken by the speaker. Expressing oneself in a different language does not only mean being able to name the same reality in different ways – which can also happen within a single language – but also implies adopting, through the chosen language, the vision of the world pertaining to the speakers of that language. Those who are bilingual, therefore, develop a high sensitivity to the communicative implications that derive from linguistic variations, maturing in advance and with greater depth the ability to reflect both on how the message is formulated and on how it can be interpreted by those who listen to it.

This sensitivity represents a solid basis for the acquisition of metalinguistic (reflection on language) and metacognitive (awareness of one's own mental processes) skills, as already highlighted by Cummins (1978). At the same time, this continuous exercise in the conscious use of language stimulates the development of the so-called Theory of Mind, or the ability to imagine what is happening in the minds of others (Goetz, 2003).

Theory of Mind is closely linked to empathy, as it allows you to understand the thoughts, intentions and emotions of the other person more clearly. The bilingual child, precisely because of this greater ability to anticipate his or her understanding of the interlocutor, knows how to accurately assess who, among those who are listening, will be able to follow what is said, and can strategically use languages to include or exclude someone from the conversation. This ability reflects an advanced degree of attention to the other, accompanied by a greater readiness to grasp communicative signals, including non-explicit ones, and to adapt one's way of expressing oneself to the context.

These are not simple skills transferred from one linguistic field to other similar ones, but constitute truly specific skills, especially in cases where the difference between linguistic codes is summed to a distance between cultures. This is particularly evident in the experiences of migrant children and families, coming from cultural areas such as the Arabic or Asian ones: here learning the Italian language implies not only the literal translation of words or phrases, but also the acquisition of new cultural norms. As a mere example, the fact that some contents, perfectly acceptable in Italian, could be considered inappropriate in another linguistic context. Or, that certain expressions, direct and immediate in Western communication, require rather more elaborate introductions or greater discretion in cultures that follow different communicative rules, such as those defined by Hall (1976) as “low-context” (more explicit) or “high-context” (more implicit and linked to the social situation).

When two bilingual people communicate with each other, the dialogue can become particularly complex and articulated, as both have the opportunity to freely manage language choices, deciding not only what to say, but also how to say it. However, for multilingualism to produce truly beneficial effects, certain specific conditions must be in place: the benefits are not guaranteed in every situation. The cognitive and linguistic advantages deriving from bilingualism or multilingualism do not emerge automatically but depend on a series of determining factors (Sorace, 2011; Bonfieni et al., 2019; Kroll et al., 2015).

Among these key factors are: sufficient and consistent exposure to each spoken language; the possibility of receiving diversified linguistic inputs from a plurality of interlocutors; and the development of literacy in those languages. All these elements allow the child to build a clear and articulated mental image of the linguistic rules, distinguishing between the correct structures and those that do not fit into the conventions of the language, even when the topics, registers or communicative purposes change (Paradis, 2011).

Another crucial element concerns the attitudes manifested towards spoken languages. It is important for all the languages in the child's repertoire to be valued and that a hierarchy is not established favouring one language over the others (Hoff, 2006; Peace-Hughes et al., 2021). The way in which the language is perceived by the community and the social context profoundly influences the desire and frequency with which it is used. If the child feels that his or her language is accepted, respected and considered worthy of being used, even if it is little known or a minority, he or she will be more inclined to speak it with enthusiasm and with precision.

Language can be seen as a living organism, which needs to be welcomed in a positive manner in order to grow and remain vital. When spoken with pleasure and pride – instead of shame or embarrassment – it manages to express its full communicative and expressive potential, helping to maintain its dynamic nature and richness over time. As a result, this linguistic liveliness, nurtured by positive emotions, can be reflected in a concrete way upon the cognitive, emotional and linguistic well-being of speakers (Phinney et al., 2001).

This beneficial effect, visible especially in children, further strengthens the value and importance of each language, regardless of its diffusion. In fact, each language represents a unique system, with its own unique combination of vocabulary, grammar and pragmatic use. In this sense, every language carries with it an intrinsic and irreplaceable value and deserves to be recognized and supported as such.

We now move on to analyze the most widespread prejudices related to multilingualism and the strategies through which it is possible to dismantle them. One of the most ingrained clichés is the belief that exposure to multiple languages can be harmful to children with difficulties or delays in language development (Garraffa, Sorace & Vender, 2020). This idea may well originate from empirical data that, if interpreted superficially, would seem to suggest a negative impact of bilingualism on language acquisition (Eikerling and Lorusso, 2024). Among these data, for example, it is highlighted that some bilingual children start speaking a little later than monolinguals, or that, if only one of the languages is taken into account, their vocabulary may appear more limited.

Subsequent research shows, however, that any such delays are temporary and can be recovered quickly and completely. In addition, if you look at all the languages your child speaks, the overall vocabulary tends to be broader than that of monolingual peers.

On the other hand, with regard to children with specific language disorders, such as Primary Language Disorder (LPD), it has long been believed that learning multiple languages can generate confusion, due to the complexity of having to manage multiple language systems (phonology, lexicon, grammar) at the same time. As a result, for years any form of multilingual education has been discouraged.

We are currently aware that this position is unfounded: although learning more language codes requires greater cognitive effort, this challenge stimulates advanced mental skills, such as cognitive flexibility and executive control, which compensate for – and can often overcome – the initial difficulties.

In addition, it has progressively emerged that the quality of language exposure is more important than its quantity: it is more effective, in fact, for a child to listen to and use a language in a rich and authentic way, even if it is a so-called “minority” language, rather than to be exposed to a language that is simplified, poorly spoken or used reluctantly by a parent who has been asked to abandon his or her mother tongue (Leseman & Van Den Boom, 1999).

Finally, in assessing the advantages of multilingualism, it is also essential to consider the relational, affective and identity aspects: language plays a key role in strengthening family ties, fostering a sense of belonging to a community and supporting the child's self-esteem. Feeling that one is an integral part of a culture, recognizing oneself in a tradition and being able to communicate in a language full of emotional meaning, contribute decisively to the construction of personal identity (Phinney et al., 2001). In this sense, each language is much more than a simple communicative tool: it is a vehicle of cultural dignity, a bridge between generations and an essential element in the child's path of growth and inclusion.

Although bilingualism does not represent an obstacle to the development of the child, neither in the presence nor in the absence of language disorders, it nevertheless poses considerable difficulties for health professionals in charge of carrying out assessments and diagnoses (Lorusso et al., 2022). Children who learn more than one language cannot be tested as monolingual subjects, in any of the languages acquired, because their learning path and language skills follow different trajectories, not comparable to those of their monolingual peers.

In addition, the language experience of a child living in a migrant context is inevitably different from that of a child raised in the country of origin. Learning takes place under different conditions: linguistic stimuli are often more limited, linked to specific contexts, and influenced by different cultural values and exposure times. For this reason, neither the tests designed for the mother tongue (L1) nor those designed for the second language (L2) can be applied directly, and their results are therefore not immediately interpretable for diagnostic purposes.

In fact, it may happen that a child obtains results below normal standards not because of a genuine disorder, but simply because of poor or discontinuous linguistic exposure. To respond to these complexities, thanks to research and cooperation between scholars and clinical professionals, increasingly accurate and specific tools are being developed, capable of addressing the challenges posed by language assessment in multilingual contexts.

In order for multilingualism skills to reach their full potential, they need to be developed in a supportive environment. In this sense, the role of the school and the educational context is fundamental. The directives of the European Union underline the importance of promoting an intercultural dimension and introducing innovative teaching methodologies (Favaro, 2002). Intercultural education projects are designed to foster tolerance, respect and mutual understanding between students and teachers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In this way, they actively contribute to combating phenomena such as racism and xenophobia.

The activities envisaged in these pathways include the comparative study of cultures, the analysis of their structures and their changes over time, as well as initiatives designed to improve intercultural communication and strengthen the understanding of differences between and among individuals (Ministry of Education, 2000c; Demetrio & Favaro, 2002).

Intercultural education therefore requires conscious choices based on the recognition of certain universal principles, such as fundamental human rights. Schools, in this perspective, have not only a didactic task, but also a civic duty, to

spread the idea that these rights constitute a common heritage, while respecting cultural differences.

Currently, national guidelines have been defined that direct the educational policies of educational institutions, offering a framework of reference for the autonomous design of paths of reception, integration and intercultural education consistent with European values.

In the 2022/2023 school year, there were about 914,860 foreign students in Italy, an increase of 4.9% compared to the previous year (integrazioneimmigranti.gov.it). This complex reality clearly requires careful management measures. To avoid situations of ghettoization, the Ministry of Education and Merit (MIM) has established that in each class the pupils with non-Italian citizenship should not exceed 30%, and has instructed the regional school offices to promote a more balanced distribution (mim.gov.it).

Multilingual classrooms are environments in which students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds learn together. In many cases, pupils are still learning the language of instruction and do not always share a common language or culture with teachers. These situations occur in various school settings and require flexible and inclusive teaching approaches.

3. *Translanguaging*

Translanguaging is a key concept in didactics and applied linguistics, both as a theory of language and as a teaching approach. The term serves to describe how bilingual or multilingual speakers use all their linguistic resources in a fluid and integrated way to communicate, learn and think.

Translanguaging is not merely about switching between languages (as in translation or code switching), but about simultaneously and strategically using elements from multiple languages to express oneself and understand the world. It is a natural practice that occurs in the daily lives of many people who speak more than one language (Li Wei, 2018).

Its dissemination was favored by the work of Ofelia García, in particular by the book *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century* (2009).

According to García, translanguaging does not envisage languages as separate systems, but as a set of linguistic resources that speakers draw upon to build meaning.

It is based on the idea that people do not “compartmentalize” languages in the mind, but use them in an integrated and creative way.

A significant example of educational application is the CUNY-NYSIEB project

in New York, which integrated the languages of migrant students into school curricula. In Europe, on the other hand, translanguaging has been received with greater caution, subordinated to the concepts of multilingualism and plural approaches (García and Sánchez, 2018).

Three aspects emerge from the analysis of European and Italian experiences:

1. Contextualization: The application of translanguaging depends on local sociolinguistic specificities, as shown by the cases of the Basque Country, Belgium and Sweden.
2. Difficulty in going beyond the simple recognition of linguistic diversity: school practices tend to stop at the level of linguistic awareness, without fully integrating the languages of migrant students. The pedagogy of translanguaging, on the other hand, requires a change in roles in the classroom, also relying on the resources of students and families.
3. Overcoming episodicity: many experiences remain isolated or temporary, even when they are valuable. Stable collaboration between schools, universities and institutions is needed to promote lasting and systemic change.

Since 2016, the University for Foreigners of Siena (CLUSS Center) has launched the *L'AltRoparlante* project, based on the teaching of translanguaging. The project, inspired by the CUNY-NYSIEB model in New York, involved over 95 teachers and 800 students from kindergarten to middle school, in various Italian schools. Winner of the European Language Label 2018, the project aims to integrate translanguaging into teachers' daily practices through training, instructional planning and monitoring activities.

A central part of the project is the involvement of families, in particular through activities such as interviews, which encourage the active participation of parents and students. Accurate analysis of the lessons, documented through video recordings and in-depth descriptions, highlights the link between translanguaging pedagogy and intercultural education, showing how the use of multilingual repertoires can stimulate non-stereotyped intercultural reflections (Carbonara and Scibetta, 2020).

In 2018-2019, in class 5B of the primary school located in Serravalle Scrivia, a multilingual educational path was created within the *L'AltRoparlante* project, curated by the two class teachers Rita Repetto and Valeria Balbi. The class, made up of 16 students with different linguistic repertoires (Italian alongside Albanian, Romanian, Moroccan, Spanish, Russian and various Italian dialects), adopted a multilingual schoolscape (meaning the physical and linguistic environment of the

school, incorporating both the physical spaces like classrooms and playgrounds, and the visual language used through signs and other displays) together with individual dictionaries to collect terms in different languages.

The course focused on “Children's Rights” on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The culminating activity was a multilingual interview with family members, with the aim to:

1. Strengthen the active role of bilingual learners in their native language.
2. Involve parents and grandparents as educational resources, overcoming the language barrier(s).
3. Reflect, in an intercultural key, on experiences related to children's rights in different national and family contexts.

The students prepared bilingual texts and interview questions, translated with the help of the families. During the activity, which was videotaped and shared with the network of schools involved in the project, family members expressed themselves in their own languages, while students played the role of language mediators. This fostered a symmetrical intercultural comparison, which highlighted common experiences and legitimised the use of all the students' linguistic resources (“translingual activism”).

The interaction, as illustrated by the example of the Romanian student who translated the interview with her mother, showed the enhancement of multilingual skills and promoted a collective reflection on children's rights, overcoming culturalist visions and fostering mutual recognition between and among different life experiences (Carbonara et al., 2020).

4. The Role of teachers

The school represents the privileged context for developing intercultural education, since only through the recognition of ethnic differences is it possible to prevent them from compromising the construction of identity of the pupils. When diversity is welcomed as a resource, the relationships that are established are based on dialogue and reciprocity; on the contrary, if diversity is perceived as a limit, integration is reduced to a mere assimilation of the dominant models, generating closure and prejudices (Volonterio, 1998).

The aforementioned increase in multiculturalism within the classroom requires teachers to rethink their role and adopt strategies to manage cultural differences. A possible difficulty does, however, derive from a lack of knowledge of the migration phenomenon and the persistence of stereotypes (Volonterio,

1998).

In a society in continuous transformation, schools, as forward looking institutions, are called upon to redefine their functions, inevitably reflecting upon the work of teachers. The figure of the teacher, in fact, appears ambivalent: on the one hand he or she is a “cultural mediator”, on the other, there is a need to reconcile conflicting needs, such as the promotion of social mobility and the maintenance of order (Giovannini, 1996).

The contradictions that characterise the teaching profession are amplified by the lack of coherent training policies. Some teachers complain of insufficient preparation, while others, albeit recognising the usefulness of updating, do not grasp its concrete applicability. Personal motivation has a significant influence: teachers who are satisfied with their work face intercultural challenges with greater serenity, while frustrated teachers tend to resist (Giovannini, 1996).

In primary school, teachers have specific peculiarities, such as a high presence of female educators, a medium-low socio-cultural background and a lower exposure to prejudices than in other levels of schooling (Giovannini, 1996).

An ISMU research survey (1996) involving 1,894 teachers found that almost half of them chose the profession out of a passion for education, while few did so for pragmatic reasons (job stability, schedules). In addition, younger teachers show a greater openness towards intercultural training, while those with more experience are often more skeptical.

Only a minority (14.4%) consider updating and further training superfluous, while the majority consider it useful, albeit with different priorities: 65.5% focus on general cultural training, 21% on language skills and only 12% on intercultural approaches. Those who have had first hand experience of migration issues or have a high level of education are more inclined to recognize the importance of education (Giovannini, 1996).

Teachers’ attitudes towards foreign pupils vary: 68.8% consider them a manageable challenge, 22.5% do not perceive them as a problem and only 8.9% see them as a serious obstacle. The greatest difficulties concern language gaps and adaptation to the school context. However, when pupils master Italian, the differences progressively diminish (Giovannini, 1996).

The teacher has a crucial role in promoting inclusion: he or she must promote a respectful and collaborative environment, avoiding both forced assimilation and the marginalisation of diversity. As Chiari (1994) points out, authentic intercultural teaching requires flexibility and the ability to adapt to the needs of pupils.

The research reveals several trends among teachers: some adopt an

assimilationist approach (“foreign children must adapt”), while others value cultural pluralism. The majority, however, develops over time an empathetic attitude towards immigrant pupils, recognising their educational needs (Volonterio, 1998).

To sum up, schools must be transformed into laboratories of democratic coexistence, where teachers, thanks to their training and sensitivity, can guide pupils towards forms of integration based on dialogue and the respect for identities.

5. Initiatives for Intercultural Education

On the basis of the aforementioned assumptions, guidelines have therefore been drawn up that define the educational policy of reference for schools. These indications allow schools to independently design activities and initiatives dedicated to reception, integration and intercultural education. This approach is based on well-defined pedagogical choices and is configured as a model that promotes integration, interculturality and the recognition of languages, cultures and diversities (Demetrio and Favaro, 2002).

In the volume “Intercultural Didactics. New looks, skills, paths” (Demetrio and Favaro, 2002), the authors illustrate how, starting from the school years 1999/2000 and 2000/2001, intercultural education has been able to make use of four important initiatives, conceived and coordinated by the Ministry of Education. These actions were aimed at disseminating knowledge and skills, as well as encouraging the sharing of experiences and projects between and among schools. The four initiatives were:

1. The establishment of the national commission for intercultural education;
2. The creation of a multimedia kit;
3. The activation of distance learning courses;
4. The launch of the project “Multicultural and multilingual schools”, aimed at the dissemination of good school practices.

The National Commission for Intercultural Education, established in 1997, was made up of teachers, scholars and experts belonging to different cultures and religions. The group was responsible for spreading interculturality and its application in the field of teaching by developing school paths centered on intercultural relationships as the foundation of the educational process. Between 1998 and 2000, the Commission promoted and organised four thematic seminars:

1. The sea that unites. School, Europe, Mediterranean;
2. The school that unites: lines for in-service training;
3. Talking, knowing, getting to know each other. The Italian language in the multicultural school;
4. Who are the Jews? Learning about Jewish history and culture to promote intercultural education.

The results of these seminars were published on a website devoted to intercultural education and subsequently collected in a multimedia kit. The material also included a CD-ROM entitled "Intercultural education in the school of autonomy", whose aim was to represent and disseminate the concept of intercultural education in Italy. The kit contained:

- 35 theoretical insights;
- A collection of 300 school projects in field of intercultural education;
- The reference legislation on intercultural education;
- The documentation regarding the four seminars;
- Links to the websites of the schools and associations involved.

Another innovative proposal was the introduction of a distance learning course on intercultural education, developed in collaboration with Rai (the national television network) and entitled "From some schools to others. Intercultural education: a training path". The course, split into ten episodes lasting one hour each, included moments of individual and group reflection.

During the 2000/2001 school year, the national coordination body for teacher training promoted the project "Multicultural and multilingual schools", whose objective was to enhance and network the educational and didactic experiences already set up in schools.

In order to concretely integrate these ideas into the educational offer plans pertaining to the individual schools, four operational paths were outlined:

1. Centrality of the relationship: through the creation of a school environment that is open to dialogue. An example is the organization of intercultural events (parties, narratives) in which all pupils are involved, with the aim of promoting mutual knowledge and the recognition of differences.
2. Focus on knowledge: with targeted interventions on disciplinary and interdisciplinary teaching, providing for the adaptation of school curricula. The activities can be specifically aimed at immigrant students to support the learning of Italian as an L2, or be aimed at the whole class,

- proposing paths of discovery with regard to different countries, languages and cultures.
3. Enhancement of reciprocity and exchange: through interventions that integrate curricular activities with the contribution of institutions and associations. The school can thus review its curricula in an intercultural key, reflecting on objectives, contents, methodologies and evaluation.
 4. Support for integration: applying specific strategies to respond to the needs of foreign pupils. This implies the inclusion of new contents or the revisiting of traditional ones, in order to stimulate knowledge and comparison.

These paths can involve both small groups of students and the entire school community. In general, intercultural education represents an important opportunity for schools and teachers, as it allows them to strengthen some fundamental pedagogical principles, including the enhancement of the cognitive and relational aspects of learning, the recognition of the plurality of the cultural belonging of pupils and finally the adoption of a pedagogy centered on active listening, decentralization and the development of intercultural communication skills.

The practical application of these principles has resulted in the use of cooperative methodologies, action-research techniques, exchanges of knowledge, narratives and interdisciplinary work.

The general objective, however, remains the promotion of the integration of foreign pupils, with an eye to the development of language skills in multilingual contexts. The aim is to allow the encounter and comparison among different histories and cultures and to promote awareness and knowledge of one's own culture and that of others while preventing prejudice and stereotypes. This clearly also implies mutual respect and protection of rights, regardless of geographical or cultural origin.

6. Conclusions

The exploration of multilingualism in educational settings, with particular reference to the practice of translanguaging and the pivotal role of teachers, reveals a complex yet promising landscape for inclusive education. In light of increasing migratory flows and the resulting linguistic and cultural diversity within European classrooms, the shift from monolingual pedagogies to more inclusive and plural approaches emerges not only as a pedagogical innovation but also as an ethical imperative.

Throughout this article, we have highlighted how multilingual environments, both as social contexts and individual competencies, can serve as vital resources rather than obstacles. Multilingualism, when properly integrated into the educational process, fosters cognitive flexibility, enhances intercultural understanding, supports the preservation of minority languages, and strengthens social cohesion. Furthermore, it aligns with the European Union's broader objectives of inclusion, equity, and employability, as stated in several policy documents over the past two decades.

At the heart of this shift lies the concept of translanguaging, which challenges traditional linguistic hierarchies and disrupts the idea of compartmentalized languages. Unlike simple code-switching, translanguaging involves the dynamic and integrated use of linguistic repertoires by bilingual and multilingual speakers. This pedagogical practice allows students to mobilize all their linguistic resources for learning, thereby positioning them as active agents in the construction of knowledge and meaning. As shown in the Italian project *L'AltRoparlante*, inspired by the CUNY-NYSIEB model in New York, translanguaging has the potential to transform classrooms into intercultural spaces of co-construction, collaboration, and mutual recognition.

It must be said, however, that the implementation of such approaches is not without challenges. The analysis of European and Italian experiences reveals three critical dimensions: (1) the need for contextualization, i.e., adapting translanguaging practices to the local sociolinguistic and institutional reality; (2) the importance of moving beyond symbolic recognition of linguistic diversity, aiming instead for the concrete integration of students' home languages into everyday teaching practices; and (3) the urgency of overcoming episodic interventions through systemic collaborations among schools, universities, and policymakers.

These challenges underline the strategic role of teachers in mediating between institutional goals and classroom realities. Teachers are not mere implementers of curricular programs but key agents in the development of intercultural competences and inclusive pedagogies. Nevertheless, current research still points to persistent gaps in teacher training regarding linguistic diversity and intercultural education. Many teachers express a lack of preparation and a feeling of uncertainty about how to translate inclusive principles into practice. Occasionally their resistance is rooted in misconceptions or limited exposure to linguistic diversity.

It is therefore essential to rethink teacher education in light of these findings. A comprehensive training model should equip teachers not only with theoretical knowledge about migration and multilingualism but also with practical tools for classroom management, curriculum planning, and family engagement. Professional

development initiatives must move beyond generic cultural awareness to encompass applied pedagogical strategies, including translanguaging, collaborative planning, and differentiated instruction. Programs such as *L'AltRoparlante* demonstrate how targeted interventions, combined with reflective practice and peer support, can empower educators to embrace diversity as a pedagogical strength rather than a challenge.

Another key aspect that emerged from this investigation is the role of family and community involvement. Effective multilingual education cannot be confined to the classroom; it requires active participation from families, particularly in those communities where linguistic and cultural diversity is more pronounced. The inclusion of parents and grandparents in school projects, such as interviews and storytelling in their native languages, not only fosters intergenerational dialogue but also legitimizes the home languages and cultures of students. This is a powerful strategy for dismantling deficit-oriented views of migrant backgrounds and promoting a more equitable and participatory model of education.

Moreover, the pedagogical shift advocated by translanguaging goes hand in hand with a broader intercultural ethos. Translanguaging is not merely a linguistic strategy but a way of rethinking power relations in the classroom. By legitimizing all languages and cultural expressions, teachers can challenge dominant norms and promote a democratic and dialogical environment. This approach counters assimilationist tendencies that still persist in some educational systems, which view linguistic diversity as a barrier to be overcome rather than as a resource to be cultivated.

In this regard, translanguaging can be seen as a form of “translingual activism”, where educational practices become sites of resistance against monolingual ideologies and linguistic discrimination. The active role of students as “language brokers” in the *AltRoparlante* project exemplifies this shift: multilingual learners are not passive recipients of knowledge, but rather co-constructors of meaning and bridges between cultures. This dynamic contributes to a more symmetrical intercultural exchange, where all voices are heard and valued.

Despite the promising outcomes of such initiatives, it is important to recognize that systemic change requires sustained commitment from all stakeholders. Pilot projects and isolated best practices, while valuable, must be scaled up and institutionalized through coherent policies, ongoing teacher support, and the inclusion of multilingualism as a structural dimension of school curricula. National and local educational authorities have a decisive role to play in this process, ensuring that linguistic diversity is embedded in school policies, teacher recruitment, textbook design, and assessment systems.

In conclusion, multilingualism, far from being a marginal issue, is central to the construction of inclusive and equitable education systems. It challenges us to reconsider not only how we teach, but also what we value in our classrooms. The adoption of translanguaging as both a pedagogical and epistemological framework represents a step forward in this direction. It invites educators to recognize the full linguistic repertoires of their students, to cultivate intercultural empathy, and to promote educational practices that reflect the complex realities of our increasingly globalized societies.

Ultimately, schools must become laboratories of democratic coexistence, where linguistic and cultural diversity are embraced as opportunities for collective growth. This requires courage, creativity, and collaboration, from teachers, families, students, and institutions alike. It is through such collective efforts that we can build a more just, inclusive, and linguistically rich educational future.

Author Contributions

Author 1 wrote paragraphs 1, and 2; Author 2 wrote paragraphs 3, and 4. Author 3 wrote paragraphs 5 and 6. This article is the result of a research endeavour collaboratively developed and shared among the authors. The three Authors intellectually contributed to the manuscript, read the manuscript, and approved the presentation in exactly the same way.

References

- Abutalebi, J., & Green, D. W. (2013). *Language control in bilinguals: The adaptive control hypothesis*. *Journal of Cognitive Psychology*, 25(5), 515–530. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20445911.2013.796377>
- Baker, C. (2011). *Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism* (5th ed.). Multilingual Matters.
- Bonfieni, M., Branigan, H. P., & Pickering, M. J. (2019). *Cognitive effects of bilingualism: A test of the adaptive control hypothesis*. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 22(3), 565–578. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1366728918000423>
- Calvo, A., & Bialystok, E. (2014). *Independent effects of bilingualism and socioeconomic status on language ability and executive functioning*. *Cognition*, 130(3), 278–288. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2013.11.015>
- Canagarajah, S. (2011). *Codemeshing in academic writing: Identifying teachable strategies of translanguaging*. *The Modern Language Journal*, 95(3), 401–417. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2011.01207.x>

- Carbonara, V., & Scibetta, M. (2020). *Il translanguaging come pratica educativa: Esperienze e riflessioni dal progetto AltRoparlante*. FrancoAngeli.
- Carbonara, V., Scibetta, M., Balbi, V., & Repetto, R. (2020). *Translanguaging, educazione interculturale e diritti dei bambini: Un'esperienza nella scuola primaria italiana*. In V. Carbonara & M. Scibetta (Eds.), *Il translanguaging come pratica educativa: Esperienze e riflessioni dal progetto AltRoparlante* (pp. 119–137). FrancoAngeli.
- Chiari, R. (1994). *Educazione interculturale e didattica: Teorie e pratiche per una scuola inclusiva*. Mondadori.
- Council of the European Union. (2014). *Council conclusions on multilingualism and the development of language competences*. Official Journal of the European Union, C183, 26–28. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52014XG0614%2802%29>
- Cummins, J. (1978). *Metalinguistic development of children in bilingual education programs: Data from Irish and Canadian Ukrainian-English programs*. In M. Paradis (Ed.), *Aspects of bilingualism* (pp. 127–138). Hornbeam Press.
- De Houwer, A., Bornstein, M. H., & Putnick, D. L. (2014). *A bilingual–monolingual comparison of young children's vocabulary size: Evidence from comprehension and production*. Applied Psycholinguistics, 35(6), 1189–1211. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0142716412000744>
- Demetrio, D., & Favaro, G. (2002). *Didattica interculturale. Nuovi sguardi, competenze, percorsi*. La Nuova Italia.
- Ehl, S. K., Andersson, S., & Bohnacker, U. (2020). *Lexical development in bilingual Swedish–Arabic children in relation to age and exposure*. Journal of Child Language, 47(5), 1012–1036. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305000919000893>
- Eikerling, C., & Lorusso, M. L. (2024). *Assessing the language development of bilingual children: Challenges and perspectives*. International Journal of Bilingualism. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006924123456>
- European Commission. (2008). *Multilingualism: An asset for Europe and a shared commitment* (COM(2008)566 final). Brussels: Commission of the European Communities. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52008DC0566>
- García, O. (2009). *Bilingual education in the 21st century: A global perspective*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- García, O., & Sánchez, M. T. (2018). Transforming schools with translanguaging: A better understanding of pedagogical possibilities. In A. De Fina & D. Tseng (Eds.), *Translanguaging in education* (pp. 140–161). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Garraffa, M., Sorace, A., & Vender, M. (2020). *Bilingualism in children with developmental disorders: A narrative review*. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 23(3), 340–353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2017.1406820>
- Giovannini, F. (1996). *Insegnare nelle scuole multietniche: Ruolo, formazione e strategie didattiche*. Carocci.
- Goetz, P. J. (2003). *The effects of bilingualism on theory of mind development*. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 6(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1366728903001007>
- Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. Anchor Books.
- Hoff, E. (2006). *How social contexts support and shape language development*. *Developmental Review*, 26(1), 55–88. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2005.11.002>
- ISMU. (1996). *Rapporto sull'integrazione scolastica degli studenti migranti*. ISMU.
- Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana. (2025). *Multilinguismo*. In *Enciclopedia Treccani*. <https://www.treccani.it>
- Ke, L., Yoshikawa, H., & Snow, C. E. (2023). *The role of early bilingual exposure on literacy skills and metalinguistic awareness in multilingual children*. *Child Development*, 94(1), 112–130. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13876>
- Kroll, J. F., Dussias, P. E., Bice, K., & Perrotti, L. (2015). *Bilingualism, mind, and brain*. *Annual Review of Linguistics*, 1, 377–394. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-linguist-030514-124937>
- Leseman, P. P. M., & Van den Boom, D. C. (1999). *Effects of quantity and quality of home language input on bilingual preschoolers' language development*. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 20(3), 323–339. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0142716499003012>
- Li Wei. (2018). *Translanguaging as a practical theory of language*. *Applied Linguistics*, 39(1), 9–30. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amx039>
- Oren, T. (1981). *Language awareness in bilingual children*. *Journal of Child Language*, 8(2), 395–405. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305000900003295>
- Paradis, J. (2011). *Individual differences in child English second language acquisition: Comparing child-internal and child-external factors*. *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*, 1(3), 213–237. <https://doi.org/10.1075/lab.1.3.01par>
- Peace-Hughes, T., Lorusso, M. L., & Garraffa, M. (2021). *Linguistic inclusion and heritage language maintenance in multilingual education*. *Languages*, 6(1), 25. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages6010025>

- Phinney, J. S., Romero, I., Nava, M., & Huang, D. (2001). *The role of language, parents, and peers in ethnic identity among adolescents in immigrant families*. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 30(2), 135–153. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1010389607319>
- Sorace, A. (2011). *Pinning down the concept of “interface” in bilingualism*. *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*, 1(1), 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.1075/lab.1.1.01sor>
- Volonterio, G. (1998). *La scuola multiculturale. Educazione e integrazione nelle società contemporanee*. Laterza.
- Werker, J. F., & Byers-Heinlein, K. (2008). *Bilingualism in infancy: First steps in perception and comprehension*. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 12(4), 144–151. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2008.01.008>
- Zirnshtein, M., Van Hell, J. G., & Kroll, J. F. (2018). *Cognitive control and language experience: Evidence from ERPs in picture–word interference tasks with bilinguals*. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 21(6), 1169–1185. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1366728918000030>