

RELIGIOSITY AND SCHOOL INTEGRATION AMONG ITALIAN
AND NON-ITALIAN STUDENTS. RESULTS FROM A SURVEY
IN MULTI-ETHNIC CLASSROOMS

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Abstract. The paper investigates the role of religion among a group of adolescents (11-15-year-old) surveyed in Italian multicultural schools. The multicultural classrooms (with over 30% of pupils with ethnic background) may be interpreted as social spaces for inter-ethnic coexistence, open to ethnic and religious diversity. We rely on a sample of 1,040 students enrolled in lower secondary education in Lombardy in 2011 on which we investigate religiosity, conceptualized as consisting of religious belonging and religious practice. The investigation questions are: does religiosity hamper horizontal relationships with classmates and vertical relationships with teachers? What consequence does the religious practice produce on educational achievement, and more in general on school integration? On average, religious students tend to report a higher level of integration (positive relationships with peers/teachers) compared to non-religious students, even after controlling for a wide set of covariates. In addition, they gain higher marks. Furthermore, these positive results are similar among Italian and non-Italian students: for future research, this evidence suggests that religiosity of students with an immigrant background could be considered as a resource for their educational integration, especially when schools are more welcoming towards religious diversity.

Keywords: Religiosity, School integration, Multicultural schools, Interethnic relationships, Non-Italian students.

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I - INTRODUCTION

Nowadays the resurgence of religion is relevant in manifold contexts, for example in democratic politics, in radicalization and violent extremism, or in integration or iso-

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lation of immigrants (Drexler - Heckmann 2005: 3). This article aims at investigating the role of religiosity, religious belonging, and religious practice, in school integration pathways of new generations. Social sciences have often forgotten religion in studying educational processes. However, the increasing secularization, underlined by the modernization theory, has not ruled out the importance of religion in social and individual life (Habermas 2006; Rosati - Stoeckl 2012; Cipriani 2015). At the same time, religious forms – both individual and collective – are increasingly interpreted as lifestyles: religious behaviors seem to be autonomous from belongings to pre-existent religious system and they are reproduced and justified with horizontal modes (Berzano 2011).

In order to introduce this topic, an interpretative framework is presented summarizing the main research findings of the international sociological literature and analyzing the nexus religion-education-migration.

According to a recent study (Pew Research Center 2016), religion plays an important role, affecting educational achievement and personal or family's attitudes toward formal education and secular knowledge, interplaying with other structural factors in shaping life carriers for both natives and immigrants. Regnerus (2003), in its research review on religion and adolescent outcomes in the US, shows that more extensive religious involvement is generally associated with positive outcomes during adolescence, also in education. Certain religious affiliations (e.g. Protestantism) can mitigate the otherwise positive influence of religious involvement on educational attainment and aspirations. Other US research finds that religious participation, commitment, and worship attendance foster several positive outcomes: religious involvement predicts higher academic performances and greater educational expectations, helps to increase study motivation, provides the discipline necessary for the persistence in school tasks, and it gives access to valuable cultural and social capital (Glanville et al. 2008).

Religion is also interpreted as a crucial resource for immigrants' integration, especially in the US literature. These studies consider belonging to a religion as a bridge for inclusion and a route for social mobility of minorities, emphasizing its positive role in facilitating the adaptation process (Kivisto 2014). On the contrary, in Western Europe religious diversity is mainly seen as a marker of a fundamental social divide, a source of conflicts and clashes between majority and minority groups. In the political and scholars' agenda religious diversity is represented as a barrier to the integration of immigrants and their descendants (Foner - Alba 2008). With respect to the educational incorporation of immigrant minorities in Europe, religiosity (and, namely, the Islamic religiosity) is controversial. Due to limited data availability, there is a lack of empirical evidence on the link religion-education-migration, topic that has been little investigated by European (and Italian) sociologists. The cross-national survey TIES (Crul - Schneider 2010) represents a *unicum* in this field, providing an interesting analysis on multiple dimensions of religiosity among the Turkish second generation and on their educational and social integration in European societies. Using TIES data, Fleischmann and Phalet (2012) assess theoretical expectations of religious decline (Esser 2010) and vitality in the second generation, concluding that religious diversity is not incompatible with structural and relational integration.

With the exception of TIES, few European studies have examined whether to belong to a religion affects educational outcomes. A recent qualitative study on Islamic students in Belgium highlights that the religious factor is often minimized in multicultural classrooms: students do not mention religiosity spontaneously when they talk about the determinants of their educational success, sometimes they recognize the religious friendship as a resource for fostering their school attachment (Van Praag et al. 2016). Hence, religion is neglected in educational environments, in order to understand both school success and interethnic relations and conflicts, phenomena mainly ascribed to social class or gender, but rarely explained by religion. This lack of studies invites scholars to examine the role of religion in multicultural schools, in producing conflicts or fostering dialogue, affecting educational achievement and relational well-being of students, influencing or preventing violent radicalism in the school environment (Santagati et al. 2017).

II - STUDENTS WITH A DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND IN ITALY. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In Italy, this research line on students' religiosity and school integration is even more underdeveloped within the tradition of studies on ethnic inequalities in education (Azzolini et al. 2019). This is mainly due to migratory inflows occurred in Italy lately. In the last two decades, the country reached immigration rates similar to those countries that have an older history of immigration, through a rapid and exponential increase of students with an immigrant background. In s.y. 2010/11 non-Italian students were about 711,000, which correspond to 7.9% of the total school population: nowadays they are about 826,000 corresponding to 9.4% of the total amount of students (Ministry of Education 2018). Evidently, an increase occurred but the situation in 2011 (when we collected the data presented below) was not so different from the actual one. With respect to the citizenship of the students, the differentiation of origins has to be associated with cultural, linguistic and religious differences in the classrooms: as shown by ISTAT research on «religious belonging and practice among foreign citizens» (2011-12), 60.4% of immigrants in Italy between 6 and 17 years (and therefore attending Italian schools) do not belong to the Catholic religion (ISTAT 2015). The majority are Muslim (30%), followed by Catholic (23.2%), Orthodox (19.6%) and, at a distance, Buddhist (3.6%) and Protestant (2.4%)¹. Notwithstanding this «religious revolution», Italian society continues to be seen as homogeneous in religious terms and the teaching of Catholic religion in state and non-state schools is still a pillar of the historical and cultural heritage of the nation.

¹ ISTAT research reports data on religious belonging collected in 2011-12, corresponding to the period of our research, whose results are presented in the following paragraphs. The differentiation of citizenships (over 200) typical of the Italian school system has been quite stable over time: the most numerous nationalities are countries of historical emigration to Italy (Rumania, Albania, Morocco, etc.: ISMU Foundation 2018).

In this scenario, Italian sociologists have focused on school integration, considering it as the process of bringing together minority and non-minority pupils in such a way that they are in a positive relationship, both socially and academically. The Italian studies deal mainly with two crucial issues in school integration: on the one hand, the academic gap (low achievement and learning difficulties among students with an immigrant background) and, on the other hand, relationships and school climate in multicultural classes, both aspects affecting the quality of students' experience (Santagati 2015). In Italy these students featured by different citizenship, language, culture, religion, compared to natives, show persistent disadvantages in the learning process, as well as more relational problems with classmates².

The growing presence of children of immigrants creates new challenges for the acknowledgement of religious diversity in education. Pioneering research on this topic reports a mix of religious practices within Italian multicultural schools, concerning food, clothes, festivities and worship traditions that sometimes lead up to «critical incidents»; nevertheless, the religious issue is mainly not explicit and faced (Ottaviano 2010). According to Benadusi, Fabretti and Salmieri (2017), schools often offer spaces of (implicit or explicit) exchange in which identities, worldviews, similarities and diversities – also based on religious traits – could play a crucial role, depending from the organizational, local and cultural conditions. In recent studies, the ambivalence of religious diversity within the educational pathways of immigrant students emerges, such as the lack of awareness among teachers in managing controversies and dilemmas related to different religious traditions (Daher et al. 2017)³.

In conclusion of this excursus it is worthy to mention the study, whose data analyzed in this article come from. This study is based on a survey conducted in 2010/11 on a sample of Italian and non-Italian students from lower secondary schools in Lombardy in classes with a high percentage of immigrant pupils (Colombo - Santagati 2014; 2017)⁴. We wonder whether pupils with an immigrant background – being part of a cultural minority in the classroom – do meet more obstacles than Italian ones, in order to achieve both targets of integration, achievement and social inclusion. We focused on their academic success and social inclusion, and we tested whether they put in place an ethnic or cultural «self-defense» as members of a group who feel discriminated. For both dimensions of school integration, the study took into account:

² Only the relationships between non-native students and teachers look less problematic if compared with natives, see Colombo (2013).

³ The multireligious nature of educational environments is even more complex: other research carried out in Italy also reveals the presence of religious lifestyles, which are independent from the institutional religious belonging of single individuals (Berzano - Genova 2015).

⁴ Our research was carried out several years ago: however, data could be still relevant – given the lack of studies on this topic. Furthermore, 2010 represents a key point for the public debate on multicultural Italian schools. In 2010, the Ministry of Education established a 30% threshold of foreign students who can be assigned to any one classroom. This document has both a normative and a cultural value, focusing on risks and consequences of the educational concentration of students coming from different cultures, religions and backgrounds. Cultural (and religious) mix is still considered, like in previous Ministry directives, an indispensable condition for a good level of integration and intercultural dialogue at school.

a) indicators of *institutional integration (learning)*: achievement of both Italian and non-Italian students, connected to the individual's ability to adapt him/herself to the demands of the school and measured through subjective/objective indexes (grades, language skills, failures, delays, self-assessment of success, and aspirations for the future etc.) and family interest for the child's achievement;

b) indicators of *relational integration (social cohesion)*: satisfying relationships in the classroom, both horizontal (relationships among pupils) and vertical (relationships between teachers and pupils), measured by the classroom climate and students' levels of well-being.

In the present article, we will focus on the role of religiosity of students in school integration, by assuming religiosity as a means to enhance or inhibit one's own integration in the classroom, specifically in a multi-ethnic school environment. We try to answer to the following questions: does the religious practice of students affect their school integration positively or negatively, in terms of school performance and classroom relationships? Are there any differences between Italian and non-Italian students regarding the influence of religious practice?

III - DATA AND METHODS

Data

The data collection (May 2011) involved 1040 pupils in 14 public schools (low secondary education, ISCED 2) with high incidence of non-Italian students (> 29%)⁵. The questionnaire contained four sections/areas: friends and classmates, relationships with teachers, parents and family environment, peer relationships outside the school. Further aspects of the school experience were investigated, such as opinions on society and immigration in general, and future expectations.

The sample comprises 56 classes⁶ and it is quite balanced with respect to school grades. Respondents are: 61.7% Italians and 38.3% foreigners, of whom 27.8% are foreign-born and 11.1% born in Italy. The ethnic origins of families are various: Asians make up 12.2% of the sample, with a majority of students from the Philippines, India and China; Africans are 9.4%, mostly from Morocco and Egypt; 8.6% come from South America, and 5.8% from non-EU countries in Europe (mostly Albania, Ukraine and Moldova). A significant number of migrant families (38%) arrived in Italy in the past 3 to 6 years, and about one out of five arrived in the last 2 years.

⁵ The survey was promoted and funded by the Regional Council of Lombardy, through the Observatory for Integration and Multi-Ethnicity (ORIM); see the study report in Colombo - Santagati (2017).

⁶ The administration of the questionnaire took place when the teacher was present in the classroom. Teachers have sometimes helped the researcher (with special needs students).

Variables

Our independent variable, religiosity, is based on pupils who declared at the same time: 1) to have a religious belonging (92% of the sample respond «Yes» to the query: «Do you belong to a religion?»⁷); 2) to be religious observant (71,3% of the sample declare to follow a worship)⁸. Hence, our models compare students who declare to belong to a religion and to be observant with all the other ones (non-believers and non-observants).

We test the influence of this independent variable on a rich subset of indexes measuring several dimensions of school integration: index of Educational Achievement; index of Future Goals and Aspirations; index of Classroom Internal Relationships; index of Vertical Relationships with teachers; index of School Well-being; index of Inter-ethnic Horizontal Relationships; index of Tensions among Peers; finally, a summative index of School Integration, reassuming previous dimensions. All indexes are standardized measures⁹. Finally, we also compare the strength of those associations among Italian and non-Italian students.

Methods

In order to test the association between religiosity and each index of school integration, we run several linear regression models (OLS), controlling for a set of regressors. Results reported in Table 2 derive from regression models controlling the associations for: students' gender, parental background, birth-year, an index measuring the intensity of familiar discourse on school issues and a fixed class-level effect, aimed at capturing all the contextual difference within the sample.

We tested also alternative models, relying on less control variables (i.e. not considering class-level fixed effects or not considering the index of familiar discourse),

Clearly, we cannot make any causal claim regarding religious practice: our analysis is limited to describe robust associations between the religious dimension and the school integration.

In addition, we compared the association between religious practice and school integration among Italian and non-Italian students. These comparisons were performed both running separate models for the two groups and running a model on the overall sample with an interaction term combining migratory condition and religious practice.

⁷ 2% did not answer the question.

⁸ The group of believers (N=779) can be divided in five clusters: Italian students, believer and observant (47%) (Catholic – mainstream religion); Italian students, believer but non-observant (14%); non-Italian students, believer and observant (13%) (Catholic – mainstream religion); non-Italian students, believer and observant (17%) (other minority religions); non-Italian students, believer but non-observant (10%).

⁹ For the construction criteria of each index, see Colombo - Santagati (2014).

Our analyses investigate the association between religious practice and a wide set of indexes measuring different dimensions of school integration. For each index, Table 1 reports descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) both for Italian and non-Italian students. Through a regression model taking into account data clusterisation, we also assess whether the indexes' means of these two groups significantly differ.

We may see that non-Italian students display worse values for all the integration indexes, but future goals and aspirations. Overall, non-Italian students are less integrated in the classes and experience worse relations, lower well-being and lower educational achievement (see also Colombo - Santagati 2014; 2017).

After looking at the main differences in students integration between Italian and non-Italian respondents we may focus on its association with students religious practice. Table 2 reports the strength of this association for each index of school integration considered in the analysis. The first part of the table refers to the entire sample of students, while the second part refers to models devoted to test whether the strength of these associations varies among Italian and non-Italian students. In this section we report results from: a. separated models estimated on the two groups; b. the interaction terms estimated through models on the entire sample, where the two groups were compared directly.

Regarding the association between religious practice and school integration's indexes, we can observe that all the indexes show a positive sign, except for the one regarding tensions among peers.

Overall, religious practice is associated with positive educational outcomes and a higher level of integration, but these associations are frequently low in magnitude and quite uncertain (hence not statistically significant). We can claim (with an acceptable level of certainty) that religious practice is associated with a higher educational integration and, more precisely, with an improvement in good relations, both with peers and teachers and also with classmates from other cultures. In addition, religious practice is positively associated with students' well-being at school (and this link is at the time associated to a good school performance). We also detect a positive and not negligible association of religious practice with education performance.

When we look at the differences between Italian and non-Italian students, the associations are pretty similar in sign and magnitude for both groups, meaning that religious practice increases integration for Italian and foreign students with the same strength. There is only a difference between the two groups, regarding the index of Tensions among peers: in this case, we do not detect a decrease of peer conflicts among observant non-Italian students (compared with non-observants of the same group), differently from what happens among the Italians. In any case, this result is highly uncertain, due the small sample size¹⁰: the lack of statistical significance limits our conclusions on this point and suggests that it must be tested in the future on larger scale surveys.

¹⁰ Only 265 students are included in the non-Italian observants and 92 in the non-Italian non-observants.

TABLE 1 – Standardized indexes measuring several dimensions of school integration by students' nationality

	Classroom Internal relationships (with peers)	Interethnic horizontal relationships (with peers)	Vertical relationships (with teachers)	School well-being	Future goals and aspirations	Tensions among peers	Educational achievement	Integration (summative index)
Italian students								
Mean	0.063	-0.348	0.042	0.055	-0.099	-0.075	0.245	0.253
Standard deviation	0.957	.968	1.001	0.968	1.189	0.926	0.996	0.923
Non-Italian students								
Mean	-0.098	0.545	-0.065	-0.115	-0.152	0.095	-0.346	-0.305
Standard deviation	1.063	0.792	0.994	1.039	1.376	1.039	0.842	0.945
Means comparison, OLS regression models Italian vs non-Italian	-0.161**	0.892***	-0.107°	-0.170**	-0.054	0.171**	-0.591***	-0.557***

*** p-value < .01; ** p-value < .05; * p-value < .10; ° p-value < .15

TABLE 2 – Association between religious practice and standardized indexes measuring several dimensions of school integration
(OLS regression model coefficients)

	Classroom Internal relationships (with peers)	Interethnic horizontal relationships (with peers)	Vertical relationships (with teachers)	School well-being	Future goals and aspirations	Tensions among peers	Educational achievement	Integration (summative index)
Overall sample	0.069 (0.094)	0.219*** (0.078)	0.248** (0.115)	0.245*** (0.089)	0.089 (0.101)	- 0.109 (0.093)	0.137° (0.091)	0.202** (0.097)
On Italian students	0.010 (0.113)	0.208** (0.102)	0.290** (0.130)	0.271** (0.107)	0.048 (0.109)	- 0.194° (0.126)	0.133 (0.099)	0.229*** (0.110)
On non-Italian students	0.155 (0.193)	0.146 (0.118)	0.154 (0.214)	0.195 (0.200)	0.001 (0.189)	0.008 (0.167)	0.162 (0.207)	0.187 (0.201)
Overall sample, interaction term for non-Italian students	0.051 (0.157)	-0.013 (0.131)	-0.044 (0.198)	- 0.143 (0.195)	0.089 (0.175)	0.234 (0.188)	- 0.134 (0.179)	- 0.091 (0.158)
Analytic sample size								
Overall sample	748	765	749	678	779	779	704	665
Italian students	496	504	503	463	514	514	492	467
Non-Italian students	252	261	246	215	265	265	212	198

*** p-value < 0.01, ** p-value < 0.05, * p-value < 0.10; ° p-value < 0.1

One additional result of some interest for the key questions is that future goals and aspirations look not to be affected by the pupil's religious practice; this index was also the only one where Italian and non-Italian students were equivalent.

Overall, considering results coming from Table 1 and Table 2, religious practice seems to play a positive role in integrating students within schools, but it does not seem a factor strong enough to overcome the existing gap between Italian and non-Italian students.

V - CONCLUSION

From this study we can draw some conclusions and interpretative suggestions for further research on religiosity and school integration in multicultural classrooms¹¹. Firstly, our analyses show that religiosity does play an important role as integration factor, mainly because it fosters students' well-being, improving their relationships with peers and teachers and promoting their openness to inter-ethnic exchanges. This is consistent with most of the sociological literature on the topic, considering religiosity as a lever to improve tolerance, respect, and intercultural sensitivity. These intercultural competences are experienced through everyday religious practice and lifestyles, shared by pupils from different origins in schools with a high percentage of immigrants (Isik-Ercan 2015; Bubritzki et al. 2018).

Our research suggests also the necessity to investigate more in depth the association between religiosity and school achievement. Our results show a positive association between the two dimensions, but we cannot rely on standardized and reliable measures of students' performance, considering that we have only self-declared students' marks. In addition, we do not find evidence of an association between religiosity and students' future goals, a relevant predictor of their achievement: this is another point to deepen with next studies.

In addition, the examined dataset confirms that religiosity affects in the same positive direction school integration both for Italian and non-Italian students. This result leads us to question: could religiosity be considered as a factor of integration in multicultural classrooms? Future studies should answer this question, looking at the heterogeneity of religions present in each classroom. More precisely, future analyses should test the hypothesis that «religious class composition and diversity» could influence the degree of students' integration.

Our study presents additional limitations: 1) data were gathered several years ago and religious class composition and teenagers' culture in Italy may have slightly changed in the meantime; 2) data capture what we aim to measure (religiosity as belonging and practice) only partially; 3) the small sample size do not permit to fully investigate differences among pupils belonging to different religions. Despite all these limitations, we hope that our study may increase the interest of sociologists in investigating the link

¹¹ As a matter of fact, we are already involved in the UCSC Research Program D.3.2. «Migration and religion» (2016-18, lasting 3 years and directed by Laura Zanfrini). Within this program we are going to carry out a qualitative study on religion dimension and inter-ethnic relationships in public education system.

connecting religious diversity and students' integration in mixed classrooms and that future analyses may rely on richer data, in order to overcome the limitations of our empirical investigation.

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