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Analysis of Intercultural Education Policies in Italy and Spain: A Comparative Perspective

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ANALISI DELLE POLITICHE DI EDUCAZIONE INTERCULTURALE IN ITALIA E SPAGNA: UNA PROSPETTIVA COMPARATIVA

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the evolution of intercultural education in the educational policies of Italy and Spain. The evolution of school regulations and educational practices in both countries presents similar characteristics, including the shift from the paradigm of integration to that of inclusion of students with migrant backgrounds. At the same time, historical and political differences between the two countries have led to the implementation of very different practices, which it is interesting to compare, with a particular interest in those processes of hidden exclusion that are still present in the two educational systems, despite the progress of official regulations. We will present the critical points and strengths of both countries' systems, identifying, on the one hand, the inclusion factors (development of inclusive practices, development of resources and programmes for foreign students) and, on the other hand, the exclusion practices that persist despite legislation (school segregation and school concentration). In the conclusions, we will suggest possible

strategies to contribute to the development of intra-European measures and policies to foster the reception of people with a migrant background in national school systems.

Keywords: Educational policies; Inclusive education; Integration; Interculturality; Italy; Spain.

1. INTRODUCTION

The intercultural perspective is one of the great challenges in the process of building a fairer and more equitable Europe, starting with the education systems (Portera, 2017). The European Union (EU) itself is a context of great cultural diversity, with 24 official languages (Extra & Gorter, 2008) and between 60 and 70 regional or minority language communities (Gogolin & Duarte, 2017). EU countries differ considerably in the number of immigrants they welcome and other issues related to cultural diversity (Gogolin & Duarte, 2017). The education system is therefore a central element, on which the development of measures to welcome and integrate students with a migrant background depends, to contribute to the improvement of educational practices and policies to promote more inclusive societies.

This article analyses these issues by focusing, in the geographical context of Mediterranean Europe, on the national cases of Italy and Spain. These two countries, together with Greece, are under similar migratory pressure (UNHCR, 2022).

Based on a comparative approach, this research analyses, starting from current legislation in Italy and Spain in the school context, good practices, strategies, programmes and methodologies of attention to cultural diversity in the two countries, without neglecting the critical points and hidden areas of exclusion that persist in schools.

2. RESEARCH CONTEXTS

Italy and Spain are two structurally similar countries (De Nardis, 2015), even though they have differences that make the comparison between them, on the topic of intercultural education, particularly significant. The fundamental similarity concerns the social and political conditions of both nations and their geographical location in southern Europe, which makes them subject to migratory pressure. In this respect, the process of democ-

ratification and improved economic conditions in both countries since the 1990s have contributed to increased flows of immigrant populations (Iosifides & King, 1996). Moreover, they are countries that share social, cultural, and religious traits (Azzolini, Schnell, & Palmer, 2012) and historical events such as, for example, the military dictatorship of a fascist nature and the wartime implications that this entailed (Poulantzas, 2017).

Italy is one of the founding countries of the EU and has a High Development Index (HDI), ranking 29th out of 187 states (UNDP, 2020). The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2018 was € 1,782,050 million, with a *per capita* income of € 30,212 (National Institute of Statistics, 2021). The Italian context is characterised by a strong imbalance between cities and rural areas, reflected in a Gini coefficient of 0.33 in 2018 (OECD, 2022). There is a great difference in access to services between urban and rural areas: the so-called «inland areas» are those areas that are significantly distant from the centres of supply of essential services (education, health and mobility) and that, therefore, undergo a progressive process of marginalisation, deriving from depopulation, the ageing of the population, the decrease in essential services, the weakening of the educational supply and the degradation of the immense natural and cultural heritage. Just to give an example, the mobility of secondary school teachers in inland areas is 9%, compared to the national average of 7% (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2017). These areas are the object of intervention by the Italian government, which, with the National Strategy for Inland Areas (SNAI) is trying to counter their marginalisation.

Spain joined the EU in 1986. After the dictatorship of General Franco (1939-1975), the country increased its economic development, despite the industrial reconversion caused by the oil crisis (1973). Spain's improved economic situation transformed the demographic situation from a country of emigration to a recipient of large numbers of immigrants (Muñoz, 2016). Spain has high levels of quality of life and human development (global position 25), placing it in an intermediate position among the countries that make up the EU. It has a GDP of € 1,203,259 million and a *per capita* income of € 25,750 (2018) (INE, 2018), with a Gini coefficient of 0.22 in 2019 (OECD, 2022). Spain, like Italy, also has strong inequalities and a growing disparity between regions, among the highest in Europe. The distribution of resources is very uneven among the population. According to data from the 11th Arope Report, 23.05% of the foreign population suffers from severe material deprivation, compared to 5.01% of the native population (EAPN, 2021).

Italy and Spain are therefore similar contexts in terms of population levels, economic indicators and development indices. To highlight the spe-

cific strengths and weaknesses of their educational systems in terms of intercultural education, it is necessary to understand how the reception of the immigrant population has developed. In both countries, immigration has become a structural and stable phenomenon in a few decades, permanently influencing the specific objectives of educational policies. Italy and Spain, together with Portugal, are usually defined as «new immigration» countries, having been for decades territories from which to emigrate, only to become immigration countries themselves over time (Stillo, 2020). It seems important to emphasise that Italy is a historically and intrinsically plural, multicultural, multireligious, multilingual territory (Fiorucci, 2020). So too is Spain, which presents a very similar situation of cultural diversity, with a wide diversity of languages and religions (Murillo, Martínez-Garrido, & Belavi, 2017). Moreover, both contexts present similarities in tolerance and disposition towards cultural diversity (Fokkema & De Haas, 2015).

In Italy, at the end of 2021, the resident foreign citizens were just over 5 million, 8.8% of the total resident population, distinguished by the variety of national groups they belong to (just under 200 citizenships), by their different demographic and social characteristics and by specific settlement paths in the territory (Idos, 2022). Among the main national communities we find, unchanged for some years now, are Romania, Albania and Morocco (Idos, 2022). In the 2020/2021 school year, there were 865,388 pupils with non-Italian citizenship in the school system, compared to 18,784 thirty years earlier (MIUR, 2022). The data show that, despite this growth, the presence of pupils with migrant backgrounds has stabilised in recent years (at around 10% of total pupils) and that the majority are second-generation students, i.e. children and young people born in Italy to non-Italian parents (MIUR, 2022). In the school year 2020/2021, 82.7% of foreign pupils aged 10 regularly attended the fifth year of primary school, 12% were one year behind and 1.3% were two or more years behind (MIUR, 2022). The lateness of students with non-Italian citizenship is often the result of placement in classes lower than those corresponding to their age, to which delays due to non-admission and repetition are added along the way. Immigrant status – even in the case of the second generation – is a determining factor, correlated with school segregation and socio-economic background as important barriers (Di Bartolomeo, 2011). Children with non-Italian citizenship, unfortunately, continue to be characterised by worse educational trajectories than Italian pupils, as well as high rates of a school delay, failure and dropout (Santagati, 2015).

The Italian school, from a legal and cultural point of view, is a positive example of democracy and inclusive citizenship (Fiorucci, 2020). Inter-

cultural education, starting from the first circulars dedicated to this topic (1989 and 1990), has been convincingly chosen as the preferred pathway for the integration of pupils from migratory backgrounds (Ongini, 2011).

The Spanish education system has also experienced the accelerated growth of an increasingly heterogeneous immigrant student body. In recent decades, the arrival of immigrant students has been a challenge for teachers, historically accustomed to a homogeneous student profile (Ortiz, 2010). In 2019, the percentage of foreign students who dropped out of the school system was 35.7%, compared to 14.7% of Spanish students (MECD, 2019). The differences between natives and foreigners do not seem to be based on a lack of family support or aspirations, but on the greater socioeconomic difficulties of the immigrant population (Carrasco, Pàmies, & Narciso, 2018), as in the Italian case.

The Spanish education system is characterised by the absence of a political pact, an agreement between political parties, to establish a general idea of basic educational issues (religion in schools, education in values, attention to immigrant pupils, etc.).

The lack of a minimum pact has generated a succession of educational reforms implemented by alternating conservative and social democratic governments. The conservative government's reform during the economic and financial crisis, approved on 9 October 2008, imposed severe cuts in education, which posed a serious problem for the support and accompaniment of students with special needs. The latest education reform of 2020, promoted by the progressive government of Pedro Sánchez, has generated controversy in the third sector and social collectives, as interculturality and the valorisation of cultural diversity are only mentioned in the preamble of the legal norm. The outcome is still uncertain, but the measures may be too abstract, as they give clear indications on how to implement intercultural education policies (García-Barrera, 2021). which have been a serious problem for the support and accompaniment of students with special needs. The latest education reform of 2020, promoted by the progressive government of Pedro Sánchez, has generated controversy in the third sector and social collectives, as interculturality and the valorisation of cultural diversity are only mentioned in the preamble of the legal norm. The outcome is still uncertain, but the measures may be too abstract, as they give clear indications on how to implement intercultural education policies (García-Barrera, 2021).

3. DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Having mentioned, in the previous section, some common features of Italy and Spain, which make them similar contexts, we will now attempt, through a comparative perspective, to go beyond the conventional single case study and provide a solid basis for understanding migrant inclusion policies, with a specific focus on the management and promotion of cultural diversity in schools. This is to contribute to the improvement of national policies for the care and reception of immigrants in European countries.

As is well known, comparative education represents a relevant field of study that offers the possibility of deepening educational and social policies related to cultural diversity, while examining the idea of openness to social practice as a strategy of intervention, integration and inclusion (Schriewer, 2010). On this basis, the present work claims one of the classic uses of comparative education, namely the approach to socio-educational realities different from the contexts of origin that are studied (Italy and Spain), intending to explore and propose alternative orientations, which may be useful in identifying and addressing some of the current social and educational challenges of the EU and Mediterranean countries (Sadler, 1990).

This article brings together policy and regulatory developments and related research literature in Italy and Spain, examining documents in English, Italian and Spanish. In particular, the educational policies and official documents of both countries are reviewed, to know, understand and evaluate the evolution of intercultural education. The study is based on the following documentary sources: legislative and regulatory developments, from the 1980s to the present day, on the reception and school accompaniment of immigrant pupils; action and intervention plans of school administrations for the social and school integration of immigrant pupils in the host community; scientific literature; reports; contributions from the third sector.

4. INTERCULTURAL MEASURES APPLIED IN AND OUT OF SCHOOL

In the European framework, migration policies are usually designed at the national level, although supranational guidance is becoming increasingly important (Paraskevopoulos, Getimis, & Rees, 2016). In Spain, much of the responsibility for educational policies for immigrant students lies with the regions or autonomous communities (Usarralde, Fernández, & Ayala de la Peña, 2015). Indeed, this regional variability is found throughout the EU (Eurydice, 2022; Catarci & Fiorucci, 2015) and is reflected in the

different initiatives implemented in different contexts, in teacher training and the publication and dissemination of information for families on the education system (Eurydice, 2022).

In the Spanish case, we must start by considering the Spanish Law on Foreigners, whose official name is Organic Law 4/2000, of 11 January, on the rights and freedoms of foreigners in Spain and their social integration, partially amended on several occasions (2003, 2009, 2011 and 2012). This legal text recognises the right and duty of foreigners under the age of 16 to access education, under the same conditions as Spanish students. This also implies that, upon reaching the age of 18, foreign students will retain this right until the end of the school year if they continue in the school system (Article 9). In this sense, Spanish legislation does not contemplate situations of segregation or discrimination.

To understand inclusive school practices in Spain, it is necessary to analyse two issues: compensatory education and intercultural education. Concerning compensatory education, multiple measures have been developed for the attention to diversity in all phases of the Spanish educational system. The objective of these measures is to compensate for deficiencies that hinder full inclusion, with equal opportunities with other peers. This objective is witnessed by Royal Decree 1174/1983 of 27 April, which offered new possibilities for school inclusion to profiles traditionally marginalised by the system. These vulnerable profiles refer in particular to students with special educational needs, Roma students (Santiago, Ruiz, & López, 2019) and students from rural areas, who present sociocultural and educational disadvantages compared to urban contexts (Bustos, 2009). In the late 1990s, these particularly vulnerable groups were joined by the foreign or immigrant population, for which specific programmes and measures were designed (LOGSE, 1990). These measures, which are regional in nature, have mainly addressed the most urgent need for sociolinguistic support, through the various regional immigration plans.

In the case of intercultural education, it is worth highlighting the implementation of so-called reception classes. These devices develop an educational focus on pupils of immigrant origin, with particular attention to learning the language of the host country. This is a widespread measure and is present in most Spanish regions (Arroyo & Torrego, 2012). The development of reception classes began within the framework of intercultural policies in Spain (LOE, 2006; Dietz, 2012), being considered a positive resource that fosters social and educational inclusion. Reception classes have succeeded in preventing school backwardness as a privileged space for pedagogical innovation, fostering the development of original and creative curricular materials. However, there have also been some criticisms based on the fact that they

have an assimilationist character, can generate segregation and do not fulfil the objective of teaching language correctly (Alcaraz & Chinchón, 2015).

In the case of the Italian state, as Campomori and Caponio (2013) point out, regions have progressively acquired more competencies in social policies, within the general framework of the development of EU social policies, including policies for the integration of migrants. This more regional management has had different impacts on school inclusion (Hudleston, Niessen, & Dag Tjaden, 2013). Clearly, the greater the degree of decentralisation and administrative differentiation, the more important it is to analyse integration measures at the regional level.

As has already been mentioned, intercultural education entered the Italian school scene already at the beginning of the 1990s as an educational response to the first presence of foreign students in schools (MIUR, 1989, 1990, 1995; MPI, 1994). Far from constituting itself exclusively as a compensatory pedagogy for fragile subjects, intercultural pedagogy sees in the multicultural society and school a great opportunity for enrichment and personal and collective growth, and in the encounter with the foreigner, with the culturally different person, an opportunity for confrontation and reflection, also in terms of values, rules, and behaviour (Portera, 2017).

From the outset, therefore, intercultural education in Italy has positioned itself as an intentional educational project capable of cutting across all the disciplines taught in schools and aimed at changing the perceptions and cognitive habits with which we generally represent both foreigners and the new world of interdependencies (Susi, 1995). It is not, therefore, a matter of a new discipline added to the others, but of an approach capable of favouring the critical re-reading of all the teachings and of guiding a revision of them, as already defined in the Circular of the Ministry of Public Education number 73 of 2 March 1994 (*Intercultural dialogue and democratic coexistence: the school's project commitment*) in which it is stated that «a systematic commitment to explore and interpret the intercultural potential of each discipline is necessary». It is important to emphasise that this is a conscious project, therefore it must be thought out, and planned, not something that can happen accidentally or by chance. In Italy, intercultural education thus soon abandoned the terrain of special education aimed at a specific social group and became an innovative pedagogical approach for the re-founding of the curriculum in general (Fiorucci, 2020), addressing everyone, not only pupils coming from migratory backgrounds, to foster welcoming habits and promote the formation not only of the Italian citizen but above all the formation of a citizen of the world (Fiorucci, 2011).

All this without forgetting that, since the school is the first educational agency in which the foundations are laid to guarantee equal oppor-

tunities to future citizens, whether native or foreign, it is precisely here that the necessary conditions begin to be put in place to ensure that everyone achieves the same school success rates (Santorini, 2010). On this aspect, it seems useful to mention the new *Guidelines for the reception and integration of foreign pupils*, issued by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) in February 2014, which define several areas of work, including reception, family involvement and participation, assessment, and orientation. Ample space is devoted to the issue of learning Italian as a second language (L2), which is one of the main factors in determining the scholastic success of pupils with a migrant background.

On this aspect, the guidelines provide very precise indications and emphasise the need to enhance multilingualism. In the Guidelines, moreover, great care is taken not to consider foreign pupils as a homogeneous group but to distinguish appropriately between multiple types of pupils of foreign origin (pupils with non-Italian citizenship, with non-Italian-speaking family backgrounds, unaccompanied minors, children of mixed couples, pupils who have arrived by international adoption, Roma, Sinti and Traveller pupils, university students with foreign citizenship).

Without wishing to cite all the documents on intercultural education in Italy, a reference should undoubtedly be made to the new Intercultural Guidelines. *Ideas and proposals for the integration of pupils from migration backgrounds* were presented a few months ago by the National Observatory for the Integration of Foreign Pupils and Intercultural Education (March 2022), a body with propositional tasks of the Ministry of Education. It is an important document that updates and modernises the aforementioned Guidelines for the integration of foreign pupils of 2014 and aims to offer organisational methods and operational indications to foster the inclusion of every student and an intercultural dimension in every school. The document contains specific focuses on the integrated Ministry of Education, eight years after the first draft of the *Guidelines for the reception and integration of foreign pupils* (MIUR, 2006), has issued a new document that looks at pupils with non-Italian citizenship, taking into account a profoundly changed scenario that required updating the operational guidelines for schools system of education and instruction from 0 to 6 years of age, on the transversal teaching of Civic Education, on citizenship and the new generations, on the teaching of the Italian language and the enhancement of multilingualism. Ample space is devoted to the intercultural training of teachers and school managers, who need to acquire the skills and tools to deal with the «problems» that arise with the entry of children with non-Italian citizenship into classes (MIUR 2015, 2022).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the regulations shows that the Spanish education system does not recognise the legal possibility of separating or segregating part of the population for any reason. Furthermore, Spanish education laws specifically mention the principles of non-discrimination and school inclusion. These principles originate in legal norms after the Spanish Democratic Constitution (Organic Law 8/1985, of 3 July, regulating the right to education).

Currently, LOMLOE (Organic Law 3/2020, of 29 December, amending Organic Law 2/2006, of 3 May, on Education) has focused on the idea of school coexistence, but from a perspective that is mainly based on conflict and how to resolve it. Intercultural education is only mentioned in the preamble of this law, which establishes a relationship with the Sustainable Development Goals. Despite this, the law insists on inclusive education, social cohesion and quality and equity in education, but from a very general and global perspective, without going into details. However, to have a more in-depth view of school functioning, it is necessary to focus on zonal school policies and the informal mechanisms that schools themselves develop concerning the different national origins of their students (Murillo, Martínez-Garrido, & Belavi, 2017).

Italian educational policies on planning, monitoring and evaluation are at an advanced level of inclusive practices in the European framework, with key actors taking joint responsibility (Najev, Bilač, & Džingalašević, 2019; Fiorucci, 2020). Furthermore, an interesting comparative study between Australia and Italy shows that «Italian teachers have significantly more positive attitudes... and better intentions to develop and implement inclusion in their classrooms» (Sharma *et al.*, 2018, p. 6). This confirms the positive evolution of Italian teachers' attitudes over the last four decades (Saloviita & Consegna, 2019).

Education legislation has the task of guaranteeing educational equality and avoiding polarization in specific centres or areas of students with vulnerable profiles or at risk of exclusion. In the Spanish context, both general and specific mechanisms are observed. The first specific mechanism is the reservation of places and the reduction of the number of classes during the pre-enrolment process. As regards the second mechanism, all actions carried out by commissions or other educational bodies to guarantee admission, which must be instituted when the demand received by an educational institution exceeds the supply it has, fall into this category. This category also includes «zoning» policies, which aim to ensure equality in the application of admission rules, including the definition of the same areas of influence for public and state-subsidised schools in different ter-

ritorial areas (Ortiz Cobo, 2010). Taking into account both education laws and immigration regulations, school policies clearly and formally establish equal treatment and coverage for pupils considered «different», although informal mechanisms of exclusion exist (García-Rubio, 2017).

One element that highlights the problem of inclusion in practice at all levels of education is the obvious difference in resources and, consequently, in school integration practices (Murillo, Martínez-Garrido, & Belavi, 2017). This is equally true in both national contexts. This difference is particularly evident between Southern and Northern Italy (Canevaro *et al.*, 2011). The existence of the two Italies (Canevaro *et al.*, 2011) places students from the South at a distinct social and educational disadvantage.

Numerous studies analyse the educational trajectories and academic achievements of first-, second- and third-generation foreign students. These studies have shown that foreign-born students encounter more obstacles, barriers and difficulties in developing positive academic trajectories, which are reflected in their lower academic progress (Gallego *et al.*, 2013; Barabanti, 2016; Cerbara & Tintori, 2017), thus highlighting aggregate elements of segregation. Barberis and Violante's (2017) research on migrants' right to access education, using social workers and civil servants as a sample, highlighted the use of opaque practices that can act as mechanisms of exclusion (e.g. requiring a residence certificate as a condition for access to services).

Another evidence of the difficulties of inclusion in practice lies in the concentration of students with migrant backgrounds in some classes and some schools, despite official guidance on the need to distribute students to avoid high concentration rates in certain classes or schools (Carrasco, Pàmies, & Narciso, 2018). This is particularly serious in some Spanish charter schools (privately owned but publicly funded), which do not meet schooling rates for immigrant pupils (Valiente, 2008). Some Italian schools in metropolitan areas have more than 50 per cent foreign pupils (Initiatives and Studies on Multiethnicity – ISMU, 2017). The 2014 Italian Guidelines warn that school segregation represents a risk to the proper development of school life, given its potential for social segregation. The Guidelines indicate, as a priority action, clear and correct information for Italian parents about the positive potential of cultural diversity and the richness of individual and group growth within a heterogeneous class. However, the indications of the Guidelines do not always become educational practice remaining what has been called an exercise in abstract idealism (Castiglioni, 2018).

The insights and contributions described above are particularly valuable when considering their possible relation to recent research, which suggests that the educational performance of immigrant children

seems to be strongly influenced by the broader socio-educational context (Gallego Estebán & Aparicio, 2013; Di Bartolomeo, Bonifazi, & Strozza, 2017). This could be related to the fact that immigrant pupils seem to have a weaker family network than native pupils, a situation that generates a greater dependence of immigrant pupils on the material and human resources available to schools.

Analysing the state of the issue from a more global perspective, it is possible to draw cross-cutting implications for the educational context of different EU countries, which could be useful for educational research and policy development. There is no doubt that teams of teachers and school leaders face a difficult challenge in dealing with cultural diversity and different abilities in the classroom (Catarci & Fiorucci, 2015). Addressing this problem means responding to two key elements: (a) the need to adopt an intercultural educational framework throughout the educational system (plans, programmes, educational measures, curriculum) that incorporates cultural differences throughout the entire institution and school community (students, families, teachers, management team, third sector, social agents, school administration); (b) the conviction to strive for quality education that can offer equal opportunities and learning to all students, regardless of their status and origin.

The development of intercultural education with a social and inclusive approach requires a focus on the problem of school performance and the factors that promote or hinder it, since so far proposals have mainly focused on the principle of educational equality (Santerini, 2010). Despite all educational policies and schools' efforts, there is unfortunately still much exclusion hidden within the devices theoretically designed to overcome it (Ortiz, 2010; Barabanti, 2016; Murillo, Martínez-Garrido, & Belavi, 2017). In the European context, there is a risk of reducing intercultural education to formal educational practice. It follows that there is a need to overcome this risk by affirming intercultural education as a complex and innovative educational paradigm, implementing the indications provided by the Ministries in an increasingly convincing and widespread manner.

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RASSUNTO

Questo articolo si concentra sull'evoluzione dell'educazione interculturale nelle politiche educative di Italia e Spagna. L'evoluzione delle normative scolastiche e delle pratiche educative in entrambi i Paesi presenta caratteristiche simili, tra cui il passaggio dal paradigma dell'integrazione a quello dell'inclusione degli studenti con origini migratorie. Allo stesso tempo, le differenze storiche e politiche dei due Paesi hanno portato all'attuazione di pratiche molto diverse, che è interessante confrontare, con particolare interesse per quei processi di esclusione nascosta che sono ancora presenti nei due sistemi educativi, nonostante i progressi delle normative ufficiali. Si presenteranno i punti critici e i punti di forza dei sistemi di entrambi i Paesi, individuando, da un lato, i fattori di inclusione (sviluppo di pratiche inclusive, sviluppo di risorse e programmi per gli studenti stranieri) e, dall'altro, le pratiche di esclusione che persistono nonostante la legislazione (segregazione scolastica e concentrazione scolastica). Nelle conclusioni, suggeriremo possibili strategie per contribuire allo sviluppo di misure e politiche intraeuropee per favorire l'accoglienza delle persone con background migratorio nei sistemi scolastici nazionali.

Parole chiave: Educazione inclusiva; Integrazione; Interculturalità; Italia; Politiche educative; Spagna.

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