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"WHY ARE WE FORCED TO TALK ABOUT INCLUSION AND INTERCULTURALITY?"
A Critical Research Journey toward Justice and Equity in Early Childhood Education in Italy: A Mixed-Methods Collection of Studies.

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Author's Note

The title of this dissertation — *"Why Are We Forced to Talk about Inclusion and Interculturality?"* — emerged from one of the most meaningful moments during my fieldwork.

In an interview, an educator paused thoughtfully before saying:

"*Why are we forced to talk about inclusion and interculturality? Maybe, instead of asking how to include someone, we should first ask to ourselves why there is a need to include someone."*

Those words stayed with me. They articulated, with clarity and honesty, the unease that often permeates educational, academic, and psychological work — revealing how inclusion often remains confined to institutional discourse, while exclusion continues to operate in practice.

I chose to make this reflection the title of my dissertation because it captures the core of this research: a journey in which my initial assumptions were repeatedly questioned, unsettled, and reshaped through encounters, dialogue, and shared reflection.

This dissertation does not offer a linear account nor definitive conclusions. Rather, it traces a process of inquiry guided more by questions than by answers — a path that moves through theories, methodologies, and relationships that challenged my ways of seeing, listening, and understanding.

Including this educator's words in the title is, above all, a gesture of recognition. It acknowledges the educators, families, and communities who generously shared their time, experiences, and knowledge. Their voices are not treated as mere "data" to be analyzed, but as living contributions that have grounded and transformed this work.

When this same quotation reappears in the final chapter, it returns as an echo — inviting to revisit it in light of the reflections, tensions, and hopes that have unfolded along the way.

Table of Contents

Author's Note **1**
Table of Contents **3**
Introduction **6**
1.Genealogy of the research **6**
2.Structure of the thesis **8**
Part I – Positionality and Theoretical foundations **11**
3.Personal and professional positioning **15**
3.1 Ethical responsibility and academic complicity: writing in the shadow of Gaza 18
4. My epistemological positioning and journey **21**
4.1 Unlearning the norm: traversing critical paradigms in search of a justice-oriented psychology 21
5.Theoretical background: a journey through intercultural paradigms, from mainstream to decolonial **26**
5.1 Mainstream paradigms about interculturality: managing difference, pursuing competence 26
5.2 Beyond neutrality: recognizing power in intercultural encounters 28
5.3 Interculturality and intersectionality: a feminist inflection 30
5.4 Toward decolonial interculturality: unlearning and reimagining 32
6.Methodological framework **34**
6.1 Participation and situated accountability 35
6.2 Interdisciplinary and narrative approach 36
7.The research fieldwork **39**
8.Migration and interculturality in education: a contextual analysis of Italy **41**
8.1 The Italian political context in contemporary migration 42
8.2 Migrant-background students in Italy: From visibility to participation in a changing educational landscape 43
8.3 Early childhood education as a structural lever for educational equity 47
8.4 Intercultural processes, practices and policies in the Italian educational system 49
8.5 Interculturality in early childhood education (ECE) 51
9.Ethical considerations and linguistic note **54**
9.1 Ethics and situated praxis 54
9.2 Linguistic note 55
Part II – Empirical studies **57**
10.Study I. The influence of intercultural sensitivity and competence on the well-being of early childhood education educators: a quantitative exploratory study in the Italian context **57**
10.1 Introduction 57
11.2 The study 63
10. 3 Methods 65

10. 4 Results 69
10.5 Discussion 77
10.6 Implications 81
10.7 Limitations and future perspectives 83
10.8 Conclusion 84
Transition chapter 86
11.Study 2. Interculturality and inclusion in early childhood education: a critical ethnographic inquiry of lived meanings and the conditions shaping practice 88
11.1 Introduction 88
11.2 The Study 92
11. 3 Method 92
11.4 Results 95
11.6 Discussion 117
11.7 Limitations and future perspectives 122
11.7 Implications 124
11.8 Conclusion 127
12.Study 3. Counter-narratives of care: educating at the margins in a time of disposability. A comparative narrative study in two multicultural ECE schools in Northwest Italy. 129
12.1 Introduction 129
13.2 The study 132
12.3 Methods 133
12.4 Results 139
12.5 Discussion 171
12.6 Limitations 184
12.7 Future Perspectives 185
12.8 Practical and political implications 185
12.9 Conclusion 186
13.Study 4. "*We are like a tree: even when cut, our roots keep us standing*". Narratives of strength and oppression among migrant parents in Italy. A collective narrative study. 188
13.1 Introduction 188
13.2 The study 191
13.3 Methods 193
13.4 Results 200
13.5 Discussion 214
13.6 Implications 221
13.7 Limitations and future perspectives 226
13.8 Conclusion 228
Part III – Final reflections and implications 230
14. Auto reflexivity. Personal reflections on a transformative research journey 230

14.1 A necessary premise: why reflect on the self in research 230
14.2 A Reflexive and critical account of my research trajectory 232
15. Practical implications 241
15.1 From training to communities of practice 244
15.2 Organization 249
15.3 Institutional responsibility, structural precarity, and political participation 252
15.4 From critical consciousness to critical action 256
16. Conclusion 258
References 261
APPENDIX 317
Appendix A – Examples of School of life created by educators 317
Appendix B – Examples of Maps of history created by parents 318
Appendix C – Examples of Three of life created by parents 319
Acknowledgements 321

Introduction

1. Genealogy of the research

This doctoral research was made possible through a thematically-bound PhD scholarship focused on interculturality and inclusion within municipal early childhood education services (ages 0–6). The funding was provided by Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), *under Ministerial Decree No. 351 of April 9, 2022, issued by the Ministry of University and Research (MUR).*

The project originated from an existing institutional collaboration between the Municipality of Genoa —specifically its early childhood education (ECE) sector—and the Department of Educational Sciences (DiSFor) at the University of Genoa. This partnership, formally integrated into the PhD program in Migration and Intercultural Processes, reflected a mutual commitment to investigating how migration, and cultural diversity intersect within public services. The agreement served as a necessary condition to access the targeted public funding scheme designed to foster cooperation between universities and public administrations, supporting research with both theoretical depth and tangible societal relevance. Thanks to this framework, the University of Genoa secured funding for a PhD position tailored to the themes outlined in the agreement. I was awarded the scholarship through a competitive selection process based on academic qualifications and an interview.

In accordance with the source of founding, the project's objectives extended beyond academic knowledge production. From the outset, it was conceived as a research effort capable of generating practical insights and reflections to support the Municipality's ongoing work in improving public education—particularly regarding the inclusion of children and families with migration backgrounds. One of the Municipality of Genoa's prerogatives in conceiving this thesis was precisely to enhance the intercultural competencies of educators working within its early childhood education services. The Municipality placed great importance on this goal and had previously launched initiatives aimed at this purpose; however, those projects gradually diminished over time. Within the context of the PhD, there was a clear intention to reopen this opportunity and improve educator training in intercultural skills.

The research was therefore embedded within a clearly defined institutional and political framework, shaped by shared priorities and existing structures. While this context inevitably influenced the thematic scope of the inquiry, it also offered a meaningful space for engagement, where knowledge production could be closely aligned with concrete and practical public needs while contribute to transformative processes.

From the beginning, collaboration with the Municipality was not envisioned as a unidirectional process of data collection, but rather as a space of mutual learning, dialogue, and co-construction.

This relational dimension—especially the close exchange with the pedagogical coordination team of the Municipality of Genoa—influenced the development of the research focus, which confirmed the intercultural competencies of educators[1] and the broader practices of inclusion within Genoa's public 0–6 education system. This focus emerged not as a predefined agenda, but through continuous negotiation between institutional priorities, field-based experiences, and evolving research questions. Importantly, these negotiations had begun even before the awarding of my scholarship, through exchanges between my supervisors and representatives of the Municipality and subsequently continued with my direct involvement once I entered the PhD program. Thus, the direction and design of the project were strongly influenced by the intersection of my background in psychology, the focus of the PhD program, and the Municipality's priorities—anchoring the research firmly within the field of social and community psychology. In response to this complexity, the empirical phase of the PhD adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies aiming to capture multiple dimensions of the field and themes under investigation. Therefore, the empirical part of the thesis is structured as a collection of four interconnected studies, each addressing a specific aspect of interculturality and inclusion, while contributing to a cohesive and layered understanding of the broader research themes.

[1] **Note:** In the Italian 0–6 education system, different professional titles are used: *educatori/educatrici* refer to the educational staff working in nurseries (0–3), while *maestri/maestre* denote teachers in preschools (3–6). In this dissertation, however, the term *educators* will be used consistently to refer to all *Early Childhood Educator(s)*—the internationally recognized designation for professionals working across Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services for children from birth to age six.

2. Structure of the thesis

In light of the methodological choices, theoretical frameworks, and institutional conditions that shaped this work, I chose to structure the thesis into three interconnected parts.

Part I

The first part of the thesis lays out the theoretical, epistemological, and methodological foundations of the research, and reflects the intellectual and personal journey I undertook throughout the PhD. This evolving trajectory significantly influenced the methodological choices I made—beginning from a more conventional, quantitative orientation and gradually moving toward qualitative, narrative, and participatory approaches.

This part it begins with a reflection on my personal and professional positioning, considering how my social background, personal history, and relational experiences shaped the way I engaged with the research project. The narrative then expands into a broader exploration of epistemological and theoretical perspectives, tracing the shift away from dominant psychological paradigms toward more situated, critical, and transformative approaches. Central to this evolution were the frameworks of liberation psychology, intersectional feminism, critical psychology, and narrative therapy—each offering both analytical tools and ethical-political commitments. Subsequently, the methodological chapter builds upon these frameworks, examining the complexities and tensions involved in conducting research that strives to be community-engaged while still operating within academic and institutional boundaries. A key theme is the commitment to participation as a process of genuine co-construction, rather than tokenistic inclusion. This section also contextualizes the research within broader socio-political dynamics, such as Italy's migration landscape and how interculturality is framed within national education policy. It concludes with a description of the research field and a reflection on the ethical considerations that accompanied each phase of the process.

Part II

The second part of the thesis presents the four empirical studies—one quantitative and three qualitative—which constitute the empirical core of the research. Each study offers a distinct entry point into the central questions driving the inquiry:

> *What is the connection between intercultural ECE educator competencies and well-being?*
>
> *What does interculturality mean within ECE services?*
>
> *What conditions facilitate or hinder its implementation?*
>
> *What resources do school communities draw on to address challenges related to inclusion and cultural diversity?*

Rather than following a linear or pre-planned path, these studies emerged iteratively, shaped by field encounters, institutional dynamics, dialogue with the pedagogical coordination team of the

Municipality of Genoa, and methodological reflection. Importantly, when the agreement between the University and the Municipality was established it was explicitly emphasized the Municipality's need for training on intercultural competences to be provided by the University. Accordingly, in addition to the restitution of the research, part of the qualitative work was designed in response to this institutional request, proposing forms of data collection that functioned simultaneously as research interventions (i.e., training opportunities) and data collection. The design of these intervention-based data collection activities was informed by the results of the first, quantitative study. A brief transition chapter between the quantitative and qualitative studies illustrates how the quantitative findings guided and informed the subsequent qualitative phase. Together, these studies reflect how my evolving theoretical, epistemological, and methodological orientations influenced the research process at every stage. Table 1 provides a summary of the key characteristics of the four empirical studies.

The first study adopts a quantitative approach and provides a system-wide overview of intercultural competencies among educators in all early childhood education services managed by the Municipality of Genoa, in the Northwest Italy. It offers a contextualized understanding of how these competencies are perceived within public institutions and their relations with educators' well-being.

In contrast, the following three studies employ a qualitative approach to examine more deeply the lived experiences of those engaged in ECE services—particularly educators and parents with migration backgrounds. The second study investigates how educators and parents conceptualize interculturality, identifying key factors that enable or hinder inclusive and culturally responsive practices in everyday school life. The third and fourth studies delve into the concrete challenges and subtle forms of resistance encountered by educators and parents as they strive to promote inclusion and address structural inequalities. Together, these studies illuminate both the structural constraints and the community-based resources that shape everyday interactions, offering a situated understanding of how interculturality is negotiated and co-constructed within ECE contexts. The inclusion of parents' voices was crucial, as their role, especially in the early years, extends beyond caregiving—they are also cultural mediators and vital contributors to the broader educational ecosystem.

Part III

The third and final part of the thesis is devoted to critical reflection. After navigating both theoretical and empirical terrain, I return to my own positionality and research process, acknowledging what has shifted, what remains unresolved, and which questions have gained urgency. This final section is not just a personal reflection, but also a space to consider the broader implications of the research—for educators, institutions, policy, and future studies.

Rather than drawing definitive conclusions, this closing part embraces complexity, honors the voices encountered, and affirms the ongoing nature of both learning and transformation. The thesis concludes not with closure, but with an invitation to continue the dialogue, assume shared responsibility, and imagine inclusion as an evolving and collective endeavor.

Table 1.

Summary of key study characteristics.

	Objective	Participants	Methods
I study	To examine how intercultural sensitivity (IS) and intercultural competence (IC) dimensions (knowledge, skills, attitude, awareness) influence early childhood education (ECE) educators' well-being, burnout prevention, and stress management, considering socio-demographic factors (age, service type, education level), and to explore the links between IS, IC, subjective well-being (SWB), and burnout components (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, personal accomplishment).	Educators	Quantitative
II study	To explore how inclusion and interculturality are understood and practiced in two early childhood education settings, focusing on the meanings given by school communities and the challenges and opportunities they face.	Educators and Parents	Qualitative (ethnographic methods)
III study	To investigate the challenges educators face related to inclusion, interculturality, and well-being, while identifying their agentic strategies of resistance and resilience enacted daily to navigate complex intercultural school environments.	Educators	Qualitative (narrative inquiry)
IV study	To explore the everyday challenges and strategies of resistance experienced by migrant-background parents in early childhood education, focusing on their experiences as parents of children aged 0–6 with a history of migration.	Parents with history of migration	Qualitative (narrative inquiry)

Part I – Positionality and Theoretical foundations

"We must recognize that the researcher is part of what he or she observes. We do not passively or objectively observe the [statistical] universe as scientific outsiders."
(Zuberi, 2001)

Adopting a social constructionist perspective, this work acknowledges that knowledge and meaning are not inherent properties of the world but are continuously shaped through social processes, interactions, and the influences of environment and culture. This approach fundamentally challenges the idea of an objective, detached reality. Rather than being fixed or universal, our understanding of reality is shaped by shared, negotiated, and context-dependent meanings (Galbin, 2014). Zuberi's assertion highlights the critical role of the researcher in the process of knowledge creation, urging a departure from the illusion of objective detachment. It underscores that researchers, by virtue of their own social positions and lived experiences, are inevitably part of the research process. In this view, knowledge is not a passive reflection of reality; it is co-constructed through the dynamic interaction between the researcher and the world under study. This reinforces the necessity of acknowledging the researcher's influence on the production of knowledge.

This perspective has gained traction across disciplines—including sociology, psychology, and linguistics—emphasizing how social structures, power dynamics, and cultural norms shape both individual and collective perceptions and representations (Burr, 2015). For instance, concepts like "gender" and "race" are recognized not as biologically determined facts, but as social constructs rooted in historical, political, and cultural contexts. By interrogating the processes through which norms and truths are socially constructed, social constructionism illuminates the fluid and contingent nature of human understanding (Lazzaro-Salazar, 2017).

Building upon these premises, it is essential to situate this dissertation within my own positionality and subjectivity as the researcher conducting this study. Psychology and the broader social sciences have long overlooked the importance of researcher positionality, often aspiring to produce narratives grounded in neutrality and objectivity. These disciplines have historically relied on the illusion that researchers can remove themselves from their work—as if their representations of the world were not influenced by their own perspectives, identities, and active involvement. Indeed, within psychology, the notion of positionality remains contested. The enduring legacy of the biomedical model continues to reinforce the idea that psychological inquiry can, or should, remain untouched by subjective influence. However, as Daminelli (2024) aptly states:

"No perspective can claim neutrality."

Each researcher enters the field carrying a unique constellation of experiences, beliefs, theoretical frameworks, and political commitments that shape every aspect of the research process. Identity markers such as gender, race, class, and nationality influence not only what the researcher observes but also how they form relationships in the field and how their presence is interpreted by participants. Acknowledging these dynamics means recognizing that all research is situated, and thus, comprehensible only through an explicit reflection on the researcher's positionality. Subjectivity, in this context, is not a weakness to be eliminated but an epistemological stance that foregrounds perception, experience, and meaning-making (Loadenthal, 2019).

The practice of declaring one's positionality has gained increasing relevance, particularly within qualitative research, but is also slowly permeating quantitative paradigms. For instance, Quant Crit Methodology (QuantCrit) asserts that all research—regardless of method—is imbued with values, shaped by power dynamics, and influenced by the positionality of the researcher (Russel, 2023). QuantCrit challenges the myth of objectivity in quantitative research and urges scholars to critically reflect on how their identities and social positions influence methodological choices—from data collection to interpretation. Accordingly, researchers are encouraged to ask:

> *How do my race, gender, class, political orientation, and lived experiences shape the research questions I ask and the conclusions I draw?*

A core principle in QuantCrit is the recognition of systemic inequalities. Researchers are called to consider how structural oppression related to race, class, gender, sexuality, and more affects the data they collect and the narratives they construct. For instance, a study on unemployment must also reflect on how official statistics often obscure systemic discrimination against racialized communities.

With these insights in mind, and in line with the mixed-methods approach of this dissertation, this chapter aims to deconstruct my own subjectivities and openly acknowledge the perspectives and experiences that have informed this work.

If positionality invites us to locate ourselves within the research process, then epistemology asks us to reflect on how we come to know what we know—and how our frameworks of understanding shift over time (Fantl, 2023). Thus, this dissertation is not only situated within a particular social and political context, nor only within the subjectivity of a particular researcher. It is also the result of a transformative intellectual and epistemological journey, one that unfolded over the course of three years of doctoral work, lived experience, and critical rethinking.

When I began this PhD, my methodological and theoretical choices were, understandably, shaped by the paradigms I had inherited through my academic training. Like many psychologists trained in Italian institutions, I entered this work with tools rooted primarily in Western, positivist, and biomedical models. These frameworks privileged individualism, emphasized measurable outcomes,

and tended to separate psychological well-being from its sociohistorical context. They offered clarity, structure, and legitimacy within the academic mainstream—but they also felt, increasingly, incomplete.

As I moved deeper into the field, and as my relationships with communities, stories, and struggles grew more complex, I found that these inherited models no longer resonated with the realities I was encountering. The language of symptoms, deficits, and adjustment could not adequately capture the experiences of children, families, and educators shaped by migration, marginalization, and systemic exclusion. Nor could it account for my own growing discomfort with the notion of neutrality or detachment in the face of injustice.

The process of developing this dissertation became, therefore, not a linear application of predetermined methods, but a series of encounters—with theories, communities, practices, and dissonances—that challenged me to rethink my assumptions. Each of the four empirical studies that compose the second part of this thesis reflects a different moment in this journey: a movement from conventional approaches toward frameworks grounded in critical, decolonial, feminist, and narrative traditions. The methods, too, evolve—shifting from standardized quantitative designs toward more participatory, interpretative, and story-based approaches.

This epistemological reorientation was neither immediate nor easy. It required unlearning much of what I had been taught to value as "scientific" and learning to stay with uncertainty, contradiction, and complexity. It also required developing a greater attentiveness to power—not only in the subjects I was studying, but in my own role as a knowledge-producer. The more I engaged with critical literature—particularly with liberation psychology, intersectional feminism, postcolonial theory, and narrative practice—the more I came to understand that theory is never neutral. Theories, like methodologies, are situated: they carry histories, ideologies, and consequences.

Importantly, this journey was not only academic—it was deeply personal and political. The questions that led me to shift frameworks were not abstract, but grounded in the ethical tensions I encountered in practice:

> *How can I speak of well-being without addressing injustice?*
>
> *How can I analyse exclusion without examining the systems that produce it?*
>
> *How can I make space for the voices of others without silencing my own or speaking over theirs?*

In acknowledging these tensions, I do not claim to have arrived at a perfect or final position. Rather, this chapter offers a cartography of my personal and professional movement, a tracing of the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological shifts that shaped this research and that continue to shape me as a scholar, practitioner and individual. It is a journey marked by contradictions and

limitations—including those imposed by the institutional context of Italian academia and the other institutions involved—but also by a commitment to learning otherwise, to thinking critically, and to aligning research with values of justice, dignity, and collective care.

In what follows, I explore in more depth the frameworks that accompanied this transition: from the individualism of mainstream psychology to the collective insights of liberation psychology; from the assumptions of objectivity to the commitments of intersectional feminism; from the abstractions of positivism to the contextual nuance of critical and decolonial theories; and finally, from the diagnostic gaze of psychology as a Western and mainstream discipline to the co-creative ethos of narrative practice. Each of these frameworks has shaped both the design and the interpretation of this research, while also informing the way I position myself as a researcher. It is precisely in this dynamic interplay between standpoint and knowledge production that the positionality of this dissertation takes form.

This evolving epistemological trajectory has had concrete implications not only for how I think, but for how I *do* research. The theoretical frameworks I began with—often rooted in developmental psychology, clinical models, or community-based interventions—gradually gave way to more critical, context-sensitive, and justice-oriented perspectives. Similarly, my methodological approach shifted: what began as a more traditional reliance on standardized tools and structured procedures opened up to include qualitative, participatory, and narrative methods capable of capturing complexity, ambiguity, and voices. These changes were not cosmetic; they reflected a deeper ethical and political reorientation. Each decision—from the questions I chose to ask, to the methods I used to explore them, to the way I interpreted and presented findings—was shaped by this process of transformation. In this sense, the empirical work that follows is not merely a product of theoretical alignment, but of epistemological accountability: a commitment to making visible the values, struggles, and shifts that have accompanied the research journey from beginning to end.

3. Personal and professional positioning

My engagement with the themes of migration, interculturality, and human rights did not begin in books or classrooms. Long before they became research interests as they were already part of my lived experience. I, too, carry a story of migration—though not one that crosses international borders. I was born in Naples, in Southern Italy, in 1992, as a white Italian female. When I was two years old, my family moved to the North in search of work. We settled in Treviglio, a small town in the Po Valley, near Milan, where I spent most of my childhood and adolescence. Yet, I always carried with me the sense of coming from elsewhere.

From an early age, I learned what it means to grow up between two different cultures. Although I was raised in Northern Italy—where I began and completed my education through university—my roots were firmly tied to the South. Every Christmas, Easter, and summer, [2]we would return to our family in Naples to celebrate the holidays and stay connected to our heritage. Therefore, during my childhood, I was constantly moving between the structured school system of the North and the warm, spirited values of my Southern family; between the quiet streets of Treviglio and the vibrant, chaotic and familiar sounds of Naples. Over time, this cultural in-betweenness became more sharply defined, particularly through experiences of exclusion and discrimination. I still remember being called *"terrona"* in middle school—a derogatory term often used to belittle Italian Southerners [3]. It was a word that conveyed not only difference, but inferiority, as if being Southern meant being less refined, less intelligent, less worthy. Those early insults planted a seed of shame that took years to unlearn. For a long time, I hesitated to even mention where I was born.

Economic differences deepened this feeling of distance. While many of my classmates wore designer clothes and were driven to school in new cars, I wore what my family could afford at the local market and commuted in an aging Fiat 500[4]. At home, the values and expectations were different too—shaped by Southern traditions that emphasized family unity, gender norms, and community over individualism. As a girl, I experienced stricter rules and less freedom than many of my peers, which created tension and a sense of isolation that was difficult to articulate at the time.

Looking back, I understand that these early experiences introduced me to the realities of social exclusion, regional inequality, and cultural normativity. While I never crossed a geopolitical border, I came to understand what it means to be seen as "less than"—to carry the burden of a stigmatized identity in a society structured around hierarchies of value. Italy's North-South divide is not only

[2] In Italy, Christmas, Easter, and the summer months coincide with the main school holidays, during which schools and many professional activities close

[3] *Terrone* is a pejorative term used mainly in Northern Italy to refer to people from the South. Historically, it reflects internal divisions within the country and stereotypes portraying Southerners as rural, uneducated, or backward.

[4] The Fiat 500 was an iconic, affordable car widely used by working-class families in Italy during the postwar decades, and by the time of my childhood, older models were often seen as modest or outdated vehicles.

economic; it is cultural and historical, rooted in narratives that have long portrayed the South as backward and dependent. My family's relocation was shaped by this context, by a South systematically under-resourced and narratively marginalized (Fiorenza, 2024).

Moving to my professional positioning, my academic and professional path has never been linear. Initially, I began with a degree in Neurodevelopmental Disorders Therapy, followed by a Master of Science in Cognitive Neuroscience. For 9 years, I worked as a therapist with children with disabilities—a role that taught me much but also left me unsettled. The children were not the source of my discomfort. Indeed, when I worked as a therapist, I was trained to identify symptoms, deficits, and delays—to define children's abilities in relation to a normative developmental trajectory. But as I spent time with these children, I began to question what exactly this "norm" was.

> *"Why were these children expected to change—sometimes at great emotional cost—to fit into a world that had no intention of accommodating them?"*
>
> *"Why was their way of being pathologized, while the rigidity of social structures remained untouched and unquestioned?"*

Those years marked the beginning of a profound internal shift. I started questioning the very idea of normality—who defines it, what it serves, and whom it excludes. Gradually, I developed a more critical consciousness, recognizing how the dominant paradigms in my field were not neutral, but aligned with a broader capitalist logic that prizes productivity, efficiency, and conformity. The ideal subject—the one that produce and consume—is the *homo economicus*: white, cisgender, male, able-bodied, autonomous, and economically productive. Everyone else must adapt (Fuchs & Lingnau, 2024; Goitom, 2024; Heizmann & Liu, 2020; Maroto, Pettinicchio, & Patterson, 2018; Michener & Brower, 2020; Rodríguez & Archer, 2022; Sang & Calvard, 2019; Walenta, 2020).

This realization didn't come all at once, nor did it immediately lead to clarity. At the time, I only knew that I felt complicit. I loved the children I worked with, but I began to see how my work could also serve a system that pathologized them. I wasn't ready to articulate it, but I was angry—deeply disturbed by the mismatch between my values, my practice and the world around me.

That dissonance ultimately led me to leave Italy for a time. I spent a year in Khartoum, Sudan, working with an NGO focused on children with developmental disabilities. The experience was transformative. I encountered models of community care rooted not in diagnostic labels or formal policies, but in shared responsibility and belonging. Inclusion there was not theorized—it was lived. At the same time, I witnessed profound suffering: poverty, displacement, child mortality, and institutional neglect. These realities could not be addressed through individual pathology alone. They revealed how health and well-being are inseparable from broader political, economic, and historical conditions. My understanding of disability deepened as I began to see it not only as a clinical category

but also as a reflection of structural inequality. Living in Sudan also forced me to confront my own positionality in new ways. As a white, Western, Christian educated woman in a post-colonial, majority-Muslim country, I became acutely aware of my privileges—and of the long shadows cast by European colonialism. I could no longer ignore how these histories shape our present: how aid, research, and even care can carry the imprint of domination. During this time, I also developed strong relationships with Palestinian individuals (one of whom later became my husband), whose stories and struggles further deepened my political awareness, especially around the violence of occupation, displacement, and erasure.

It was from this rich and complex interplay of personal, professional, and political experiences that I returned to Italy in 2019 with a renewed sense of purpose. I chose to pursue further studies in psychology—this time not with the aim of "fixing" individuals, but of understanding how mental health and well-being are shaped by systemic injustice. I became increasingly interested in how psychology could serve as a tool for social transformation rather than normalization. My Master's thesis reflected this shift in perspective, focusing on forced migrations and exploring the psychological effects and developmental outcomes in children, while linking individual well-being to broader dynamics of social inequality, migration, and marginalization.

These threads led me to this doctoral research. I entered the program with a clear conviction: that psychology must address suffering as a response to inequality, exclusion, and injustice, and must also support the development of collective and individual protective factors rooted in dignity, agency, and solidarity. I have never believed in a neutral psychology. To me, research becomes meaningful only when it is aligned with activism, with communities' instances and needs, and with the desire to imagine and co-create more just futures.

And yet, I remain acutely aware of the contradictions embedded in the very fabric of this project. This dissertation was made possible through a government-funded scholarship aimed at strengthening public administration—an institutional objective whose priorities often differ substantially from those of the communities I have engaged with throughout this research. Although the funding program formally allowed academic institutions to independently define the thematic focus of doctoral research, in reality this autonomy was exercised at the institutional level, without involving the people most directly affected by the project. Indeed, in this specific case, the research topic and structure were determined entirely by academic and administrative decision-makers, without any prior consultation with educators, parents, or children—despite the fact that the research focused on their lives, experiences, and working conditions. Agreements between universities and school administrators were reached at the top of institutional hierarchies. Educators—those working daily in classrooms—were informed only after decisions had already been finalized. They were not asked

whether the proposed research aligned with their needs, interests, or priorities; they were simply expected to participate. This was not a participatory process. It was a top-down one.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that this very process—whereby a project was designed and selected at the institutional level in order to secure public funding—was also what made the doctoral scholarship possible. Without such mechanisms, there would have been no opportunity to dedicate three years of work to these themes. This reflects a structural paradox: as researchers, we benefit from institutional arrangements that both enable our academic trajectory and, at the same time, risk silencing the voices of those most directly concerned.

This contradiction—between the emancipatory intent of critical scholarship and the institutional logic that governs its implementation—runs through the entire trajectory of this dissertation. It forces me to confront uncomfortable but necessary questions:

> *When and how does community participation truly begin?*
>
> *Can we speak of co-creation when the groundwork has already been laid without those most affected?*
>
> *What does it mean to pursue a vision of justice, dignity, and care while operating within systems that often reproduce asymmetry, silencing, and exclusion?*

These are not theoretical dilemmas. They are the lived contradictions I have had to navigate throughout this doctoral journey. And they continue to shape not only how I approach research, but also how I understand accountability, authorship, and the political implications of academic work.

3.1 Ethical responsibility and academic complicity: writing in the shadow of Gaza

As I write this dissertation, my academic reflections are inseparable from my personal and familial circumstances and from the broader socio-political context in which they unfold. As mentioned earlier, I am married to a person of Palestinian origin, and this relationship profoundly shapes the way I experience, interpret, and position myself within the world—and, inevitably, within this research.

Accordingly, while I write this dissertation, I cannot remain silent about the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Since October 2023, the people of Gaza have been subjected to nearly two years of relentless bombardment, deprivation, and forced displacement (Albanese, 2024). This violence is not isolated; it is the most recent expression of a much longer history of colonization, apartheid, and illegal occupation imposed by the Israeli state (Human Rights Watch, 2021; B'Tselem, 2021; Amnesty International, 2022; International Court of Justice, 2024)

On June 30, 2025, during the 59th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, Francesca Albanese—the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967—presented a landmark report titled *From Economy of Occupation to Economy of Genocide* (Albanese, 2025). In it, she details how the Israeli occupation has evolved into

what she defines as an "economy of genocide," supported by a global network of military, technological, financial, and academic institutions. Among these, universities are not neutral observers, but active contributors to the systems that legitimize, maintain, and normalize state violence. For instance in Israel, academic institutions—particularly law faculties and departments of archaeology and Middle Eastern studies—serve as ideological pillars of apartheid by producing and legitimizing state-aligned narratives that erase Palestinian history and claims to land. Meanwhile, departments of science and technology collaborate directly with the military-industrial complex, designing and refining technologies for surveillance, crowd control, facial recognition, and targeted killings. These are not abstract products of innovation; they are tested on Palestinians and used to enforce systems of domination and territorial control (Albanese, 2025). This complicity, however, extends well beyond Israeli borders. Prestigious institutions in the Global North are also involved. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), for example, has received funding from the Israeli Ministry of Defense to develop drone swarms and underwater surveillance systems—technologies reportedly deployed in Gaza in recent offensives. In Europe, the Horizon Europe framework has enabled extensive partnerships between EU universities and Israeli institutions accused of violations of international law. The Technical University of Munich (TUM) is a prominent example, having received substantial funding for joint research with Israel Aerospace Industries and IBM Israel, both central players in the Israeli military and surveillance apparatus (Albanese, 2025).

Italy is no exception. One of the policies that fosters this type of complicity is the bilateral *MAECI Scientific and Industrial Cooperation Agreement* with Israel (Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, 2025), the Italian government continues to promote joint research with Israeli institutions, despite their documented involvement in systemic human rights abuses (Rete Ricerca e Università per la Palestina [RUP], 2025). Far from being neutral, these partnerships risk normalizing and legitimizing institutions directly complicit in apartheid, settler colonialism, and violence.

As Albanese (2025) clearly argues, these are not incidental affiliations—they are structural. They are part of a global system that materially supports occupation and genocide. Under international law, the obligation to disengage from such complicity is not a matter of personal or institutional discretion: it is a legal duty. Indeed, universities are not apolitical spaces, and research is never outside of power. When academic institutions collaborate with entities complicit in war crimes and systemic oppression, they contribute not only financially, but also intellectually and culturally to the maintenance of those crimes. This applies not only to the distribution of research funding, but also to the symbolic authority and legitimacy that academic collaboration confers. In the face of genocide,

silence is not neutrality—it is complicity. Disengagement is not optional; it is an ethical, political, and legal imperative (Albanese, 2025).

For these reasons, and in alignment with the 2005 Palestinian Civil Society Call for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (Palestinian Civil Society Organisations, 2005), and the principles articulated by the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI, 2014), I have chosen to observe the academic and cultural boycott of Israeli institutions. This means that, in writing this dissertation, I have deliberately refrained from citing or engaging with works authored by scholars affiliated with Israeli academic institutions.

This decision is not directed against individuals, nor is it based on identity markers such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, or political opinion. PACBI, as part of the broader BDS National Committee (BNC), explicitly upholds the principle of freedom of expression as defined in the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)*, and firmly rejects any boycott based on personal characteristics or beliefs. The academic boycott, instead, targets institutions due to their active and structural role in systems of oppression and human rights violations (PACBI, 2014).

This stance is neither symbolic nor rhetorical. It reflects a deeper commitment to a decolonial, anti-racist, and justice-oriented approach to scholarship. I believe that research, particularly in the social sciences, must not only describe the world but also take responsibility for the ways it participates in shaping it. Solidarity must not remain at the level of sentiment or words—it must be embodied in ethical research practices that refuse complicity and strive to support those resisting systemic violence (Veronese & Kagee, 2025a). Thus, taking a position on Palestine is not separate from my role as a psychologist or researcher; rather, it is a direct extension of what I have come to understand about power, vulnerability, violence, and resistance. Writing this dissertation means carrying my biography, my contradictions, my doubts, and my political commitments into the research process. This work is not, and cannot be, a neutral product. It is a situated, intentional, and accountable contribution to a broader struggle for justice and liberation.

4. My epistemological positioning and journey

As noted earlier, this dissertation is not only a contribution to debates on interculturality within early childhood institutions, but also a deeply personal and professional journey. It traces the epistemological shifts that have shaped how I understand psychology, knowledge production, and my role as a researcher and practitioner. Rather than treating epistemology as a fixed or abstract framework, this chapter approaches it as an evolving process—one shaped by encounters, tensions, and transformations over time.

The purpose of this chapter is not to provide an exhaustive review of critical psychological traditions, but to make explicit the epistemological assumptions that underpin this research. By retracing my trajectory across paradigms, theories, and methodological orientations, I aim to clarify how my engagement with interculturality and inclusion has been informed by processes of unlearning, critical dialogue, and political commitment. Making this journey visible strengthens the coherence of the dissertation by linking its theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices to a clearly situated epistemological stance.

4.1 Unlearning the norm: traversing critical paradigms in search of a justice-oriented psychology

My academic training in psychology took place within Italian universities and was firmly grounded in Western mainstream paradigms. The frameworks I was taught to apply were largely shaped by biomedical models, positivist epistemologies, and individualistic understandings of mental health. Within this dominant framework, well-being is commonly defined through the absence of symptoms, emotional stability, adaptability, and productivity. Suffering is equated with dysfunction, and healing is framed as a process of eliminating pain in order to restore individuals—or groups—to what is perceived as "normal" functioning (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2020).

This notion of functioning is particularly revealing. In this context, to function well often means to work consistently, consume, socialize in socially acceptable ways, and rest only in order to repeat the cycle the next day (Paterson, 2023). Psychological well-being thus becomes closely aligned with the figure of the *homo economicus*, the ideal subject of capitalist society who performs effectively as both consumer and producer. Health, in this framework, is less about justice or collective dignity and more about conformity to economic and social routines that sustain the status quo (Gudmand-Høyer & Hjorth, 2009).

This normalized logic shaped the early years of my professional practice, and beginning to question it marked a decisive turning point in my epistemological journey. I started seeking frameworks that could hold pain without immediately pathologizing it, and that could understand distress not as individual failure but as a meaningful response to structural injustice. I was particularly drawn to

approaches that interpreted resistance not as dysfunction, but as a legitimate reaction to oppressive conditions.

This search—together with my proximity to and solidarity with Palestinians—led me to the work of Guido Veronese. His scholarship, grounded in the study of systemic oppression and the psychological impact of war and structural violence, particularly in the Gaza Strip, challenged dominant clinical interpretations of suffering. What struck me most was his refusal to frame people as passive victims. Instead, he emphasizes agency, resilience, and the resources individuals and communities draw upon through histories, traditions, and family networks in contexts of prolonged oppression (Veronese & Barola, 2018; Veronese & Cavazzoni, 2020; Veronese et al., 2021a; Veronese et al., 2021b; Veronese et al., 2022; Veronese et al., 2023). In this perspective, psychological distress is not a sign of personal deficiency but an intelligible response to living within unjust systems. Western models that pathologize individuals risk obscuring a crucial truth: mental health is not merely a clinical issue, but a profoundly political terrain (Veronese & Kagee, 2025b).

Engaging with this body of work opened the path to liberation psychology, and in particular to the writings of Ignacio Martín-Baró (1997, 1998). Liberation psychology reframes mental health as inherently political, grounded in the recognition that psychological suffering often originates in injustice rather than individual disorder. For Martín-Baró, psychology should not aim to restore people to functionality within oppressive systems, but to support processes of collective liberation. He rejected universal models of well-being and emphasized the historical, cultural, and geographical specificity of each community's struggle. In this paradigm, healing is no longer understood as symptom reduction, but as liberation from the conditions that produce suffering (Martín-Baró, 1998). Liberation psychology also challenges rigid binaries between oppressor and oppressed, recognizing that power operates across multiple levels and that individuals and communities may be entangled in these roles simultaneously (Lykes et al., 2003; Montero & Sonn, 2009).

Within this same framework, the work of Samah Jabr further shaped my understanding of the inseparability of psychological well-being and political reality. Practicing in the West Bank, Jabr argues that healing is not an individual journey toward equilibrium, but a collective act of resistance—the right to name one's pain, to narrate one's experience, and to imagine futures beyond domination. Her work insists that psychologists must take positions, and that neutrality in the face of oppression constitutes a form of violence (Jabr & Berger, 2021).

A complementary and deeply influential contribution comes from Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, whose work critically interrogates dominant psychological understandings of trauma and childhood. Through the concept of "unchilding," she describes how Palestinian children are systematically denied the protections associated with childhood—safety, innocence, and care. In settler-colonial

contexts, she argues, Western assumptions about restoring children to normative emotional states are not only inadequate but harmful. Healing, in these contexts, cannot mean erasing pain; it must begin by acknowledging it, naming it, and situating it within the systems that produce it (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2019; 2020).

Across these perspectives, pain emerges not as individual failure but as a form of knowledge—a testimony of what has been endured. Naming pain is not a retreat from healing, but a step toward resistance. As emphasized by Martín-Baró (1998), Jabr (2020), and Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2019), well-being is not a private achievement but a collective, political, and relational process shaped by history, injustice, and struggle. These approaches invite a psychology that listens rather than erases, that aligns itself not with neutrality but with solidarity.

As my epistemological journey continued, intersectional feminism became a crucial influence in shaping how I understand power, identity, and the production of suffering. Intersectionality offered not simply an expansion of analytic categories, but a different way of reading the world—one that understands race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, and colonial history as mutually constitutive rather than separate dimensions of experience. The work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) provided language for this lens, highlighting how institutions systematically fail to recognize people situated at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression.

Thinkers such as bell hooks (2000) and Audre Lorde (1994) further challenged dominant feminist narratives by insisting that the margins are not only sites of exclusion but also spaces of knowledge, creativity, and resistance. From them, I learned that lived experience is not anecdotal or secondary, but central to theory-making. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) deepened this reflection by conceptualizing power as a matrix rather than a hierarchy, revealing how oppression operates through interconnected structures that normalize some lives while marginalizing others.

Intersectional feminism also foregrounded the necessity of collective resistance. As Angela Davis (2000) has argued, struggles against sexism, racism, classism, and colonialism cannot be separated without reproducing the very systems they oppose. This resonated strongly with liberation psychology's insistence that healing must be linked to social transformation. It also made visible the Western and colonial assumptions underlying claims to universality in psychology. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2005) challenged these assumptions by emphasizing the importance of location, history, and power in feminist scholarship.

These insights reinforced my understanding of inclusion as a relational and political process rather than a technical outcome. Intersectionality, in this sense, is not about adding categories, but about shifting perspective—about recognizing how inequalities are produced and how possibilities for resistance emerge. This lens has been particularly important for my engagement with interculturality,

where identities and experiences are always multiple, intersecting, and historically situated (hooks, 2000).

Alongside these feminist and liberationist frameworks, critical and decolonial thinkers further shaped my epistemological stance. Michel Foucault's work revealed how disciplines such as psychology function as mechanisms of normalization and control through processes of surveillance, categorization, and biopower (Foucault & Dreyfus, 1986; Foucault & Chomsky, 2011). In dialogue with Foucault, Paulo Freire's notion of *conscientização* emphasized the inherently political nature of education and knowledge production, grounded in dialogue and collective reflection (Freire, 1970).

Postcolonial and decolonial scholars such as Gayatri Spivak (1988), Edward Said (1977), and Achille Mbembe (2019) exposed how colonial legacies continue to shape who is heard, who is erased, and whose knowledge counts. Frantz Fanon's work (1963) was particularly influential in illuminating how colonial violence leaves deep psychological traces, shaping both oppression and resistance. His refusal to frame healing as adaptation to a violent order, and his insistence on liberation as both psychological and political, profoundly influenced my understanding of intercultural encounters and migration.

Drawing on these perspectives, decolonial thought—particularly as articulated by Walter Mignolo (2012, 2020)—offered a framework for interrogating the Eurocentric foundations of knowledge production. Decoloniality calls for epistemic disobedience: a refusal to treat Western epistemologies as universal and a commitment to centering marginalized ways of knowing. In intercultural contexts, this reframes inclusion as a process of epistemic justice rather than assimilation.

Narrative theory provided a further reorientation of my epistemological journey. Narrative approaches, particularly those developed by Michael White and David Epston (1990, 2004) and expanded by Cheryl White and David Denborough (2004, 2005, 2014; Denborough, 2018), conceptualize people as separate from their problems and understand identity as constructed through language, relationships, and social discourse. Rather than privileging professional expertise, narrative practices honour lived knowledge and create space for re-authoring stories of resistance, dignity, and survival.

By decentring diagnosis and interpretation, narrative approaches challenge pathologizing language and open possibilities for collective meaning-making, particularly important in community and intercultural contexts (Russell, White, & Carey, 2004). As Foucault (1972) reminds us, discourse is never neutral; narrative practices take this seriously by supporting people in reclaiming their own vocabularies and histories.

Taken together, these epistemological shifts—from mainstream psychology toward liberation, intersectional, decolonial, and narrative frameworks—have reshaped my understanding of research

as a dialogical, ethically engaged, and transformative practice. Inclusion, from this perspective, is not an endpoint but an ongoing relational process. This journey continues to inform every stage of my work, from research design to analysis and writing, grounding the dissertation in a commitment to justice, accountability, and the collective imagining of more just ways of living together.

5. Theoretical background: a journey through intercultural paradigms, from mainstream to decolonial

Over the course of this doctoral research, my understanding of interculturality has evolved—from early exposure to mainstream, competence-based frameworks to a more critical and decolonial engagement with the structural dimensions of culture, race, and knowledge. This chapter is both a map and a memory: it narrates how I have come to think about difference—not as something to manage, but as something that reveals the deep asymmetries embedded in our institutions and epistemologies.

5.1 Mainstream paradigms about interculturality: managing difference, pursuing competence

My initial academic training introduced me to what are often considered the foundational paradigms in the field of intercultural studies—frameworks that have been widely adopted in educational, organizational, and institutional contexts. These approaches typically emphasize the development of individual competences intended to facilitate positive engagement with cultural difference. At the time, they appeared both ethically sound and pedagogically useful, especially in my work on the relationship between educators' intercultural skills and their well-being in multicultural contexts (see Chapter 10).

Among the most influential of these models is Milton Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), which conceptualizes intercultural awareness as a linear progression. Individuals are seen as moving from ethnocentric stages—where one's own cultural perspective is perceived as universal—toward more ethnorelative stages, where difference is acknowledged, valued, and integrated into one's worldview. The model presents intercultural sensitivity as a cognitive and attitudinal achievement, attainable through proper education and self-awareness (Bennet & Hammer, 2017).

Similarly, Darla Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence focuses on the cultivation of skills such as empathy, openness, and adaptability. Framed as a dynamic and ongoing process, her model is especially influential in the field of international education, where successful intercultural encounters are often tied to the individual's ability to communicate effectively and respectfully across cultural boundaries (Deardorff, 2006; 2009; 2011).

Michael Byram's concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram, 2020), Fantini's emphasis on emotional intelligence and reflection (Fantini, 2018), and Chen and Starosta's Intercultural Sensitivity Framework (Chen & Starosta, 2000) all converge on a similar premise: that intercultural challenges are best addressed by developing a repertoire of individual dispositions—curiosity, respect, empathy—and communication strategies that allow for mutual understanding. While differing in emphasis and terminology, these models tend to frame cultural difference as

something that can be managed—rendered legible and navigable—through personal growth and interpersonal dexterity. Taken together, these theories promote a vision of interculturality as a question of individual transformation: a shift in perception, attitude, or behaviour. Culture is frequently portrayed as a coherent, bounded system that individuals carry with them; competence, in turn, becomes a matter of decoding these systems correctly and responding "appropriately" (Lau & Rodgers, 2021)

At the time, I found these models compelling. They spoke to my desire to support educators, reduce conflict, and foster inclusive classrooms. Yet, as I engaged more deeply with their application—in both literature and practice—I began to notice certain epistemic and political limitations. In particular, these frameworks often approach culture as a relatively stable or neutral category, which can obscure the ways in which cultural identities and differences are shaped by historical and structural conditions such as colonial legacies, racial hierarchies, migration regimes, and global inequalities. When difference is framed primarily as a communicative or psychological challenge to be managed, the broader material and systemic dimensions of exclusion, domination, and privilege may remain underexplored (Anthias, 2016).

Furthermore, the vision of intercultural engagement promoted by many of these models tends to emphasize harmonious coexistence within the existing social order. Integration is often presented as the desired outcome, yet the underlying assumptions of that process—whose norms prevail, what counts as "competent" behaviour, and who is expected to adapt—are rarely made explicit. In practice, this can unintentionally reproduce subtle expectations for minoritized individuals to align with dominant cultural norms, often under the guise of effective communication or professionalism (Briones, 2020). By centering individual attitudes and behaviours, these frameworks may also contribute to a depoliticized understanding of interculturality—one that privileges personal development over institutional or structural change. In this sense, they resonate with aspects of liberal multiculturalism, which celebrates diversity discursively while leaving existing power relations largely intact (R'boul, 2022).

This realization prompted a fundamental shift in my understanding of interculturality. I began to ask:

> *Why are some forms of difference celebrated while others are policed or erased?*
> *Who benefits from the dominant narratives of inclusion and competence?*
> *And what forms of knowledge or identity are rendered unintelligible or unacceptable under these paradigms?*

It became increasingly clear to me that interculturality must be approached not as a question of technique or disposition, but as a deeply political terrain—one that demands critical engagement with

power, privilege, and positionality. This transition—from normative to critical, from competence to justice—is the focus of the following sections in this chapter.

5.2 Beyond neutrality: recognizing power in intercultural encounters

As my research deepened—particularly during the qualitative phase of the data collection, where I engaged directly with educators, families, and children living at the intersections of migration and marginalization—I began to experience a growing dissonance between the neatness of mainstream intercultural models and the complexity of the lived realities I was encountering.

Interculturality, in these contexts, was not simply a matter of miscommunication or cultural misunderstanding. It was about institutional racism, linguistic hierarchies, racialized gatekeeping, and the systematic erasure of non-dominant ways of being. It was about children who were read through deficit lenses because they spoke the "wrong" language at home. About mothers treated with suspicion or pity because of the passports they held or the clothes they wore. About educators struggling not just with classroom diversity, but with policies and practices that rendered some children visible and others disposable.

These were not issues that could be addressed by promoting empathy or communication skills. What was needed was a way of seeing that could name power, locate it, and challenge its reproduction in educational spaces. This epistemological shift began to emerge clearly in the second empirical study presented in this dissertation (see Chapter 11), where I started to draw from critical intercultural frameworks—those that understand interculturality not as a neutral space of exchange, but as a terrain of struggle shaped by history, ideology, and power. In this view, culture is not a soft variable or a set of "differences" to be managed—it is political, historically situated, and always entangled with questions of who is allowed to belong, under what conditions, and at what cost.

Critical intercultural scholars argue that we must move beyond depoliticized notions of inclusion and diversity. They insist that interculturality must grapple with structural conditions—racism, capitalism, coloniality, patriarchy—that shape and constrain how people live and relate across difference (Andreotti, 2011; Delgado, 2015; McLaren, 2015; Reyes, 2011). From this vantage point, education is never just about knowledge transmission; it is also about the reproduction or contestation of social hierarchies.

In these frameworks, interculturality becomes a political project, not simply a pedagogical one. It demands that we critically interrogate normativity itself—especially the centrality of whiteness as the unmarked, assumed standard against which all others are measured. It requires that we ask difficult questions:

Who defines the criteria for inclusion?

Who sets the terms of "tolerance" or "respect"?

What forms of knowledge and language are legitimized, and which are silenced?

The goal is not harmony through assimilation, but justice through transformation. Inclusion, from this perspective, cannot mean being "welcomed" into an unchanged system; it must mean rethinking and remaking the system itself. Otherwise, inclusion risks becoming merely conditional—granted only to those willing or able to mimic dominant norms.

This turning point in my research and theoretical thinking marked a deeper alignment with frameworks that refuse neutrality and insist on positionality, complicity, and accountability. The shift from competence to critique, from diversity to decoloniality, from empathy to equity, reflects the evolution of this doctoral work itself—not as a linear trajectory, but as a process of unlearning and reorientation, shaped by the realities of the people and communities I was working alongside.

It is this critical understanding of interculturality that increasingly guided both the questions I asked and the methods I used, and that profoundly shaped the later stages of my doctoral journey.

This critical reorientation also brought into sharper focus another dimension too often overlooked in intercultural literature in school: the position of educators themselves as subjects situated within oppressive institutional structures. While much of the discourse around intercultural education focuses on what educators must "learn" or "develop" to work effectively with culturally diverse students, far less attention is paid to the conditions under which these same educators live and work, and to the multiple forms of disempowerment they experience (Tualaulelei & Halse, 2022).

In the course of my fieldwork, I was struck not only by the dedication of many educators, but also by the structural silencing they endured. Their knowledge—often rich, situated, and grounded in everyday practice—was rarely acknowledged as valid expertise. Despite being on the front lines of intercultural encounters, they were frequently expected to become recipients of top-down training on "competence," rather than being recognized as professionals already engaged in complex forms of relational, emotional, and pedagogical negotiation. Their existing competencies were made invisible, and in their place, external experts—myself included, at times—were invited to "bring" knowledge, as though educators themselves were not already generating it daily.

Moreover, in different cultural contexts educators often described feeling undervalued by institutions, underpaid, and excluded from decision-making processes that directly affected their classrooms. This sense of marginalization extended to the way their work was bureaucratized, surveilled, and increasingly reduced to quantifiable outcomes, leaving little space for creativity, relationality, or care (Akiba et al., 2023).

The sense of inequality and constraint within educational settings was not experienced uniformly across roles. Within schools, organizational hierarchies manifested in both subtle and explicit ways. Support staff—such as janitors, assistants, and other non-teaching personnel—are often positioned at

the margins of educational projects, despite their crucial contributions to creating safe and welcoming environments. Similarly, learning support educators, frequently employed through external cooperatives, described facing greater contractual instability, limited access to pedagogical planning, and fewer professional rights, even as they carried out some of the most complex and emotionally demanding work in the school (Sirko et al., 2022).

These dynamics illustrate that inequalities in education are rarely binary. They do not simply map onto roles such as educator versus student, or majority versus minority culture. As Paulo Freire (1970) suggests, the dynamics of power and vulnerability within institutions are fluid and context-dependent. Educators can sometimes act as gatekeepers of inclusion, yet they can also experience forms of institutional pressure and marginalization that constrain their agency and recognition.

Engaging meaningfully with interculturality in early childhood education, therefore, requires attentive listening to educators—not only the provision of training. It calls for an awareness of the intersectional inequalities that operate within educational systems themselves, and for collaborative approaches that value the lived expertise of all staff members. Intercultural transformation cannot be prescribed from above; it must be co-constructed with those who sustain the everyday life of schools. Inclusion, in this sense, is not limited to students and families. It also involves ensuring that educators and support staff are fully recognized and valued—not only for their formal qualifications, but for the relational, situated, and often invisible knowledge they bring into their work every day.

5.3 Interculturality and intersectionality: a feminist inflection

As my theoretical lens expanded, I found invaluable insights in intersectional feminism—perspectives that deeply reshaped the way I understood not only cultural difference, but also the very language through which we speak about inclusion, equity, and recognition. This became particularly evident in the second empirical study of this dissertation (see Chapter 11), where it was clear that neither educators nor parents conceived of "interculturality" in isolation. For them, cultural diversity was always intertwined with material conditions, power relations, and personal histories marked by class position, gendered expectations, and broader social inequalities.

In this sense, discussions of interculture risk becoming abstract if detached from these intersecting realities. An intersectional perspective offers a richer, more grounded understanding of experience—one that views identities not as fixed categories, but as dynamic positions shaped by overlapping systems of power. Through the work of intersectional feminist scholars, I came to see that cultural identity is never limited to ethnicity or nationality; it is continuously redefined through the intersections of gender, class, sexuality, ability, and the historically situated contexts in which these dimensions are lived and perceived (Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 2000; Lorde, 1984; Collins, 2000).

Intersectionality also reminds us that "difference" is never a neutral concept. It invites reflection on who defines it, under what conditions, and whose experiences are made visible or invisible in the process. From this perspective, culture cannot be reduced to a collection of customs or values to be respected; it is a field in which power circulates—sometimes constraining, but also enabling creativity, resilience, and solidarity (Andreotti, 2011; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 2000; Delgado, 2015; Anthias, 2016).

This understanding became particularly relevant within early childhood education. Institutional discourses often portray educators as neutral transmitters of knowledge or culture, yet my fieldwork revealed a more nuanced reality. Many educators—particularly women, migrant women, those from Southern Italy, or those working in precarious positions—navigated multiple, intersecting challenges. Several described feelings of fatigue or invisibility, and a lack of recognition for the skills and sensitivities they already brought to their work. Often, they were encouraged to "acquire" intercultural competence through external training, even though they were already engaging daily with diverse and complex realities with creativity, care, and commitment.

This tension between institutional narratives and the lived expertise of educators resonates with what intersectional and decolonial scholars describe as epistemic inequality—the uneven recognition of different forms of knowledge (Andreotti, 2011; hooks, 1994; Collins, 2000). Feminist thinkers have long emphasized that care, emotional labour, and embodied mediation are not secondary aspects of education, but vital forms of professional knowledge that deserve acknowledgment and value (Anzaldúa, 1987; Lorde, 1984).

Within educational systems, power relations are also differentiated and complex. Hierarchies exist not only between educators and families but also among school staff—between those directly employed by public institutions and those working through external cooperatives, or between teaching and support roles. Contractual conditions, professional recognition, and participation in pedagogical processes vary considerably, even as all are expected to contribute to the "inclusive school." An intersectional lens helps make these internal dynamics visible, reminding us that interculturality cannot be reduced to the celebration of diversity. It also involves examining how institutional structures shape participation, recognition, and equity within the educational community itself.

Ultimately, intersectional feminism has encouraged me to understand interculturality not as a discrete set of competences, but as a continuous and relational process—a space of negotiation where the personal and the political remain intertwined (Hanisch, 1970). It invites us to value the lived experiences of educators and families as legitimate sources of knowledge, and to approach

educational transformation as a shared, situated effort. From this perspective, inclusion is not a finished goal but an ongoing practice of dialogue, reflexivity, and co-construction.

5.4 Toward decolonial interculturality: unlearning and reimagining

The most profound shift in my theoretical journey occurred when I encountered decolonial and postcolonial thought—a moment that did not merely add new concepts to my framework, but invited me to reconsider the very foundations of my understanding. It was no longer simply a matter of improving intercultural practices or making them more inclusive. The questions became deeper and more unsettling:

Whose knowledge are we building upon?

Whose histories are we overlooking?

Whose terms are we using to define both the problems and the solutions?

Interculturality can only be fully understood as a site of epistemic negotiation rather than a neutral technical domain (Fanon, 1963; Mignolo, 2012; Quijano in Mignolo, 2020; Mbembe, 2019; Said, 1977). From this perspective, interculturality is not simply about the peaceful coexistence of different cultural identities within existing institutions. The decolonial lens reminds us that institutions themselves are historically situated, epistemically constructed, and often shaped by Eurocentric norms that determine what is recognized as legitimate, intelligent, or valuable (Mignolo, 2012).

Adopting a decolonial perspective therefore entails a shift in responsibility—not only toward the people and communities we engage with, but also toward the very systems of knowledge in which we participate. It requires acknowledging that no amount of cultural competence can compensate for forms of epistemic inequality that silence entire ways of knowing, teaching, and being. This recognition also reframes the work of learning: it becomes as much about *unlearning* as about acquiring knowledge—unlearning habits of mastery, explanation, and validation, and cultivating instead the capacity to listen, to accompany, and to relate across difference.

Seen in this light, decolonial interculturality is less a pedagogical method than an ethical and political orientation. It moves beyond the goal of integrating difference into existing systems and instead opens a space to question and reimagine those systems themselves. It invites educators and researchers to address epistemic injustices, to make visible the colonial legacies embedded in our institutions, and to create space for relational and context-specific forms of knowledge and coexistence.

This understanding resonates with the work of Catherine Walsh, whose notion of *interculturalidad crítica* emphasizes interculturality as a political, epistemic, and ethical project (Walsh, 2005). For Walsh, critical interculturality is not about tolerance or celebration of diversity—concepts that risk neutralizing the political significance of difference—but about confronting the coloniality of power,

being, and knowledge. It calls for collaborative imagination: not simply including others within dominant structures, but working collectively to envision alternatives.

For me, this perspective clarified why intercultural education cannot be confined to competence-based training or curriculum reform. It must become a space of inquiry and transformation—a setting where dominant norms can be questioned, where histories of exclusion can be acknowledged, and where more equitable and dialogical relationships can take shape. It means embracing the contradictions inherent in intercultural work, understanding that no single framework can fully capture the complexity of classrooms, communities, or research encounters. Yet it also requires rejecting the comfort of neutrality and recognizing education and psychology as fields of power that demand critical and responsible engagement.

In this sense, my trajectory from mainstream to decolonial interculturality has been neither linear nor conclusive. Each shift was not only intellectual but also experiential—emerging from tensions encountered in the field, in academic spaces, and within myself. Over time, I have come to weave together a constellation of critical approaches—liberation psychology, intersectional feminism, decolonial thought, and narrative practice. While these frameworks arise from different genealogies and political contexts, they share a set of ethical and epistemological commitments: to naming and interrogating power, to centering historically marginalized voices, and to reimagining knowledge not as extraction but as co-creation within the broader landscape of migration and interculturality.

Through this convergence, I began to understand interculturality not as a model to be applied, but as a praxis—a way of being, thinking, and acting that remains situated, relational, and open-ended. This orientation has shaped not only my theoretical framework but also my research practice, influencing the questions I ask, the methods I use, and the relationships I build. It represents, for me, a movement from managing diversity toward seeking justice, from theoretical certainty toward critical humility, and from fixed methodologies toward relational and evolving epistemologies.

While this journey is deeply personal, it is not private. The empirical studies that follow bear the traces of this ongoing transformation. In the questions posed, the tools adapted, and the voices prioritized, this epistemological shift becomes visible. In this sense, theory becomes practice, practice becomes politics, and research becomes an act of shared world-making.

6. Methodological framework

My methodological orientation, much like my theoretical development, has been shaped by a continuous negotiation between inherited paradigms and the situated challenges encountered in the field. Trained within Western psychology's dominant frameworks, I initially approached research through ideals of scientific objectivity and methodological rigor. Within this paradigm, methods were not only tools of inquiry but also markers of legitimacy, defining what counted as valid or "real" knowledge within academic and institutional contexts (Foucault, 1972; Gudmand-Høyer & Hjorth, 2009).

This orientation was most visible in the early phase of my doctoral work, which began with a quantitative study using a standardized survey to assess intercultural competences among early childhood educators in Genoa (see Chapter 10). At the time, this approach appeared both appropriate and strategic: it met institutional expectations, produced communicable results, and aligned with the evidence-based language common to educational policy and practice (Deardorff, 2006; Russell, 2023).

However, as I engaged more closely with educators, families, and children, I became aware of the limitations of this framework. The distance between standardized data and lived experience raised questions about what—and whose—realities were being represented. Gradually, I began to view research methods not as neutral instruments but as choices that shape whose voices are heard and what forms of knowledge are legitimized (Loadenthal, 2019; Burr, 2015; Andreotti, 2011).

This awareness marked a turning point. In the following stages of research, I turned toward ethnographic and dialogic approaches that allowed for more situated, relational, and plural forms of understanding. Ethnography—conceived not merely as observation but as a way of being present in the field—required me to slow down, embrace ambiguity, and allow meaning to emerge through engagement rather than imposition. This approach offered a more attentive and open-ended mode of inquiry, sensitive to the textures of everyday life and to the complexity of social interactions (Montero & Sonn, 2009; Lykes et al., 2003).

Ethnographic immersion also reshaped my understanding of knowledge itself: no longer as something to be extracted and generalized, but as something co-constructed within relationships and shaped by context. It invited attention to words and silences, gestures and contradictions, and to what remains unsaid. This methodological reorientation deepened further through the adoption of narrative inquiry, which I came to see as both a research method and an ethical stance. Drawing on the work of Michael White, David Epston, and the Dulwich Centre, I began to view stories not as anecdotal, but as powerful sites of meaning-making, where participants could re-author their experiences as

knowledgeable and agentic subjects (White & Epston, 1990; White & Denborough, 2005; Lykes et al., 2003).

The methodological trajectory of this dissertation reflects this evolution. The first study employed a quantitative survey; the second introduced ethnographic engagement; the third and fourth studies developed participatory and narrative methodologies with educators and parents, including the use of the Tree of Life, Life Storylines, and Maps of History. Together, these phases illustrate a gradual movement from standardized measurement toward dialogic and co-constructed inquiry.

This transformation was supported by my engagement with critical, feminist, and decolonial epistemologies, which emphasize reflexivity and accountability in knowledge production (Fanon, 1963; hooks, 2000; Mignolo, 2020; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2019). Informed by liberation psychology, intersectional feminism, and postcolonial theory, I came to understand methodological choices as inherently ethical and situated decisions—choices about what to foreground, what to question, and how to ensure that research remains responsive to the voices and realities it seeks to represent (Martín-Baró, 1998; Crenshaw, 1989; Said, 1977).

6.1 Participation and situated accountability

One of the most significant transformations in my methodological journey was the gradual move toward participatory logics of inquiry. This shift did not occur all at once; rather, it emerged through moments of discomfort, critical reflection, and unexpected connection in the field—moments when the limitations of extractive research designs became impossible to ignore (Loadenthal, 2019; Andreotti, 2011).

In much of traditional psychological research, participants are positioned as data providers—objects of analysis rather than co-constructors of knowledge. Rooted in positivist epistemologies and hierarchical assumptions, these models often perpetuate asymmetries of power between researchers and those being researched (Foucault, 1972; Martín-Baró, 1998). In contrast, participatory and community-based approaches reconfigure this dynamic by emphasizing research as a relational and collective process, grounded in mutual respect, dialogical ethics, and the possibility of transformation (Freire, 1970; Montero & Sonn, 2009; Colucci, 2019).

While I do not claim to have fully enacted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) model, I consider this dissertation deeply informed by participatory values—particularly in its later phases. I made a conscious effort to open space for dialogue, to treat participants as interlocutors rather than respondents, and to allow the research to be shaped by what emerged in real time (Lykes et al., 2003). This required me to loosen control and to ask, repeatedly and reflexively:

Who defines the research problem?

Who determines what counts as valid knowledge?

Who benefits from this work?

These questions became both ethical compass and methodological guideposts. They helped me recognize the asymmetries embedded in the research process—particularly in light of the top-down design of this PhD project, defined by prior agreements between academic institutions and municipal authorities. In such a context, genuine participation was partial, negotiated, and often constrained by institutional timelines and expectations (hooks, 2000; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2019). Yet these constraints did not render the process meaningless. Within them, I still witnessed moments of collaboration, recognition, and shared reflection—especially when participants were invited to make sense of their own practices, challenges, and forms of resistance (White & Denborough, 2005).

This perspective resonates with the work of Erminia Colucci, whose research highlights the transformative potential of participatory and community-based approaches in promoting collective well-being and mental health. Colucci argues that engaging communities as active partners—rather than as recipients of interventions—enhances cultural relevance, trust, and sustainability, particularly in multicultural or vulnerable contexts such as those involving refugees and migrants (Colucci & Lester, 2025; Bulik & Colucci, 2019; James et al., 2020). Her work demonstrates that participation is not only a methodological principle but also a pathway toward empowerment, social cohesion, and destigmatization. These insights reinforce the idea that participatory inquiry, when grounded in cultural sensitivity and shared ownership, can become a powerful means of fostering both knowledge production and collective resilience.

Crucially, participation in this sense is not merely procedural—it is epistemological and political. It requires a shift from viewing knowledge as something to be extracted and owned, to understanding it as relational, situated, and co-produced (Mignolo, 2020; Walsh, 2005; Colucci & Lester, 2025). It also requires attending to the emotional and ethical dimensions of fieldwork, including trust, vulnerability, and accountability—not only to institutions, but to the people and communities whose lives shape and are shaped by the research.

Rather than striving for methodological purity, I have embraced a logic of responsiveness—remaining open to what emerges and accepting that participation, like all critical praxis, is always partial, evolving, and imperfect. It is this imperfect, situated commitment to dialogue, reflection, and shared meaning-making that underpins the methodological orientation of this work.

6.2 Interdisciplinary and narrative approach

Building on the epistemological foundations outlined in the previous section, this part focuses on how narrative principles were translated into methodological practice and integrated within an

interdisciplinary framework. While narrative theory provided the conceptual grounding, its methodological application required crossing disciplinary boundaries—drawing insights from psychology, education, anthropology, and feminist scholarship to engage with lived experience in situated and relational ways (Andreotti, 2011; Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000).

This interdisciplinary orientation emerged from a recognition that no single discipline could adequately address the complexity of intercultural relations, identity, and power in early childhood contexts. Psychology offered tools for understanding meaning-making processes; anthropology provided methods for ethnographic attention and cultural interpretation; feminist and decolonial approaches foregrounded reflexivity, care, and accountability as central to the ethics of inquiry (Crenshaw, 1989; Mohanty, 2005; Walsh, 2005).

Within this framework, narrative methodologies became the connective thread linking theory and practice. Rather than using stories as data to be analysed, I approached storytelling as a dialogical and participatory process—one that foregrounded co-presence, mutual listening, and shared authorship. The methods used in this dissertation, such as *Tree of Life*, *Life Storylines*, and *Maps of History*, were chosen for their capacity to create spaces where participants could articulate experiences of migration, belonging, and professional identity in their own words. These tools allowed participants to re-author their experiences collectively, moving beyond deficit-based discourses toward stories of connection, resilience, and transformation (White & Denborough, 2005; Lykes et al., 2003).

From a methodological standpoint, narrative work required a shift from extraction to collaboration. Interviews, observations, and workshops were conceived not as means to gather information but as encounters of mutual learning. This involved careful attention to the dynamics of power, emotion, and vulnerability—particularly when working with educators navigating institutional hierarchies or families living precarious migration trajectories. Ethical reflexivity and responsiveness were therefore embedded in each stage of the process: from the design of activities to the interpretation and restitution of findings (Tracy, 2010; Freire, 1970).

Finally, the interdisciplinary nature of this approach also shaped how analysis and writing were conducted. Data were not treated as isolated narratives but as relational texts situated within broader socio-political discourses. Combining psychological insight, sociological sensitivity, and critical theory allowed me to hold together different scales of meaning—from the intimate to the structural, from the personal to the political.

In this sense, the interdisciplinary and narrative orientation of this research represents more than a methodological choice: it is an ethical stance. It seeks to honour complexity, to listen without appropriation, and to engage with participants not as subjects of study but as co-authors of situated

knowledge. This approach affirms that research, especially in intercultural settings, is not only about describing realities but also about participating in their ongoing transformation.

7. The research fieldwork

The empirical field of this research is rooted in the municipal early childhood education services (ECE) of the city of Genoa, in Northwest Italy. As a Mediterranean port city with a long history of migration and cultural exchange, Genoa offers a complex social landscape marked by deep spatial and socioeconomic contrasts (Rosasco & Sdino, 2022). Within this context, the 0–6 education system—comprising nurseries (0–3), spring sections (24–36 months), and preschools (3–6)—represents a crucial public space where questions of interculturality, inclusion, and social justice take everyday form (MIUR, 2024).

The study was conducted within the network of public ECE services managed by the Municipality of Genoa. The system includes municipal and state-managed institutions, and educators are required to hold a university degree in Education or Primary Education Sciences—a relatively recent professionalization process established in 2003. Despite this formal homogeneity, the local system reflects the broader national tension between universal access and social inequality, with schools in under-resourced neighbourhoods facing disproportionate challenges.

The fieldwork unfolded through a multi-phased mixed-methods design, gradually moving from breadth to depth. The initial quantitative phase mapped intercultural competences and educator well-being across the municipal system through a structured survey administered to all educators in public nurseries and preschools. This provided a panoramic understanding of how interculturality was conceptualized and practiced within the system, revealing both strengths and areas of tension.

Building on these findings, the qualitative phases deepened the inquiry within two selected schools—a nursery and a preschool—located in socio-culturally dense and materially constrained neighbourhoods. These schools were chosen not only for their demographic diversity but also for their teams' willingness to engage in reflective and collaborative research processes. Over six months of field presence, I participated in daily school life and facilitated collective reflection through interviews, workshops, and collective narrative practices such as the Tree of Life and Maps of History. These encounters transformed the schools from sites of data collection into spaces of dialogue and co-construction. Educators and parents—many of migrant backgrounds—shared stories that challenged deficit-based narratives and illuminated the affective and relational labour underpinning intercultural practice. Through these stories, systemic contradictions became visible: between institutional ideals of inclusion and the material conditions that often undermine them.

In this sense, the research field cannot be reduced to a geographical or institutional setting. It was a relational and epistemic space, shaped by multiple scales of engagement—from macro-level policy frameworks to micro-level everyday practices of care and negotiation. By foregrounding the lived

experiences of educators and parents, the fieldwork redefined participation not as a methodological tool but as an ongoing process of recognition, accountability, and shared meaning-making.

8. Migration and interculturality in education: a contextual analysis of Italy

To understand the dynamics explored in this research, it is crucial to begin with a snapshot of Italy's demographic and migratory landscape. To ground this research in a reliable empirical framework, I refer primarily to the *30th ISMU Migration Report* (ISMU, 2025), which provides one of the most comprehensive and long-standing data collections on migration in Italy. Published annually by the ISMU Foundation (Initiatives and Studies on Multiethnicity), these reports offer detailed, interdisciplinary analyses of migratory flows, demographic trends, policy developments, and integration processes within the Italian and European contexts. Although the 30th edition was published in early 2025, the data and analyses it contains refer to the year 2024. This aligns with the temporal scope of this research, whose fieldwork and theoretical development were carried out between 2023 and 2024. The ISMU report thus serves as a relevant and up-to-date reference for understanding the structural and statistical dynamics underpinning the Italian migration landscape during this period.

As of early 2024, Italy hosted approximately 5.25 million foreign residents, accounting for 8.9% of the total population (ISMU, 2025). When including those not formally registered, the overall number of foreign nationals in the country approaches six million. This presence, however, is not static: it reflects both long-term processes of settlement and new, often precarious arrivals.

The most significant trend over recent years has been the growing stabilization of the migrant population. While the number of undocumented individuals has steadily declined—falling to just over 300,000—there has been a marked increase in long-term residents and naturalized citizens. In 2023 alone, over 214,000 individuals acquired Italian citizenship, primarily from non-EU countries (ISMU, 2025). This shift signals a move beyond mere presence toward deeper social entrenchment, with many migrants becoming formally recognized members of the national body.

Despite public narratives framing immigration as a recent or exceptional event, Italy has been a country of immigration since the late 20th century. The country's migrant population is now multigenerational, comprising not only first-generation arrivals but also second- and even third-generation individuals—many of whom were born and raised in Italy, though often without full legal or social inclusion. Data from the 2021 census reveals that 12.4% of Italy's total population consists of individuals with migratory backgrounds, including foreign-born Italians and children of immigrants still classified as foreign nationals (ISMU, 2025).

In terms of legal status, more than 2.1 million non-EU nationals now hold long-term residence permits, a status that often precedes naturalization (ISMU, 2025). However, this apparent consolidation contrasts with Italy's declining capacity to attract and retain new migrants. Entry flows for work and study have fallen sharply in recent years, while most recent arrivals enter for family

reunification or humanitarian protection, particularly in response to crises such as the war in Ukraine. Moreover, fewer newcomers are settling permanently: data shows that only about a third of non-EU migrants who entered in 2016 still held valid residence permits five years later (ISMU, 2025).

This complex reality—marked by both stabilization and marginalization—lays bare the contradictions at the heart of the Italian migration regime. Migration is no longer a transient or peripheral phenomenon. It is a structural feature of Italian society, central to its demographic renewal, labor market sustainability, and social transformation. Yet, as the following analysis explores, this presence has not been matched by coherent or inclusive institutional responses. Rather, migrants often remain suspended in legal and social liminality—welcomed in numbers but denied full belonging.

8.1 The Italian political context in contemporary migration

Italy's relationship with migration is marked by enduring contradictions: while the country has long been shaped by human mobility—historically as a nation of emigration and, since the late 20th century, as one of arrival (Ambrosini, 2018)—its institutional and political responses remain fragmented, reactive, and often exclusionary. Migration has frequently been addressed through emergency frameworks centered on control and security rather than inclusion and justice (Campesi, 2011). From the restrictive Turco-Napolitano (1998) and Bossi-Fini (2002) laws to the Minniti-Orlando decree (2017), the legislative landscape has consistently framed migration as a problem to be managed, reinforcing precariousness and conditional belonging (Perocco, 2021).

Under successive governments, securitarian logics have persisted. The Conte I administration (2018–2019) introduced the Security Decrees, narrowing humanitarian protection and dismantling the SPRAR system; later revisions under Conte II and Draghi softened but did not overturn these measures. The Meloni government (from 2022) has intensified deterrence policies, positioning migration as a threat to national sovereignty. The 2023 Italy–Albania agreement exemplifies this trajectory: by establishing migrant reception centers under Italian jurisdiction on Albanian soil, it externalizes asylum procedures and accountability, raising concerns about legal transparency and human rights (Amnesty International, 2024; ASGI, 2025; UNHCR, 2024a).

Public narratives—shaped by media sensationalism and political rhetoric—have further fueled the racialization and criminalization of migration (Giuliani & Riva, 2013). Migrants, particularly racialized ones, are often portrayed as either threats or victims, rarely as rights-bearing subjects. Italy's unresolved colonial past sustains this dynamic, fostering a national identity that obscures its complicity in global hierarchies of race and capital (Lombardi-Diop, 2012; Vergès et al., 2021).

Despite these discursive and legal barriers, migration remains a structural reality of Italian society. In 2024, ISTAT recorded 382,000 new immigrants and over 155,000 emigrants—the highest emigration rate in a decade—while foreign residents accounted for 8.9% of the total population. Italy also hosts

more than 306,000 recognized refugees and 180,000 asylum seekers (ISMU, 2025; UNHCR, 2024b). These figures reveal an enduring paradox: migrants are indispensable to Italy's demographic, economic, and social fabric, yet their participation remains systematically restricted (Ambrosini, 2005; Cvajner, 2014).

This exclusion is not merely attitudinal but institutional. Migration law operates as a structuring device that shapes bureaucratic practices and professional cultures. Through frameworks such as Bossi-Fini and Minniti-Orlando, emergency governance has been normalized, embedding logics of surveillance, containment, and speed across public institutions (Campesi, 2018). As a result, administrative systems—from immigration offices to schools—often prioritize procedural efficiency over inclusion and equity, internalizing legal and symbolic hierarchies that define who belongs and on what terms (Foucault, 2007; Cvajner, 2014).

Within this landscape, interculturality cannot be treated as a neutral pedagogical task. It must be understood as a political and ethical practice that engages with the legacies of colonial amnesia, racialized belonging, and structural exclusion. Intercultural education, in this sense, is not about managing diversity but about transforming the power relations that determine whose knowledge, values, and experiences are legitimized in public life (Lombardi-Diop, 2012; Vergès et al., 2021).

The implications extend beyond education. Schools, healthcare systems, and municipal institutions each participate in shaping the social imagination of migration—sometimes reinforcing inequality, sometimes opening spaces for dialogue and change. Addressing migration, therefore, requires more than legislative reform: it calls for dismantling the institutional and cultural logics that sustain exclusion and for cultivating practices of recognition, participation, and justice.

8.2 Migrant-background students in Italy: From visibility to participation in a changing educational landscape

Over the last two decades, the Italian education system has been profoundly reshaped by the increasing and structural presence of students with a migrant background. This demographic transformation has not only altered classroom composition nationwide, but has also triggered deeper reflections on the meaning of national identity, citizenship, and belonging within educational spaces. In response to this ongoing shift, the ISMU Foundation (Initiatives and Studies on Multiethnicity) dedicated four consecutive annual reports between 2019 and 2022 to exploring the complex relationship between migration and education. These reports, through a mix of statistical data, policy analysis, and local case studies, have mapped a trajectory of evolving awareness—tracing the journey from an initial focus on inequality and marginalization, to the recognition of migrant-background students as active and capable agents within the school system.

As of the 2020/2021 academic year, there were 865,388 students with non-Italian citizenship enrolled in Italian schools, accounting for 10.3% of the total student population. However, this figure masks the actual diversity within schools, excluding naturalized citizens and Italian-born children of foreign parents who are still formally classified as non-citizens. In fact, 65.3% of non-Italian students were born in Italy, underscoring the growing prominence of the second generation and challenging the outdated narrative that frames migrant students solely as recent arrivals. These students are not exceptions at the margins—they are embedded within the daily fabric of Italian schools and increasingly represent its future.

The 2019 ISMU report, *Emergenze e traguardi* ("Emergencies and Achievements"), laid the groundwork for this broader reflection. It advocated for moving beyond emergency-driven framings of migration, calling instead for a structural approach that recognizes how systemic inequality shapes educational trajectories (ISMU, 2019). The report highlighted two pressing issues: high rates of school dropout and academic failure among newly arrived students, and a lack of institutional acknowledgment for the aspirations and skills of second-generation youth. Despite these challenges, the report documented remarkable cases of resilience and adaptability, suggesting that success is possible when adequate support mechanisms are in place.

Expanding on this, the 2020 report, *Le opportunità oltre gli ostacoli* ("Opportunities Beyond Barriers"), turned the spotlight toward the institutional and territorial dynamics that perpetuate inequality (ISMU, 2020). It critiqued practices such as social and territorial segregation, biased tracking into vocational education, and low expectations from educators. Significantly, it reframed the problem: educational disadvantage was not simply the result of linguistic or cultural difference, but of the system's failure to see diversity as a strength. However, the report also surfaced examples of effective practice—from intercultural educator training to community-school collaboration—demonstrating that institutional change is both necessary and possible.

By 2021, the report *Generazioni competenti* ("Competent Generations") marked a rhetorical and analytical shift. Rather than centering on disadvantage, it highlighted the accomplishments of migrant-background students, particularly "top performers" who excel academically despite adversity (ISMU, 2021). These students' success—especially in STEM fields and multilingual competencies—disrupts deficit-based narratives and illustrates the richness of transnational experience. The report advocated a strengths-based perspective and recognized cultural hybridity as a resource. Still, it warned that such achievements often occur in spite of, rather than thanks to, the education system—emphasizing the need for systemic change that enables all students to thrive, not just the exceptionally resilient.

In 2022, the final report in the series, *Dalle disuguaglianze alle strategie di partecipazione* ("From Inequality to Strategies of Participation"), broadened its lens to examine the role of families, communities, and local governance (ISMU, 2022). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it drew attention to how digital exclusion, housing precarity, and legal instability deepened educational inequality. Crucially, the report repositioned migrant families not as passive recipients of institutional support, but as co-constructors of educational practices. It promoted a vision of schools as democratic and participatory spaces, where interculturality must be structurally embedded—not treated as an optional add-on.

Taken together, these four reports articulate a clear progression—from risk to recognition, from marginality to agency, and from passive inclusion to active participation. Throughout, a consistent message emerges: students with a migrant background are not a peripheral population to be accommodated, but integral protagonists in Italy's educational future. Their presence necessitates a profound rethinking of pedagogical practices, institutional design, and cultural assumptions.

Beyond ISMU's longitudinal reports, which trace the structural evolution from marginalization to participation, a rich and convergent body of academic research has delved into the everyday realities of migrant-background students in Italian schools. This scholarship highlights, first, the persistence of educational inequalities but also the diverse strategies of success mobilized by students who achieve despite adversity. Qualitative narratives document how young people draw on transnational biographies, bilingual repertoires, and family aspirations to construct pathways of resilience and achievement (Santagati, 2021; Triventi et al., 2021; Azzolini et al., 2019).

Second, studies underscore the strong distributional bias of school tracking. At the first upper-secondary transition, migrant-origin students are disproportionately directed toward vocational programs. Here, educator guidance and expectations play a decisive role, often reflecting implicit biases about language ability, parental involvement, or "cultural fit" (Bonizzoni et al., 2016; Aktaş et al., 2022; Barban & White, 2011).

Third, while Italy is internationally recognized for its commitment to intercultural education, the literature shows that this framework alone is insufficient to dismantle structural discrimination. Intercultural projects, though valuable, are too often episodic and concentrated in high-density migrant schools, leaving systemic inequalities unaddressed (Santagati & Bertozzi, 2023; Catarci, 2013).

Finally, research draws attention to the centrality of well-being, peer effects, and classroom diversity. Positive peer climates, inclusive language practices, and recognition of plurilingual resources significantly influence both social integration and academic outcomes, though with variations

depending on school context and generational status (Contini, 2013; Ambrosetti et al., 2022; Fedeli & Triventi, 2023; Alivernini et al., 2019; Biasutti & Concina, 2021).

Taken together, these strands of scholarship complement ISMU's macro-level insights by illuminating the micro-level mechanisms through which disadvantage is reproduced, but also by showcasing the conditions under which migrant-background students succeed and reshape the school system from within.

The 30th ISMU Migration Report (2025), offers an updated portrait of migrant-background students using data from the 2023/2024 school year. According to the report, 826,110 students with non-Italian citizenship were enrolled in Italian schools, comprising 9.7% of the total student body. Among them, 65.9% were born in Italy—further reinforcing the permanence and rootedness of this population (ISMU Foundation, 2025). However, the report also reveals persistent disparities: students with migrant backgrounds are concentrated in specific urban areas such as Milan, Brescia, and Prato, often exceeding 15% of local school populations. At the upper secondary level, only 26.4% attend academic *licei*, compared to 48.1% of their Italian peers, while 44.6% are funneled into vocational tracks—over twice the rate of Italians in the same pathway. These patterns reflect broader structural inequalities that begin early and extend across educational transitions.

Beyond enrollment statistics, the ISMU report points to significant gaps in academic outcomes, especially in standardized testing and language proficiency. First-generation students struggle most, though second-generation youth also lag behind the national average. Alarmingly, early school leaving remains disproportionately high—18.5% among non-Italian students versus 10.5% for Italian nationals. The report identifies language support as a crucial factor, noting the scarcity of structured L2 programs and the fragmentation of intercultural education, which is often relegated to short-term projects rather than embedded in curricula or educator training.

Legal status further compounds educational vulnerability. Students from families with undocumented or precarious residency face numerous barriers, from inconsistent school attendance to limited digital access and exclusion from civic participation. The report urges a shift from a conditional model of access—based on documentation—to one anchored in the universal right to education, irrespective of legal status.

In addressing these systemic issues, ISMU proposes a set of urgent policy recommendations: the development of a comprehensive national plan for inclusive education; expanded investment in early childhood education as a preventive and equity-promoting measure; sustained intercultural educator training; and the construction of territorial "educational ecosystems" that bring together schools, families, municipalities, and civil society. These interventions are not just programmatic—they represent a call to reconceive the very foundations of the Italian school system.

Ultimately, the ISMU reports—past and present—make clear that inclusion cannot be episodic or project-based. It must be embedded as a structural and political commitment, rooted in the recognition that diversity is not a challenge to be managed but an asset to be cultivated. In this light, intercultural education becomes central to educational reform, not only as a pedagogical approach but as a framework for democratic participation and shared citizenship. The future of Italian schools, the reports argue, will depend on their ability to embrace this pluralism—not as an exception, but as their defining condition.

Building on these systemic patterns, research shows how tracking mechanisms in Italy transform small early disadvantages into more enduring forms of stratification at the upper-secondary level. While the ISMU data reveal a strong concentration of migrant-background students in vocational tracks, qualitative and quantitative studies clarify *why* this occurs. Educator recommendations and guidance practices, often filtered through implicit assumptions about linguistic proficiency, family capital, or cultural "fit," heavily influence pathway allocation and tend to reproduce inequality, with migrant-origin youth disproportionately steered away from academic licei (Bonizzoni et al., 2016; Aktaş et al., 2022; Barban & White, 2011).

Yet the same literature also documents countervailing trajectories of success. Some students manage to turn structural disadvantages into opportunities by leveraging bilingual repertoires, transnational experiences, and strong alliances between schools and families. These assets are particularly evident in STEM fields and in language-rich curricula, where cultural hybridity can become a source of resilience and excellence (Santagati, 2021; Azzolini et al., 2019).

Taken together, these findings point to a dual imperative. On one side, equity safeguards are needed within guidance systems to counteract bias and ensure fair access to academic tracks. On the other, education policies must recognize and actively scaffold the resources that many migrant-background students already mobilize, transforming what is currently exceptional resilience into a more broadly supported pathway for accomplishment and determination. These empirical dynamics, while highlighting patterns of persistence and change, raise crucial questions about how national education policies and intercultural frameworks have responded—or failed to respond—to such transformations. The following section explores this policy dimension in depth.

8.3 Early childhood education as a structural lever for educational equity

The 30th ISMU Migration Report (ISMU Foundation, 2025) identifies early childhood education (ECE) as one of the most critical and overlooked frontiers in addressing long-standing educational inequalities affecting children with migrant backgrounds. The report underscores that the first years of life—particularly the 0–3 age range—are foundational for cognitive, emotional, linguistic, and relational development. These early stages represent not only a period of profound human growth but

also a strategic window of opportunity to interrupt intergenerational cycles of disadvantage before they take root. In this light, equitable access to high-quality ECE emerges not as a supplemental benefit, but as a structural necessity—a basic prerequisite for ensuring equal starting conditions for all children, regardless of origin, legal status, or socioeconomic background.

Despite this evidence, the ISMU report reveals a persistent underrepresentation of children from migrant families in Italy's nursery and preschool systems. This disparity is the result of intersecting barriers—structural, administrative, and cultural. Structurally, many municipalities, especially in southern regions and urban peripheries, suffer from a scarcity of public nursery services, making access difficult for all families but disproportionately impacting newcomers with limited financial resources and weaker social networks. Administratively, the bureaucratic complexity of enrollment processes—often requiring formal residency, identity documentation, or legal status—can become insurmountable for families living in conditions of legal precarity. Culturally, some migrant parents may lack familiarity with Italy's early education model or perceive it as economically inaccessible or socially unwelcoming, especially in the absence of linguistically and culturally accessible outreach.

This exclusion, the report warns, is far from neutral. Without early educational intervention, migrant-background children face delays in Italian language acquisition, limited opportunities for early social integration, and a higher risk of academic difficulty and school disengagement in later years. This aligns with earlier ISMU findings (ISMU, 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022), which have repeatedly pointed to the compounding effect of early exclusion, setting the stage for later disparities in standardized assessments, school tracking, and dropout rates. In this sense, early education is the first node in a chain of systemic disadvantage—but also the most strategic point for policy intervention. Ensuring robust and inclusive early years education is not only a matter of equity, but also of educational efficiency and social cohesion.

In response, the ISMU Foundation calls for strategic public investment in ECE infrastructure, especially in areas with high migrant density and socioeconomic vulnerability. But expanding availability is not enough. The report emphasizes the need for an intercultural transformation of early years services. This includes comprehensive educator training in linguistic and cultural diversity, pedagogical models that affirm multiple identities, and co-designed partnerships with families, based on mutual trust and recognition. Crucially, the report reframes early education not merely as preparation for formal schooling, but as the first institutional encounter between migrant families and the state—a space where belonging, citizenship, and inclusion begin to be shaped.

Finally, ISMU situates this call within a broader civic and political frame: investing in ECE is a democratic imperative. It signals a commitment to building a school system—and a society—that does not reproduce inequality but actively works to dismantle it from the earliest stages of life.

Without such a shift, Italy risks reinforcing invisible barriers for a new generation, denying both their potential and the collective opportunity to create a more inclusive future.

8.4 Intercultural processes, practices and policies in the Italian educational system

Building on the ISMU findings presented above, this section shifts the focus from the statistical and sociological dimensions of migration to the policy framework that regulates intercultural education in Italy—particularly its translation into practice within early childhood education.

The persistent gap between official discourses and lived realities is a defining feature of how migration is governed in Italy—legally, politically, and institutionally. Despite policy declarations that promote inclusion, participation, and diversity, the actual implementation of these principles often falls short, revealing a structural disconnection between normative intentions and concrete practices. This discrepancy is not limited to the broader socio-political sphere; it is acutely visible in the domain of education, and particularly within early childhood education (ECE). Here, interculturality is frequently endorsed as a guiding value, yet rarely materialized in sustained, systemic ways. What emerges, therefore, is a form of symbolic alignment without operational coherence—a situation where intercultural education is formally recognized but remains uneven, fragmented, and dependent on individual initiative or local experimentation rather than embedded in institutional structures.

Interculturality within the Italian educational system is shaped by a complex interplay of historical, legal, and cultural factors. Since the early 1990s, Italy has witnessed an increasing diversification of its school population due to the rise in international migration. This demographic transformation has challenged the education system to address the needs of a multicultural student body while redefining its own pedagogical and institutional assumptions (MIUR, 2021). Schools have thus become key arenas where broader social dynamics around migration, identity, and citizenship are negotiated and reflected (Ambrosini, 2014; Cvajner, 2012).

Despite the country's relatively recent engagement with large-scale migration, several institutional steps have been taken to promote intercultural education. A pivotal moment came in 2007 with the publication of the *Guidelines for Intercultural Education* (*La via italiana per la scuola interculturale e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri*), which laid the foundation for a model grounded in reciprocity, inclusion, and the recognition of plural identities. These Guidelines rejected both assimilationist and multiculturalist approaches, instead advancing interculturality as a transformative pedagogical and ethical practice centered on dialogue, co-responsibility, and critical engagement with diversity. However, as Zanfrini (2016) notes, the application of these principles has remained inconsistent, often lacking structural investment, monitoring, and coordination.

In response to ongoing demographic shifts and the evolving complexity of school populations, the Ministry of Education released in 2014 a new set of *Guidelines for the Reception and Integration of Foreign Students*. These updated provisions sought to operationalize inclusion by providing concrete tools for school leaders and educators—such as enrollment procedures, linguistic support frameworks, personalized assessment strategies, and orientation paths tailored to newly arrived students. Emphasizing the importance of Italian as a second language (L2), the document promoted plurilingualism and cultural mediation as assets rather than deficits, framing them as integral to an inclusive school culture (MIUR, 2014). These Guidelines also stressed the need to prevent educational marginalization by focusing on regular school attendance, smooth transitions between school levels, and coordinated guidance processes.

Building on these prior efforts, the 2022 *Intercultural Guidelines* marked a renewed institutional commitment to systemic change. Structured in three parts, this document expanded the focus to encompass students from migratory contexts across all educational levels, including early childhood education. It reinforced the principles of the 2007 and 2014 texts, while advancing a more comprehensive and strategic framework that calls for action at every level of the school system. These Guidelines underscore the value of linguistic and cultural diversity, the need for continuous professional development in intercultural competence, and the importance of fostering collaborative governance between schools, local institutions, and communities (MIUR, 2022). They also propose a vision of the school not as a neutral space but as an active site for constructing democratic coexistence and social justice.

Despite the progressive vision articulated in the 2007, 2014, and 2022 Intercultural Guidelines, the literature consistently identifies a normative–operational gap between principles and practice. Intercultural initiatives are most visible in schools with high concentrations of migrant-background students, where they often take the form of projects and pilot schemes rather than systemic reforms. As a result, they rarely challenge the deeper structural barriers that sustain inequality, such as biased tracking processes, unequal allocation of resources, and assessment regimes that privilege monolingual norms (Santagati & Bertozzi, 2023). Earlier analyses had already warned that interculturality risks sliding into symbolic or celebratory practices—episodic, externally funded, and dependent on the commitment of individual educators—rather than functioning as an institutional principle embedded in curricula, educator professional development, and leadership strategies (Catarci, 2013).

Bridging this gap requires a shift in orientation: from treating diversity as an occasion for cultural celebration to addressing it as a matter of redistributive justice. This means embedding accountability for inclusion into mainstream evaluation, resource distribution, and policy monitoring, so that

interculturality is no longer confined to the margins of school innovation but becomes a structural dimension of educational quality and equity.

Yet, despite the normative richness of these documents, intercultural education in Italy still largely relies on individual school initiatives or the commitment of particularly motivated educators. The systemic integration of intercultural pedagogies remains weak, hindered by structural barriers such as insufficient resources, fragmented territorial implementation, and the absence of a long-term national strategy (Pastori et al., 2022; Gobbo et al., 2011). Moreover, as Giuliani and Riva (2021), and Lombardi-Diop and Romeo (2012) have shown, broader cultural narratives—including persistent racialized imaginaries and the denial of Italy's colonial past—continue to shape both institutional cultures and classroom interactions in ways that undermine genuine inclusion.

In conclusion, while Italy has made significant formal progress in defining an intercultural educational framework—through key documents such as the 2007 Guidelines, the 2014 operational update, and the strategic 2022 Orientamenti—the practical realization of these principles remains partial and fragmented. The challenge ahead lies in translating these normative visions into everyday school practices capable of dismantling exclusionary logics and building truly inclusive, plural, and democratic educational environments.

The next subsection takes this discussion further by examining how these national principles are—or fail to be—translated into practice within early childhood education, where the foundations of inclusion, belonging, and recognition are first laid.

8.5 Interculturality in Early Childhood Education (ECE)

Early childhood education (ECE) in Italy offers a critical yet underexplored lens through which to examine the practical implementation of intercultural principles. While interculturality has been formally recognized as a guiding value in national policy, its presence within the 0–6 sector remains fragile, often overshadowed by other priorities or subsumed within generic narratives of inclusion. Yet nurseries and preschools (*nidi* and *scuole dell'infanzia*) represent not only children's first point of contact with public institutions, but also a foundational stage where early experiences of difference, recognition, and belonging begin to form (MIUR, 2021).

Although the Italian ECE tradition—particularly in contexts influenced by relational pedagogies such as those developed in Reggio Emilia—emphasizes child-centeredness, participation, and care, this has not automatically translated into structurally embedded intercultural practices. As noted by Pastori et al. (2022) and Gobbo et al. (2011), intercultural education at this level is often left to local experimentation or the goodwill of individual educators, with little systemic coordination or institutional support. Where available, intercultural training tends to be optional, generic, and limited

in scope, rarely tackling deeper issues such as cultural identity, racialization, or power dynamics in early childhood contexts.

This gap between pedagogical ethos and practical implementation has been partially acknowledged in policy documents such as the *2014 Guidelines for the Reception and Integration of Foreign Students*, and more recently the *2022 Intercultural Guidelines*, which explicitly extend their remit to services for children aged 0–6. These texts call for culturally responsive curricula, recognition of linguistic diversity from early on, and a redefinition of the school–family relationship that acknowledges the agency and diversity of migrant caregivers (MIUR, 2014; MIUR, 2022). Nonetheless, their application has often remained declarative, without significant translation into material or organizational change.

Recent research on well-being, peer relations, and early learning underscores why interculturality in the 0–6 sector cannot be treated as an afterthought. Nurseries and preschools that intentionally cultivate positive peer climates, provide structured opportunities for language mediation, and actively value plurilingual repertoires generate measurable improvements in children's sense of belonging and cognitive development. These effects are particularly significant for migrant-background children, for whom early experiences of recognition or exclusion set the tone for later educational trajectories (Contini, 2013; Ambrosetti et al., 2022; Fedeli & Triventi, 2023; Alivernini et al., 2019).

At the same time, local and place-based studies reveal the practical pathways through which interculturality can be embedded in early education. Initiatives that connect pedagogy with family engagement and municipal services—such as intercultural mediation, community-based language projects, and inclusive outdoor education—demonstrate how territorially rooted approaches can mitigate early disadvantage and foster long-term equity (Biasutti & Concina, 2021; Natalini, 2024).

The policy implication is clear: interculturality in ECE must be conceived as an early, systemic, and territorially grounded intervention, rather than as optional enrichment. Because disadvantages accumulate rapidly from the earliest years, structurally embedding these practices in the 0–6 sector represents the most cost-effective and equity-promoting strategy for breaking cycles of exclusion later in schooling.

At the same time, inequalities in access and investment persist. Children from migrant families—especially those in southern Italy, in peripheral urban areas, or in economically precarious conditions—face compounded disadvantages in accessing high-quality early years services (Ambrosini, 2014; Cvajner, 2012). Moreover, dominant institutional discourses often continue to frame migrant families through a lens of deficit, unfamiliarity, or "cultural distance," rather than as holders of valid pedagogical knowledge or parenting practices (Giuliani & Riva, 2021; Lombardi-Diop & Romeo, 2012).

Research highlights how these frames produce subtle but impactful forms of symbolic exclusion, which can affect children's sense of legitimacy and belonging from the very beginning of their educational journey. Interculturality, therefore, cannot be reduced to surface-level adaptations or festive multicultural events. As Caponio and Donatiello (2017) argue, it is not a neutral or technical concept, but a contested terrain shaped by affect, politics, and institutional culture. The ECE sector exemplifies this ambivalence: full of pedagogical potential, yet constrained by structural inertia and a still insufficient recognition of cultural diversity as an asset.

Furthermore, while recent literature has highlighted the value of narrative-based approaches for fostering intercultural dialogue in ECE—especially through storytelling practices that support identity exploration and language development (Pittaluga, 2020)—a deeper issue remains largely unaddressed. As argued by Santagati (2025) in the 30th ISMU Migration Report, the intercultural project in early education risks being trapped in a technical, practice-based focus. Rather than rethinking the educational paradigm itself, many initiatives simply layer intercultural strategies onto existing structures, without interrogating the systemic roots of inequality.

This concern is echoed by Agostinetto, Bugno, and Moretto (2023), who emphasize the need to realign intercultural education with the real issues facing contemporary families and educators—not simply ethnic or linguistic difference, but housing insecurity, social fragmentation, and rising educational poverty. They caution against framing interculturality as a symbolic or ethical adornment, detached from material concerns and institutional transformation. In this sense, the problem is not the absence of intercultural practices, but their depoliticization and misalignment with the “real problems” of educational justice.

In conclusion, intercultural education in the 0–6 sector must be reimagined not as a technical tool, but as a critical, transformative practice rooted in structural change. It requires a paradigm shift that moves beyond superficial inclusion toward the co-construction of pedagogical and institutional models capable of engaging with diversity as a constitutive element of education itself. Without this shift—as Santagati (2025) notes—interculturality risks remaining peripheral, its transformative potential reduced to a series of fragmented good practices rather than a coherent strategy for educational equity.

Taken together, ISMU’s longitudinal evidence and the Italian scholarly literature depict an education system at a critical inflection point. On one side, stabilization processes, naturalizations, and the growth of the second generation make migrant-background students constitutive—not exceptional—actors within Italian schooling. On the other, persistent stratification, the partial and project-based enactment of intercultural principles, and uneven access to early childhood education keep opportunity structures fragile and unequal.

9. Ethical considerations and linguistic note

9.1 Ethics and situated praxis

The studies included in this doctoral dissertation fully comply with the ethical standards outlined in the American Psychological Association's (APA) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 2017). Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Genoa (approval number N. 2023/53, dated 13/07/2023), confirming adherence to institutional and disciplinary guidelines. This formal validation ensures the research's methodological integrity and transparency.

Yet, in the lived reality of fieldwork, ethics extends far beyond the procedural act of obtaining approval. While institutional clearance is essential, it represents only one layer of a broader ethical landscape—one grounded in relationships, trust, and ongoing dialogue with participants. Ethics, in this sense, is not a fixed checkpoint but a continuous, situated praxis: it unfolds through attentiveness, reciprocity, and accountability to those whose experiences inform the study (Lykes, Blanche, & Hamber, 2003; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

The research was conducted in collaboration with the Municipality of Genoa. During the quantitative phase, all educators working in municipal early childhood services received detailed information about the study's aims, their rights, and the anonymity of their responses. Participation was voluntary, no sensitive personal data were collected, and results were presented in aggregate form to protect confidentiality.

In the qualitative phase—carried out in two early childhood institutions, a nursery and a preschool—particular attention was paid to relational ethics. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, including educators, staff members, and the parents of migrant children. Consent, however, was not treated as a one-off event but as an evolving, dialogical process: participants were regularly reminded of their right to withdraw, modify, or anonymize their contributions at any stage (Tracy, 2010; White & Denborough, 2005).

Ethical reflexivity became especially significant in the qualitative stages of the research. As a white, Italian, university-affiliated researcher entering the everyday spaces of schools—contexts often characterized by institutional fatigue, precarious employment, and unacknowledged emotional labour—I was acutely aware of the asymmetries of power embedded in each encounter (hooks, 2000; Loadenthal, 2019). These asymmetries were not limited to the researcher–participant relationship but were also internal to the school system itself. Hierarchical tensions existed between educators, assistants, outsourced support workers, and leadership teams. Many participants faced systemic disempowerment—low wages, instability, and limited recognition in decision-making processes (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000). Acknowledging vulnerability as a structural rather than individual

condition was therefore central to maintaining an ethical stance (Lorde, 1984; Montero & Sonn, 2009).

Given the participatory and narrative orientation of the later phases, ethics also became a matter of co-presence and shared responsibility. Stories were not collected but co-constructed, requiring careful negotiation around voice, authorship, and representation (White & Epston, 1990; White & Denborough, 2014). Anonymity was ensured through pseudonyms in all publications; nonetheless, as identities were often recognizable within institutional contexts, decisions regarding how stories were represented were made in continuous consultation with participants.

Ethical engagement was inseparable from my epistemological and political positioning. As discussed in Chapter 3, I adopted a decolonial and anti-racist stance that rejects claims of neutrality in the face of injustice. This commitment had tangible ethical implications, including my decision to adhere to the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) academic and cultural boycott and to refrain from citing scholars affiliated with Israeli institutions, as an act of solidarity with the Palestinian people (PACBI, 2014; Albanese, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2021). While such decisions may be contested in conventional academic contexts, I view them as an ethical refusal of complicity in systemic and epistemic violence (Fanon, 1963; Mohanty, 2005; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2020).

Finally, ethical responsibility extended to the dissemination of findings. Results were shared not only through academic outputs but also through restitutive moments—collective discussions, presentations in schools, and informal meetings—allowing participants to engage with, question, and reinterpret the findings on their own terms (Freire, 1970; White & Epston, 1990). In this way, ethics was enacted as a living, reciprocal practice—rooted in dialogue, situated accountability, and the continuous redefinition of what responsible research can mean.

9.2 Linguistic note

Given that this thesis is concerned with intercultural processes and the migratory experiences of parents and children, language was never a neutral medium, nor a purely technical choice. On the contrary, it became a central and contested element—both methodologically and ethically. Language is never just a tool of communication; it is a carrier of culture, symbolic power, and histories of domination and resistance (Andreotti, 2011; Reyes, 2011; Mignolo, 2020).

From the very beginning of this project, I was aware that writing in a dominant language reproduces, to some extent, the very hierarchies that intercultural and decolonial research aims to challenge. Italian, as the primary language of the researcher and the fieldwork context, initially seemed the most appropriate choice. It reflected the location of the study and allowed for a closer alignment with participants, institutions, and the socio-political context in which the research took place. I also considered incorporating a patchwork of languages (Daminelli, 2024), including excerpts in original

tongues—especially when quoting parents or referring to non-Italian authors—within the limits of my own linguistic comprehension.

However, this intention soon encountered a dilemma. Many of the people I engage with—both personally and professionally—do not speak Italian. Writing exclusively in Italian would have made this work inaccessible to international colleagues and scholars in the broader field of intercultural and critical psychology. I ultimately decided to write the thesis in English, fully aware of the contradiction this entails.

English is not my first language, nor is it neutral in this context. It dominates global academic discourse and, in doing so, often silences or marginalizes other voices and epistemologies (Said, 1977; Spivak, 1988). Yet, it is also the lingua franca of the academic communities I inhabit. Choosing English, therefore, was not a resolution of this contradiction, but a way to navigate it consciously, acknowledging the tensions and responsibilities that come with it.

Writing in English was, for me, an imperfect compromise: a strategic choice that enables accessibility and dialogue, while remaining haunted by the knowledge that no language choice is innocent. This note does not resolve the tension between linguistic accessibility and epistemic justice—it simply makes it visible (Mignolo, 2020; R'boul, 2022).

Part II – Empirical studies

10. Study I. The influence of intercultural sensitivity and competence on the well-being of early childhood education educators: a quantitative exploratory study in the Italian context.

10. 1 Introduction

Contemporary migration is a dynamic and progressively evolving global phenomenon, shaping societies where individuals are increasingly required to navigate interactions across diverse cultural backgrounds (Eslami-Rasekh & Ahmadvand, 2015). This phenomenon underscores the critical need to develop effective frameworks for fostering meaningful engagement among individuals from varied cultural contexts. Interculture, as conceptualized by Byram and Wagner (2018), refers to the dynamic process of promoting meaningful interactions and mutual understanding among individuals of different cultural heritages. This process is rooted in creating a space for dialogue that emphasizes relational cultural dynamics, enabling shared development and the collaborative construction of meaning. Central to this approach is the recognition that culture is not static but relational and co-constructed through interaction, with collaboration and exchange serving as foundational elements. Building on this theoretical perspective, scholars have extensively examined strategies to advance interculturality, often defined in terms of fostering intercultural dialogue (Martorana et al.,2021). This dialogue involves an open and respectful exchange between individuals and groups from diverse ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, rooted in mutual understanding and respect (Miculek, 2015). Further research has concentrated on identifying the intercultural competencies necessary for professionals to effectively facilitate these engagements. These competencies are seen as pivotal for ensuring that intercultural interactions are not only positive but also meaningful within the diverse social environments.

The existing body of literature addressing the complex field of intercultural competence has endeavored to dissect its multifaceted nature through the exploration of various theoretical models (Hoff, 2014). These models aim to provide structured insights into the intricate components, processes, and outcomes of effective intercultural interactions. As highlighted by Martorana et al. (2021), this rich diversity of frameworks offers important perspectives that contribute to a deeper understanding of interculturality and its practical applications. However, this abundance of theoretical models, while enriching the academic discourse, also introduces significant challenges to the field. The coexistence of multiple constructs and frameworks often creates a fragmented landscape, making it difficult to establish a unified approach or clear conceptual boundaries. This complexity is further compounded by the overlapping use of terminology and constructs, which can obscure distinctions

between related but distinct ideas. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) underscore this challenge, having identified over 300 terms and constructs associated with intercultural competence. Many of these terms are employed interchangeably, leading to conceptual ambiguity and making it challenging for researchers and practitioners to navigate the field. This is further supported by a recent literature review by Romijn and colleagues (2021), which highlighted the wide variability in definitions of educators' intercultural competences. Some scholars in the review associated IC with inclusive education, defining it as the ability to adapt perspectives and behaviors to cultural differences, grounded in intercultural sensitivity. Others described intercultural competence ad more broadly as readiness to teach in diverse settings or as adopting multicultural perspectives. In-service literature often framed IC in terms of culturally responsive teaching or intercultural sensitivity, while pre-service literature also incorporated perspectives from multicultural education and social justice education. Regarding intervention goals, in-service studies predominantly took a holistic approach, addressing educators' knowledge, skills, and belief systems. In contrast, pre-service studies tended to focus on combinations of knowledge and skills or skills and beliefs, with fewer addressing all three domains comprehensively (Romijn et al., 2021).This lack of standardization hinders the development of cohesive frameworks and complicates efforts to translate theoretical insights into practical strategies for fostering intercultural competence.

Among the numerous theoretical models of intercultural competence, Deardorff's conceptualization stands out as a pivotal contribution toward establishing consensus within the scholarly community. In 2006, Deardorff provided a succinct yet profound definition of intercultural competence as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural contexts by leveraging intercultural understanding, abilities, and mindset (Deardorff, 2006). This definition has become a foundational reference for subsequent research and discussions, offering a comprehensive framework for examining the dynamics of intercultural interactions. Delving deeper into Deardorff's model reveals the specific constructs that underpin intercultural competence, which are categorized into cognitive, behavioral, affective and relational dimensions. The cognitive dimension encompasses knowledge and awareness, including an understanding of cultural differences, sociolinguistic nuances, and one's own cultural identity. The behavioral dimension highlights practical skills such as adaptability and effective communication strategies that enable individuals to navigate intercultural interactions. The affective and relational dimensions are particularly emphasized, as they include attitudes such as openness, curiosity, and respect, alongside the ability to establish meaningful relationships across cultural boundaries. These dimensions are considered foundational, shaping an individual's willingness and ability to engage constructively in intercultural encounters (Deardorff, 2009). A key strength of Deardorff's model lies in its recognition of the dynamic and flexible nature

of intercultural competence. The model does not prescribe a linear progression but instead acknowledges that development may involve moments of stagnation or regression. Progression depends on the interplay of its components—attitudes, skills, knowledge, and relational capacities—and the extent to which these elements are integrated to produce effective communication and behaviour. While individuals may move directly from developing attitudes and skills to exhibiting appropriate external behaviours, the depth and comprehensiveness of their internal development ultimately determine the quality of both internal (e.g., perspective shifts, empathy) and external (e.g., observable communication, relational engagement) outcomes (Deardorff, 2006, 2009, 2011). Deardorff's model offers a flexible and inclusive framework that not only defines intercultural competence but also captures its multifaceted and evolving nature (Rokos, 2024) highlighting the interconnectedness of cognitive, affective, relational, and behavioural components (Zur, 2019).

In this study, we operationalize these concepts by integrating Chen and Starosta's (2000) model of intercultural sensitivity (IS) and Fantini's (2009) framework of intercultural competence (IC). Chen and Starosta's model emphasizes the relational abilities of individuals, focusing on their capacity to approach intercultural interactions with sensitivity and adaptability. This perspective highlights the affective and relational dimensions that facilitate effective engagement across cultural boundaries. Fantini's framework adopts a holistic approach, encompassing the cognitive, affective, and behavioural components essential for successful intercultural communication. Specifically, it integrates knowledge, attitudes, skills, and awareness as interrelated dimensions that collectively underpin intercultural competence (Tamam, 2010). By synthesizing these complementary models, our approach aims to illuminate the nuanced interplay of intercultural dynamics. This integration allows for a deeper and more comprehensive analysis of intercultural interactions, enriching both theoretical understanding and practical applications within the scholarly discourse. Additionally, in addressing the lack of clarity surrounding the discourse on intercultural competence, as highlighted by Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) and Romijn and colleagues (2021), I aim to provide a theoretical explanation that guided our selection of specific constructs and their operationalization. By doing so, I hope to contribute to the discourse by facilitating clearer communication and understanding of the dimensions and implications of intercultural competence in the context of this study.

IS and IC within early childhood educational educators

Early childhood education (ECE) educators—who work with children aged 0–3 years (e.g., nursery) and 3–6 years (e.g., preschool or kindergarten)—play a foundational role in fostering intercultural dialogue in educational environments. These educators serve as a critical connection point between families and the broader educational system. By establishing inclusive and respectful learning spaces, ECE educators help shape the societal values of tolerance, equity, and respect for diversity from an

early age (Fandakova & Hartley, 2020). Given that early childhood represents a formative stage for cognitive and emotional development, the values and attitudes instilled during this period have long-lasting impacts on children and the communities they will contribute to in the future. Research highlights that children in early childhood are already capable of recognizing differences in race and gender, forming early self-identity through these observations. This awareness contradicts the misconception that young children are free from biases. Instead, evidence shows that preschool-aged children begin to develop group-based emotions, forming positive attitudes toward their in-group and negative feelings toward out-groups. These biases, if unaddressed, can persist into later life, underscoring the importance of intentional efforts by ECE educators to counteract prejudice and foster inclusive thinking (Kim et al., 2023).

Neuroscientific studies further underscore the critical nature of this developmental period. The early years are marked by heightened neural plasticity, enabling children to readily acquire new knowledge and behaviors. This plasticity makes early childhood an ideal window for introducing intercultural education, as children are particularly receptive to learning diverse social and cultural frameworks during this time (Fandakova & Hartley, 2020). Educators who intentionally incorporate intercultural learning opportunities can profoundly influence children's behaviors and attitudes, promoting empathy, openness, and respect for diversity. Consequently, kindergarten-aged children represent an especially important demographic for intercultural education, with ECE educators playing a central role in shaping these early lessons (Kim et al., 2023). To create inclusive and nurturing environments, ECE educators require both intercultural competence (IC) and intercultural sensitivity (IS). Intercultural competence encompasses a wide range of skills, attitudes, and knowledge that enable educators to effectively engage with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. This competence empowers educators to adapt their practices to meet the varied needs of children and families, fostering an optimal learning environment for all. Intercultural sensitivity complements this by equipping educators with the ability to recognize, understand, and respond to the cultural nuances present in their daily interactions. This sensitivity enables educators to address the unique needs and experiences of diverse families empathetically and appropriately (Dejaeghere & Cao, 2009; Némethová, 2020; Norvilienė, 2014). Despite the critical importance of these attributes, there is a limited body of literature specifically analyzing this group of educators, particularly in terms of both their intercultural sensitivity and competencies and the strategies they employ to enhance their ability to work with children and families from diverse cultural backgrounds (Zhou, 2011; Alaei & Nosrati, 2018). A literature review conducted by Romjin and colleagues (2020) revealed that, for instance, professional development programs for educators primarily took place in primary education settings (65%) rather than in early childhood settings (22%). Similarly, interventions targeting student

educators were more often aimed at those preparing to work in primary education (59%) compared to those focused on early childhood settings (23%). These findings are confirmed also by Alaei and Nosrati (2018) which they analysed the essential role of intercultural competence in educational contexts, particularly within early childhood education. The authors argue that the formative years are critical for fostering inclusive attitudes and cross-cultural understanding among children. However, the study identifies a significant lack of research and professional development programs specifically tailored to equipping early childhood educators with the necessary intercultural skills. This gap limits the capacity of ECE educators to address cultural diversity effectively in their classrooms, leading to missed opportunities for creating inclusive learning environments. The authors advocate for systemic reforms in educator education programs to incorporate training that enables educators to integrate intercultural practices into early childhood settings.

An additional issue regarding professional development programs for ECE educators is their frequent lack of effectiveness, even when aimed at promoting intercultural competence. Romijn et al. (2020) highlight that such programs often fail because they are disconnected from the real-world contexts in which educators operate. Educators' practices are not shaped solely by their personal knowledge, skills, dispositions, and goals but are also heavily influenced by their colleagues, professional networks, school policies, and broader national discourses. This misalignment underscores the need for professional development initiatives to be contextually relevant and practically applicable, ensuring that educators can implement the strategies they learn in meaningful ways.

Relationship with intercultural sensitivity, intercultural competence and educator well-being

Intercultural competences, like other professional skills, are intrinsically connected to individuals' overall and job-related well-being (Khuja & Björkqvist, 2023). The effective application of these competences depends largely on one's psychological state, a factor particularly relevant in professions characterized by intense interpersonal interactions such as teaching (Martorana et al., 2021). Educators engage continuously with students and their families, and this dynamic becomes even more central in Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings, where strong relationships are foundational to educational success.

In such relationally demanding contexts, encounters with culturally diverse individuals—students, colleagues, or parents—require high levels of intercultural competence (IC). However, research indicates that possessing these competences alone does not ensure their effective use, underscoring the pivotal role of educators' well-being in enabling meaningful intercultural engagement. For instance, De Sousa (2022) found that educators with higher subjective well-being (SWB) tend to create more inclusive learning environments, promoting both academic success and cultural integration. Similarly, Jurásek and Wawrosz (2021) showed that job satisfaction enhances cultural

adaptability, while Zhang and Fathi (2023) emphasized that supportive school climates strengthen educators' psychological well-being and intercultural teaching capacities.

Conversely, intercultural competence itself can positively influence educators' psychological health. Educators with strong intercultural skills report lower stress, greater job satisfaction, and improved classroom management. Wang et al. (2020) demonstrated that psychological well-being mediates the relationship between IC and job satisfaction, facilitating effective management of culturally diverse classrooms. Dzerviniks et al. (2024) further observed that intercultural training reduces classroom tensions and fosters inclusion, while Zlatković et al. (2017) highlighted that cultural self-regulation supports emotional balance and resilience.

These findings collectively show that fostering intercultural competence through professional development is crucial not only for teaching effectiveness but also for preventing burnout—a condition defined by Maslach and Leiter (2016) as a reaction to chronic workplace stress marked by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a sense of inefficacy. Burnout undermines personal well-being, social relationships, and work quality, affecting both educators and the educational community. Prioritizing educators' well-being, therefore, has profound implications for sustaining positive relationships with children and families, including those from diverse cultural backgrounds. Despite this, research exploring how intercultural sensitivity (IS) and intercultural competence (IC) influence ECE educators' well-being and experiences of burnout remains limited (Jennings, 2015). This gap concerns not only the population studied (ECE educators) and the constructs examined (IS, IC, SWB, and burnout), but also the lack of investigation into how these dimensions interact—particularly regarding the specific components of intercultural competence (knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness) that may support educators' well-being. While numerous studies stress the importance of intercultural training programs that foster self-reflection and understanding of cultural norms and languages, quantitative evidence linking IS, IC, and well-being—especially in ECE contexts—remains scarce (Jeon et al., 2022; De Los Santos et al., 2023).

Examining these relationships is essential not only to advance scholarly understanding but also to inform the design of more effective intercultural training for ECE educators (Romijn et al., 2020; Miao & Lepeyko, 2023). In this context, I propose the following research questions:

- How do IS and IC impact the SWB and burnout of ECE educators?
- Are there particular competences that positively or negatively influence these outcomes?
- Are there specific demographic factors or characteristics of ECE schools that contribute to the increase or decrease of IS, IC, SWB, and burnout?

This line of inquiry is crucial for designing training programs that not only impart new knowledge but also circulate it effectively within school systems, emphasizing the central role of educator well-being as a cornerstone for ensuring equity, justice, and respect in education. By exploring these factors, this study seeks to guide the development of more impactful intercultural competence training for educators. Such programs aim to optimize professional growth, enhance educator well-being, and foster greater inclusion within ECE services.

11. 2 The study

Aims and Hypothesis

This pilot explorative quantitative study explores how intercultural sensitivity and the dimensions of intercultural competences —namely, knowledge, skills, attitude, and awareness—impact on ECE educators' ability to manage work related stress, prevent burnout, and maintain psychological balance in their professional roles. Specifically, the research investigates the level of IS, IC dimensions, SWB and Burnout and the potential socio-demographic and contextual differences among the study variables based on variables such as age, kind of ECE service in which they are employed (i.e., 0-3 years or 3-6 years), and level of education[5]. Additionally, it examines the interplay between IS, IC, on educators' subjective well-being (SWB), and burnout factors (i.e., emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment). The goal is to explore how intercultural competencies can be effectively promoted among ECE educators, recognizing that simply having these competencies does not guarantee successful intercultural interactions. Achieving such success depends on considering educators' well-being, highlighting the connection between professional competence and psychological health.

Accordingly, we hypothesized:

H1. Significant differences in IS, IC dimensions, psychological well-being, and burnout factors are expected based on factors such as age, kind of ECE service in which they are employed (i.e., 0-3 years or 3-6 years) and level of education.

H2. There will be a negative and significant association between emotional exhaustion (independent variable) and IS, IC, and SWB (dependent variables) among ECE educators.

H3. There will be a negative and significant association between depersonalization (independent variable) and IS, IC, and SWB (dependent variables) among ECE educators

H4. There will be a positive and significant association between personal accomplishment (independent variable) and IS, IC, and SWB (dependent variable) among ECE educators.

[5] Gender was not included because our sample was almost entirely composed by women (e.g., 98,8%).

H5. There will be a positive and significant association between SWB (independent variable) and IS, IC (dependent variable) among ECE educators.

The Study Background

This study was conducted within Early Childhood Education services in Northwest Italy, in the city of Genoa. The city has developed a comprehensive and well-coordinated network of early childhood education and care services for children aged 0–6, managed by the Department of Educational Services within the Municipal Department of Education (Municipality of Genoa, 2024a). The municipal system consists of 34 nurseries (including two micro-nurseries), 11 spring sections for children aged 24–36 months, and 46 municipal preschools. These facilities are distributed across the city's nine administrative districts, which ensure local accessibility and management (Municipality of Genoa, 2024a; Municipality of Genoa, 2023). Central coordination and planning are provided by the city's Education Department, while each district hosts a local office responsible for family support, enrolment procedures, and day-to-day operations (Municipality of Genoa, 2024b).

Staff working in these services include early childhood educators, pedagogical coordinators, auxiliary staff, and administrative personnel. Their work is guided and supported by the Pedagogical Coordination Office, which oversees educational quality, inclusion, and the professional development of staff (Municipality of Genoa, 2024c). The municipality directly employs most of the educators working in its schools, while accredited and private institutions complement the public network within the integrated 0–6 education system (Region of Liguria, 2024). Recent reports from education unions have pointed out ongoing challenges related to staffing levels, workload balance, and the need for new recruitment to maintain high-quality services and prevent educator burnout (CGIL Liguria, 2024).

As discussed earlier in this dissertation (see Chapter 7), Genoa has a steadily growing multicultural population, particularly in some urban areas where families from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds contribute to the richness and complexity of early childhood environments. This social context highlights the importance of educators' intercultural sensitivity and competence as key factors in promoting inclusion and educational equity (Municipality of Genoa, 2024a).

Overall, the municipal early childhood education network in Genoa provides a structured and inclusive system that integrates high-quality care, professional collaboration, and strong community engagement. Within this organizational and cultural context, the present study explores how educators' intercultural sensitivity (IS) and intercultural competence (IC) relate to their subjective well-being (SWB) and experiences of burnout, aiming to understand how these dimensions interact within municipal early education settings.

10. 3 Methods

Participants

A total of 503 early childhood educators participated in the study, 98.8% of whom were female. Participants' ages ranged from 28 to 67 years, with a mean age of 49 (SD = ±8.96). All met the inclusion criteria of being qualified ECE professionals employed in educational services for children aged 0–6 within the jurisdiction of the Municipality of Genoa. Recruitment took place between September and November 2023 in collaboration with the Municipality, which invited all eligible educators to participate. To encourage participation, completion of the questionnaire was formally recognized as part of the participants' professional development hours. Despite these efforts, participation was voluntary, and the final sample represented approximately 64% of the total eligible population.

Instrument and procedures

This study employed a quantitative research approach using a self-report survey questionnaire. We utilized the LimeSurvey platform to administer an online questionnaire featuring validated scales. The research methodology involved disseminating the questionnaire through a link provided in collaboration with the Municipality of Genoa. The anonymous questionnaire was emailed by the Municipality of Genoa's pedagogical coordinators to all educators within the 0-6 age group educational services in Genoa. In the initial section of the questionnaire, participants were presented with the research objectives, the areas under investigation, and the informed consent form, which clarified that participation was voluntary and participants could withdraw at any time by simply closing the browser window. By acknowledging this information, participants could proceed to subsequent sections of the questionnaire, beginning with socio-demographic inquiries followed by the main research questions. In line with ethical considerations, the study places significant emphasis on obtaining informed consent from participants and ensuring their anonymity throughout the research process. Participants retained the option to decline to respond to certain questions or to withdraw from the study entirely at any stage.

The study protocol involved collecting socio-demographic information (i.e., age, gender, education level, and place of work) and administering a questionnaire composed of four validated measurement scales. Since the instruments were originally developed in English and the participants were Italian speakers, all scales were translated into Italian following a rigorous back-translation procedure to ensure linguistic and conceptual equivalence. The translation process involved independent forward and backward translations by bilingual experts, followed by a consensus review to resolve discrepancies and confirm semantic accuracy before administering the final version of the questionnaire.

The Intercultural sensitivity Scale (Chan & Starosta, 2000) utilized in our study consists of 24 items, each measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) analyzing intercultural sensitivity as an individual's capacity to develop emotional empathy towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences, thereby fostering appropriate and effective behaviour in intercultural communication contexts. This scale delves into various facets of intercultural interaction. Firstly interaction engagement encompasses the degree to which individuals actively participate and engage in intercultural interactions, showcasing a readiness to communicate and connect across cultural divides (e.g., "I tend to withhold forming impressions of culturally-distinct counterparts"). Secondly respect for cultural differences involves acknowledging and valuing the diversity of cultural norms, values, and practices, and demonstrating respect towards individuals from various cultural backgrounds (e.g., "I avoid interactions with people from diverse cultures"). Thirdly, interaction confidence characterizes individuals with high IS, who display confidence in navigating intercultural encounters, demonstrating self-assurance and adaptability across diverse cultural contexts (e.g., "I am confident in my ability to interact with people from different cultures"). Additionally, interaction enjoyment pertains to the level of satisfaction and pleasure individuals derive from engaging in intercultural interactions, reflecting a positive attitude towards cultural diversity (e.g., "I often feel a sense of fulfilment when interacting with people from different cultures"). Lastly, interaction attentiveness encompasses being receptive to the subtleties of intercultural communication, including non-verbal cues, cultural nuances, and contextual factors, thereby facilitating effective cross-cultural understanding and communication. (e.g., "I am attentive and perceptive when interacting with people from different cultures"). In this study it was considered the total score of the scale representing the overall IS. The instrument's reliability within our sample was satisfactory (Cronbach's Alpha = 0,81).

The Intercultural competence Scale (Fantini, 2007) consists of a total of 54 items, each measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and categorized into four key dimensions. The dimension of Knowledge (e.g., "I am able to provide a definition of culture and describe its components and complexities") aims at assessing participants' understanding and ability to define fundamental cultural concepts. Attitude (e.g., "I am able to suspend judgment and appreciate the complexities of communicating and interacting interculturally") probes participants' openness and sensitivity to cultural diversity. The Skills sub-dimension (e.g., "I have helped resolve intercultural conflicts and misunderstandings when they arose") examines participants' ability to effectively manage intercultural conflict situations. Finally, Awareness, illustrated by statements like "I recognize the danger of generalizing individual behaviors as representative of an entire culture," emphasizes participants' understanding that individuals harbor their own cultural backgrounds,

influencing the attribution of meaning and behaviors, much like others' cultures do. This underscores their recognition of the nuances and potential pitfalls inherent in cultural generalization. Even in this case, within our sample, the instrument exhibited highly satisfactory reliability, with Cronbach's Alpha at 0.97.

The WHO-5 (World Health Organization-Five Well-being Index) (World Health Organization, 1998; Hochberg et al., 2012) is a widely recognized tool designed to evaluate subjective well-being (SWB) and emotional functioning. Comprising five items, the scale assesses aspects such as positive mood, energy levels, and overall well-being (e.g., "Over the past two weeks, I have felt cheerful and in good spirits"). Participants rate each statement on a scale from 0 (at no time) to 5 (all of the time). The responses are summed to produce a total score ranging from 0 to 25, with higher scores reflecting greater well-being and lower scores indicating diminished well-being. The WHO-5 has been validated across diverse populations, demonstrating strong psychometric properties (World Health Organization, 1998). In our study, the scale showed excellent reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.85.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach, 2009) used in this study is a widely recognized instrument consisting of 22 items, designed to measure burnout across three distinct factors. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (every day). The three dimensions include Emotional Exhaustion (EE) (e.g., "I feel emotionally exhausted from my work"), Depersonalization (D) (e.g., "I seem to treat some students/parents of students as if they were objects"), and Personal Accomplishment (PA) (e.g., "I can easily understand how my students/parents of students think"). This tool captures the intensity and frequency of burnout symptoms in professional contexts, providing a comprehensive assessment of the emotional, interpersonal, and self-evaluative components of burnout. In this study, we employed the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey (MBI-ES), an instrument specifically adapted for individuals working in educational settings, including educators, administrators, support staff, and volunteers across various educational contexts. The survey demonstrated strong internal consistency in our sample, yielding satisfactory Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.73 across all measured dimensions.

Data analysis and interpretation

All quantitative data collected from the questionnaires were processed using SPSS (version 28.0.1.1). Before statistical analysis, the assumption of normality was assessed by examining kurtosis and skewness values, ensuring they did not exceed the recommended limits of -2 and +2 (George & Mallery, 2009). Participants with more than 20% missing data were excluded from the analysis. All variables were then checked by calculating Mahalanobis distances ($p<0,001$) to identify and skip multivariate outliers (Cabana et al., 2019). Cronbach's alpha was calculated to assess the variables'

internal consistency. Main descriptive statistics were adopted to investigate the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents and summarize their features regarding the study variables. Descriptive statistics were also employed to describe the participants' scores for each variable examined (i.e., IS, IC, Burnout factors and SWB). The results regarding IS and IC were interpreted using the framework proposed by Saricoban and Oz (2014). According to this framework, the Likert scale's first two response options, namely strongly disagree and disagree, were categorized as indicating a "low level of ICC and IS." The third option, neither agree nor disagree, was considered to represent a "moderate level of ICC and IS," while the last two responses, agree and strongly agree, were indicative of a "high level of ICC and IS." To interpret the levels of SWB and burnout, I respectively adopted the guidelines provided by the World Health Organization (1998) and from the authors of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach, 2009). According to the WHO-5 scale, a raw score below 13 is considered a cut-off point indicating poor mental well-being, suggesting the need for further assessment of potential mental health issues, such as depression. In this context, scores below 13 are categorized as reflecting poor well-being, while scores above this threshold indicate good mental health. For burnout, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach, 1997) offers specific threshold values for its three core dimensions (i.e., EE, DP and PA). Regarding emotional exhaustion, a score of 13 or lower indicates low burnout, while scores between 14 and 23 suggest moderate burnout, and scores of 24 or higher reflect high levels of burnout. For depersonalization, scores of 1 or lower are considered low burnout, 2-3 is moderate, and 4 or higher is indicative of high burnout. In terms of personal accomplishment, a score of 40 or higher reflects low burnout, 34-39 suggests moderate burnout, and scores of 33 or lower indicate high burnout.

Age was divided into two groups based on the median value (Field, 2013) : participants younger than 40 years and those aged 40 years or older. An independent sample t-test was used to compare the mean results based on age and kind of ECE service in which they are employed (i.e., 0-3 years or 3-6 years). After checking all assumptions (i.e., multivariate normality, homoscedasticity, linearity, independence of observations, and absence of multicollinearity), a MANOVA analysis was conducted to examine whether there were significant differences based on education level, considering the study variables as multiple dependent variables. For post hoc analysis, the Tukey test was applied with a significance threshold set at $p < 0.001$.

Pearson correlation analysis was performed to investigate any statistically significant relationships between the study variables. Additionally, four separate linear Stepwise regression models were conducted to assess the impact of IS and IC on different factors of burnout and SWB. In each model, IS and the dimensions of IC were considered as potential predictors.

Considering that academics typically operate alone and do not involve practitioners in identifying research questions or interpreting results (Van de Ven, 2007), thereby creating a self-referential process of "theory talking to theory" (Siggelkow, 2007), we took a proactive approach by involving municipality professionals in the definition of the research questions and interpretation of the study's results. This collaborative effort not only enriched our analysis but also allowed us to sidestep the pitfalls of self-referentiality (Van de Ven, 2007).

10. 4 Results

Socio-demographic characteristics

Table 2 provides a demographic overview of the study participants. The sample consisted predominantly of females born in Italy (99.8%), with the majority being over 40 years old (84.9%) and holding a high school diploma (55.1%). Additionally, more than half were employed in nurseries (54.5%) and reported having earned a diploma (55.1%).

Table. 2

Demographic and professional profile of study participants

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Place of birth	Italy	502	99,8
	Colombia	1	,2
Gender	Female	497	98,8
	Male	3	,6
	Non-binary	3	,6
Age Group	< 40 years	75	14,9
	>40 years	427	84,9
Level of education	Diploma	277	55,1
	University Degree	186	37
	Post lauream	40	8
Kind of ECE service	Nursery (0-3)	274	54,5
	Pre-school (3-6)	229	45,5

Descriptive statistics and levels of the study variables

Table 3 provides descriptive statistics of the study variables while Table 4 presents mean scores and agreement levels for different dimensions of intercultural sensitivity and competence among study participants. The agreement levels are categorized as high, moderate, or low based on the consensus among participants. Analysis reveals a notably high level of agreement among participants in of intercultural sensitivity. Moving to intercultural competence, while "Attitude" (M = 3.95) and "Skills" (M = 3.61) garner high levels of agreement with mean scores of 3.95 and 3.61 respectively, "Knowledge" (M = 2.56) and "Awareness" (M = 3.36) exhibit comparatively lower levels of agreement, with mean scores of 2.56 and 3.36. Regarding subjective well-being (SWB), the mean score was 17.77 (SD = 3.80), suggesting a moderately high level of SWB among participants.

Considering the burnout factors (Table 5), all three dimensions were found to be at a medium level. Specifically, emotional exhaustion had a mean of 14.9 (SD = 9.23), depersonalization had a mean of 2.91 (SD = 3.98), and personal accomplishment had a mean of 34.54 (SD = 6.55).

Table 3

Descriptive statistics of the study variables (N=503).

	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Value	Value	Value	Value	Value	SE	Value	SE
IS	32	116	93,99	10,64	-,940	,109	2,743	,217
IC_Knowledge	2	55	28,21	9,38	-,113	,109	-,154	,217
IC_Attitude	10	65	51,37	9,80	-,882	,111	1,150	,222
IC_Skills	5	55	39,72	8,63	-,432	,112	,258	,223
IC_Awareness	13	90	63,75	13,44	-,374	,113	,556	,225
SWB	5	25	17,77	3,80	-,384	,109	,273	,217
B_EE	0	50	14,09	9,23	,940	,109	,880	,217
B_D	0	23	2,91	3,98	2,008	,109	4,686	,217
B_PA	16	48	34,54	6,55	-,198	,109	-,431	,217

Legend: (IS = Intercultural Sensitivity; IC_Intercultural Competence; SWB = Subjective Well-Being; B_EE = Burnout_Emotional Exhaustion; B_D = Burnout_Depersonalization; B_PA = Burnout_ Personal Accomplishment)

Table 4

Level of IS and IC scores.

Construct	Dimentions	Mean	Agreement Level
IS	***Total***	3,92	High
IC	***Knowledge***	2,56	Moderate
	Attitude	3,95	High
	Skills	3,61	High
	Awareness	3,36	Moderate

Legend: (IS = Intercultural Sensitivity; IC_Intercultural Competence)

Table 5

Level of Burnout among the study participants.

Construct	Dimentions	Mean	Burount level
Burnout	***Emotional Exausthion***	14,9	Medium
	Deperonalization	2,91	Medium
	Personal Accomplishment	34,54	Medium

Mean differences (T-test and MANOVA)

The independent samples t-tests revealed no significant differences between age groups concerning IS and IC components. However, regarding educators' well-being, a statistically significant

difference emerged in the personal accomplishment dimension based on age (t(500) = -1.957, p = 0.050). Educators over 40 years reported higher personal accomplishment scores (M = 34.79, SD = 6.61) than those under 40 (M = 33.19, SD = 6.04), with a small effect size (Cohen's d = -0.25).Similarly, a significant difference was found in depersonalization scores according to the type of early childhood education (ECE) service in which the educators work (i.e., nursery or pre-school) (t(501) = -2.199, p = 0.028). Educators working with children aged 3-6 years scored higher (M = 3.54, SD = 4.29) than those working with children aged 0-3 years (M = 2.55, SD = 3.68), indicating a small effect size (Cohen's d = -0.19).

The MANOVA analysis revealed significant differences among the study variables in relation to their level of education (Wilks' Lambda = 0.883, F(26, 830) = 2.042, p < 0.002), indicating that at least one of the dependent variables varied significantly across the groups. Further post hoc tests were conducted to explore these significant differences between groups. For the intercultural competencies dimensions, significant differences were found in Knowledge (F(2) = 5.703, p = 0.004), where post-lauream graduates achieved higher scores (M = 33.21, SD = 10.11) compared to high school graduates (M = 27.53, SD = 9.26) and degree holders (M = 28.54, SD = 8.91), with a significant difference (p = 0.004). The Dimension of Attitude also demonstrated significant differences (F(2) = 6.545, p = 0.002), with higher scores among post-graduates (M = 55.38, SD = 8.64) compared to high school graduates (M = 50.14, SD = 10.34) and degree holders (M = 52.77, SD = 8.59). The Skills dimension also showed significant differences (F(2) = 6.572, p < 0.002), with higher scores among post-lauream graduates (M = 42.88, SD = 9.07) compared to high school graduates (M = 38.56, SD = 8.47) and degree holders (M = 42.08, SD = 8.39). The Awareness dimension also exhibited significant differences (F(2) = 4.709, p < 0.009), with post-graduates achieving higher scores (M = 67.44, SD = 14.86) compared to high school graduates (M = 62.26, SD = 13.86) and degree holders (M = 65.85, SD = 12.07). Additionally, the Emotional Exhaustion dimension showed significant differences (F(2) = 3.768, p = 0.024), with post-graduates reporting higher scores (M = 14.94, SD = 11.36) compared to high school graduates (M = 14.88, SD = 9.49) and degree holders (M = 12.39, SD = 8.05). For more details see table 6, 7 and 8.

Table 6

T- test and MANOVA on IS by Age, Type of School, and Level of Education. No significant results were fund. (N=503)

	IS			
	M (SD)	*t/F*	*p*	*Cohen's d/ηp2*
Age				
<40 years	94,21 (8,28)			
>40 years	94,00 (10,98)			
Kind of school				
Nursery (0-3)	94,21 (10,43)			
Pre-school (3-6)	93,72 (10,90)			
Level of education				
High School Diploma	93,05 (11,82)			
University degree	95,30 (9,04)			
Post lauream	97,15 (9,12)			

Legend: (IS = Intercultural Sensitivity).

Table 7

T- test and MANOVA on IC by Age, Type of School, and Level of Education (N=503).

	IC_Knowledge				IC_Skills				IC_Awareness				IC_Attitude			
	M (SD)	*t/F*	*p*	*Cohen's d/ηp2*	*M (SD)*	*t/F*	*p*	*Cohen's d/ηp2*	*M (SD)*	*t/F*	*p*	*Cohen's d/ηp2*	*M (SD)*	*t/F*	*p*	*Cohen's d/ηp2*
Age																
<40 years	28,67 (9,03)				41,39 (8,18)				62,79 (10,73)				52,15 (8,81)			
>40 years	28,12 (9,46)				39,44 (8,68)				63,95 (13,90)				51,26 (9,97)			
Kind of school																
Nursery (0-3)	28,02 (8,94)				40,06 (8,37)				64,28 (12,21)				51,67 (9,41)			
Pre-school (3-6)	28,44 (9,91)				39,31 (8,93)				63,09 (14,83)				51,00 (10,27)			
Level of education																
High School Diploma	27,53 (9,26)	5,70	,004	,85	38,56 (8,47)	6,5	,002	,92	62,26 (13,86)	4,71	,01	,93	50,14 (10,34)	6,55	,002	,94
University degree	28,54 (8,91)				41,08 (8,39)				65,85 (12,07)				52,77 (8,59)			
Post lauream	33,21 (10,11)				42,88 (9,07)				67,44 (14,86)				55,38 (8,64)			

Legend: (IC_Intercultural Competence)

Table 8

T-test and MANOVA on SWB and Burnout by Age, Type of School, and Level of Education (N=503).

	SWB				Burnout_EE				Burnout_D				Burnout_PA			
	M (SD)	*t/F*	*p*	*Cohen's d/ηp2*	*M (SD)*	*t/F*	*p*	*Cohen's d/ηp2*	*M (SD)*	*t/F*	*p*	*Cohen's d/ηp2*	*M (SD)*	*t/F*	*p*	*Cohen's d/ηp2*
Age																
<40 years	18,19 (3,87)				12,27 (8,74)				2,27 (3,03)				33,19 (6,04)	-1,96	,05	-,25
>40 years	17,71 (3,79)				14,41 (9,29)				3,03 (4,13)				34,79 (6,61)			
Kind of school																
Nursery (0-3)	17,89 (3,75)				13,78 (9,24)				2,55 (3,68)	-2,12	,03	-,19	34,25 (6,11)			
Pre-school (3-6)	17,63 (3,87)				14,45 (9,21)				3,54 (4,29)				34,89 (7,03)			
Level of education																
High School Diploma	17,59 (3,82)				14,88 (9,49)	3,77	,02	,02	2,97 (4,05)				34,60 (6,43)			
University degree	18,20 (3,57)				12,40 (8,05)				2,40 (3,27)				34,75 (6,20)			
Post lauream	18,26 (2,99)				14,94 (11,36)				3,21 (4,89)				36,06 (6,33)			

Legend: (EE = Emotional Exhaustion; D = Depersonalization; PA =Personal Accomplishment)

Correlations

The results highlight significant relationships among IS, IC dimensions, SWB, and burnout factors (Table 9). IS positively correlates with all IC dimensions—Knowledge ($r = 0.373$, $p < 0.01$), Attitude ($r = 0.657$, $p < 0.01$), Skills ($r = 0.560$, $p < 0.01$), and Awareness ($r = 0.516$, $p < 0.01$)—indicating that higher IS aligns with stronger IC, particularly with Attitude. IC dimensions are moderately and positively associated with SWB, with correlations ranging from 0.331 to 0.371 ($p < 0.01$), suggesting that higher IC supports better psychological well-being. IS and IC show negative correlations with burnout factors such as Emotional Exhaustion (e.g., IS: $r = -0.250$, $p < 0.01$) and Depersonalization (e.g., IS: $r = -0.292$, $p < 0.01$), while positively correlating with Personal Accomplishment (e.g., IS: $r = 0.396$, $p < 0.01$). SWB is also negatively associated with Emotional Exhaustion ($r = -0.343$, $p < 0.01$) and Depersonalization ($r = -0.220$, $p < 0.01$) and positively with Personal Accomplishment ($r = 0.510$, $p < 0.01$), indicating its protective role against burnout.

Table 9

Pearson correlation between the study variables (N=503).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. IS	1								
2. IC_Knowledge	,373**	1							
3. IC_Attitude	,657**	,484**	1						
4. IC_Skills	,560**	,472**	,802**	1					
5. IC_Awareness	,516**	,499**	,688**	,703**	1				
6. SWB	,322**	,333**	,360**	,371**	,331**	1			
7. B_EE	-,250**	-,045	-,155**	-,142**	-,080	-,343**	1		
8. B_D	-,292**	-,014	-,153**	-,110*	-,093*	-,220**	,531**	1	
9. B_PA	,396**	,302**	,398**	,380**	,379**	,510**	-,315**	-,311**	1

Legend: (IS = Intercultural Sensitivity; IC_Intercultural Competence; SWB = Subjective Well-Being; B_EE = Burnout_Emotional Exhaustion; B_D = Burnout_Depersonalization; B_PA = Burnout_ Personal Accomplishment)

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Linear Regressions

Four stepwise regression analyses were conducted to identify predictors of SWB and the three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (Table 10). Each analysis employed a stepwise selection method, using inclusion criteria of $p \leq 0.05$ and removal criteria of $p \geq 0.10$. Table 9 is showing the details of the most stringer predicting model

for each regression analysis. For the model examining SWB as the dependent variable, the most robust solution (Model 3) identified CI_Skills, CI_Knowledge, and IS as significant predictors of SWB. This model accounted for 16.4% of the variance in WHO_5 ($R^2 = 0.164$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.158$) with a standard error of 3.373. All predictors were statistically significant, with CI_Skills ($\beta = 0.185$, $p = 0.001$) and CI_Knowledge ($\beta = 0.189$, $p < 0.001$) showing slightly stronger contributions compared to IS ($\beta = 0.131$, $p = 0.015$). The model was highly significant overall ($F(3, 426) = 27.756$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting these variables as meaningful contributors to variations in SWB. However, a considerable proportion of variance remained unexplained, underscoring the importance of other, unmeasured factors.

For emotional exhaustion, the most robust solution (Model 1) identified IS and IC_Knowledge as significant predictors. This model explained 5.5% of the variance in M_EM ($R^2 = 0.055$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.053$) with a standard error of 8.952. IS was statistically significant ($\beta = -0.235$, $p < 0.001$), indicating a negative relationship with emotional exhaustion while IC_Knowledge was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.135$, $p = 0.001$), indicating a positive relationship with emotional exhaustion.The overall model was highly significant ($F(1, 428) = 24.935$, $p < 0.001$).. Also for depersonalization the strongest solution (Model 2) identified IS and CI_Knowledge as significant predictors. This model explained 11.6% of the variance in M_D ($R^2 = 0.116$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.112$) with a standard error of 3.630. Both predictors were statistically significant, with IS ($\beta = -0.366$, $p < 0.001$) contributing more strongly than CI_K ($\beta = 0.133$, $p = 0.007$). The overall model was highly significant ($F(2, 427) = 28.070$, $p < 0.001$). For personal accomplishment, the strongest solution (Model 2) identified CI_Awarenss and IS as significant predictors. This model accounted for 18.5% of the variance in personal accomplishment ($R^2 = 0.185$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.182$) with a standard error of 5.728. Both predictors were statistically significant, with CI_Awareness ($\beta = 0.263$, $p < 0.001$) showing a slightly stronger effect than IS ($\beta = 0.231$, $p < 0.001$). The model was highly significant overall ($F(2, 427) = 48.605$, $p < 0.001$). Although this model showed the highest explanatory power among the four, a significant portion of variance remains unexplained, indicating the likely contribution of other factors not included in the analysis.

Table 10

Summary of stepwise regression analyses predicting subjective well-being and burnout dimensions (N=503).

Model	Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
1. Predicting SWB	***(Constant)***	8.373	1.441	-	5.809	<.001
	IC_Skills	0.079	0.024	0.185	3.294	.001
	IC_Knowledge	0.075	0.020	0.189	3.754	<.001
	IS	0.045	0.018	0.131	2.449	.015
2. Predicting Emotional Exhaustion	***(Constant)***	32.927	3.825	-	8.609	<.001
	IS	-0.201	,040	-,235	-4,993	<,001
	IC_Knowledge	0,067	,025	,135	2,767	,001
3. Predicting Depersonalization	***(Constant)***	13.603	1.551	-	8.771	<.001
	IS	-0.131	0.018	-0.366	-7.493	<.001
	IC_Knowledge	0.055	0.020	0.133	2.717	.007
4. Predicting Personal Accomplishment	***(Constant)***	13.945	2.448	-	5.696	<.001
	IC_Awareness	0.124	0.024	0.263	5.169	<.001
	IS	0.137	0.030	0.231	4.539	<.001

Legend: (IS = Intercultural Sensitivity; IC_Intercultural Competence; SWB = Subjective Well-Being; B_EE = Burnout_Emotional Exhaustion; B_D = Burnout_Depersonalization; B_PA = Burnout_ Personal Accomplishment)

10. 5 Discussion

This exploratory quantitative study examines how intercultural sensitivity and the dimensions of intercultural competence —including knowledge, skills, attitude, and awareness—affect ECE educators' ability to manage work-related stress, prevent burnout, and maintain psychological well-being in their professional roles. The research evaluates levels of IS, IC dimensions, SWB and burnout, while considering socio-demographic and contextual differences such as age, type of ECE service (0-3 years or 3-6 years), and educational attainment. Gender was excluded due to the predominantly female composition of the sample (98.8%). Additionally, the study explores how IS and IC relate to SWB and burnout indicators, including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. This study aims to understand how intercultural competencies can be effectively promoted in educational contexts, recognizing that simply possessing these competencies

does not guarantee successful intercultural interactions. Such success depends on considering educators' well-being, reinforcing the idea that professional competence is inherently tied to psychological health (Miao & Lepeyko, 2023).

Our sample revealed a notably high level of intercultural sensitivity, suggesting strong confidence and efficacy in intercultural interactions perceived by ECE educators. When assessing educators' perceived level of intercultural competence, it became clear that while they rated themselves highly in terms of "Attitude" and "Skills," they perceived their "Knowledge" and "Awareness" as moderate. These findings align with international scientific literature, which also reports relatively high self-perceived intercultural competencies within this specific population (Saricoban & Oz, 2014; Mostafaei Alaei & Nosrati, 2018). However, given the lack of comparable national data for the Italian population, and specifically for ECE educators, the differences between the different IC may reflect the unique context of Genoa. Since the early 1990s, the city has been significantly exposed to migration and the coexistence of diverse cultures, particularly in the integration of foreign or migrant children (Gastaldi, 2009). Educators, especially in nurseries and preschools, have often been the first to encounter immigrant students and families. Their professional development has long included training focused on intercultural education and inclusive practices. As a result, practical skills and behavioural competencies in interacting with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (i.e., skills), as well as mental dispositions toward intercultural communication (i.e., attitude), may have been naturally fostered and supported by the Genoese context. However, when it comes to understanding the theories, concepts, and characteristics of different cultures (i.e., knowledge), as well as recognizing and reflecting on one's own and others' cultural perspectives (i.e., awareness), there remains potential for further development. Being immersed in a context of high cultural diversity does not automatically lead to a deeper understanding of cultural theories or an enhanced sense of self-awareness (Acquah & Commins, 2017)

Analyzing the levels of well-being reported during the questionnaire (i.e., SWB and Burnout), it is clear that while participants showed a moderately high level SWB, all factors related to burnout fell within the middle range. Numerous studies highlight the increasing levels of burnout among early childhood educators, even when subjective well-being remains relatively stable (Xu et al., 2024). This suggests that the distress experienced by these educators is primarily work-related and deeply rooted in the realities of their job. Various factors contribute to this, including a shortage of professionals in the field, high turnover rates, and understaffed facilities and schools (De Los Santos et al., 2023). The educational work, particularly in early childhood education, is both physically and emotionally demanding. Educators are responsible for addressing the basic needs of young children, fostering their physical, social-emotional, language, and cognitive development, while also managing

numerous non-instructional tasks. Research has shown that these extensive job demands, coupled with limited resources, significantly impact educators' professional and psychological well-being, often leading to burnout (Jeon et al., 2022). In the context of Genoa, these stressors are compounded by specific challenges. Considering the migration component, Genoa it is an Italian city with a long history of migration both internal and external (Rosasco & Sdino, 2022). Specifically, Immigration to Genoa began in the aftermath of World War II, marked by a significant influx of individuals from southern Italian regions seeking employment in the city's state-owned industries and port-related companies. This internal migration declined in the 1970s with the onset of deindustrialization and was gradually replaced by foreign immigration, primarily from the poorest countries in North Africa and Central America. The new residents typically settled in central and semi-central neighborhoods, which had been abandoned by previous inhabitants due to physical and social deterioration, or in semi-central and peripheral areas where lower property prices made housing more affordable to those with limited financial means. Therefore, Genoa's high number of migrant families, many facing psychosocial difficulties such as poverty, unstable housing, and limited access to healthcare (Rosasco & Sdino, 2022), means that educators are not only responsible for the educational needs of their students but also for addressing their emotional and psychological well-being (Bennouna et al., 2019). This responsibility increases the emotional burden on educators, especially when dealing with children who may experience trauma or instability at home. Research indicates that early childhood educators working with vulnerable populations are at a heightened risk of emotional exhaustion and stress (Jeaon et la., 2018). Beyond emotional demands, as a general trend in many western institutions also ECE educators in also face the challenge of managing a heavy bureaucratic workload (Martinelli, 2023). In addition to instructional duties, educators must complete administrative tasks such as documentation, planning, and meeting regulatory requirements. These additional responsibilities often detract from the time available for direct interaction with children and their families, leading to higher levels of stress and burnout (Nwoko et al., 2023).

Moving to the regression analysis our data suggest that improving knowledge does not necessarily lead to an improvement in the quality of educators' well-being. Indeed, our findings indicate that knowledge is a positive predictor of both subjective well-being and burnout, specifically in relation to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. This is further evidenced by the differences observed between groups, where individuals with higher levels of education report higher burnout levels despite the higher knowledges acquired. Although this result should be interpreted within a broader context that includes other interconnected factors (such as job satisfaction, geographical location, institutions, etc.,) and it challenges our initial hypothesis (H2 and H3). While unexpected, this outcome is not entirely surprising. Numerous studies conducted during the COVID-19 period have

shown that an overload of health-related information increased anxiety and stress levels in individuals (Wang et al., 2022). A high volume of information, received in a short time without the opportunity to process and internalize it—moving from the realm of knowledge to that of knowing how to be and knowing how to act (which inherently requires a long process of work, practice, study, and ongoing supervision)—may be ineffective and negatively impact individual well-being (Kominiarczuk & Ledzińska, 2014; Belavkina et al., 2024). Empirical evidence indicates that possessing extensive knowledge does not necessarily translate into the ability to apply it effectively and with confidence and composure in practice.. Moreover, the pervasive use of mobile technologies in daily life has led to what some authors, such as Bawden and Robinson (2020), describe as a "violent" era of information overload. This constant stream of information deprives individuals of the time needed to process and internalize what they receive, often resulting in mental overload which is representing a continuous stressing experience (Shahrzadi et al., 2024). Effective processing of information requires both time and supervision—factors frequently absent in intercultural training programs, which are typically brief mainlydue to resource constraints. Moreover, when considering intercultural training, merely providing information and facts without addressing the structural and systemic factors that make these relationships difficult may be counterproductive (Mahadevan, 2021), particularly if we view intercultural relations and competencies as closely tied to well-being. This well-being should naturally extend to all individuals involved in these exchanges and relationships, not just the educators. Therefore, it is essential to focus not only on enhancing educators' competences but also on fostering the skills and well-being of all actors engaged in these interactions. This necessitates a thorough examination and response to the various forms of oppression that, at different levels and scales, may affect educators, children, families, and other school personnel.

Another crucial element to consider is the role of self-awareness in relation to the burnout factor of personal accomplishment. Our results indicate that awareness is a positive predictor of personal accomplishment, further confirming its beneficial influence on work-related well-being. Moreover, our correlations reveal that awareness is associated with all other dimensions of IC, underscoring its pivotal role in fostering positive attitudes and enhancing knowledge within intercultural contexts (Baker, 2011). This finding supports Fantini's theoretical model of IC (2009), in which individuals who reflect on themselves and become aware of their own cultural perspectives are better equipped to navigate intercultural interactions with sensitivity and respect. Through self-reflection and increased awareness of their cultural perspectives, individuals become more adept at managing intercultural interactions with sensitivity and respect. This heightened awareness fosters the development of the other three dimensions—knowledge, attitudes, and skills—creating a continuous

cycle of growth and deeper understanding within the framework of intercultural competence (Fantini, 2009).

At last, the comparison of means revealed that educators over 40 reported significantly higher personal accomplishment scores than their younger counterparts. This difference may reflect greater professional experience, well-developed coping mechanisms, and increased job-related confidence accumulated over years of practice (Dawson, 2018). However, the modest effect size suggests that while age contributes to personal accomplishment, other factors such as the work environment, administrative support, and career development opportunities also play essential roles (Van Vuuren et al., 2023). Similarly, the type of ECE service significantly influenced depersonalization levels. Educators working with older children (aged 3-6) reported higher depersonalization compared to those teaching infants (0-3 years). This could be attributed to the increased cognitive, emotional, and behavioral demands of teaching older children, coupled with a more structured and academically oriented curriculum. Managing larger groups, addressing complex behavioral challenges, and meeting academic standards may contribute to emotional exhaustion and detachment from students (Pellerone et al., 2020). Finally, no significant differences were found in IS and IC based on educators' age or the type of school (nursery or pre-school), contrary to our initial hypothesis (H1). This suggests that these professional skills are likely developed uniformly through training and experience, regardless of demographic factors or the specific type of ECE service in which educators are employed.

10. 6 Implications

Acknowledging these findings, it is essential to adopt Gorski's (2008) concept of a "shift in consciousness"—the cultivation of self-awareness—as a critical starting point. Awareness, which involves recognizing one's thought processes, biases, and stereotypes, is developed through self-reflection, supervision, and group work (Torres-Rivera et al., 2001). One approach to facilitate this shift among educators is through personal and collective auto-reflexive work (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2006; Cloonan et al., 2017). This process entails recognizing the impact of cultural background and experiences on individual perspectives and identities, confronting personal biases and prejudices, analyzing how these biases shape interactions, and initiating intercultural dialogue by sharing this self-awareness with colleagues within the specific cultural context of the school (Cloonan et al., 2017). The rationale behind such self-exploration lies in the understanding that adopting an intercultural perspective involves recognizing our cultural roots and understanding how our identities are shaped by our cultural backgrounds, much like how others' identities are influenced by theirs (Bredella, 2003; Sarli, 2017).

Numerous scholars argue that these issues cannot be resolved by simply offering "cultural diversity training" (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2006; Kowal & Downing, 2011). Such programs have been criticized for presenting racial and cultural differences in simplistic and reductionist ways, reinforcing stereotypes and perpetuating static, unchanging notions of culture and cultural differences (Cloonan et al., 2017). These approaches often neglect the cultural practices of the racial, religious, and cultural majority, depict minorities as the only groups possessing "culture," and emphasize differences between "us" and "them," thus reinforcing prejudices and racism that sustain inequitable power relations in society (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2006; Colvin-Burque, Zugazaga, & Davis-Maye, 2007; Cloonan et al., 2017). In contrast, an effective approach to intercultural education requires profound shifts in individual awareness, rather than merely practical or systematic changes often labeled as "intercultural education" (Gorski, 2008). Without these shifts, intercultural education programs in schools risk being reduced to superficial content, focusing on "food, flags, and festivals" of different ethnic groups (Cloonan et al., 2017).

Our results confirmed the pivotal role of intercultural sensitivity as a predictor of well-being, both in terms of subjective well-being and in reducing burnout. The capacity to interact with others without judgment, to take another's perspective, and to appreciate and value different viewpoints appears to form the foundation for developing other intercultural competences. As Guillén-Yparrea and Ramírez-Montoya (2023) emphasize, intercultural encounters are, above all, human interactions between individuals with distinct cultural experiences. In this sense, the ability to engage with others in an open and non-judgmental manner becomes essential—not only for fostering mutual understanding but also for addressing practical challenges, such as overcoming language barriers (Augustin et al., 2024). Consequently, relational competence emerges as a central dimension in the discourse on interculturalism and a critical focus for its development and support in educational contexts.

In practical terms, one promising approach to cultivating awareness through relational engagement and storytelling is represented by the collective narrative practices (Denborough, 2008, 2018). These practices offer opportunities for individuals to share their stories and listen to others, prompting reflection on how these narratives shape their subjective experiences. Personal narratives are powerful tools for self-interpretation and challenging dominant social narratives (Bruner, 2004). By amplifying marginalized voices, these stories contribute to reshaping societal norms and countering stereotypes (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Furthermore, such practices encourage reflexivity, helping individuals reflect on their own cultural, traditional, and familial backgrounds, which leads to greater awareness and flexibility in navigating intercultural interactions (Kowal et al., 2013). Promoting these methods can facilitate a deeper level of awareness necessary for adopting an effective intercultural approach.

It can also foster more inclusive and positive intercultural encounters within schools, while challenging the structural inequalities perpetuated by training programs that focus exclusively on the cultural characteristics of minority groups (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2006).

Moreover, continuing to consider the implications related to how to promote IC and IS in ECE educators trough dedicated trainings, it is crucial to recognize that such interventions are deeply embedded within the broader organizational and contextual frameworks of teaching. As mentioned earlier, educators' practices are shaped not only by their individual knowledge and goals but also by their colleagues, professional networks, school policies, national discourses, and ultimately their well-being. Therefore, a standardized, "one-size-fits-all" approach is unlikely to yield optimal results (Romijn et al., 2020). Training programs should be designed based on a comprehensive needs assessment that considers the educator's unique environment and external influences, recognizing that educators are integral members of a larger school community, not isolated individuals. Community-driven strategies, along with the active involvement of key stakeholders such as school directors, counselors, staff members, and families, are essential for creating an environment that supports the effective implementation of new strategies and practices (Romijn et al., 2020).. Furthermore, it is crucial to consider the resources and policies available at the school, district, and national levels. For instance, resources such as time for implementation and suitable classroom materials are essential for driving meaningful change. However, policies can either facilitate or impede progress. For example, monolingual perspectives often clash with the objectives of multilingual professional development initiatives. Interventions that tackle these obstacles and engage key decision-makers who can influence policy are more likely to produce lasting impact.By integrating these factors, we can ensure that educational interventions are more effective, sustainable, and responsive to the specific needs of the community they serve (Romijn et al., 2020).

10. 7 Limitations and future perspectives

Despite the rigorous methodology employed, several limitations warrant consideration. Firstly, the choice to conduct the review of scientific articles using only English-language databases could introduce a potential language bias, as studies published in languages other than English may have been overlooked. This may result in the exclusion of valuable insights and findings from non-English studies, leading to an incomplete representation of existing knowledge on intercultural sensitivity and competence.

Secondly, while quantitative instruments provide valuable data, they inherently lack the ability to capture the dynamic nature of the constructs under study. Intercultural sensitivity and competence are complex phenomena influenced by various contextual and intersectional factors and processes that may not be fully captured through quantitative measures alone. Future research should complement

quantitative data with qualitative investigations to delve into educators' nuanced perceptions and experiences regarding intercultural sensitivity and competence. Qualitative methodologies would provide a deeper understanding of the contextual factors shaping educators' intercultural interactions and inform the development of targeted interventions. By delving into educators' lived experiences, qualitative research can offer rich insights into the complexities of intercultural competence within early childhood education settings.

Additionally, the sample predominantly consisted of female participants, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. It is important to emphasize, however, that at both local and national levels, preschool educators are overwhelmingly women, comprising about 99% of the workforce (MIUR 2023). Consequently, we are confronted with a highly feminized professional environment. However, for future theoretical considerations, it would be profoundly enlightening to incorporate male educators or conduct a targeted analysis of male and non-binary educators within school settings. Such an approach promises to enhance our comprehension of intercultural sensitivity and competence across genders, potentially revealing nuanced gender-specific dimensions in perceptions and behaviors

Furthermore, the self-report nature of the survey may be susceptible to social desirability bias, wherein participants may respond in a manner they perceive as socially acceptable rather than providing genuine responses.

Lastly, while efforts were made to ensure participant diversity, the study's focus on educators within the Italian early childhood education sector may restrict the generalizability of findings to other educational contexts or cultural settings.

10. 8 Conclusion

Our study provides compelling quantitative evidence supporting Deardorff’s model of intercultural competence, particularly among ECE educators. It underscores the crucial role of relational skills (i.e., IS) as foundational to fostering affective, cognitive and behavioral capabilities in intercultural contexts while also promoting educators' well-being which are both essential for navigating intercultural dynamics within ECE practice. This highlights the importance of prioritizing relational skills as a cornerstone for enhancing overall intercultural competence. Additionally our study underscores the catalytic role of self-awareness within this developmental process. Our findings suggest that educator training programs should shift focus from solely imparting theoretical knowledge to emphasizing relational skills and self-reflective practices advocating for action-research paradigms that promote awareness within school communities. Storytelling methodologies offer promising avenues for cultivating awareness. These practices encourage reflective dialogue, foster empathy, and empower educators and stakeholders to co-create inclusive educational

environments that reflect the diverse needs and aspirations of their communities. This paradigm shift is critical for two key reasons. First, self-awareness emerges as a driving force for developing other dimensions of intercultural competence—skills, attitudes, and knowledge (Fantini, 2009)—and significantly contributes to educators' sense of personal accomplishment. Second, recognizing that cultural background shape's individual identity and perspectives, as it does for others, is vital for fostering mutual understanding and harmony in diverse societies, aligning with the UNESCO Statement on Intercultural Communication. These insights point to the necessity of framing intercultural competence within a broader context. It requires addressing not only individual educators' development but also the well-being of children and families from migrant backgrounds. Moreover, structural and systemic barriers that undermine well-being must be acknowledged and confronted. A comprehensive, community-centered approach is essential, one that incorporates historical, geographical, social, cultural, and political contexts to create sustainable and equitable solutions for fostering social justice.

Transition chapter

As anticipated in the first part of the thesis (see Chapter 2), the studies presented in this dissertation did not follow a predetermined or linear trajectory. Rather, they evolved through an iterative process shaped by field encounters, institutional dynamics, exchanges with the pedagogical coordination team of the Municipality of Genoa, and continuous methodological reflection.

Following the completion of the quantitative phase (Study 1), the transition toward qualitative inquiry was informed not only by the overall aims of this doctoral research—conceived as a practice-oriented project supporting the Municipality's efforts to strengthen inclusion within public early childhood education—but also by a close analytic engagement with the key findings that emerged from the quantitative data.

Study 1 highlighted that educators' intercultural competence cannot be understood primarily as a set of abstract knowledge or technical skills. Instead, the results underscored the central role of relational competences, particularly those connected to self-awareness, reflexivity, and the quality of interpersonal engagement, as foundational to the development of affective, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions of intercultural competence. These relational dimensions were also strongly associated with educators' well-being, suggesting that intercultural work in early childhood education is deeply entangled with emotional labour, identity, and professional positioning.

Crucially, the quantitative findings indicated that training approaches focused predominantly on theoretical or normative content may be insufficient—and, in some cases, potentially detrimental—if not accompanied by opportunities for reflective processing and relational support. Self-awareness emerged as a catalytic factor in this process, pointing to the need for educational and training spaces that enable educators to reflect on their own positionality, experiences, and emotional responses within intercultural contexts.

These findings directly informed the design of the subsequent qualitative studies (Studies 2–4). Rather than using qualitative methods solely to "explain" or "illustrate" quantitative results, the qualitative phase was conceived as a space to explore in depth the relational, experiential, and contextual dimensions that the quantitative data had identified as central but could not fully capture. On this basis, the following research questions were formulated:

1. *Why, despite explicit references to interculturality in educational policies, does it often remain ineffective in practice? How is interculturality understood and enacted within early childhood education services, and which relational, institutional, and contextual factors hinder or support its implementation*? (Study 2)

2. *How do educators and parents with a migration background experience intercultural dynamics within early childhood education settings? What challenges do they encounter, and what forms of agency, knowledge, and relational resources do they mobilize in navigating these challenges?* (Studies 3 and 4)

Studies 3 and 4 adopted narrative practices inspired by the work of Michael White (White & Epston, 1990; White, 2007) and by approaches developed at the Dulwich Centre (Denborough, 2008, 2018). This methodological choice was not incidental but was directly informed by the quantitative findings of Study 1. Narrative practices were selected precisely because they operationalize relationality and reflexivity as methodological principles: they create structured spaces for self-awareness, shared meaning-making, and the articulation of lived experience within social and institutional contexts.

Within this framework, narrative practices functioned simultaneously as research methods and as research interventions, aligning with action-research paradigms that foreground participation, reflexivity, and transformation. By centring stories, relationships, and collective reflection, these practices offered a coherent methodological response to the quantitative evidence that relational and reflective competences are central to intercultural work and educators' well-being in early childhood education.

In this sense, the qualitative studies did not represent a departure from the quantitative phase, but a deepening and recontextualization of its findings through a critical and situated lens. The transition from Study 1 to Studies 2–4 thus reflects a deliberate methodological progression: from identifying key relational dimensions quantitatively, to exploring how these dimensions are lived, negotiated, and transformed within everyday educational practices.

11. Study 2. Interculturality and inclusion in early childhood education: a critical ethnographic inquiry of lived meanings and the conditions shaping practice

11. 1 Introduction

In contemporary educational discourse, the concept of *interculturality* encompasses a wide range of meanings and interpretations. Across research, policy, and institutional practice, it is associated with ideals such as coexistence, dialogue, inclusion, and mutual understanding. Yet these notions are not always aligned, and the term itself remains open to diverse—and sometimes conflicting—uses. Policy documents and educational frameworks at international, national, and local levels increasingly promote *interculturality* as a guiding principle for fostering inclusion and social cohesion in early childhood education. However, translating these objectives into concrete practices often proves challenging. Implementation tends to vary across contexts, depending on available resources, institutional priorities, and the differing understandings held by educators, families, and policymakers.

The Italian case discussed in the first part of this dissertation (see Chapter 8, Subchapter 8.4) provides an example of this emerging discourse. Indeed, Italy has progressively incorporated *interculturality* into its educational discourse through national guidelines and local policy initiatives that emphasize inclusion and interculturality within increasingly diverse school communities. Nonetheless, the practical realization of these goals remains uneven, revealing tensions between formal commitments and everyday realities in early childhood education settings.

In light of these considerations, and as illustrated by the Italian case, this study aims to explore how interculturality is understood, interpreted, and enacted within early childhood education, and to identify the factors that facilitate or hinder its implementation in practice, with a particular focus on the perspectives of both educators and parents with a migration background.

The plurality of meanings of interculturality

In contemporary educational and international discourse, *interculturality* is widely recognized as a multifaceted and evolving concept, whose meanings reflect diverse philosophical, pedagogical, and political orientations. Scholars have approached it from at least three main perspectives.

First, interculturality has been conceived as a pedagogical and dialogical principle grounded in mutual respect, reciprocity, and learning through encounter (Portera, 2011; Rapanta & Trovão, 2021; Mikander et al., 2018; Elias & Mansouri, 2023). Within this view, the intercultural dimension of education is fundamentally relational: it seeks to foster empathy, openness, and communicative competence through everyday interaction. Education thus becomes a process of cultivating shared values and attitudes that enable individuals to coexist and collaborate across cultural boundaries.

Second, interculturality has also been interpreted as a social and ethical project aimed at promoting democratic coexistence, inclusion, and social cohesion in increasingly plural societies (UNESCO, 2025; Akkari & Maleq, 2019; Cummins, 2015). This perspective connects education to broader social and political goals, positioning intercultural education as a tool for reducing inequalities and ensuring participation. In this sense, interculturality is not only about understanding cultural difference, but about fostering equity and recognition—values that are central to social justice and civic belonging.

Third, a more recent critical and decolonial turn in the literature has redefined interculturality as a transformative process that questions the power structures, epistemic hierarchies, and Eurocentric assumptions embedded in educational systems (Dervin, 2016; Walsh, 2018; Aman, 2017; Zembylas, 2023; R'boul, 2023; Saidi, 2024; González-Machado & Santillán-Anguiano, 2024). From this perspective, interculturality extends beyond fostering dialogue: it seeks to transform the very conditions under which knowledge, identity, and difference are produced and valued. This approach calls for *inter-epistemic dialogue* and the inclusion of marginalized voices, particularly those from Indigenous and Global South contexts (Ravet et al., 2024; Valencia & Valencia, 2023; R'boul & Saidi, 2023).

Despite their differing orientations, these perspectives coexist within educational research and policy, contributing both to the richness and the conceptual ambiguity of the term. Several scholars have noted that "multicultural" and "intercultural" frameworks are often used interchangeably, despite their distinct theoretical premises (Coulby, 2006; Elias & Mansouri, 2023; Van Maele & Jin, 2022). As a result, interculturality remains a situated and negotiated construct, whose interpretation depends on specific historical, political, and institutional contexts. This openness explains its wide diffusion across educational systems, yet it also complicates its consistent translation into pedagogical practice.

Interculturality within educational contexts

Within educational theory, interculturality is frequently anchored in social constructivist and socio-cultural perspectives, which view learning as a socially mediated process shaped by interaction, communication, and shared experience (Vygotsky, 1978; Banks, 2020). From this standpoint, education is conceived as a dynamic space in which cultural meanings are co-constructed, and diversity is understood not as an obstacle but as a resource for cognitive, emotional, and social development (Leutviler et al., 2018; Kurteš et al., 2017; Holmes et al., 2022).

However, the way interculturality is interpreted and enacted in schools varies widely across national and institutional contexts. While many educational systems have integrated it into curricula, educator education, and early childhood frameworks as a guiding principle for inclusion, its pedagogical translation often differs according to local priorities and constraints. In some cases, the focus lies on fostering intercultural dialogue, empathy, and cooperative learning (Coulby, 2006; Mighani et al.,

2019). In others, it is associated primarily with linguistic support for multilingual learners or celebratory activities that showcase cultural diversity (Bajzáth et al., 2022; Pongračić, 2020). Although such initiatives may raise awareness and encourage positive attitudes toward difference, scholars caution that, without deeper reflection, they risk remaining symbolic or event-based, rather than transforming the relational fabric of educational practice (Holmes et al., 2022; Yarychev, 2024). Recent studies highlight the value of constructivist and experiential pedagogies—such as inquiry-based learning, dialogic approaches, and collaborative projects—that actively engage learners in intercultural encounters and meaning-making (Leutviler et al., 2018; Mighani et al., 2019; Spieler et al., 2025). In this sense, intercultural education is not about acquiring knowledge *about* other cultures, but about developing relational, communicative, and ethical competences that enable dialogue and cooperation across difference. These issues acquire particular relevance in early childhood education. The early years are a formative period during which children begin to construct notions of self, others, and belonging (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). ECE institutions thus represent key spaces where children experience diversity in practice, through relationships with peers, educators, and families. Research in this field highlights diverse approaches: some emphasize the recognition of languages and cultural heritages (Fermín-González & Domínguez-Garrido, 2021; Pongračić, 2020), while others focus on relational, emotional, and ethical dimensions of encounter fostered through play, storytelling, and shared classroom activities (Suri & Chandra, 2021; Gómez-Parra, 2021; Raivio et al., 2022). Emerging perspectives also underline the importance of integrating local values, worldviews, and sustainability ethics to create inclusive "communities of care" (Raivio et al., 2022; Kultti, 2022).

The professional development of educators plays a decisive role in shaping these practices. Studies stress the need for reflective, practice-based training that enhances intercultural awareness and critical self-reflection (Domínguez et al., 2025; Yarychev, 2024). Culturally responsive educator education—through experiential learning, international collaboration, or digital initiatives such as COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning)—has shown promise in building educators' confidence and intercultural competence (Spieler et al., 2025). Overall, intercultural education appears not as a single model but as a continuum of practices and orientations, whose effectiveness depends on institutional conditions, professional preparation, and prevailing societal discourses on diversity. Within ECE, interculturality emerges as a multidimensional construct—linguistic, relational, ethical, and affective—through which children, educators, and families learn to coexist and communicate across difference.

The policy–practice gap

Although interculturality has gained increasing prominence in international, national, and local education frameworks, research consistently reveals a persistent gap between its rhetorical

endorsement and its practical enactment. Policy documents often present intercultural education as a cornerstone of inclusion, equality, and social cohesion, yet these commitments are rarely matched by sufficient resources, institutional support, or systematic professional training (Elias & Mansouri, 2023; Giavrimis & Dimitriadou, 2023; Yarychev, 2024).

A central factor underlying this disjunction is the conceptual ambiguity of the term itself. The coexistence of multiple definitions allows different—and at times conflicting—interpretations across policy, research, and practice. As scholars note, such vagueness can dilute interculturality's critical potential, leading to depoliticized or essentialist views of culture (Roiha & Sommier, 2021; Romijn et al., 2021; Davies, 2022). Consequently, while the principles of interculturality are often embraced at the policy level, their translation into practice frequently remains fragmented, limited to symbolic initiatives such as cultural events or awareness days rather than integrated into everyday pedagogy (Tobin, Arzubiaga & Adair, 2013; Faas et al., 2014; Roiha & Sommier, 2021; Romijn et al., 2021).

Educators themselves often express uncertainty about how to implement intercultural approaches meaningfully, citing limited training and institutional guidance (Romijn et al., 2021; Bajzáth et al., 2022; Choi & Ahn, 2024). Professional development, where available, tends to focus on cultural knowledge rather than on critical reflection and transformative practice, thus perpetuating descriptive or celebratory models of diversity (Domínguez et al., 2025; Han & Senyshyn, 2024).

This implementation gap is particularly evident in early childhood education, where interculturality is frequently promoted as an inclusive ideal but seldom examined in its relational and everyday dimensions (Bajzáth et al., 2022; Domínguez et al., 2025; Choi & Ahn, 2024). Educators in ECE settings often rely on intuitive, experience-based strategies rather than structured reflective frameworks, and systemic barriers—such as limited time, training, and curricular flexibility—further constrain the potential for sustained intercultural engagement (Pongračić, 2020; Giavrimis & Dimitriadou, 2023).

Emerging research suggests that context-sensitive professional learning models, including guided reflection, peer mentoring, and collaborative international programs, can foster deeper and more consistent enactment of intercultural principles (Romijn et al., 2021; Spieler et al., 2025; Han & Senyshyn, 2024). These findings emphasize that genuine intercultural education depends not only on policy intent but on continuous institutional commitment and supported educator reflexivity.

In sum, while interculturality enjoys broad policy legitimacy, its pedagogical realization remains uneven and often rhetorical. This persistent gap underscores the need for empirical investigation into how interculturality is understood, interpreted, and enacted within educational communities—especially in early childhood settings, where the foundations of inclusion, belonging, and identity first begin to take shape.

11. 2 The Study

Building on the theoretical and empirical premises outlined above, this qualitative study investigates the dynamics of inclusion and interculturality within early childhood education settings, examining how these concepts are understood, interpreted, and enacted in everyday school life. Adopting an ethnographic approach, the research combines participant observation with semi-structured interviews involving educators and parents—particularly those with a migration background—to capture the multiple meanings attributed to interculturality and to explore the challenges and opportunities that emerge in its practical implementation.

The study is guided by two central research questions:

1. How do parents and educators conceptualize interculturality within early childhood education? What convergences or differences can be observed between their perspectives?
2. Which factors enable or constrain the development of intercultural practices within ECE contexts?

By bringing together the voices of both educators and parents, the study aims to construct a comprehensive, multi-perspectival understanding of how interculturality takes shape in practice. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the everyday interactions, expectations, and negotiations that define the school environment and influence the broader processes of inclusion and interculturality in early education.

11. 3 Method

Fieldwork and participants

This study was conducted within two 0-6 educational institutions in the Northwest Italy (in the municipality of Genoa): one catering to children aged 0-3 (nursery) and another for children aged 3-6 (kindergarten). These schools were identified and selected through discussions with the municipal coordinators for 0-6 services, aiming to choose institutions with a highly heterogeneous composition in terms of the geographical origins of families and children. Additionally, the selected schools demonstrated motivation and interest in hosting my presence as a researcher within their daily practices to facilitate the study. Adopting ethnographic methodologies, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews, I spent three months in the nursery and three months in the kindergarten. Overall, I conducted interviews with 22 educators and 51 parents.

Participants interviewed

The study involved a total of 22 educators and 51 parents from two early childhood education settings—a nursery (0–3 years) and a kindergarten (3–6 years)—both located in the municipality of Genoa. This diverse participant group ensured a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives within each educational context.

Among the educators, all participants were female, with an overall mean age of 43.4 years (SD = 6.9). Specifically, 8 educators worked in the nursery and 14 in the kindergarten. Their professional experiences and roles provided insight into pedagogical approaches, institutional dynamics, and everyday practices related to inclusion and interculturality.

The parent group comprised 51 participants representing a wide range of national, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. Across both settings, approximately 76% were female, with a mean age of 39 years (SD = 5.4). Of these, 27 were parents of children attending the nursery and 24 the kindergarten. Their narratives offered valuable perspectives on family–school relationships, expectations toward educators, and the ways in which interculturality was experienced and interpreted in daily interactions.

Interview context

In both schools, interviews with the educational staff were conducted on the premises during working hours. These sessions took place within the paid working time allocated to non-teaching duties (monte ore), which educators are contractually required to dedicate to activities such as planning, reflection, or collaboration with families. Interviews with parents were arranged individually, on a case-by-case basis, according to each participant's availability and preferences. In most cases, parents chose to meet either inside the school or in its immediate surroundings, typically before or after dropping off or picking up their children. These times and places were perceived as convenient and familiar, allowing the conversations to take place in a relaxed and informal atmosphere. However, in several instances, parents preferred to meet elsewhere in the city—such as in cafés, parks, or their homes—where they felt more comfortable or where it was easier to reconcile the interview with their daily routines. All parent interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis, and no financial compensation was provided. This aspect was clearly communicated at the time of recruitment, yet no participant raised concerns or questions regarding remuneration throughout the research process.

Recruitment process

Participants for the interviews were recruited through targeted convenience sampling during the participant observation phase. The inclusion criteria for participation were:

1. Membership in the school community, either as staff or as parents.
2. Willingness to share personal thoughts and experiences on migration and interculturality.

The recruitment process began with an initial meeting with the municipal coordinator for early childhood education services, during which the objectives, scope, and methodological design of the study were presented. Following this institutional approval, two schools—a nursery (0–3 years) and a kindergarten (3–6 years)—were jointly selected with the coordinator, based on their diverse socio-cultural composition and their interest in participating in the research.

Subsequently, introductory meetings were held with the school coordinators and educational staff of both institutions to present the project, clarify its aims, and discuss the procedures for voluntary participation. In both educational contexts, the staff agreed to take part in the study, although in each case they expressed some concerns regarding the timing of the fieldwork and the fact that they had not been involved in the project's initial design phase. Nevertheless, once these issues were discussed and clarified, the educators showed openness and genuine interest in contributing to a study that addressed questions of inclusion and interculturality relevant to their daily work.

Educators were given time to consider their involvement, either by taking part in interviews or by assisting in engaging parents. Those who agreed to participate communicated their consent directly and collaborated fully throughout the period of participant observation.

The recruitment of parents was conducted in close collaboration with the educators. Notably, it was the educators themselves who proposed the idea of creating an informational flyer to introduce the project to families and encourage participation. They asked me to translate the flyer into multiple languages spoken within the school communities, ensuring accessibility for parents with diverse linguistic backgrounds. The flyers were distributed to all families, and during the first days of participant observation, educators also facilitated informal introductions between the myself and the parents at drop-off and pick-up times. These spontaneous exchanges provided an opportunity to briefly explain the research, answer questions, and obtain informed consent for participation.

Instruments and procedure

Qualitative data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation conducted between January and June 2024. The interviews, held in Italian, English, or Arabic depending on the participant's language preference, gathered detailed sociodemographic information, including age, gender, nationality, marital status, and educational attainment. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, was audio-recorded with consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. In addition to the interview transcripts, detailed field notes were produced both during and immediately following each interview, capturing contextual information, non-verbal cues, and preliminary analytical insights. Furthermore, participant observation was carried out over the course of full school days, encompassing all key moments of the children's daily routine — from their arrival at school in the morning, through classroom activities, meals, and recreational breaks, until their departure in the afternoon. These observational sessions generated rich ethnographic field notes aimed at deepening contextual understanding and triangulating the interview data. Prior to data collection, all participants received a comprehensive briefing about the research's nature, objectives, and procedures. They were explicitly informed of their right to decline

participation or withdraw at any stage without any repercussions. Informed consent forms, guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity, were thoroughly reviewed and signed by all participants.

Data analysis

After completing the interviews, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and, when necessary, translated into English. The resulting dataset was analyzed using Reflective Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), supported by NVivo 12 software. The analytical process followed an inductive, data-driven approach consistent with grounded theory principles (Snodgrass et al., 2020), while remaining embedded within a critical and reflexive epistemological framework.

Themes were developed through an iterative and interpretive engagement with the data, informed not only by participants' narratives but also by the researcher's positionality, emotional responses, and theoretical stance. Importantly, the interviews were not analyzed in isolation. As previously described, a substantial corpus of fieldnotes—produced during and immediately after participant observation—was systematically examined in parallel with the interview material. This triangulation between interviews and observations provided a richer and more contextualized understanding of the everyday practices and interactions within the school settings. Taken together, this analytical strategy allowed the study to capture how interculturality and inclusion are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted in daily educational life, highlighting the interplay between discourse, relational dynamics, and institutional conditions.

11. 4 Results

Two key macro-themes were constructed during the reflective thematic analysis: the diverse meanings ascribed to interculture and the factors that facilitate or obstruct interculturality in early childhood education settings. These themes underscore not only the complexity of intercultural dynamics but also the different perspectives of educators and parents. The following sections delve into each theme in detail, highlighting both areas of alignment and points of tension in how interculturality is interpreted and enacted within the school community.

The different meanings of interculture

Data shows how interculturality is not a stable or universally agreed-upon concept. In the context of early childhood education, it emerges as a polysemic and situated notion, shaped by the lived experiences, expectations, and positionalities of those who inhabit the educational space, specifically parents and educators. Rather than a fixed framework, interculture is expressed through a range of interpretations that coexist, overlap, and sometimes contradict one another.

> *"I asked a seemingly simple question—'What does interculture mean to you?'—and received a dozen answers. For some, it was about coexistence; for others, about racism. For a few, it*

was a word with no clear meaning at all. What struck me was how emotionally charged it was: it carried not just ideas, but memories, wounds, ideals, silences." (Field note – Kindergarten, March 2024)

From the narratives collected, interculturality emerged as a multifaceted and interwoven experience, articulated through three closely connected dimensions rather than distinct perspectives. It was described, first, as a confrontation with discrimination and exclusion—particularly racial discrimination—and as a response to fear, marginalization, and the search for recognition. At the same time, participants spoke of interculturality through an intersectional lens, emphasizing how experiences of belonging and exclusion are shaped by the intertwining of race, gender, class, religion, and bodily norms. Finally, interculturality was also understood as a relational and dialogical process, grounded in everyday encounters, empathy, and the continuous effort to create spaces of mutual understanding and coexistence.

These three dimensions coexist and overlap within participants' accounts, revealing interculturality as a dynamic, multidimensional practice through which individuals negotiate identity, difference, and inclusion in their everyday educational and social lives (Table 11).

Interculturality as confrontation with discrimination. Among the various meanings attributed to interculturality within early childhood education settings, the theme of discrimination—particularly racial discrimination—emerges as central yet contested. While some parents speak of interculturality as a space of protection and recognition, several educators experience it as a moral terrain, occasionally charged with discomfort or resistance. These divergent interpretations are not incidental: they are deeply shaped by the actors' social positions, lived experiences, and institutional roles within the school.

"I had planned to open the discussion around interculturality with a general question. I expected thoughtful but measured reflections. Instead, what emerged was raw and intimate: memories of discrimination, silences heavy with discomfort, and words charged with both hope and mistrust. It struck me how far-removed academic discourse is from these affective, embodied realities. Interculturality, here, is not a theoretical category—it is lived, felt, negotiated every day, in sometimes painful ways." (Field note – Kindergarten, February 2024)

Table 11

Dimensions and meanings of interculturality emerging from the analy

Dimension of Interculturality	Description	Parents' Perspective	Educators' Perspective
1. Interculturality as confrontation with discrimination	Interculturality is understood as a response to racism, exclusion, and the need for recognition and dignity. It embodies a protective and political dimension, rooted in lived experiences of discrimination.	Interculturality represents protection and hope for equity and safety for their children. Parents frame it as a response to everyday racism and social vulnerability.	Often interpreted as a moral or evaluative discourse that can provoke defensiveness or discomfort, especially when linked to accusations of bias. Some educators emphasize individual tolerance rather than systemic critique.
2. Interculturality through the lens of intersectionality	Interculturality is experienced through the entanglement of multiple social categories—race, class, gender, religion, and body norms—showing that inclusion and exclusion are multidimensional.	Parents connect exclusion not only to cultural difference but also to racialization, class hierarchies, and religious or bodily norms. Experiences of discrimination often intersect across these axes.	Educators recognize how their own class, gender, or cultural background shapes relationships with families. Some reflect on how social hierarchies influence their sense of belonging and professional practice.
3. Interculturality as relation and transformation	Interculturality is viewed as a relational and dialogical process—an ongoing encounter that fosters mutual learning, empathy, and personal transformation.	Emphasized in everyday ethics of care, respect, and coexistence. Parents focus on relational gestures—listening, kindness, reciprocity—as the basis of inclusion.	Seen as a transformative professional and personal journey; educators describe becoming more reflective, open, and self-aware through encounters with diversity.

Parents. For many parents with a migratory background, interculturality is not a theoretical construct but a necessary response to the racism they and their children encounter in daily life. The meaning of interculturality here is shaped by vulnerability, concern, and the urgent need for systemic protection. One mother explained:

> *"I am very happy that you are doing this work with the university about interculture… A lot of people are still very racist in this country. I experience this, and my fear is that my children will be victims of racism." (Mother, 36 years old, Ecuador)*

Another parent similarly emphasized:

> *"Talking about interculture is so important because there is still a lot of racism in our country… I don't know how it is possible, but still, it's like this—it is not acceptable." (Father, 47 years old, Bangladesh)*

These accounts foreground the protective and political function of intercultural education, especially when tied to hopes for a more equitable future for their children. Interculturality, this perspective, is less about dialogue and more about survival and recognition.

> *"After an interview, a mother looked at me and quietly asked, 'Do you think they will be safe here?' Her voice was steady but tense. It struck me how deeply this question connected school, race, and trust. For her, interculturality was not theory—it was the hope of dignity for her children." (Field note – Nursery, February 2024)*

Educators. Among educators, interculturality is often framed in terms of pedagogical ideals and personal openness. However, when explicitly linked to racism or bias, the conversation frequently triggers defensive or resistant responses. In these moments, interculturality shifts from being a professional value to becoming a space of potential exposure.

> *"Let's talk frankly, these discussions about interculture mean that now you are evaluating our level of racism."(Educator, 40 years old, Italy)*

This reaction illustrates how interculturality can evoke discomfort, particularly when educators feel that their professional or personal ethics are being questioned. Discussions on diversity, rather than fostering mutual reflection, can be experienced as threatening, especially in the absence of institutional support or structured dialogue.

At the same time, other educators expressed enthusiasm for diversity in a relational frame:

> *"I don't have a problem with anyone; I love all the cultures and all the people coming from different countries." (Educator, 45 years old, Italy)*

These statements, while positive, may risk reducing interculturality to a matter of individual tolerance, bypassing the need to critically examine systemic dynamics of exclusion.

"I noticed how the word 'racism' was never spoken aloud, even when we were discussing clear cases of exclusion. It was as if naming the problem would make it too real—or too uncomfortable to hold." (Fieldnote–Nursery, March 2024)

Interculturality through the lens of intersectionality. A second layer of meaning emerging from the fieldwork is the deep interconnection between interculturality and intersectionality. While intercultural discussions are often framed in terms of ethnic or national difference, the experiences shared by parents and educators reveal that identity is shaped by the entanglement of multiple dimensions—including gender, class, race, cultural practices, religion, and even body image. These intersecting factors influence how individuals perceive themselves, relate to others, and navigate inclusion and exclusion in early childhood education contexts.

"As I listened to people speak, I realized how impossible it was to isolate culture from the rest of their lived experience. The stories of being misjudged because of gender, dismissed because of class, or made invisible because of religion—all of them folded into how people made sense of 'difference.' It became clear that interculturality cannot be reduced to ethnicity or nationality—it is deeply layered and deeply felt." (Fieldnote–Nursery, March 2024)

Parents. Many parents described how their experiences of marginalization were not simply tied to cultural or linguistic difference, but to intersecting social conditions. A recurring theme was how racial identity—particularly Blackness—was a defining factor in limiting access to basic rights such as housing:

"The house here belongs to Italians. So it may be many foreigners here, may be from other countries, but the problem is for me... it's difficult for them to give houses to Black people." (Mother, 32 years old, Nigeria)

This statement exemplifies how interculturality is often mediated by structural racism, rather than individual cultural misunderstandings. For this parent, the problem is not about integration or communication—but about institutional exclusion based on racialized identity.

Class, too, emerged as a significant axis of differentiation. One mother reflected on the social hierarchies she encountered in her child's school environment:

"I really felt different there. I truly felt different because all the girls had their light blue blouses, little leather belts with golden heart-shaped buckles – you know, like little dolls – and I, no, I was just as I am now, hooded up. Even the educators were much more inclined to interact with kids from those families. And this is what is happening also nowadays. The most important thing is the financial aspect, not the culture." (Mother, 42 years old, Italy)

Another parent highlighted how class and professional background created feelings of inadequacy and exclusion in social situations:

> *"I believe that sometimes at dinners, I'll be the only 'fly in the ointment.'" (Mother, 42 years old, Italy)*

These accounts illustrate how economic capital and symbolic prestige operate as invisible boundaries within supposedly inclusive spaces, reinforcing a sense of otherness even among those who share cultural backgrounds.

Religion and body image also surfaced as points of tension. One mother reflected on the emotional difficulty of navigating religious difference in daily interactions:

> *"I don't know if it's just me, but I think the biggest challenges were more related to cultural and religious contexts. Sometimes, in daily activities, there were limits. Also, being part of and following a set of religious rules, which clashed with my own view of religion, was something that bothered me."(Mother, 45 years old, Italy)*

Another parent described how physical appearance and body image shaped inclusion and social judgment among children:

> *"Honestly, it has never happened to me, maybe because you can see that I have a certain likability, but they really felt defeated, maybe because they were a bit chubbier than the others."(Mother, 45 years old, Ecuador)*

These reflections reveal that intercultural belonging is not only shaped by cultural practices, but also by normative expectations about gender roles, beauty standards, and religious conformity.

Educators. Educators also offered powerful insights into how intersectional factors shape relationships and educational dynamics. One educator recounted an experience that illustrated how gender and trauma intersect in shaping trust and interpersonal interaction:

> *"There was one incident that stuck with me. A mother from Nigeria, who had been through terrible violence from her ex-partner, came to me during parent-educator meetings. I remember her walking toward me, but she kept stepping back. She told me right away, 'Sorry, I don't even know you, you're a man, and I find it hard to trust you.'" (Educator, 50 years old, Italy)*

This encounter reveals how past trauma and gendered power dynamics mediate intercultural relations in subtle but profound ways. The educator is not rejected for cultural reasons, but because of what his gender represents in the mother's embodied memory. These everyday micro-interactions illustrate the complexity of educational spaces, where identity is never singular and neutrality is impossible.

Other educators reflected on how their own class background influenced their perceptions of inclusion. One educator recalled feeling different from more privileged families:

"I grew up in a family where we never had much, and when I started working in certain schools, I felt that I didn't belong. The mothers would talk about vacations, nannies, and tennis lessons… I didn't have those things, and I felt it in my posture, in the words I chose." (Educator, 46 years old, Italy)

These voices underscore how educators, too, are embedded in social hierarchies, and how their experiences of class, gender, or cultural difference can influence their approach to diversity and relational work.

Interculturality as relation and transformation. Beyond the dimensions of discrimination and intersectionality, a third powerful meaning attributed to interculturality is that of relationship—a space for encounter, self-discovery, and mutual transformation. In this register, interculturality is not seen as a policy framework or identity label, but as a living process of becoming-with others, shaped by shared humanity, emotional resonance, and everyday cohabitation.

"What struck me most during these conversations was how often people spoke of relationships—not programs, not projects, but people. They talked about parents who changed their perspectives, children who made them reflect, colleagues who challenged them. Interculturality, in these moments, wasn't about diversity management. It was about connection, humility, and mutual growth." (Fieldnote–Nursery, March 2024)

Educators. Among educators, interculturality is frequently described as a deeply personal journey. Many reflected on how working in diverse environments had not only enriched their professional practice but also transformed their sense of self.

"Interculturality, and the people I worked with, the experience of difference in all its forms, allowed me to live through what was happening to me in my life in a freer way. I have to say thank you to everyone who has been part of my life—first and foremost, the mothers, the parents—because their stories, their accounts, their courage became my own." (Educator, 44 years old, non-binary, Italy)

This statement reveals how educational relationships can transcend institutional roles, becoming spaces of empathy, resonance, and shared vulnerability. For this educator, the stories of others became not just learning materials, but mirrors for their own transformation.

Another educator expressed a similar sentiment:

"The encounter with others has also been a journey of conscious growth. Whether with my colleagues, parents or children." (Educator, 57 years old, non-binary, Italy)

These reflections suggest that interculturality is not a static competence but an evolving, relational practice—one that demands openness, reflection, and continuous learning. Rather than being about

mastering the "Other," it becomes about unlearning and re-learning oneself in the presence of difference.

Parents. Parents, too, framed interculturality in relational terms, though often starting from more grounded experiences of daily interaction. Their voices highlighted the centrality of respect, empathy, and kindness as foundations for coexistence.

> *"We are all people and we stay together, we must listen to each other, respect and stay together. That is the point." (Mother, 32 years old, Nigeria)*

Another parent echoed this view, emphasizing that interculturality is not primarily about understanding exotic traditions, but about cultivating a respectful and ethical way of being with others:

> *"We just have to be kind, talk with others, and respect those who are different from us… It is a matter of relation and respect, not different cultures." (Mother, 34 years old, Ecuador)*

These narratives resist a static or essentialist view of culture. Instead, they promote a vision of interculturality as a moral and relational orientation, rooted in the day-to-day ethics of care and reciprocity. While not always framed in explicitly political terms, these voices offer a powerful redefinition of inclusion—not as the integration of others into a predefined norm, but as a shared practice of mutual recognition and human connection.

The voices in this section invite us to rethink interculturality not as a fixed body of knowledge, but as a transformative relation—a becoming that unfolds in encounters with others, and through others. For educators, this often takes the form of biographical and professional metamorphosis. For parents, it is grounded in daily practices of respect, coexistence, and hope for their children's futures. What emerges is a pluriversal vision of interculturality—not a universal model of how to live with difference, but a multiplicity of situated ways of building relations across boundaries. in the process of relation.

The factors promoting and hindering interculture

The analysis also brought to light a second major dimension: the factors and conditions that enable or impede the enactment of interculturality within early childhood education settings. Interculturality in early childhood education is not simply the result of good intentions or individual attitudes—it is shaped, constrained, and enabled by a constellation of contextual factors that operate across multiple levels. These include the physical architecture of educational spaces, the emotional and relational climate of the school, the quality and ethics of inter-institutional collaborations, and the broader socio-political and cultural environment in which education is embedded.

Throughout the fieldwork, it became evident that promoting or obstructing interculture does not depend solely on the presence of "diversity" or the adoption of inclusive discourses. Rather,

interculture is made possible—or rendered fragile—by the ways spaces are designed, by how people relate, by the support (or abandonment) offered by external institutions, and by the narratives of belonging and exclusion that circulate in the wider society. Table 12 summarizes the main factors that promote or hinder interculturality within early childhood education settings, highlighting convergences and divergences between educators' and parents' perspectives. As shown, both groups perceive interculturality as shaped by material, relational, and structural dimensions, though their emphases differ depending on positionality and lived experience.

The architecture of places and spaces. Spaces are never neutral. Within early childhood education, the architecture of places—their layout, location, material condition, and symbolic history—plays a decisive role in shaping how interculturality is lived, fostered, or interrupted. Physical structures do not simply contain relationships; they produce them, giving form to the possibilities of encounter, separation, or inclusion.

> *"This school is organized in two different floors and the educators and the children seldomly they met. This is also happening to the parents. Additionally the rooms are having closed doors so the parents are coming to bring their kinds and then left. There is no place to gather and talk. It became clear to me very early on that the space itself speaks. It welcomes or excludes, connects or isolates, builds bridges or erects walls. And yet, these architectural messages are often so taken-for-granted that we forget they are also political: who sees whom, who meets whom, and who gets to belong, are all shaped by how a school is built and maintained." (Field note–Nursery,March,2024)*

Educators. Educators frequently emphasized the importance of the school's physical location within the neighbourhood as a key enabler of intercultural connection. A centrally placed school, surrounded by other institutions, public landmarks, and everyday social life, naturally fosters openness and interaction:

> *"Here is our school, right in the heart of the neighbourhood. Behind it, there's a church, some cafés, and all the other schools. It's located in the very central part of the area, where everyone passes through." (Educator, 44 years old, Italy)*

However, beyond geographic centrality, the physical state of the building emerged as a powerful factor shaping collective identity. Schools in disrepair, with aging infrastructure and poor maintenance, were often described as spaces of fragmentation—where connection is made harder, not easier.

> *"The building of this school is very old, and we constantly face issues related to wear and lack of maintenance. This is a big problem for us because it causes us to be separated, and*

we lose strength and energy. Together, we are strong, but when we are separated, we lose our power."(Educator, 44 years old, non-binary, Italy)

The internal layout of school buildings also has significant relational effects. Circular structures and shared central spaces support visibility, spontaneity, and inclusion:

"Inside the school, the spaces are very large. There are three floors, including the ground floor, all arranged around a central common area that coincides with the entrance. The presence of the large open space creates opportunities for sharing and interaction with the entire school community." (Educator, 60 years old, Italy)

By contrast, vertical separations and stratified layouts reinforce division, not only spatially but symbolically:

"You've noticed that there are significant differences between those who work upstairs and those who work downstairs. Structurally, we seem divided into two distinct realities." (Educator, 40 years old, Italy)

Such spatial fragmentation also affects the relationships between professionals, especially when educators and assistants are confined to separate areas:

"The division between educators and assistants is also reflected in the division of spaces. The assistants have a separate area where they spend their day; they never stay in the classrooms with the educators and the children." (Educator, 63 years old, Italy)

Some educators also reflected on how classroom design itself—with circular layouts and open central spaces—fosters equity and participation among children:

"The tables are arranged in a U-shape along the edges of the room, ensuring that all the children can see each other while leaving a central area entirely dedicated to their activities." (Educator, 40 years old, Italy)

Finally, the temporal stability of a school within a neighborhood was described as vital for building trust and continuity:

"If a school remains in one place over time, it becomes an integral part of the neighborhood and the community, serving as a space where listening, dialogue, and connection become possible. A school is not just a physical place; it carries values and histories that are passed down." (Educator, 40 years old, Italy)

Parents. Parents also articulated how the spatial organization of the school impacts their sense of inclusion or exclusion. One key element was visibility—the ability to see, enter, and be present within the learning environment. When architectural design obstructs visual or physical access, parents may feel distanced from their children's experiences and from educators:

"Sometimes I leave my daughter and don't even see where she goes. The entrance is narrow and there are too many people. I don't want to bother anyone, so I just leave. But it makes me feel disconnected." (Mother, 37 years old, Tunisia)

Another parent expressed appreciation for moments when spatial openness allowed for informal connection:

"I like it when I can come in and stay a few minutes, just to see how my son is doing. If the space is open, I feel like I'm part of the school, not just someone dropping off a child." (Mother, 34 years old, Peru)

For many parents, the school is not just a service provider—it is, or could be, a community space. But this depends greatly on how the space is designed and how accessible it feels to them.

"A mother arrived early and waited outside because she 'didn't want to interrupt.' The architecture, in this case, didn't invite her in—it signaled thresholds. It made me wonder: how many relationships are lost because the walls say 'stop' before the people do?" (Field note – Nursery, March,2024)

Symbolic space: what is (not) visible. In early childhood education, space is never just material—it is also cultural and symbolic. Beyond walls, corridors, and layouts, the environment communicates values, norms, and imaginaries about what is considered central, legitimate, or peripheral. These symbolic dimensions often go unnoticed, yet they profoundly shape the experience of inclusion and exclusion for both children and families.

"On the classroom walls: drawings of nuclear families, posters with white-skinned cartoon children, signs only in Italian. The space was not hostile—yet it was quietly homogeneous. I wondered how a parent or child who did not see themselves reflected here might feel. It reminded me that visibility is not a given—it is designed, and it speaks." (Field note – Nursery, March,2024)

Educators. Although educators rarely addressed the symbolic aspects of space directly, some revealed an emerging awareness of how the environment reflects specific cultural norms. These norms are often unintentional, but they convey a powerful sense of what is "normal," and by contrast, what is "other." Several educators admitted that their daily materials, stories, and traditions tend to reflect their own backgrounds, which are often white, Italian, and middle-class.

"Sometimes I realize that all the books we read, the songs we sing, the holidays we celebrate… they're all from the same world. And that's the world I know. But it's not the only one." (Educator, 43 years old, Italy)

Other educators reflected on how certain expressions of cultural difference are framed not as part of everyday life, but as "special events" or "exceptions," reinforcing the idea that diversity exists outside the norm.

> *"When we talk about Christmas, there's space. When we talk about Ramadan, it's seen as something special—almost exceptional. That says something." (Educator, 41 years old, Italy)*

In these reflections, what emerges is not a rejection of diversity, but rather a recognition that representation operates subtly, often affirming one worldview while rendering others invisible.

Parents. For many parents—especially those with migrant or racialized backgrounds—the symbolic environment of the school can generate feelings of discomfort or marginality, even when interpersonal relationships are positive. Their sense of inclusion is not only relational, but also shaped by whether their identities, languages, and traditions are visible in the shared cultural space.

> *"I don't expect everything to be about my culture. But sometimes, it feels like it doesn't exist here. That we're invisible." (Mother, 35 years old, Tunisia)*

In some cases, parents described how their children noticed these symbolic absences too—especially when books, posters, or songs did not reflect their family forms, skin tones, or languages. These gaps can quietly communicate that their experiences are secondary or irrelevant.

> *"A mother told me: 'My daughter once asked why no children in her storybook looked like her. She wasn't angry—just curious. But I realized in that moment how early invisibility begins.'" (Field note – Kindergarten, May,2024)*

School climate. Within early childhood education, the school climate profoundly shapes the lived experience of interculturality: it can foster trust, openness, and recognition—or breed exclusion, tension, and invisibility.

> *"There was no single episode that defined the climate of the school—it was the sum of small things: the way a educator greeted a parent, how children were spoken to, how staff spoke to each other when no one was watching. You could feel whether people were at ease, or whether something heavy lingered beneath the surface. Culture lived in the air between people." (Field note – Kindergarten, May, 2024)*

Educators. Educators often described school climate as something fragile and collective, built day by day through mutual respect and shared responsibility. Several pointed to the emotional climate among colleagues as a crucial precondition for working well with children and families:

"If we don't feel supported or heard among ourselves, it's hard to create a positive climate for the children or for the parents. The tone we set with each other is what spreads throughout the school." (Educator, 41 years old, Italy)

Tensions within teams—especially unresolved conflicts or hierarchical dynamics—were frequently cited as barriers to inclusive practice. These tensions were not always visible, but their effects were:

"You can see when the climate isn't good. People speak less, keep to themselves, avoid each other. It creates a sense of coldness that parents feel too—even if no one says it out loud." (Educator, 50 years old, Italy)

Others described how rigid routines or strict institutional norms stifled creativity and relational spontaneity, reducing the school climate to mere task management:

"There are so many rules and procedures now. Sometimes you're more worried about doing everything right than actually seeing the child or listening to the parent. That's not a good climate—it's sterile." (Educator, 45 years old, Italy)

At the same time, many educators emphasized the importance of leadership, emotional intelligence, and institutional culture in shaping an environment of inclusion and care:

"When you have a coordinator who listens, who creates space for everyone's voice, everything changes. You feel like you can breathe, and you pass that onto the families too." (Educator, 39 years old, Italy)

Parents. For parents, the school climate was often sensed rather than explicitly evaluated. Many described it in terms of welcome, tone of voice, accessibility, and perceived openness. Positive climates were associated with small, human gestures:

"There's one educator who always smiles and kneels down to speak to the children. She doesn't just look at my daughter; she looks at me too. That makes a big difference." (Mother, 36 years old, Romania)

Others spoke of the climate in terms of emotional safety: whether the space felt warm or cold, inviting or distant:

"Sometimes I feel like I'm entering a place where I don't belong. Not because anyone says anything, but because no one says anything. No one looks up. I drop off my child and leave." (Mother, 33 years old, Tunisia)

Importantly, some parents noted that their perception of the climate depended not just on individual interactions but on the consistency of the overall environment:

"It's not enough that one educator is nice. What matters is how people speak to each other, how the kids are treated, how problems are handled. You feel if it's a good place or not."

(Father, 40 years old, Ethiopia).

"A parent asked me, 'Do they love the children here?' It was not a rhetorical question. It captured how the emotional atmosphere of a school—the way it holds or fails to hold—can be more important than any pedagogical approach." (Field note – Nursery, March,2024)

Table 12

Educators' and parents' perspectives on factors promoting or hindering interculture

Factor	Description	Educators' Perspectives	Parents' Perspectives
Architecture of places and spaces	The physical layout, location, and material conditions of schools shape relationships, visibility, and belonging.	• The physical structure shapes collaboration, visibility, and team cohesion. • Central locations and open layouts promote exchange and shared community life. • Fragmented spaces, old buildings, and separated staff areas create distance and weaken collective identity. • Stability of the school's location fosters belonging and continuity.	• Visibility and accessibility of spaces strongly affect the sense of inclusion. • Open and welcoming entrances enable connection; narrow or restricted ones cause discomfort. • The design of spaces determines whether parents feel part of the school community or outsiders.
Symbolic space: what is (not) visible	The school environment communicates cultural norms and values through symbols, images, and representations.	• Awareness that materials often reflect dominant (white, Italian, middle-class) norms • Recognition that cultural events tend to exoticize difference (e.g., "special" holidays). • Some educators begin questioning representational homogeneity.	• Feelings of invisibility when family structures, languages, or skin tones are absent from the environment. • Appreciation when diversity is reflected in books, posters, and everyday materials. • Concern that children notice when they "don't see themselves" represented.
School climate	The emotional, relational, and ethical atmosphere that shapes everyday life in schools and depends on educators' well-being and relationships.	• Interculturality depends on team cohesion and **teacher well-being**. • Positive emotional climate arises from trust, peer support, and leadership that values care. • Stress, internal conflict, or bureaucratic pressure undermine relational quality. • Leadership style strongly influences inclusion.	• The climate is felt through warmth, tone, and gestures. • Feeling seen and welcomed by educators creates trust. • Silence, coldness, or inconsistency generate exclusion. • Parents perceive **teacher well-being** indirectly—through the atmosphere it produces.

Factor	Description	Educators' Perspectives	Parents' Perspectives
Working with institutions	The quality and ethics of collaboration between schools and external institutions (e.g., social, health, or community services).	• Collaboration with external institutions is essential but often burdensome. • Bureaucracy and lack of communication produce frustration. • Educators often act as mediators or social workers without adequate training. • Ethical and respectful alliances enable real support for families.	• Experiences of confusion or exclusion when navigating services. • Encounters with institutions often perceived as judgmental or impersonal. • Deep appreciation when educators act as mediators and guides. • Accessibility and empathy of institutional actors shape trust.
The socio-political and cultural climate	The broader social and political environment that influences discourses on diversity, migration, and belonging.	• Growing social polarization and racism affect school climate and educators' sense of safety. • Schools viewed as last spaces for dialogue and mutual respect. • Teachers notice children reproducing societal stereotypes. • Some use storytelling and discussion to counter hostile narratives.	• Strong awareness of stigmatizing media and political discourses. • Daily experience of being "othered" or scrutinized. • Fear and insecurity linked to social hostility. • Recognition and empathy from educators restore trust and belonging.

Working with institutions. The relationship between schools and other institutions—municipal services, health agencies, immigration offices, religious and community organizations—is a crucial yet often underexplored dimension of interculturality in early childhood education. These institutional ties shape not only the resources available to educators and families, but also the discourses, expectations, and logics of power that circulate in the school context.

> *"It's not just about working 'with' institutions—it's about navigating them, negotiating them, sometimes resisting them. I could feel the tension in the room when people talked about bureaucracy, unresponsive offices, or inconsistent services. And yet, there was also recognition: we can't do this work alone. Interculturality needs alliances—but they must be ethical, relationally ethical, not strategic." (Field note – Nursery, March,2024)*

Educators. Educators described their interactions with institutions as both necessary and ambivalent. On one hand, they recognized the importance of inter-institutional collaboration, especially when dealing with complex family needs or vulnerable children:

> *"You can't separate school from the rest. We work with families who are dealing with housing, legal issues, trauma. Without institutional support, we can't respond adequately." (Educator, 42 years old, Italy)*

However, many also expressed frustration with bureaucratic rigidity, lack of communication between services, and institutional cultures that often operate with standardized or deficit-based logics:

> *"Too often, the institutions only see the problem. They don't see the person, the family, the context. That creates distance, not trust." (Educator, 38 years old, Nursery, Italy)*

A recurring concern was that educators were increasingly being positioned as mediators, case managers, or informal social workers—without the resources, recognition, or training to take on such roles:

> *"We're expected to handle everything—from mental health to social integration—but we're not trained for that, and we're left alone. That's exhausting and unfair." (Educator, 45 years old, Italy)*

Despite these challenges, some educators shared positive experiences of constructive institutional alliances, especially when professionals from different sectors were willing to engage horizontally and respectfully:

> *"There was this one social worker who really made a difference. She didn't come in to evaluate—she came to listen, to collaborate. That changed everything." (Educator, 50 years old, Italy)*

Parents. For parents, institutional dynamics were often experienced indirectly—but

powerfully. Many described a sense of confusion or exclusion when navigating services connected to the school, especially in contexts marked by linguistic or legal barriers:

> *"I never know which office to go to, or who to ask. Sometimes they tell you to bring one paper, then another. It's like a maze, and no one explains." (Mother, 35 years old, Morocco)*

Others reported that institutional encounters often involved judgement, rather than support—especially for migrant or low-income families:

> *"When you go to certain services, you already feel looked down on. You're not a mother anymore—you're a case." (Mother, 33 years old, Ecuador)*

Even when institutions were physically present or offered services, their accessibility and relational attitude made all the difference:

> *"At school they gave me a number to call for help with housing, but the person on the phone was rude and didn't understand me. I felt worse than before." (Mother, 32 years old, Nigeria)*

Conversely, some parents described moments of meaningful support, often tied to the ability of individual educators to mediate between institutions and families with care and cultural sensitivity:

> *"The educator helped me fill in the documents, explained where to go, even called the office. Without her, I would have given up." (Mother, 40 years old, Tunisia)*

The socio-political and cultural climate. The experience of interculturality in early childhood education does not take place in isolation from the broader social, political, and cultural landscape. On the contrary, it is deeply shaped by the dominant narratives, ideologies, and public discourses that circulate in society—especially those concerning migration, identity, nationalism, and belonging. These macro-level forces are not just abstract; they filter into classrooms, corridors, and conversations, shaping what is visible, what is sayable, and what feels possible.

> *"We weren't talking about politics, but it was everywhere. In the way people hesitated to say 'immigrant,' in the discomfort around religious expression, in the glances when someone spoke Arabic on the phone. The classroom is never outside the world. The world is in the room, even when it's not named." (Field note – Nursery, June,2024)*

Educators. Educators often expressed a sense of ambivalence and tension in relation to the wider socio-political context. On the one hand, some felt that schools had become one of the few remaining spaces where dialogue across difference was still possible:

> *"We live in a society that is getting more closed, more afraid. But here at school, I feel like we can still show another way—where people meet, talk, learn to respect each other." (Educator, 50 years old, Italy)*

Yet others expressed concern about the impact of growing racism, xenophobia, and polarization, which affect the school climate, families' trust, and their own sense of freedom:

> *"There's been a shift. You hear parents saying things now that they didn't say before. Sometimes even colleagues. It's subtle, but it's there—a kind of hardening, a suspicion of anything different." (Educator, 39 years old, Italy)*

Some educators also noted how media representations of migration and multiculturalism infiltrated families' attitudes and the assumptions that children brought to school:

> *"You realize that children are absorbing things from TV, from their parents. They make comments that reflect fear or superiority. It's not their fault—it's the air they breathe." (Educator, 44 years old, Italy)*

At the same time, educators described moments of resistance—small pedagogical acts aimed at rehumanizing discourse and reclaiming complexity:

> *"We try to tell stories from different cultures, to talk about emotions, to create a space where children feel that differences are normal and valuable. It's not always easy, but it's essential". (Educator, 36 years old, Italy)*

Parents. Parents were acutely aware of the stigmas and narratives circulating in the broader cultural climate. Several spoke of a persistent sense of being othered, scrutinized, or misrepresented, especially in public discourse and policy debates:

> *"On television, they always talk about migrants like a problem. It's like we are never just people—we are always a number, a danger, a burden." (Mother, 37 years old, Nigeria)*

Others described how these narratives shaped their sense of safety and dignity in everyday life—including their interactions with institutions, neighbours, and even within the school:

> *"Sometimes I feel I have to prove I'm a good mother, a good person, just because I wear the veil or because I don't speak perfect Italian. There's always this pressure." (Mother, 33 years old, Morocco)*

Many parents emphasized the discrepancy between public hostility and individual relationships—noting that while the societal climate could feel hostile, specific educators made them feel seen and respected:

> *"I know the country is changing, and it's harder to live here than before. But at this school, there are people who listen. That makes a difference." (Father, 45 years old, Peru)*
>
> *"A mother told me she was afraid every time there was an election. Not because of the policies directly, but because of how people start talking in the street, at the supermarket. The political*

climate, for her, wasn't distant. It was something that entered her body, her child's future, her sense of being allowed to stay." (Field note – Kindergarten, May,2024)

To conclude, the following table (table 13) provides a synthetic overview of the key factors that promote or hinder interculturality within early childhood education settings. Drawing on both educators' and parents' perspectives, it summarizes how material, relational, and institutional dimensions interact to enable or constrain the enactment of intercultural practices in everyday school life. The table highlights that interculturality is not the result of individual goodwill alone, but emerges—or fails to emerge—from the interplay between spatial design, symbolic visibility, emotional climate, institutional collaboration, and the broader socio-political context. As the table illustrates, interculturality operates across multiple, interconnected levels. While inclusive spaces, supportive leadership, and ethical institutional partnerships can nurture a sense of belonging and mutual recognition, fragmentation, bureaucratic constraints, and hostile socio-political narratives tend to undermine these efforts. This synthesis reinforces the central finding of the study: that interculturality is a situated, relational process shaped by everyday material conditions, emotional dynamics, and structural contexts rather than by discourse or policy alone.

Table 13

Factors promoting and hindering interculture within early childhood education settings

Factor	Description	Promoting	Hindering
Architecture of places and spaces	The physical layout, location, and material conditions of schools shape relationships, visibility, and belonging.	• Central and accessible location • Open, shared, and circular spaces • Common areas encouraging encounters • Stable presence in the neighborhood	• Fragmented or vertical layout • Closed or restricted spaces • Poor maintenance and aging buildings •Separation between staff roles (educators/assistants)
Symbolic space: what is (not) visible	The school environment communicates cultural norms and values through symbols, images, and representations.	• Multilingual signage and inclusive visuals • Representation of diverse families, languages, and skin tones • Integration of different traditions in daily life	• Homogeneous or Eurocentric materials • Diversity limited to “special events” • Lack of visibility of minority cultures and languages
School climate	The emotional, relational, and ethical atmosphere that shapes everyday life in schools and strongly depends on educators’ well-being and relationships.	• Positive **teacher well-being** supported by trust, care, and mutual respect • Leadership that fosters emotional safety and collaboration • Open communication and peer support • Shared responsibility and reflective team culture	• Burnout, emotional exhaustion, or lack of recognition among educators • Hierarchical tensions or unresolved conflicts • Rigid procedures and bureaucratic pressure • Emotional coldness or distance perceived by families

Factor	Description	Promoting	Hindering
Working with institutions	The quality and ethics of collaboration between schools and external institutions (e.g., social, health, or community services).	• Horizontal and respectful inter-institutional collaboration • Clear communication and shared goals • Culturally sensitive mediation by educators	• Bureaucratic rigidity and fragmentation between services • Deficit-based or judgmental institutional logics • Lack of training and support for educators
The socio-political and cultural climate	The broader social and political environment that influences discourses on diversity, migration, and belonging.	• Schools as spaces of dialogue and resistance • Pedagogical practices promoting empathy and critical thinking • Storytelling and activities normalizing diversity	• Growing racism and xenophobia • Polarization and fear in public discourse • Negative media narratives affecting trust and belonging

11.6 Discussion

This qualitative research explores how inclusion and interculturality take shape within early childhood education environments, focusing on how these ideas are perceived, interpreted, and practiced in daily school routines. Using an ethnographic methodology, the study integrates participant observation and semi-structured interviews with educators and parents—particularly those with migrant backgrounds—to uncover the diverse understandings of interculturality and to identify the challenges and possibilities that arise in its everyday implementation.

Following the findings are discussed according to the two key areas of the research: the different interpretations of interculturality, and the factors that promote or hinder its development within the ECE context.

The different meanings of interculture

These findings indicate that interculturality is not a fixed or universally defined concept, but a pluriversal and situated practice experienced through multiple, intersecting layers of meaning by parents and educators in early childhood education. These layers coexist and overlap, shaped by individuals' social positions, emotional trajectories, and historical and political circumstances. Rather than a pedagogical framework or static value, interculturality emerges as a relational and political dynamic process—charged with tension, hope, and continuous negotiation.

A central tension revealed by this analysis lies in how intercultural discourse often encounters the realities of discrimination. The narratives of parents and educators expose the circulation of power within intercultural practices—determining whose voices are heard, whose knowledge counts, and who is granted belonging. Parents, particularly those racialized or marginalized, often speak from lived experiences of vulnerability, while educators—though committed to inclusion—tend to adopt more institutional or abstract perspectives. This divergence highlights a dissonance between embodied, situated knowledge and normative or academic framings of interculture, which risk diluting its political potential. Without confronting racism, discomfort, and institutional asymmetries, interculturality risks remaining a symbolic gesture rather than a transformative practice. Creating room for these tensions is therefore essential if early childhood education is to become a site of genuine inclusion rather than a silent reproduction of inequality (Walsh, 2005).

From this perspective, interculturality and social justice are inseparable. Interculturality offers a lens through which to question the structural conditions that determine whose experiences are legitimized and who is allowed to belong in educational spaces. As Mignolo and Walsh (2018) suggest, it is a space for co-constructing a *pluriversal narrative*—one that values multiple epistemologies and resists the dominance of any single worldview. Yet, as Malicse (2024) reminds us, such recognition remains

superficial if it fails to address the historically entrenched hierarchies that regulate access to resources, rights, and symbolic legitimacy.

Interculturality is, therefore, inherently political. Schools do not operate outside systems of power; they reproduce societal inequalities through policy, discourse, and daily interactions (Narayanan, 2021). For many racialized and migrant parents, intercultural engagement is less an opportunity for dialogue than a response to exclusion. Their relationships with educational institutions are often marked by mistrust, fear, and the need for protection. Educators, meanwhile, may approach interculturality from professional or normative standpoints that prioritize harmony and coexistence while avoiding the discomfort of naming racism. This epistemic and affective dissonance exposes how power circulates within intercultural discourse, shaping which realities are acknowledged. Within this dynamic, another dimension emerges—one that highlights the moral and emotional vulnerability that intercultural encounters bring to the surface. For many parents, interculturality functions as a means of survival and adjustment: navigating institutional barriers, striving for recognition, and negotiating belonging within unequal systems. For educators, on the other hand, these interactions often act as a mirror that challenges both their professional ethics and personal convictions. Such exposure can evoke discomfort and resistance, revealing the affective weight of engaging with structural injustice. The concept of *white fragility* (DiAngelo, 2018) is particularly relevant here: when educators are confronted with their own unexamined privileges or with institutional mechanisms that perpetuate exclusion, they may respond defensively—through denial, withdrawal, or irritation. Interculturality, therefore, should be understood not as a neutral pedagogical space but as an affective and political terrain where privilege, power, and vulnerability are constantly renegotiated. Families encounter asymmetry through insecure access to institutions, while educators experience unease when their authority or good intentions are unsettled by the visibility of persistent inequalities (DiAngelo, 2018).

The analysis of intersectionality deepens this discussion. As Crenshaw (1989) argues, identities cannot be understood as isolated categories; race, gender, class, religion, and body politics intersect to shape experiences of inclusion and exclusion. The data clearly show that interculturality is always entangled with broader axes of power that structure everyday life in schools. As Febriansyah (2024) notes, cultural diversity alone does not constitute interculturality—it is the conditions under which interaction occurs, shaped by structural inequalities, that define its meaning and value.

Gender emerged as a crucial but often neglected dimension. As Quirós Domínguez and De Ormaechea Otarola (2025) demonstrate, gendered power relations influence early education through histories of trauma, care work, and institutional trust. Many mothers—especially those who have experienced violence or marginalization—encounter school spaces as both sites of support and arenas

of surveillance (Sargent, 2005; Hearn, 2013). Moreover, while early education remains a feminized profession, this does not equate to equality. As McDonald et al. (2024) argue, the predominance of women in the field reflects the broader moralization and devaluation of care work.

Body politics also shape intercultural encounters. Fatphobia, as Schmalz et al. (2021) and Hutter (2022) explain, operates as a form of embodied exclusion. Dominant norms around body size intersect with race and gender to produce moralized hierarchies of worth and competence. Racialized and fat bodies—especially when gendered—are frequently perceived as excessive, unfit, or in need of regulation. Within families, these norms are often internalized as protective strategies that inadvertently reproduce fatphobic discourses (Bahra, 2018; Horton & Frawley, 2024).

Economic inequality further amplifies exclusion. As Sanford (2024) and Zare & Assari (2024) demonstrate, class encompasses not only income but also access to housing, healthcare, and education—factors that determine families' capacity to engage meaningfully with schools. Yet working-class and migrant parents are often misread as disengaged, reinforcing deficit narratives and obscuring systemic barriers (Bradley, 2024; Elias, 2024). This dynamic reproduces what Chikumbu (2025) identifies as *layered exclusions* at the intersection of race and class.

Religious identity, particularly for Muslim families, also figures prominently in experiences of marginalization. Islamophobia—expressed through both policy and everyday practice—disproportionately affects visibly Muslim women (Iddrisu, 2019; Kozaric, 2023). As Abdelgadir & Fouka (2020) and Modood & Sealy (2021) observe, secularism often operates asymmetrically, treating Christian norms as neutral while framing Islamic expressions as problematic. These dynamics reveal how religion, race, and gender intersect to position Muslim identities as incompatible with dominant national narratives (Lönnroth-Olin, 2025).

Yet alongside these exclusions, the data also reveal moments of relation and transformation. Parents and educators recount experiences of mutual recognition, learning, and solidarity. For educators, engaging with diverse families often triggers biographical and professional reflection—what Walsh (2010) calls an ethical and affective *"becoming-with"* others. For parents, interculturality is enacted through everyday gestures of care, respect, and coexistence—often oriented toward their children's futures.

These encounters suggest that when grounded in lived relationships rather than institutional rhetoric, interculturality can become a transformative force. It challenges technocratic or tokenistic models of diversity by foregrounding the ethical, emotional, and political labor required to live and learn together. Ultimately, interculturality is not about knowing the Other, but about being changed through the encounter (Walsh, 2005; 2010).

Factors promoting and hindering interculture

Building on the previous reflections, it becomes evident that the practice of interculturality is not shaped in a vacuum. Its emergence and sustainability depend on the contextual conditions in which it unfolds. Understanding what enables or constrains it requires examining how material, emotional, institutional, and socio-political forces intersect in the everyday life of educational settings. As our fieldwork revealed, interculturality does not arise spontaneously from diversity or inclusive discourse alone. It is co-produced through specific constellations of spatial organization, institutional climate, social alliances, and broader cultural narratives that either foster or obstruct encounters, recognition, and shared belonging. Interculturality must therefore be conceived not as a decontextualized process, but as a situated and polysemic practice—continuously shaped by power, visibility, and access (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Walsh, 2010).

Architecture and spatial design play a decisive role in creating or restricting intercultural possibilities. As Halse et al. (2015) and Webb and Radcliffe (2016) suggest, space is not only functional but also pedagogical and political. Our findings resonate with this view: the material layout of educational environments can promote cohesion or reinforce fragmentation. Open and accessible structures—characterized by shared common areas and flexible boundaries—were associated with greater trust and interaction between educators and families. In contrast, closed layouts, vertical divisions, and deteriorated infrastructures tended to reproduce symbolic hierarchies and social distance. These observations echo Karakatsani and Papaloi (2017), who highlight the inclusive potential of architectural design in reducing hierarchies, and Vilugrón et al. (2023), who link spatial justice to well-being and social cohesion. As Bekerman et al. (2020) remind us, space is never ideologically neutral—it conveys implicit messages about who belongs, who is peripheral, and who is excluded.

This notion of *the architecture of place* foregrounds the communicative nature of physical environments. Space does not merely contain interaction—it speaks. It signals to children, parents, and educators whether they are welcome, seen, and valued. For educators, spatial openness enables collaboration; for parents, it invites participation and trust. Designing for interculturality thus means cultivating environments that are both relational and symbolically inclusive—spaces that invite engagement rather than reproduce distance or intimidation.

Equally important is the material condition and maintenance of educational environments. Research by Yu and Moskal (2019) and López-Azuaga and Suárez Riveiro (2020) demonstrates that physical deterioration undermines psychological well-being and communicates institutional neglect. Likewise, Neuner (2012), Latour (2005), and Davidová (2020) argue that built environments both reflect and shape social relationships. Well-maintained schools signal care, dignity, and belonging; neglected ones reinforce feelings of marginality and abandonment. As Ristić Trajković (2024) notes, poor

physical conditions disrupt routines and fracture relationships, threatening the continuity and trust that intercultural relations depend on.

Closely linked to material conditions is the symbolic dimension of space—what is visible, represented, and celebrated. Representation within school environments is not a matter of decoration but a pedagogical and political act. The presence—or absence—of certain languages, holidays, books, or images conveys powerful messages about whose identities are recognized. While educators may underestimate these semiotic cues, families are acutely sensitive to them. The *hidden curriculum* of representation shapes children's sense of belonging and self-worth. Avoiding tokenism requires intentional and ethically grounded practices of visibility that critically question who is centered and who remains unseen (Kirby et al., 2020).

The emotional climate of the institution emerged as another crucial determinant of intercultural practice. As Day et al. (2011), Roffey (2012), and Collie et al. (2012) demonstrate, educator well-being is deeply intertwined with their capacity to cultivate inclusive environments. Our findings confirm that supportive workplaces—where teachers feel valued and emotionally secure—foster intercultural engagement. Conversely, exhaustion, isolation, and institutional indifference undermine inclusion efforts (Webb et al., 2009; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016). Sleeter (2011) and Harris et al. (2017) similarly emphasize that culturally responsive pedagogy presupposes the emotional and professional well-being of educators.

These insights converge in the notion of school climate as emotional infrastructure. Inclusion and exclusion are experienced not only through policies but through the affective texture of daily interactions—gestures, tone, presence. Where warmth, empathy, and flexibility prevail, intercultural practices arise naturally; in cold or fragmented environments, diversity work becomes formalistic or even risky. This calls for what Daddow (2020) terms a *pedagogy of atmosphere*—an approach that consciously nurtures the relational, emotional, and ethical dimensions of school life.

Another enabler concerns team cohesion and shared vision. Research by Sormunen et al. (2017) and Nielsen et al. (2019) shows that collaboration, mutual respect, and collective purpose among staff are key to building trust and equity. Schools with stable, cohesive teams demonstrate greater capacity to engage with cultural diversity and sustain inclusive practices. Daddow et al. (2020) and Guo-Brennan and Guo-Brennan (2021) further underline the importance of leadership and collegial support in shaping the everyday culture of respect and inclusion.

These dynamics are situated within a broader institutional ecology. Schools do not operate in isolation: their capacity for intercultural work depends on the quality of relationships with social services, healthcare, and local governance. Educators often navigate tensions between pedagogical care and bureaucratic demands, while parents encounter these systems unevenly, often feeling unseen

or misrecognized. Meaningful intercultural practice therefore requires institutions to move beyond administrative coordination toward what might be called *ethical presence*—a mode of institutional engagement grounded in listening, reciprocity, and trust (Franco & McCowan, 2020).

Finally, the socio-political and cultural climate exerts a profound influence on how interculturality is experienced. Islamophobia, as discussed by Muzayyanah et al. (2023) and Kuswaya (2020), functions not merely as personal prejudice but as a structural and cultural form of racism. Studies by Mohamed (2021) and Yusdany (2020) show how systemic discrimination against Muslim communities, particularly in educational contexts, reflects wider public narratives and national policies. These macro-level discourses shape school climates and constrain the possibilities of inclusive belonging. Parents often report feeling pre-judged as "problems" before speaking, while educators struggle to reconcile their inclusive values with exclusionary public rhetoric (Yusdany; 2020).

Taken together, these findings underscore that interculturality is a multidimensional, politically situated process. Promoting it in early childhood education requires more than individual openness or good intentions. It demands a critical engagement with the material, relational, and institutional ecologies that underpin educational life. Addressing spatial design, maintenance, team collaboration, and the wider socio-political environment is essential. Only by confronting these material, structural and symbolic dimensions can interculturality move beyond rhetoric to become a transformative practice rooted in justice, recognition, and shared humanity.

11.7 Limitations and future perspectives

While this study offers crucial insights into the dynamics of inclusion and interculturality in early childhood settings, its limitations invite a deeper reflection on the boundaries and conditions of situated inquiry. The research was deliberately conceived as a small-scale, context-specific investigation focusing on two early childhood institutions within a single Italian urban area. From this perspective, its goal was not to generate universally applicable findings but to produce *situated knowledge* that illuminates how interculturality is lived, negotiated, and constrained in practice. Rather than seeking generalization, the study aims to contribute to broader debates on the persistent disconnection between policy frameworks and the everyday enactment of inclusion in educational spaces.

Nonetheless, the local and context-bound nature of the research inevitably restricts its scope. Interculturality is always shaped by specific socio-political, economic, and cultural configurations that vary across contexts. The findings therefore reflect particular institutional and territorial dynamics rather than universal patterns. Yet, this specificity should not be viewed as a limitation in itself. On the contrary, it underscores the importance of understanding interculturality as a situated

and relational process—one that exposes how inclusive ideals are translated, contested, and redefined through local histories, material conditions, and institutional practices.

Beyond spatial scope, methodological constraints also limit the depth and temporal continuity of the analysis. The relatively short duration of fieldwork—approximately three months per institution—captures only a partial picture of how intercultural relations evolve over time. Educational environments and social dynamics are fluid, responding to broader political, economic, and institutional shifts. Without a longitudinal perspective, it remains difficult to trace how moments of inclusion and exclusion emerge, stabilize, or transform across different temporal and structural contexts.

Researcher positionality also represents a critical point of consideration. While strategies were implemented to minimize bias, it cannot be assumed that proximity or prolonged engagement automatically reduces asymmetries of power. In qualitative studies of interculturality, the encounter between researcher and participants is itself a site of negotiation, mediated by institutional hierarchies, linguistic differences, and social privilege. A more explicitly reflexive approach would have allowed for a deeper interrogation of how the researcher's own standpoint shaped data production, interpretation, and meaning-making—particularly in relation to participants whose voices are often marginalized within institutional discourse.

The reliance on participant narratives—especially those of migrant parents—raises additional epistemological questions. Linguistic barriers, emotional fatigue, and past experiences of exclusion may have limited what participants chose or felt able to articulate. Yet these silences and omissions are not merely methodological shortcomings; they reveal how power, recognition, and vulnerability operate within intercultural encounters. Acknowledging these constraints foregrounds the epistemic politics of representation: whose experiences are rendered visible, whose are filtered, and whose remain unheard. Future research should therefore engage more critically with these asymmetries, positioning marginalized perspectives not simply as data sources but as central to the co-construction of knowledge on interculturality.

A further limitation lies in the study's limited engagement with the wider institutional and policy ecologies that condition how interculturality is practiced and perceived. While the research offers an in-depth exploration of local dynamics, it does not fully account for how governance structures, funding mechanisms, and national discourses on migration shape the lived realities of educators and families. Without situating micro-level findings within a systemic analysis, there is a risk of reproducing a reformist understanding of inclusion—one that celebrates local good practices without confronting the structural inequalities that sustain exclusion. Integrating ethnographic insight with

policy analysis would therefore allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how interculturality is simultaneously enabled and constrained by institutional design.

Taken together, these limitations point to the need for future research that deepens and broadens the study of interculturality as a lived, relational, and political process. Longitudinal and multi-sited approaches could illuminate how intercultural relations and practices evolve over time, capturing both persistence and transformation. Comparative research across diverse socio-political contexts would further clarify how different systems of governance, migration, and education shape the conditions of coexistence. Moreover, participatory and intervention-based studies could extend beyond documenting practices to assessing the transformative potential of community-led initiatives, anti-racist pedagogies, and collaborative policymaking.

Finally, advancing scholarship on interculturality requires explicit engagement with the structural and affective ecologies that underpin it. This entails examining how bureaucratic routines, funding priorities, and public discourses on migration shape educators' agency and families' experiences. Strengthening collaboration between parents and educators remains vital, but it must be reimagined as a structural and ethical commitment rather than an optional or compensatory effort. Building genuinely co-constructive educational spaces—where migrant families act as partners rather than beneficiaries—is essential for transforming interculturality from a rhetorical principle into a lived practice grounded in justice, reciprocity, and shared humanity.

11.7 Implications

From this standpoint, the implications of the study lie less in the formulation of universal recommendations than in the invitation to rethink how institutions, educators, and policy frameworks understand and enact inclusion. The results reveal that diversity alone does not generate interculturality: it must be intentionally constructed and sustained through practices that confront inequalities in visibility, power, and access to resources. This requires a shift from performative approaches to inclusion toward an ethics of relationality and justice—where interculturality becomes not a goal to be achieved, but a practice of ongoing negotiation and mutual transformation.

Material dimension: space and labour conditions

One of the most significant implications concerns the material dimension of educational life. Architecture and spatial organization are not neutral backdrops; they are active agents that shape the possibilities of encounter, communication, and belonging. Schools designed with open, accessible, and well-maintained spaces were shown to foster trust, visibility, and informal interaction, whereas fragmented or deteriorated environments reinforced isolation and symbolic hierarchies. These findings echo those of Ziaee (2024) and Moss et al. (2017), who argue that inclusive spatial design promotes participation and reduces social distance.

The study also demonstrates that interculturality depends on the material and labor conditions under which educators work. Precarious employment—particularly among support educators hired through temporary contracts—creates discontinuity, undermines team cohesion, and limits the trust necessary for meaningful intercultural relationships. Similar concerns emerge in the literature, which highlights that instability and lack of recognition weaken educators' sense of agency and collective responsibility (DeMatthews et al., 2025; Biasutti et al., 2019; Tualaulelei & Halse, 2022). Structural investment in the educational workforce—through stable contracts, equitable pay, and professional recognition of care work—is therefore a prerequisite for sustainable intercultural engagement.

Symbolic dimension

Equally crucial is the symbolic dimension of interculturality. What is made visible, celebrated, or erased within school environments—through books, images, displays, and festivities—shapes who feels recognized and who remains peripheral. The findings confirm that representation is not neutral decoration but a pedagogical and political act. Schools that embedded cultural and linguistic plurality into daily routines, rather than limiting it to special occasions, fostered stronger senses of belonging among both children and parents. This aligns with scholarship emphasizing the need for critical reflection on everyday pedagogical choices and the cultivation of plural, multilingual imaginaries of identity (Vižintin, 2018; Caetano et al., 2020; Giavrimis & Dimitriadou, 2023; Pérez-Jorge et al., 2023; Wegner, 2024).

These insights reinforce the call for continuous professional development in intercultural and socio-emotional competences (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2018; Biasutti et al., 2019). Teacher education should not merely provide technical "competencies," but cultivate reflexivity and ethical awareness about how educators' own positionalities influence inclusion and representation.

Relational dimension: families and communities

At the relational level, the study underscores the need to transform how schools engage with families and communities. Many parents with migratory backgrounds experienced participation as peripheral or conditional, constrained by linguistic barriers, bureaucratic procedures, or institutional habits that position them as passive recipients rather than active partners. However, practices that invited co-creation—such as collaborative storytelling, informal daily exchanges, and the involvement of cultural mediators—helped foster reciprocity and shared ownership of educational spaces.

These results resonate with recent international studies emphasizing the value of *co-creative engagement* between schools and migrant families (Bilbao et al., 2025; Marcos et al., 2023). Effective intercultural collaboration requires relationships grounded in trust, empathy, and horizontal communication—an approach that also extends to cooperation with social services and community

organizations (Pérez-Jorge et al., 2023). Building networks of reciprocity rather than systems of control is essential for developing inclusive, community-based ecosystems of support.

Emotional and ethical dimension

The emotional and ethical climate of institutions also emerged as a decisive factor in sustaining intercultural practices. Inclusion cannot be reduced to structures or curricula—it is lived through the affective texture of everyday interactions. When educators feel valued, connected, and supported, they are more likely to embody the openness, curiosity, and empathy required to sustain intercultural engagement. Conversely, exhaustion, fragmentation, or institutional neglect erode trust and weaken educators' relational capacity.

These observations echo the findings of Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2018) and Karousiou et al. (2019), who link teachers' emotional well-being to the quality of intercultural engagement. Institutional care for educators must therefore be recognized as integral to inclusion: fostering reflective, cohesive, and emotionally supportive teams is a structural—not optional—requirement for practicing meaningful interculturality.

Toward a systemic understanding of interculturality

Finally, interculturality cannot be isolated from the broader institutional and socio-political landscape. Schools operate within governance systems, funding structures, and public discourses that often reproduce inequality. The research confirms that educators are frequently forced to navigate bureaucratic expectations with limited resources, acting as intermediaries between families and fragmented welfare systems. This underscores the need for ethical and coordinated inter-institutional alliances based on reciprocity, care, and mutual accountability (Marcos et al., 2023; Pérez-Jorge et al., 2023).

Taken together, these implications reinforce an understanding of interculturality as a systemic and transformative process—one that must be cultivated across interconnected dimensions: material, labor, symbolic, relational, emotional, and political. Transforming early childhood institutions into genuinely intercultural environments requires action at multiple scales: redesigning physical spaces, stabilizing employment conditions, diversifying curricula, and fostering co-constructive relationships with families and communities.

Ultimately, interculturality should not be treated as a technical competency or a policy mandate, but as an ethical and political project of justice, recognition, and shared humanity. It calls for institutions capable of reflecting critically on their own practices, redistributing power, and creating the material and emotional conditions under which all children and families can not only belong—but actively shape—the world they inhabit.

11.8 Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research that conceptualizes interculturality as a plural, dynamic, and politically situated process rather than a fixed pedagogical model. Building on theoretical debates that have framed interculturality variously as a dialogical, ethical, and decolonial project, the research demonstrates that its meanings are always context-bound—shaped by the historical, institutional, and relational conditions in which they unfold. Within early childhood education, interculturality emerges not as a universal framework or a normative goal, but as a lived practice that takes form through everyday encounters among educators, families, and children.

The empirical findings reveal that the multiplicity of meanings attached to interculturality corresponds not to conceptual confusion, but to the coexistence of different layers of experience and interpretation. Parents and educators do not simply hold divergent understandings of interculturality; rather, they inhabit distinct positionalities within structures of privilege, precarity, and recognition. These asymmetries shape how interculturality is practiced, felt, and imagined. For parents with migratory or racialized backgrounds, it often appears as a matter of survival and adaptation—navigating institutions and seeking belonging within unequal systems. For educators, it functions as both a professional ideal and a moral test, exposing tensions between inclusive aspirations and institutional constraints.

From this perspective, interculturality cannot be reduced to a collection of good practices or celebratory events. It is an affective, material, and political field in which power, visibility, and vulnerability are constantly renegotiated. Spatial design, labor conditions, symbolic representation, and the emotional climate of institutions all shape how inclusion is enacted or denied. Schools that foster open, accessible, and well-maintained environments, stable pedagogical teams, and reflexive, collaborative relationships with families tend to cultivate more equitable and participatory forms of coexistence. Conversely, bureaucratic fragmentation, precarious employment, and superficial approaches to diversity undermine trust and perpetuate subtle forms of exclusion.

These findings also illuminate the persistent policy–practice gap that characterizes intercultural education across contexts. As the study shows, the failure of many inclusion policies does not necessarily stem from weak implementation, but from their generic and depoliticized nature. When interculturality is framed as a technical or moral goal detached from power relations, it risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative. True intercultural engagement requires confronting the structural and epistemic hierarchies that shape who is heard, who belongs, and whose knowledge counts within educational institutions.

In this sense, the study affirms that interculturality is inseparable from questions of justice. Following Mignolo's (2000) and Walsh's (2018) decolonial insights, transformative interculturality demands

more than the celebration of diversity: it entails dismantling the hierarchies that sustain exclusion and creating conditions where marginalized voices can redefine the educational project itself. This involves recognizing educators and families as co-constructors of meaning, not as agents and beneficiaries of a pre-defined policy agenda. It also implies that inclusion cannot be achieved through isolated acts of goodwill, but through structural commitment—adequate resources, stable labor conditions, participatory governance, and ethical forms of collaboration that acknowledge interdependence.

The implications of this research extend beyond the immediate context of early childhood education. By revealing how interculturality is produced in practice through affective, spatial, and institutional arrangements, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how educational systems can function as sites of democratic transformation. Interculturality becomes, in this view, an ethical and political practice of *becoming with* others—a process of continuous negotiation in which discomfort, tension, and mutual vulnerability are not obstacles but necessary conditions for justice and recognition.

Ultimately, moving toward genuine interculturality requires engaging critically with issues of power, privilege, and epistemic inequality. It means cultivating educational environments that are not only inclusive in form, but also just in substance—places where belonging is co-created rather than prescribed, and where all participants, regardless of origin or status, are recognized as contributors to shared human meaning. Only by embracing this complexity can interculturality move beyond symbolic inclusion to become a concrete pathway toward systemic transformation and social equity.

12. Study 3. Counter-narratives of care: educating at the margins in a time of disposability. A comparative narrative study in two multicultural ECE schools in Northwest Italy.

12. 1 Introduction

In contemporary urban peripheries—shaped by intersecting dynamics of mobility, inequality, and precarity—early childhood education has become a pivotal arena for negotiating the social implications of migration and diversity. In these neighborhoods, educators working with children aged 0–6 operate within complex social ecologies where economic hardship, housing instability, and institutional neglect meet linguistic and cultural pluralism. Migration is not, in itself, a condition of marginality; rather, it interacts with structural forces—poverty, discrimination, and urban exclusion—that contour how educators and families build relationships, meanings, and practices of care (Santiago, 2022).

A substantial body of research shows that structural inequality and spatial segregation shape both access to quality ECE and children's developmental trajectories. Household and neighborhood poverty correlate with poorer educational and health outcomes, and the timing and persistence of poverty intensify these effects (Roos et al., 2019). In disadvantaged areas, services are frequently under-resourced and less accessible, producing territorial injustice whereby the most vulnerable populations receive the lowest quality provision (Baranyai, 2023; Cloney et al., 2016; Fjällström et al., 2023). Expanding equitable, high-quality ECE is therefore widely recognized as a lever for reducing long-term inequality and promoting social mobility (Magnuson & Duncan, 2016; Betancur et al., 2023).

Within these constrained settings, migration and diversity add complexity without constituting a deficit. Migrant and racialized families often encounter xenophobia, institutional bias, and epistemic invisibility in schools (Santiago, 2022). Educators must meet pedagogical, ethical, and emotional demands in multilingual, multicultural classrooms while resisting deficit discourses that cast diversity as a problem (Souto-Manning et al., 2019; Pérez & Saavedra, 2017; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). In response, scholarship increasingly advances culturally sustaining and anti-racist pedagogies aimed not merely at inclusion but at transforming institutional structures and redistributing symbolic and material power (Escayg, 2020; Adair et al., 2024).

Intersectional and decolonial perspectives clarify why inequality in ECE persists: multiple systems of oppression overlap in the lives of children, families, and educators. Frameworks informed by Critical Race Theory, DisCrit (Disability Critical Race Theory), and postcolonial thought challenge white, ableist, monocultural norms and argue for justice-oriented, relational pedagogies (Love & Beneke, 2021; Iruka, 2022; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). These approaches center the voices of multiply minoritized children, families, and teachers as co-constructors of educational

knowledge and meaning, rather than passive recipients of inclusion (Souto-Manning et al., 2019; Pérez & Saavedra, 2017; Adair et al., 2024).

Within marginalized urban neighborhoods, the everyday work of early childhood educators extends well beyond formal instruction. In contexts marked by economic precarity, migration, and social fragmentation, they act as cultural mediators, emotional stabilizers, and community anchors who sustain networks of trust when public institutions fall short (McDevitt, 2021; Bennett et al., 2018; Suri & Chandra, 2021; Raivio et al., 2022). Their practice sits at the intersection of education and social work: each day they negotiate bureaucratic demands alongside the lived realities of families facing migration-related, socioeconomic, or linguistic vulnerabilities. Empirical studies document how educators mobilize dialogic and culturally responsive pedagogies—drawing on local values, multilingual repertoires, and community knowledge—to foster participation and belonging (Bennett et al., 2018; Vesely et al., 2017; Raivio et al., 2022). Classrooms thus become micro-spaces of recognition and care, enacting humanizing pedagogy grounded in empathy, dialogue, and social justice (Souto-Manning et al., 2019; Pérez & Saavedra, 2017; Rajan, 2021). Through this work, educators translate structural inequalities into relational practices that sustain coexistence and mutual understanding; their agency is therefore political insofar as care, mediation, and solidarity operate as everyday forms of resistance.

Yet such agency is routinely obscured. Research and policy often depict educators in intercultural and low-income settings as either compliant implementers or overburdened workers in failing systems (Osgood, 2011; Moss, 2018). This depoliticization erases the ethical and emotional labor at the heart of their practice and silences situated professional knowledge built through daily negotiation of diversity, trauma, and inequity (Love & Beneke, 2021; Peleman et al., 2019; O'Grady et al., 2024). Reframing educators as producers of knowledge and as political agents—especially where migration, poverty, and disability intersect—aligns with Fricker's (2007) notion of epistemic injustice, and supports a conception of ECE as an ethical, relational, and political field where teaching is inseparable from care, advocacy, and resistance.

These tensions are intensified by sectoral conditions. The early childhood field is widely characterized by institutional undervaluation, labor precarity, and chronic underfunding, creating zones of compounded marginality (Peleman et al., 2019; Chovan et al., 2022; Ncube & Ajani, 2024). Educators navigate unstable contracts, heavy workloads, and scarce resources while supporting families affected by poverty, housing insecurity, and bureaucratic exclusion (Wang, 2008; Green et al., 2024). Comparative research—from Roma communities in Central Europe to racialized and migrant families in Canada and the Global South—shows how educators continually balance care, advocacy, and institutional compliance in systems that rarely acknowledge their agency (Chovan et

al., 2022; Ncube & Ajani, 2024; Nigro & Ward-Seidel, 2024). Under these conditions, micro-political forms of resistance emerge: small but consequential gestures that uphold relational ethics, protect children's dignity, and contest inequities (Peleman et al., 2019; Sadownik & Ndijuye, 2023).

Taken together, this literature positions early childhood educators as central actors and critical witnesses at the intersection of migration, inequality, and education. Their relational, ethical, and political labor sustains possibilities of inclusion and belonging within fragile social ecologies, embodying a situated professionalism that renders care a political and epistemic act—an everyday practice of survival, solidarity, and hope.

At the same time, the specificity of the 0–6 field magnifies these dynamics. Early childhood settings demand constant attention to vulnerability, dependency, and trust; educators interpret children's affective signals and family narratives, translating plural cultural repertoires into pedagogical meaning. This requires a distinctive professional sensitivity that combines cognitive and emotional intelligence, cross-cultural competence, and sustained relational negotiation—often amounting to moral improvisation that reconciles institutional requirements with the realities of life at the margins (Peleman et al., 2019; Raivio et al., 2022; McDevitt, 2021). The feminized and undervalued character of the sector compounds this tension: care is both the medium and the source of educators' agency, yet the language of care is frequently used to naturalize and diminish their professionalism (Osgood, 2011; Moss, 2018). Acting as liaisons between institutions and communities, they translate policy goals into culturally responsive practices and advocate for children's and parents' social-emotional needs (Vesely et al., 2017; Suri & Chandra, 2021). Their expertise therefore lies less in the mechanical application of models than in turning vulnerability into connection, constructing everyday spaces of recognition and belonging within exclusionary systems.

Despite growing attention to diversity and inclusion, a significant gap persists regarding the dual positioning of educators in marginalized urban contexts. On one hand, they are oppressed subjects, constrained by structural precarity, gendered expectations, and institutional hierarchies that limit autonomy. On the other, they are carriers of situated knowledge, capable of converting constraints into relational, ethical, and pedagogical innovation. This ambivalent condition—simultaneously dominated and generative—remains under-theorized. Few studies examine how lived experiences of marginalization shape educators' professional identities and contribute to reimagining educational justice (Sadownik & Ndijuye, 2023; Ncube & Ajani, 2024). Likewise, limited attention has been paid to how educators are navigating exclusion and co-construct shared forms of in early education (Nigro & Ward-Seidel, 2024; Vesely et al., 2017).

Addressing this lacuna, the present study approaches educators not as passive intermediaries but as epistemic agents whose narratives of care, conflict, and survival illuminate the intersections of

migration, marginality, and social transformation. By reclaiming their voices, the research foregrounds ECE as a relational, political, and epistemic contentious space—a site where care and resistance converge to imagine new possibilities for justice in the everyday life of schools.

12. 2 The study

Building on these premises and drawing on the frameworks of liberation psychology (Martín-Baró, 1994; Montero & Sonn, 2009) and Narrative Therapy (White & Epston, 1990), as developed at the Dulwich Centre (Denborough, 2008), this comparative qualitative case study explores the experiences and perceived challenges of early childhood education educators in their professional practice. Particular attention is given to issues of inclusion, interculturality, and well-being in two public schools located in marginalized urban neighborhoods of Genoa, Northwest Italy. Although both institutions belong to the Italian public ECE system, they serve different age groups—0–3 and 3–6 years. The study aims not only to identify and analyze the difficulties encountered by educators but also to understand the everyday agentic and resistance strategies they develop and enact in their professional practice. Accordingly, it addresses three main research questions:

1. What challenges do ECE educators face in their daily work?
2. What forms of agentic responses and resistance do they construct?
3. Are there any notable similarity or difference between the two educational settings?

The third question, in particular, stems from the interests of the psychological coordinators of Genoa's 0–6 municipal ECE service.

Importantly, the purpose of this study is not to provide universal or generalizable answers, but rather to generate situated knowledge that, in line with the principles of participatory and situated research (Colucci, 2019; Alby, Zucchermaglio & Fatigante, 2014), liberation psychology, and narrative therapy, can support the communities involved in their own processes of conscientization and critical action. At the same time, such situated insights may serve as inspiration for other communities seeking to develop their own context-specific pathways of reflection and transformation.

The study background

This research is situated in two public early childhood education (ECE) settings located in historically working-class and culturally diverse neighbourhoods of Genoa, a port city in Northwestern Italy. Shaped over time by industrial expansion and subsequently by the processes of deindustrialization, these neighbourhoods now embody the complexities of urban marginality—a dense intersection of economic decline, institutional neglect, and vibrant multicultural life.

It is within this multilayered landscape that the two ECE services at the heart of this study operate—not as neutral educational institutions, but as deeply situated sites entangled in the social, emotional, and political fabric of their surroundings.

The first setting (School 1) is a nursery located in a working-class neighbourhood where conditions of marginality are present but comparatively less severe than in the second site. Here, the teaching team is younger, less consolidated, and characterized by greater fluidity due to frequent staff turnover. Unlike the deep sense of mission that defines the second school, educators in this setting tend to interpret their roles primarily through the lens of formal professional duties. Their engagement is generally confined within contractual boundaries, both in terms of time commitment and personal involvement. As a result, the team is more fragmented and pluralistic, displaying a diversity of perspectives on what the school should represent within its local context. While this configuration fosters flexibility and openness to multiple viewpoints, it lacks the long-term cohesion and shared identity that characterize the second school.

The second setting (School 2) is a kindergarten located in one of the city's most impoverished and marginalized areas. Over the years, it has developed a highly cohesive and intergenerationally consolidated team, united by a strong sense of mission. For these educators, teaching is not merely a profession but a vocation that extends beyond contractual obligations. Their shared ethos—cultivated and transmitted across successive cohorts of teachers—frames their work as a collective act of resistance and care. This strong identity, while a source of solidarity and resilience, has also generated moments of tension, as staff members who do not fully align with the school's values often find it difficult to remain. Nevertheless, the group continues to embody a resilient and enduring professional community, capable of transforming a precarious working and social environment into a meaningful space of purpose and belonging.

Both schools serve highly heterogeneous student populations in terms of linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Many families experience precarious living conditions, legal uncertainty, or displacement. Within this context, the schools emerge not merely as service providers but as nodes of public intimacy—spaces where the boundaries between education, welfare, and activism are porous, continually negotiated, and redefined through daily practice.

12.3 Methods

Participants

The study involved a total of 23 participants — 8 from School 1 and 15 from a kindergarten within School 2 — ranging in age from 27 to 63 years (M = 44.1, SD = 11.1). The group of participants was composed primarily of women (78.6%), along with two non-binary individuals (14.3%) and one man (7.1%). All the classroom educators were holding with permanent contracts under the municipal education system. In terms of educational background, 42.9% of participants held a university degree, while 57.1% had completed upper secondary education.

Instrument and procedures

Following the selection of the two school sites and the reconfirmation of the staff's willingness to participate, a series of individual and group meetings were organized. These encounters sought to explore, through narrative methodologies, the challenges perceived by educators in relation to intercultural dynamics, as well as the resistance strategies they develop in response. Within this framework, the group activities served a dual purpose: they functioned both as an intervention promoting self-reflexivity and conscientization, and as a means of data collection.

Data collection took place within the school facilities, during hours allocated for non-teaching duties—time that educators are contractually expected to devote to institutional activities not involving direct interaction with children.

To explore both the challenges faced by participants and the agentic strategies they employ to resist and transform oppressive circumstances, the study drew on the principles of narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990; Denborough, 2008, 2018) and integrated two forms of narrative practice—one collective and one individual. The collective practice was particularly suited to capturing shared experiences of struggle and resilience within a relational and dialogical space.

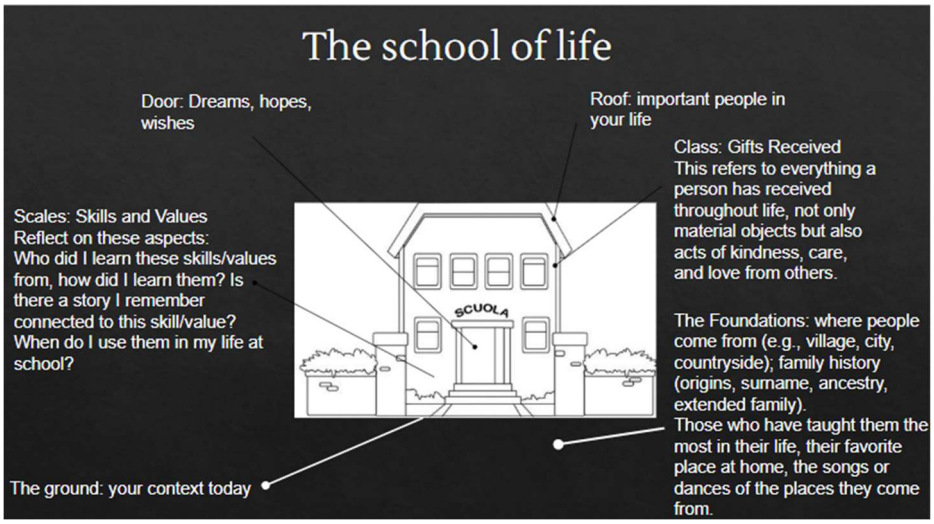
This collective narrative practice was designed by the author of this dissertation, inspired by the *Tree of Life* approach—a collective narrative methodology co-developed by David Denborough (2008, 2018) of the Dulwich Centre in Australia and Zimbabwean psychologist Ncazelo Ncube (2006). Widely used in community-based and trauma-informed contexts, particularly among vulnerable populations, this method provides a structured yet creative space for participants to reflect on and share their life stories through the metaphor of a tree, which represents different dimensions of identity and lived experience.

To adapt this methodology to the educational context of the participants and to the specific aims of the research, the author developed a variation called the *School of Life*. While maintaining the structure and objectives of the original method, the metaphor was reinterpreted to reflect educators' lived experiences within their school environment. This adaptation aligns with the narrative framework underpinning the study, which emphasizes the importance of tailoring tools and metaphors to the specific cultural and relational contexts of participants (White, 2007; Denborough, 2014; Dulwich Centre, n.d.). By doing so, it strengthens participants' capacity to re-author their own stories within a context that is both familiar and meaningful to them.

Figure 1 represents the structure of the School of Life provided to the participants to initiate the activity.

Figure 1

The School of Life

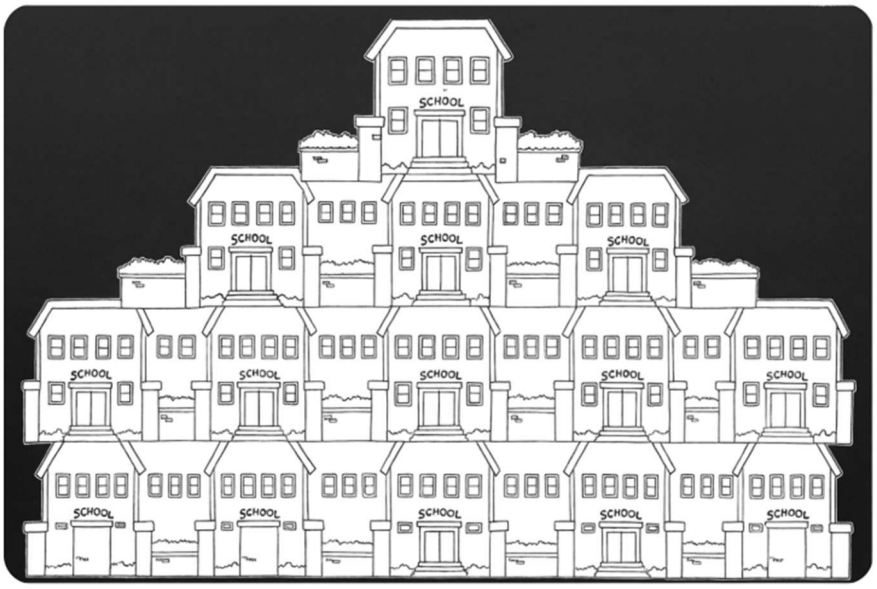


In this revised version, the first stage focused on individual reflections about one's own school-related experiences and identity, resulting in the creation of a personal School of Life. Examples of School of life created by the educators are provided in the appendix.

The second stage transitioned from individual to collective reflection, with each personal narrative conceived as a building block contributing to a shared representation of the school community (Figure 2).

Figure 2

The school community composed by the school of life of each educator.



The third and final stage involved discussion of the metaphorical "storms" faced by the school and the protective strategies employed to navigate them (Figure 3, 4 and 5).

The guiding questions to facilitate these conversations were the following:

- What are the effects of these dangers on your lives?
- What are the effects of these dangers on your lives as educators?
- What do you do to solve them?
- What skills do you use to solve these problems? From whom did you learn them and how? What is their story?

This adapted practice was conducted on a Saturday morning, with the full consent and participation of the school staff, and concluded with a communal lunch, which served to further strengthen relational bonds among participants.

Figure 3

In preparation for the collective narrative session, individual meetings were conducted using the *Life Storyline* narrative practice (Denborough, 2008, 2012, 2018) consistent with narrative inquiry approaches. The *Life Storyline* is a qualitative research and therapeutic tool rooted in the narrative approach, which emphasizes the centrality of personal stories in shaping meaning, identity, and action. Within narrative inquiry, the Life Storyline provides a structured yet flexible framework through which individuals can reflect on and reconstruct the key moments of their life history, particularly those that have influenced their personal and professional identities. The process typically involves inviting participants to create a visual timeline—a metaphorical "line" representing the course of their life—on which they mark significant events, turning points, challenges, and achievements. These markers may include formative personal experiences, educational milestones, professional transitions, or moments of cultural, social, or existential importance. The line may fluctuate in height to represent emotional highs and lows, symbolizing the affective dimension of lived experience.By mapping their lives in this way, participants are encouraged to re-author their experiences, identifying not only the difficulties they have encountered but also the strategies of resistance, resilience, and growth that emerged in response. The method highlights the temporal and relational aspects of identity, acknowledging that who we are is continuously shaped by the stories we tell, the meanings we attribute to past events, and the way we situate ourselves in relation to others and to broader social narratives (Denborough, 2008, 2012).

In this study, the Life Storyline was used in individual sessions as a preparatory step for the collective narrative activity (Veronese et al., 2021). It allowed participants to engage in a process of personal reflection and self-awareness before entering the group context. This initial stage helped build trust, encouraged introspection, and provided a narrative foundation upon which the collective practices—such as the Tree of Life and School of Life—could be meaningfully constructed.

The use of the Life Storyline in narrative research aligns with the epistemological stance that knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue and that individual stories are embedded within, and influenced by, broader cultural, institutional, and historical discourses. As such, the method serves not only as a technique for eliciting data, but also as an ethical and relational practice that honors the agency, voice, and complexity of each participant (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Veronese et al., 2021). The collection of qualitative data for this study took place from January to June 2024.

Method as reflexive and transformative practice

Importantly, the methodology functioned not only as a means of data collection, but also as a transformative intervention. Through the process of collective narrative practice, educators engaged in a dialogical space where they could critically examine and re-signify their experiences. This process acted as a catalyst for the development of critical consciousness (*conscientização*, Freire,

1970), enabling participants to name, interrogate, and reframe their everyday struggles in relation to broader structures of power and inequality.

One of the central aims of this intervention was to enhance both self-awareness and collective awareness, supporting educators in recognizing how their professional realities are shaped by socio-political and institutional forces. This reflexive praxis aligns with the tenets of liberation psychology, which emphasizes participatory inquiry as a vehicle for understanding systemic oppression and enacting transformative action.

Far from a neutral or extractive research process, the methodology established a micro-political space in which educators could articulate not only what they endure but also what they resist—and how they envision more just and dignified educational futures.

Following the completion of the collective and individual narrative activities, a restitution meeting was organized with the participating educators. This encounter functioned as a reflective and dialogical space in which participants could revisit and renegotiate the themes that had emerged throughout the process, in light of their lived experience and the insights gained along the way. The restitution phase thus represented both an ethical act of accountability and a further moment of co-construction of meaning—allowing participants to collectively reinterpret, consolidate, and project forward the transformative potential of the narratives they had produced together.

Data Collection and data analysis

All narrative outputs, including those generated during the individual Life Storyline sessions and the collective School of Life practices, were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and systematically analyzed. The transcripts were first processed in Italian, the participants' native language, to preserve the cultural, emotional, and linguistic nuances embedded in their stories. Subsequently, relevant excerpts were translated into English to support comparative interpretation and ensure accessibility for an international academic readership.

In addition to the verbal narratives, the visual and artistic materials produced during the sessions—such as drawings, timelines, and written elements within the School of Life—were also treated as primary empirical data. These creative expressions were not considered supplementary, but rather as integral components of the participants' meaning-making processes. Written inscriptions, illustrations, and compositional choices were examined in parallel with the verbal data to ensure a multimodal and comprehensive understanding of the narratives.

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), following a six-phase, iterative process. This method enabled the interpretive construction of themes grounded in participants' narrative accounts with the researcher playing an active role in meaning-making through ongoing critical reflexivity. To further support the analytic process, the researcher took detailed field

notes at the end of each individual narrative practice and following the collective narrative workshop. These notes included contextual observations, non-verbal cues, reflections on the relational dynamics, and emerging insights. This reflexive documentation contributed to a richer interpretation of the data, offering an additional layer of meaning beyond the transcribed narratives and visual artifacts. Rooted in a narrative epistemology (White, 2007), the analysis acknowledged the situated, co-constructed nature of meaning and the embedding of each participant's story within broader social, cultural, and institutional frameworks. The thematic analysis was inductive and data-driven, fully aligned with the study's narrative and participatory orientation, and supported through the use of NVivo 12 software for the organization and coding of qualitative data (Lambert, 2019; Veronese et al., 2020b). The adoption of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) was a deliberate methodological and epistemological choice, consistent with the study's narrative, participatory, and critically informed framework. This approach rejects the idea that themes simply "emerge" from the data; instead, it recognizes that themes are actively constructed through the researcher's interpretive engagement with participants' accounts.

The themes and subthemes were then examined in relation to their manifestations across the two school sites, with particular attention to both similarities and differences.

12. 4 Results

This section presents the key findings from the reflective thematic analysis of early childhood educators' narratives in two public schools located in marginalized urban areas of northwest Italy. Three overarching categories emerged: the hardships educators face, the skills of survival and resistance they enact, and the school's role as a site of transformation.

Educators described carrying both emotional and structural burdens—stemming from the trauma experienced by the children and families they serve, institutional neglect, limited resources, and strained interpersonal dynamics. These conditions often generate feelings of powerlessness and concern for the children's futures. In response, educators engage in subtle yet meaningful forms of resistance: creating beauty in neglected spaces, advocating for justice, supporting one another, and acting with ethical commitment beyond formal duties. Together, these practices form a collective strategy of survival grounded in care, creativity, and solidarity.

Although these patterns appear across both schools, the ways they are experienced and expressed differ.

In School 1, hardships are primarily situated within the relational dimension of the work—tensions among colleagues who hold divergent values, fragile reciprocity with families, and parents' limited understanding of the educators' role (Figure 4). Correspondingly, their strategies of survival focus on maintaining shared values and mutual support among peers, sustained by the conviction that every

child deserves joy and well-being. Resistance here is oriented less toward structural change and more toward preserving dignity and solidarity in daily practice.

Figure 4

The storms of the school 1

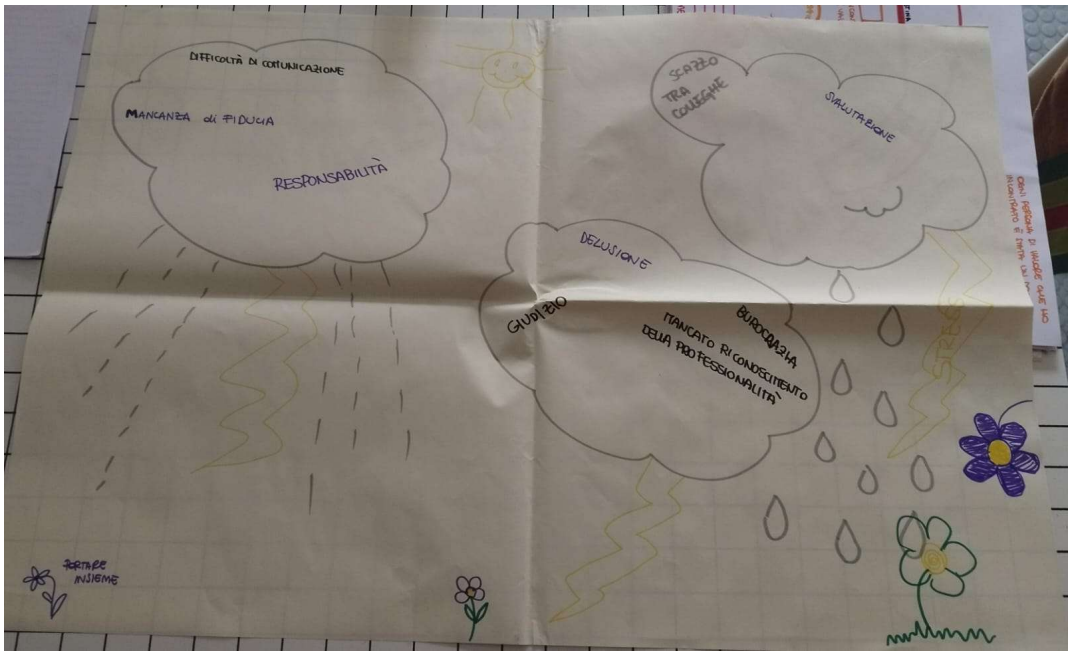
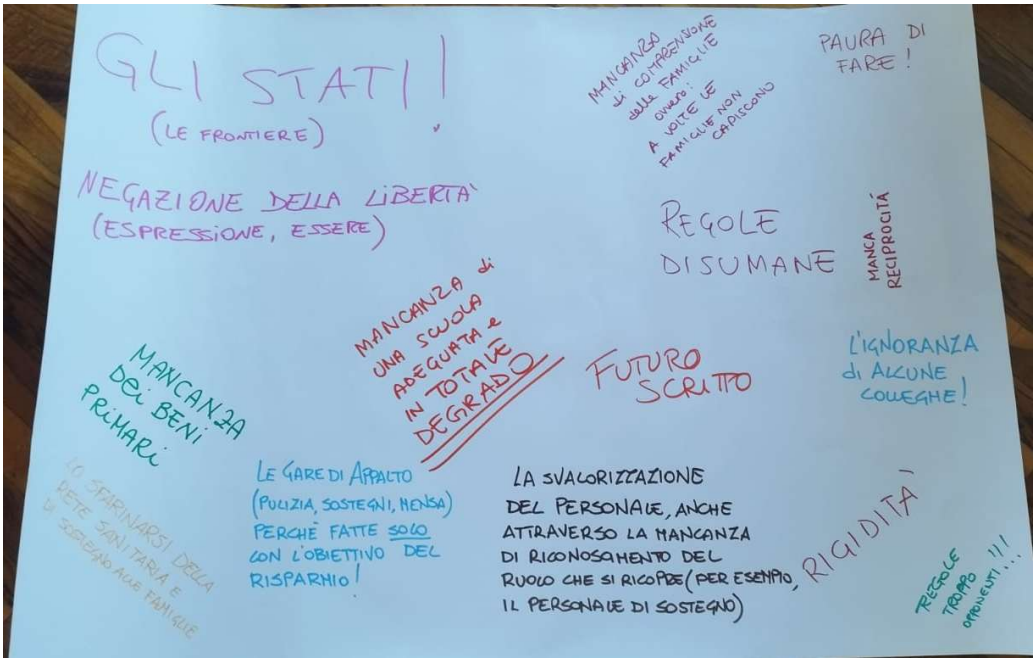


Figure 5

The storms of the school 2



In School 2, by contrast, educators emphasize not only relational but also structural and political challenges: lack of resources, job insecurity, insufficient training, and the physical deterioration of

the school (Figure 5). Their responses are broader and more explicitly resistant—transforming neglected spaces into places of beauty, voicing dissent against injustice, and prioritizing ethical care over bureaucratic constraints. Only in this setting does the school itself emerge as a locus of social resistance, described as a civic anchor for the neighborhood, a place of radical coexistence and belonging, and a collective home where hope and future are actively cultivated.

Educators' hardships. The following analysis draws from educators' lived experiences in early childhood settings located in socially and economically fragile contexts. They confront not only the pedagogical demands of their profession but also intertwined emotional, structural, and relational pressures that shape their daily work. These are not isolated difficulties but interconnected, systemic conditions that reveal the depth of strain placed on educators who function simultaneously as caregivers, advocates, and community anchors. Table 14 provides an overview of the main challenges identified by participants, illustrating the emotional toll of working with children affected by trauma, tensions within school teams, institutional disengagement, and persistent resource scarcity.

Table 14
Hardships faced by ECE educators in the two marginalized and multicultural educational context.

Themes	Sub-themes	School 1	School 2
Emotional burden	• Traumatic children and families' stories	x	x
	• Feeling powerless and hopelessness	x	x
	• The pain of resistance		x
	• Feeling abandoned by the institution	x	x
	• Fear to be divided		x
Difficult relationships	• Colleagues that are not sharing the same values and attitude	x	x
	• Building reciprocity with the families	x	x
	• Absence of understanding from the parents	x	x
Disconnection from the belonging institution	• Inaccessibility of the institution	x	x
	• Absence of support from superiors	x	x
	• The rules are stronger than humanity		x
Structural challenges	• The States, the borders		x
	• Lack of resources		x
	• Job insecurity for special education educators		x
	• Inadequate training		x
	• Run-down School		x
Loss of hope	• A future already written for children		x

These reflections expose the complexity of their roles and underscore the need for broader structural recognition and reform. While both schools share several challenges—emotional exhaustion, powerlessness, and insufficient institutional support—distinct patterns emerge. In School 1, difficulties revolve around the relational fabric of the school: conflicts among staff, fragile

partnerships with families, and a perceived lack of parental understanding. In School 2, relational challenges are compounded by structural and political ones: inadequate resources and training, employment precarity (especially for support staff), and the deteriorated condition of the school building. Educators also express a broader sense of disillusionment regarding the role of the State and social inequality, captured in the recurring sentiment that "the children's future is already written.

Emotional burden

School 1

Within School 1, educators describe their work as profoundly shaped by an ongoing emotional burden that seeps into the texture of their everyday practice. This burden is not episodic, but continuous, sustained by the weight of the children's and families' traumatic stories—narratives that educators often feel powerless to change. One educator recalls:

> *"M. was a child with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, but there were many other factors involved. Along with these challenges, there was an Eritrean mother who was living in a difficult situation—she still is in that horror. We are still in touch. We tried everything, but nothing"* (P23[6]).

These stories linger, becoming part of the educators' own emotional landscape, pressing against the limits of what they can hold.

The consequence of this exposure is a heavy sense of powerlessness and hopelessness, a despair that grows even in the presence of professional dedication. *"I can't wait to retire because things aren't working anymore. We only deal with bureaucracy. When we see a child who is unwell, we make reports and plans, but then nothing concrete happens"* (P18).

In these words, the exhaustion is palpable—hope eroded not by indifference, but by the repeated experience of systemic inaction.

What deepens this weight is the pervasive sense of abandonment by the institution, which leaves educators feeling both overburdened and unseen. As one educator explains: *"For me, what makes this job more difficult is the bureaucracy, which we're a bit abandoned with ourselves… Even though sometimes we're a bit abandoned ourselves, even from this perspective"* (P20).

Here, abandonment is not only administrative but existential: a recognition that those who should sustain them are absent, leaving them to face overwhelming challenges alone.

School 2

Within the walls of certain schools—especially those embedded in socially and economically fragile neighborhoods—educators carry out their work under constant emotional, structural, and existential

[6] Given the comparative nature of the present study, in order to protect participants' anonymity, the individuals involved were identified using alphanumeric codes (e.g., P1, P2, P3).

pressure. Theirs profession extends far beyond the boundaries of curriculum and classroom. These schools function as frontline spaces, where educators face not only the challenges of teaching, but the overwhelming realities of the children's lives. The challenges perceived by the educators emerge not as temporary crises, but as sustained conditions that test their resilience, convictions, and humanity—day after day.*"A school like this and a project of this kind truly put you to the test, and we can't deny it,"* one educator admits. *"Those who came and then left did so because they faced a challenge that was anything but simple* (P1)*."*

In this acknowledgment, there is no judgment—only a recognition that this kind of work is not for everyone. It *"tests you in many ways, especially on an emotional level: empathy is an essential part of our work, but connecting with children who experience such deep suffering is something that is difficult even to put into words* (P7)*."* This suffering is not abstract; it is embodied in stories that *"weigh like stones"*—stories of *"mothers who are victims of human trafficking, who have only ever known violence and continue to live in it—violence that they, in turn, inflict on their children. Children growing up in environments marked by drugs, prostitution, and abuse* (P9)*."* These are the stories educators absorb—not as observers, but as deeply engaged caregivers. *"It shakes you to the core, deep in your guts, in your bones, in the tiniest fibers of your being. It stays with you, seeps into you, and then at night, you can't sleep. And you don't forget the reasons why you can't sleep* (P10)*."*

This kind of emotional exposure leads to a heavy sense of powerlessness, a despair that seeps in even when the will to do good is strong. Another educator, worn down by this dynamic, shares:

> *"When it comes to saving children, it becomes increasingly clear to me just how difficult it really is. It's disheartening because even the goodwill to make things better is often neither appreciated nor accepted. In the end, no one truly helps you* (P10)*."*

The pain of feeling alone in the fight to protect children, even as they pour themselves into the work, leaves educators questioning their own capacity. *"Sometimes, you just lose the motivation because it feels like fighting against windmills* (P4)*."* It is a haunting image—educators confronting overwhelming challenges with limited resources and little systemic support, battling forces far beyond the classroom.

Even when they continue to act, to give, to hope, it is not without scars. Another educator expresses this pain with devastating honesty: *"I'm the one who tries every two days, but, how can I put it… they're bruises. Because I will keep doing it, but I have many bruises.* (P5)*"* Resistance, here, is no longer an idea—it is a practice that leaves marks. This is what it means to care deeply in a system that rarely reciprocates that care. These are not metaphorical wounds, but the slow accumulation of emotional and moral bruising endured in silence.

This emotional labor is further exacerbated by the physical and symbolic neglect of the very spaces in which educators work. One educator reflects: *"It feels heavy in every way because even when you talk about beauty… To me, beauty is also goodness.* (P11)*"* But the environment offers little support to that vision: *"This is not a school. The first time I walked in here, I felt like I was dying. It looks more like a prison than a place for growth.* (P7)*"* The architecture and atmosphere reflect abandonment, stagnation—*"an old school, clearly from the '60s or '70s, with no real thought of renewal.* (P12)*"* Educators are left to *"endure it all,"* finding themselves emotionally committed to a space that physically and symbolically resists transformation.

Amidst these challenges, one fear looms persistently: the fear of being divided. *"When they divide us for maintenance work, we lose our strength. Separated, we are vulnerable. We must stay united. This fear haunts us every day.* (P3)*"* In a system where external support is scarce, the internal bonds between colleagues become essential for survival. These are not simply professional relationships—they are protective structures. To be physically separated—by maintenance, policy, or restructuring—is not a logistical inconvenience, but a rupture that threatens their emotional and psychological stability. Unity is their strongest form of resistance, and their most fragile resource.

Together, these testimonies form a powerful chorus of fatigue, love, sorrow, and unyielding commitment. These educators are not merely teaching—they are holding lives, absorbing traumas, and pushing back against a tide of indifference and degradation. They do so at great personal cost, and often in silence. To speak these truths is not to concede defeat, but to make visible the depth of the challenges they face—so that perhaps, one day, they will not have to carry them alone.

Difficult relationships

School 1

Among the challenges faced by educators in School 1, none appear more delicate—or more central—than those tied to relationships. These difficulties unfold in concentric circles: within the staffroom, in the fragile space of trust with families, and in daily interactions with parents.

At the core lies the work group, perceived as both the greatest strength and the most vulnerable point of the school. Its cohesion is described as indispensable: *"If a group work doesn't work, nothing works, because it's like a planet spinning on its own"* (P15). Yet this centrality also renders it fragile. Misalignments in values and attitudes among colleagues create fractures that weigh heavily: *"There are people you work well with who make you want to come to work, and people you might clash with more… The most difficult part is undoubtedly managing relationships between adults"* (P14). Here, conflict is not merely professional disagreement, but a destabilizing force that threatens the collective identity upon which educators rely for resilience.

Beyond internal dynamics, educators highlight the arduous process of building reciprocity with families. Trust does not come easily, and its absence reverberates painfully. One educator recounts: *"We struggled so much to gain her trust, also because sometimes she herself made us a little angry. The child was a wonderful child, but at times a bit neglected, especially emotionally. I saw multiple times scenes where the mother came to pick him up… and she wouldn't even look at him. The child would freeze, press himself against the wall, and it broke my heart"* (P16). Such moments reveal the fragility of reciprocity, where care extended by the school is not always mirrored or acknowledged by families.

Finally, educators speak of an absence of understanding from parents, particularly regarding the shared responsibility for children's education. *"Yes, because now, especially in recent years, there is a struggle on the part of parents when it comes to educating their children. They delegate so much to you; in my opinion, there is much more delegation compared to the past"* (P17). What emerges is a sense of imbalance: educators feel overburdened by expectations while simultaneously under-recognized in their efforts.

School 2

Among the many challenges that educators face in School 2 few are as persistent—and as painful—as *difficult relationships*. These challenges are not limited to the well-known pressures of institutional bureaucracy or material scarcity. They are deeply relational and affect the very heart of educational work. Whether it is conflict or misalignment within the teaching team or the difficult, often fragile process of building trust with families, educators frequently find themselves operating in spaces of disconnection, misunderstanding, and emotional labor. These are the places where hope and exhaustion coexist.

The experience of working with colleagues who do not share the same mission, the same vision of the school, can become a source of profound emotional toll. *"We have paid dearly, dearly, dearly,* (P5)*"* a educator repeats, as if trying to quantify a cost that cannot be measured. *"It was a resilient resistance, let's not tell ourselves it was easy.* (P5)*"* What is evoked here is not just professional disagreement but deep, lingering damage—the kind that shapes not only how one works, but how one feels, how one carries their body, their mental health, their spirit. *"As post-traumatic stress disorder, from stress, if you analyze us.* (P1)*"* These words do not come lightly. They suggest that in environments where unity is lacking, resistance becomes a lonely act. The emotional violence of working without shared purpose does not fade; it imprints itself on the body and psyche.

But the terrain of difficulty extends far beyond internal team dynamics. One of the most complex and misunderstood challenges is the relationship between schools and families, particularly those from marginalized or precarious backgrounds. Here, educators must constantly navigate the tension

between care and authority, between institutional responsibility and human reciprocity. One educator articulates this with brutal honesty:

> *"Building reciprocity with families is a long and difficult process, and it has nothing to do with institutional bureaucracy or a superficial idea of inclusion. Unfortunately, things often get confused.* (P10)*"*

The institutional posture of inclusion is often more about control than care, more about containment than connection. The educator warns us: *"We must be careful."* True reciprocity—real, mutual recognition—is far more difficult than many educational frameworks acknowledge.

> *"There is a deeper and more noble version of this discourse: the pursuit of true reciprocity. And reciprocity is not built solely through rules, but through an understanding of mutual needs.* (P10)*"*

In this reframing, inclusion is not a checklist or a document translated into multiple languages. It is an ethical relationship shaped by humility, listening, and shared vulnerability.

But even when such efforts are made, they exist in tension with broader systemic failures. Families who have endured violence, displacement, or deprivation often carry wounds that make trust difficult. *"Those who have experienced hunger, those who have suffered, those who have neither a mother nor a father, may be angry at you, who have a home and stability,* (P9)*"* the educator reflects. And this anger is not misdirected—it is real. *"This anger makes them see you as a means to an end: I use you to get something. And if they perceive you as welcoming, they may even go as far as stepping on your feet.* (P10)*"* These encounters are raw, painful, and complex. They test the very boundaries of professional patience, emotional endurance, and ethical consistency.

The educator clarifies: *"But this is not reciprocity. We know this because we have experienced the lack of reciprocity.* (P9)*"* And here lies the crux of the problem: institutions are often far more comfortable with dependency than with mutuality. *"Building reciprocity is much harder than creating welfare dependency. It is harder than being paternalistic.* (P8)*"* The easy route is giving packages. The harder route is building relationships. *"Why? Because it clashes with the indifference created by the institution.* (P10)*"* The system offers forms, processes, and policies—but not human connection.

> *"If I receive a package from Sant'Egidio but from the institution only an enrollment form written in a language I do not understand, where do I find openness? In the package. And that is why people ask for it: 'Give me the package.* (P2)*'"*

According to these narratives this contrast is devastating. When families are offered symbolic gestures in place of structural care, when they find generosity in NGOs but coldness in public systems, their trust migrates accordingly. And educators, positioned between these two poles, are often left trying

to build bridges across a chasm that should never have existed. They carry the weight of institutional failings while trying to embody values that go far beyond what the system supports.

In both the staffroom and the community, these relationships are where the emotional labor of teaching becomes most visible—and most invisible. The challenge lies not in ignorance or malice, but in the deep asymmetries that exist between lived experience and institutional logic. Educators are asked to be stable in unstable spaces, kind in systems that lack compassion, open in structures built on hierarchy. And when they try—and fail—it is not for lack of effort, but because the very conditions of reciprocity are so fragile.

As another part of the testimony reveals:

> *"If I say, 'Wait a moment, I'm working,' it shouldn't mean, 'I am white, strong, and powerful, and you must stay there until I decide otherwise.' Yet, in many schools, unfortunately, that is exactly what happens.* (P12)*"*

This power dynamic—embedded in subtle everyday interactions—undermines real connection. It produces resentment, mistrust, and at times, open hostility.

This plays out in ordinary but painful episodes, where educators are met with a lack of understanding and even verbal aggression.

> *"The other time, S.'s mother came from the bathrooms after ten minutes and said to me: 'Gloves up to here, you're just staring at the shit.' I replied: 'Yes, we're working.' And she said: 'But excuse me, are you angry, D.?* (P5)*"*

The educator continues, *"No, but don't say things like that to me… She stayed there for three minutes, I swear, guys."* These seemingly minor exchanges reflect much deeper tensions—about visibility, respect, and the failure to recognize the labor educators perform every day, often in silence.

Another educator echoes this frustration:

> *"It happened to me too. I had to go downstairs three times while I was in the bathroom. I always try to smile, even when I'm angry, because that's how it should be. But then they came and asked me: 'Michela, didn't you want to open the door?' And I answered: 'No, mom, of course I wanted to open it…*(P6)*"*

These moments of being misread—where exhaustion is interpreted as indifference, and diligence is repaid with suspicion—are deeply wounding. They underscore the lack of recognition educators often face from the very people they strive to support.

Still, some of these difficult encounters lead to quiet shifts. The same educator who was upset later notes a subtle change: *"Now when someone arrives, they ring the bell only once and wait for us to open the door. They don't ring insistently anymore. It's a reflection of that change.* (P14)*"* Even in

moments of tension, there is space for growth, for adjustment, for mutual awareness—but it is a slow and difficult road.

Disconnection from the belonging institution

School 1

For educators in School 1, one of the most persistent challenges is a deep sense of disconnection from the institution to which they belong. This disconnection manifests in multiple ways—through bureaucratic inaccessibility, the absence of concrete support from superiors, and the feeling that rigid rules take precedence over human needs.

Educators often describe the institution as distant and inaccessible, an entity that exists more as an obstacle than as a source of guidance. *"There are few things for which we can really turn to the so-called superiors"* (P15), one educator admits, underscoring a perception that decision-makers remain detached from the everyday realities of the school.

This distance is compounded by the absence of meaningful support. Educators recount feeling abandoned, left to navigate overwhelming challenges on their own: *"For me, what makes this job more difficult is the bureaucracy, which we're a bit abandoned with ourselves… Even though sometimes we're a bit abandoned ourselves, even from this perspective"* (P20). What surfaces here is not simply frustration with paperwork, but the loneliness of working in a space where institutional backing is missing.

School 2

Among the most pervasive and disheartening challenges experienced by educators in School 2 is the deep and chronic *disconnection from the institution to which they belong*. Far from being a protective framework, the institution is often perceived as a distant, opaque, and even antagonistic force—one that imposes barriers rather than breaking them down, and rules rather than support. The educators' voices speak not only to a lack of structural responsiveness, but to a profound mismatch between the values that guide their daily practice and those that shape institutional decisions.

As one educator starkly puts it: *"The barrier of the institution is, in some ways, insurmountable. The same borders they impose on people at sea are imposed on people within this school.* (P5)*"* This analogy is piercing. It reframes institutional disengagement not as a bureaucratic issue, but as a *political and moral act of exclusion*. The institution becomes a border regime—its rules, protocols, and hierarchies operating like invisible walls that cut through the very space meant to be inclusive and nurturing. *"They are unavoidable,* (P7)*"* the educator continues, *"because it is a system designed, after all, to be corrupted.* (P1)*"* There is no illusion of reform here—only the recognition of a system built on contradictions, where caring educators are left to work despite the institution, rather than with it.

This disconnection becomes especially painful when those in positions of authority—supervisors, administrators—respond not with support, but with criticism. *"Our approach and style have been heavily criticized* (P4)*"* shares one educator. *"We were accused of being too accommodating with parents, overly empathetic, as if our role was not to support families.* (P3)*"* The very values that define the educators' commitment—empathy, openness, a community-oriented approach—are dismissed as *unprofessional* or *misaligned*. *"According to them, we were not in line with the required approach… despite the genuine effort to improve things, this often goes unrecognized and unappreciated.* (P7)*"* The gap between what the institution demands and what the work truly requires becomes unbridgeable. *"And in the end, no support is given.* (P11)*"* This sentence, spare and direct, captures a reality that many educators know too well: they are alone.

This abandonment is not simply emotional—it has concrete consequences. Institutional logic frequently overrides basic human needs, reinforcing a system where *rules are stronger than humanity*. As another educator explains: *"The problem isn't the mistake of an individual; it's the system itself that is absurd. Instead of finding solutions—for example, regarding food access and waste—the preference is to throw food away.* (P14)*"* Even in cases where a child is disabled, even when the solution is obvious and compassionate, *"Institutional rules always take precedence over humanity, even when it comes to a plate of pasta for a disabled child.* (P1)*"*

This cold rationality, this bureaucratic rigidity, becomes the defining posture of the institution. The educator continues, *"There is a fundamental tendency to say, 'Remember, institutional rules come before humanity.' And it's true. That's the core issue.* (P10)*"* The tragedy here is not only in what happens, but in the normalization of these choices—the internalization of the idea that human needs must always yield to administrative order.

A deeply illustrative example of this is shared by another educator, who recalls a child's sensory-technical routine with a food cart:

> *"The latest issue? Have you seen how M. interacts with the food cart? He has a whole routine with S.: he approaches, she hands him the plate, she lets him put the cheese on it… It's a technical process, crucial for him.* (P7)*"*

This small, gentle ritual is more than a preference—it is part of the child's developmental and emotional regulation. And yet, it is seen not as essential, but as a violation of institutional roles. *"When an inspection took place, S. was reprimanded… simply because she spoke and communicated with him. Their role is not to talk to him, but just to serve the food.* (P5)*"* The interaction—so meaningful to the child—is rendered *inappropriate* by a system that sees humans as functions, not as beings in relationship. *"It's the system that's idiotic. It's the system.* (P14)*"*

This refrain is not just an expression of frustration—it is a diagnosis. What these educators are up against is not a broken rule or a single insensitive act. It is an entire institutional culture that prioritizes control over compassion, compliance over care. They resist this every day—but that resistance is heavy, lonely, and often unrewarded.

These testimonies reveal a stark and painful reality: educators who strive to act with compassion, integrity, and creativity are often met not with support, but with resistance. Rather than serving as a structure of care and protection, the institution becomes a mechanism of constraint—silencing initiative, discouraging innovation, and marginalizing those who dare to do things differently.

And yet, they stay. They keep working, keep fighting, keep caring. But the cost is real. And unless institutions begin to listen—not only with their ears, but with their structures—this disconnection will continue to undermine the very future of education.

Structural challenges

School 2

One of the most enduring obstacles in School 2 are often those imposed by structural challenges. These are not simply logistical problems or bureaucratic hurdles. They are embedded within the very architecture of society: in national policies, institutional indifference, underfunding, and systemic inequality. The educators who work in these contexts see the consequences of these structures not in abstract terms, but in the faces and stories of the children they serve. They are the ones who must hold together schools that are physically collapsing, socially disregarded, and administratively abandoned—while still being expected to perform, to resist, and to care.

At the root of these challenges lies the role of the State—its ideology, its borders, its control. One educator speaks to this with striking clarity:

> *"States oppress and restrain us. They are institutions built on a model that has left entire communities in decay, designed by men—not women, not mothers—who decided to divide the world in two.* (P14)*"*

This critique is not only political; it is deeply personal. It comes from years of seeing how children and families are labeled, categorized, and excluded.

> *"If living in a place and building a thriving community were a natural process, there would be no need to belong to a state or a specific tradition… But that is not how states operate.* (P5)*"*

The educator exposes how institutional frameworks, designed to classify and control, undermine the human potential of communities.

"We are forced to talk about inclusion (P1)*"* the same educator continues, *"because we have children with different nationalities, expiring residence permits, uncertain citizenship statuses. But the issue shouldn't be about inclusion—it should be about simply living well together.* (P4)*"*

These words cut through the rhetoric of diversity and inclusion and challenge the underlying structures that make such terms necessary in the first place. In their place, the educator imagines a different world: *"If escaping from a war zone to a better place were always an option… wars would no longer work.* (P10)*"* This vision is radical, hopeful, and fundamentally political—it envisions schools not just as places of learning, but as tools to dismantle the very logic of exclusion and violence.

But such visions often collide with harsh realities. Across the board, educators describe the chronic lack of resources in their schools. One educator states bluntly:

> *"Schools have been facing continuous budget cuts from governments over the past twenty years, and staff training is becoming increasingly superficial. We see it every day: even the most basic necessities are lacking.* (P2)*"*

The consequences are everywhere: *"The food arrives overcooked, cold, inedible… The newly renovated roof leaks… cleaning is poorly done…*(P3)*"* and worst of all, *"healthcare is crumbling along with the support system for families.* (P8)*"* Educators are left improvising in the face of state neglect: *"At this point, it's as if they're telling us: 'Figure it out on your own.* (P7)*"*

And this improvisation is made worse by a cruel paradox: the system's rules often undermine care. In a heartbreaking example, a child with a high fever and a rash is misdiagnosed: *"The paediatrician says, 'On Black children, it's harder to identify skin rashes.'* (P10)*"* The educator steps in, orders a strep test—it comes back positive. Meanwhile, *"paediatricians in our neighbourhoods have stopped examining children out of fear of making mistakes. They have stopped examining everyone.* (P4)*"* The systemic racism and institutional fear leave the most vulnerable exposed—and it is the educators who have to fill the void.

Another layer of structural injustice emerges in the precarious employment conditions of special education educators. *"There is a pressing issue we need to talk about* (P9)*"* begins one educator, *"special education educators… are colleagues, people we have worked with for years… yet they are employed by cooperatives… their contracts do not guarantee a dignified future.* (P8)*"* These educators build close bonds with children, only to be reassigned like objects. *"They are shuffled from one child to another as if they were chess pieces.* (P12)*"* Even in public schools, this erodes the continuity and trust that children desperately need. *"The system itself is flawed… today they're here, tomorrow the contract goes to another bidder, and they disappear.* (P5)*"* And when they remain? *"Under what conditions are they working?* (P5)*"*

Educators also name the failures of academic training, which too often feel disconnected from the reality of the work. *"Training in a certain type of academy hasn't really helped. It's not entirely useless, but it's not enough, they didn't prepare us… My real education didn't happen at school.* (P5)*"* This testimony reveals a gap between theory and practice, between institutional training and the lived demands of teaching in contexts marked by fragility. *"At 18, you're still too young… you need to go out into the world, to embark on a life journey that goes beyond.* (P13)*"*

And all of this unfolds inside buildings that symbolize neglect and inequality. One educator says it clearly: *"The truth is, this school is completely run-down.* (P5)*"* The physical decay is not just aesthetic—it shapes the self-image of the school and the children who attend it. *"It creates a barrier—not just physically, but mentally as well.* (P12)*"* The building becomes a metaphor for how the institution sees them. *"And then there's the prejudice. 'This is the school for Black kids.' I say it deliberately because that's how it is perceived.* (P14)*"* This brutal clarity names what many avoid: that even within public systems, some schools are seen as less worthy—less deserving of care, of investment, of respect. *"But that's not true. We are a school like any other. And if this building were in a different neighborhood… things would be completely different.* (P7)*"*

These structural challenges are not isolated issues. They are interconnected, systemic failures that reflect a society unwilling to prioritize the education, dignity, and well-being of all its children. And yet, these educators continue. They resist. They create care where the system withholds it, structure where there is chaos, and meaning where there is neglect. But they should not have to do this alone.

The voices of these educators remind us that structural injustice is not abstract—it is experienced through overcooked food, leaking roofs, misdiagnosed rashes, shuffled contracts, inadequate training, and the emotional toll of holding up a collapsing system.

Loss of hope

School 2

Among the most painful challenges experienced by educators in School 2 is the gradual and relentless loss of hope—not only for themselves, but for the children they care for. Hope, in these contexts, is not abstract. It is measured in everyday acts: in the stability of a relationship, in the quality of a school meal, in the dignity of a clean and safe environment. When these are systematically denied, when the structural failures are so deep and so continuous, hope becomes one of the first things to disappear. What remains is the quiet devastation of knowing that the children are growing up in a world that expects nothing from them—and offers even less.

One educator puts it with heartbreaking clarity:

"In the end, the ones who always pay the price are the children. (P5)*"* It is a sentence that speaks to the core of educational injustice. The children grow up surrounded by instability, fragmentation, and indifference—conditions that shape not only their daily life, but their sense of what is possible.

> *"They grow up in an environment where special education educators change every year, where food is served however it comes because the kitchen is closed, where cleaning is done poorly simply because that's how it was decided.* (P3)*"*

In these conditions, there is no continuity, no care, no space for aspiration. The message to children is implicit but clear: *"You don't matter enough for us to change* (P9)*"*. And so, slowly, the future begins to shrink. *"It's as if their future is already written.* (P11)*"*. The system, through its repeated failures, writes a narrative of limitation, where children's lives are mapped out by circumstance rather than by possibility. The educator continues:

"If you go around and ask children what they want to be when they grow up, their answers remain limited. Their dreams are small, often confined within narrow expectations. (P4)*"* This sense of confinement is contrasted with a memory from the past—a time when childhood dreams were expansive, vivid, and full of possibility:

> *"There used to be a famous commercial where an adult with a microphone interviewed children: 'Hi, G., what do you want to be when you grow up?' And they would respond: 'A pilot!' 'A police officer!' 'A firefighter!' It was the image of an 80s and 90s child—carefree, smiling, white, successful, with an important future ahead.* (P4)*"*

Here the educators are showing how cultural narratives once held space for dreaming, for imagining oneself beyond the conditions of the present. But today, that space is vanishing.*"If we remade that commercial today, what would we get? 'Hi, little girl, what do you want to be when you grow up?' 'A prostitute.' 'And you?' 'A drug dealer.* (P5)*'"* This moment in the testimony is raw, provocative, and brutally honest. It is not a judgment of the children, but an indictment of the world that surrounds them.

"Because we have taken their dreams away. They are being stolen from them. (P14)*"* This theft is systemic. It happens when schools are underfunded, when educators are dismissed, when violence becomes normalized, and when the public narrative surrounding these communities assumes failure before possibility.

And the loss is not only social or political—it is deeply personal. The educator ends with a quiet, intimate pain: *"Even when I ask my teenage daughter—who means everything to me—what she wants to be when she grows up, that light in her eyes is no longer there.* (P4)*"*

This is the real cost of systemic abandonment. It is not only in failing grades or broken buildings—it is in the extinguishing of that light, that inner spark that says to a child: *you can become anything*.

When that disappears, the damage is not just emotional—it is existential. These testimonies are mirroring what the society has lost its way. In it, we see the consequences of decades of institutional neglect, racism, economic disinvestment, and policy failure. The educator does not speak from detachment but from love—love for her students, for her daughter, for the idea that school could still be a place where futures are built rather than dismantled. And in this love, even in the face of despair, there is still a trace of resistance. By naming this loss, by refusing to pretend everything is fine, the educator is holding space for a truth that must be heard: we cannot talk about education without talking about the futures we are stealing—or the ones we still might save, if we choose to act differently.

Skills of survival and resistance strategies. In response to the overwhelming challenge that characterize their daily professional lives, early childhood educators develop and embody a wide range of survival skills and resistance strategies. These are not abstract concepts but deeply embedded practices rooted in care, solidarity, and moral clarity. Far from being passive responders to systemic neglect, these educators become quiet yet powerful agents of transformation—nurturing beauty in degraded environments, advocating for justice, and cultivating collective resilience. Table 2 provides an overview of these strategies, which include speaking out against injustice, building relationships as foundations for growth, prioritizing ethics over rigid rules, and engaging in acts of everyday solidarity. Through these practices, educators not only resist the forces that devalue their work and their communities—they actively reimagine what school can be: a place of hope, connection, and shared humanity.

Even if educators in both schools confront systemic neglect not only by enduring it, but by developing strategies of survival and resistance that allow them to reimagine their everyday practice,yet the nature and breadth of these strategies differ significantly between the two contexts.

In School 1 , survival strategies are more limited and primarily anchored in *shared values*. Educators emphasize above all the conviction that *every child deserves joy and well-being*, even in conditions of deprivation. Acts of resistance take the form of *everyday kindness* and *mutual support among colleagues*, where solidarity within the team becomes the main source of strength. Here, resilience does not emerge through structural transformation or public advocacy, but through a daily ethic of care and the protective bonds cultivated inside the group (Table 2).

In School 2, by contrast, educators articulate a much broader repertoire of resistance practices. Beyond the shared belief in children's right to joy and the ethic of solidarity, they also speak of *creating beauty amid degradation* through art, color, and self-initiative; of *raising their voices* to report injustices and advocate for equity; of *prioritizing ethics over bureaucratic rules*; and of *stepping beyond institutional roles* by following common sense and seeing themselves as part of a

collective effort. These practices, rooted in both moral clarity and practical creativity, illustrate a consolidated *culture of resistance* that has developed over time within the school community.

Thus, while both schools embody forms of care and solidarity, School 1 frames resistance almost exclusively in terms of values and mutual support, whereas School 2 mobilizes a wider, more structured set of strategies that extend from everyday acts of care to open advocacy and moral defiance (Table 15).

Table 15

Skills of survival and resistance strategies described by by ECE educators in the two marginalized and multicultural educational context.

Themes	Sub-themes	Nursery	Kindergarten
Creating beauty amid degradation and abandonment	• Practicing everyday humility		x
	• Believing every child deserves joy and well-being	x	x
	• Transforming spaces through color, art and self-initiative	x	x
Raising one's voice	• Reporting injustice and harmful conditions		x
	• Advocating for rights and equity		x
Encounter as a foundation for growth	• Creating spaces for shared development		x
	• Dialogue as a source of collective knowledge		x
Prioritizing ethics over rules	• Acting with moral courage for justice		x
	• Upholding a long-standing culture of resistance		
Stepping beyond institutional roles	• Following the common sense in action		x
	• Seeing oneself as part of a collective effort		x
Caring for one another	• Practicing kindness as a daily ethic	x	x
	• Creating spaces for solidarity and mutual support	x	x

Creating beauty amid degradation and abandonment

School 1

In School 1, the theme of *creating beauty amid degradation and abandonement* takes shape through modest but deeply meaningful practices. Educators ground their work in two core convictions: that *every child deserves joy and well-being*, and that even in a neglected environment, small gestures of care—color, art, and initiative—can transform the atmosphere.

This ethos is expressed not in grand reforms but in everyday acts of creativity and commitment. As one educator explains, *"What I enjoy about working here is when we manage to create a network where we all support each other. To me, the beauty of this job lies in bringing out each person's unique*

qualities, because we are all different and each of us has particular strengths. When we manage to combine them, something good comes out of it. So, in this context, being like a human body… I love it when we can do meaningful and beautiful things for our children together" (P17).

In these words, beauty is not aesthetic decoration alone—it is the result of solidarity and shared responsibility. It is about affirming that, despite structural decay and limited resources, children must encounter spaces infused with joy and dignity. Educators cultivate this beauty by bringing color into classrooms, engaging children in artistic expressions, and initiating projects that transform neglected corners of the school into places of vitality.

As another educator reflects, *"No, with the children I have fun; they are a constant source of joy and learning"* (P24). This joy, however fragile, becomes itself a form of resistance: a daily reaffirmation that, even in conditions of scarcity, children deserve to grow up surrounded by signs of care and possibility.

Unlike in School 2, where *creating beauty* is tied to a broader culture of resistance and political critique, in School 1 this practice remains closely linked to *values and relationships*. It is the combination of humility, joy, and collegial support that sustains educators' efforts to create livable and dignified spaces amid degradation.

School 2

In the context where the School is situated, in degraded or marginalized environments, skills of survival and strategies of resistance emerge at first through the everyday, often invisible actions of educators. These educators engage in quiet yet powerful forms of resistance by reclaiming space, restoring dignity, and creating joy for children, despite the material and institutional limitations they face. Their resistance is not loud or confrontational, but rather rooted in humility, creativity, and a deep sense of care.

One of the most telling expressions of this resistance is their willingness to do things themselves—to physically and emotionally invest in the spaces they inhabit with children. As one educator describes: *"We resist by doing things ourselves—painting the walls, reclaiming the cracks in construction work, repurposing tin cans, buying old herbs and forgotten items, placing little fish on the child's wall, and finding the gaps where we exist. The work, we do it ourselves.* (P5)*"*

This statement exemplifies a hands-on survival skill, where acts of repair and aesthetic care are transformed into acts of defiance. The educators do not passively accept the degradation around them; instead, they intervene with their own labor and imagination, asserting that their presence—and the presence of the children—matters.

This commitment extends beyond the physical environment to the emotional and cultural life of the children. In situations where joy might be seen as secondary to more urgent needs, these educators

insist that happiness is itself a right—and a necessity. During Carnival, for example, educators bring materials from home to create a festive atmosphere:

> *"During Carnival in Genoa, we celebrate with the pentolaccia, a beautifully decorated piñata filled with candies. To make it special, we brought materials from home to build it, along with costumes to dress up. Every child deserves the right to experience Carnival joyfully and create wonderful memories of this celebration.* (P13)″

Here, resistance takes the form of celebration. Through their efforts, educators ensure that children are not excluded from cultural rituals that foster belonging, imagination, and joy—regardless of socioeconomic circumstances. Their belief that "every child deserves the right" reveals a pedagogical stance that affirms dignity and beauty as fundamental elements of survival.

Finally, the symbolic dimension of this resistance is expressed through acts of artistic and personal expression. Drawing becomes a tool not just of education, but of endurance and legacy. As one educator puts it: *"I drew a symbol of strength and resistance on the wall. Now, it will stay there forever.* (P1)″ This gesture transforms a temporary, fragile space into one marked by permanence and meaning. The wall, once a silent structure, becomes a site of testimony and pride. The drawing is not merely decoration; it is a declaration that despite precarity, there is strength, there is resistance, and there will be memory.

Raising one's voice

School 2

To Speak out encapsulates a vital strategy of resistance enacted through voice—through the deliberate choice to denounce injustice, advocate for equity, and mobilize communities. In contexts where silence can mean complicity and neglect is normalized, speaking out becomes a radical and courageous act. ECE educators, often at the intersection of structural fragility and relational strength, use their voices not only to survive but to transform.

One of the most urgent expressions of this is the act of reporting unacceptable conditions. Educators document and speak up about the systemic failures they witness, particularly in the treatment of support staff and the impact on children. As one educator testifies:

> *"We write continuously, for example, about support educators—it's truly a disaster. We have asked for the service not to be outsourced anymore, given the serious impact these decisions have on the children. I don't know, but if there were a viable path, I would take it, because this situation is unacceptable. Resistance itself lies in denouncing that support staff don't even receive the bare minimum, like food, and this must be reported.* (P4)″

In these words, resistance is deeply tied to visibility: it is the refusal to allow exploitation or degradation to go unnoticed. The act of writing, of documenting, becomes a tool of political resistance

and moral responsibility. Even in a context of uncertainty—*"I don't know, but if there were a viable path, I would take it* (P7)"—the will to act, to name injustice, stands as a form of ethical survival.

Yet, the resistance does not end at denunciation. It expands into public, collective acts of advocacy that transcend the boundaries of the school. Educators invite children, families, and the broader community into shared action, affirming their collective agency. One educator recounts:

> *"Last year, we organized a march and involved everyone—children, parents, grandparents, brothers, and sisters—not just from the school, but from the entire neighborhood. We marched for peace, for justice, and for an end to wars. Together in the streets, we walked side by side, feeling united like brothers and sisters, standing in solidarity with our distant brothers and sisters as well.* (P8)*"*

Here, advocacy becomes a celebration of solidarity and a public performance of ethical education. The act of marching is both symbolic and real—a reclaiming of public space and a refusal to raise children in isolation from the world's injustices. It is a statement that education is not confined to the classroom but unfolds in the shared streets of the city, in the relationships between generations, and in the collective imagining of a more just world.

Encounter as a foundation for growth

School 2

Building upon the encounter with the other emerges as a profound foundation for both survival and transformation. In contexts marked by instability, scarcity, or systemic fragmentation, educators do not retreat into individualism. Instead, they seek strength in relationship, constructing spaces where dialogue, co-presence, and shared reflection become essential strategies of resilience and growth. The encounter with the other—colleagues, children, families—becomes not only a source of support but also a starting point for the co-construction of meaning and knowledge.

This relational grounding is vividly expressed in the conviction that shared spaces of understanding are necessary for growth. As one educator states: *"There must always be a space to talk, understand each other, and build new meanings together.* (P12)*"* This is not a neutral space—it is an intentional, generative one. It reflects the belief that survival in difficult conditions is not just about enduring, but about creating: making room for communication, for mutual recognition, and for the collective redefinition of what is possible. These spaces are pedagogical and political—they support both emotional sustenance and the production of new cultural and educational meaning. In creating places of growth, educators actively resist isolation and fragmentation, nurturing instead a culture of connection and co-authorship.

This commitment to relationality extends into how knowledge itself is constructed. As another educator reflects: *"Dialogue with colleagues is essential; it allows me to reflect on my individual*

experience and transform it into a shared wealth of knowledge, together with that of others. (P12)″

Here, knowledge is not seen as static or individually owned. Rather, it is shaped through dialogue—through the encounter with others' perspectives, experiences, and interpretations. The educator's personal journey becomes part of a collective process, where the individual is not erased but expanded through collaboration. This kind of dialogic practice resists the logic of isolation and competition often found in educational institutions; instead, it affirms that professional and personal development are deeply relational processes.

Thus, the encounter with the other is both a pedagogical tool and a survival strategy. It is through talking, listening, and sharing that educators resist despair, find meaning, and generate new possibilities—both for themselves and for the children they accompany. In this framework, resistance does not always look like protest; sometimes, it looks like making time for a conversation, or sitting together in uncertainty, or choosing to transform a personal insight into shared knowledge. These are quiet, everyday acts, yet they carry immense power. They reveal how, even in adversity, educators build foundations—not just for education, but for solidarity, reflection, and collective hope.

Prioritizing ethics over rules

School 2

In the everyday realities of the kindergarten—particularly as a contexts marked by deprivation, systemic neglect, or bureaucratic rigidity—resistance often takes the form of choosing moral clarity over institutional compliance. For many educators, especially those working in vulnerable communities, prioritizing common sense and moral ethics over rigid rules is not just a principle, but a necessary survival skill. It is a form of civil courage, rooted in care, solidarity, and a long-standing ethical commitment to justice.

This courage reveals itself most clearly when educators are faced with situations where rules fail to serve the wellbeing of children or the broader community. One educator expresses this with quiet conviction:

> *"If I have to do something to fight against an injustice, I do it anyway, even if it means facing the consequences. That has always been clear. Each of us, in our own way and to varying degrees, has challenged the rules, when necessary, always staying within ethical boundaries. And I want to emphasize this: we have always remained true to our moral ethics.* (P2)″

The resistance described here is not reckless defiance but principled action—rooted in a shared moral compass that prioritizes human dignity and care above bureaucracy. These educators do not reject rules out of convenience, but out of conscience, and only when those rules contradict the deeper ethical demands of the work they do.

This sense of moral duty becomes especially visible in small, everyday decisions—like ensuring a child without lunch is fed.

> *"For example, if yesterday a child arrived without lunch, no one hesitated or debated what to do. There was no need to even think about it because many had already brought extra.* (P5)*"*

This spontaneous generosity is framed through a powerful metaphor:

> *"It's like the orange metaphor we talked about: if each of us has an orange with multiple slices and one person has none, all it takes is for each of us to give up a single slice to form a whole one for them.* (P9)*"*

This imagery captures the ethical foundation of their community: solidarity is not about grand gestures, but about simple, collective acts of care that restore dignity where it's been lost. Their minimal individual sacrifice becomes transformative for someone else and for the broather community.

Importantly, this way of acting is not occasional or improvised—it is sustained by a deep, collective history. As another educator reflects:

> *"Even while following the rules, there are actions that cannot be considered wrong, even if the regulations prohibit them. I recognize this, and it is something that was born here, something that exists. I don't know whether it comes from the refuge itself or from the people who, year after year, have arrived, each bringing a part of themselves and weaving this vision together, shaping it into what it is today—despite often being stifled by rules and conventions, which we have always questioned here.* (P14)*"*

What emerges is a long-standing culture of ethical resistance—a living tradition carried and reshaped by generations of educators. This is not just a spontaneous response to injustice, but a deeply embedded practice, grown over time through the contributions of many. Each person who enters the space adds a thread to a shared fabric of moral vision and quiet defiance.

In this way, choosing ethics over rules is not an individual decision, but a collective stance—a pedagogy of conscience. These educators do not rely on hierarchy or formal authority to act; rather, they trust in the moral authority that emerges from community, care, and lived experience. Their resistance is not loud, but it is steady, enduring, and deeply rooted in a long history of questioning what is "normal" when "normal" becomes unjust. Here, justice is not abstract—it is lived, shared, and continuously reaffirmed through action.

Stepping beyond institutional roles

School 2

Another crucial aspect emerged is how resistance is often enacted not through grand declarations but through a quiet and consistent willingness to step beyond the boundaries of defined roles. In contexts

where institutional frameworks are rigid, inadequate, or disconnected from lived reality, educators reclaim agency by prioritizing presence, responsiveness, and common sense over formal job descriptions. *Flexibility over the roles* becomes both a survival strategy and a form of resistance—an ethical stance that privileges the wellbeing of children and the functioning of the community over bureaucratic definitions of duty.

> This form of resistance is often embodied in small, almost invisible gestures. As one educator recounts: *"Lending a hand with cleaning during breaks, helping carry plates even when it's not our responsibility, ensuring that food reaches the children warmer—through a thousand small gestures that make a difference.* (P9)*"*

These acts may seem simple or mundane, but they are deeply significant. They reflect an understanding that care cannot be compartmentalized; that the well-being of children demands flexibility, attentiveness, and a willingness to act wherever a need appears. In this context, common sense becomes more important than role-specific tasks, and educators resist the fragmentation of labor that would otherwise constrain their ability to care.

At the heart of this approach is a powerful reimagining of what it means to belong to a collective. The educators do not see themselves as confined to narrow roles, but as part of a broader mechanism, where each action contributes to a shared purpose. One educator articulates this with striking clarity:

> *"Resistance is possible from an ordinary perspective, but according to the state and our official roles, it wouldn't be. Yet, we resist because the idea of someone going without food is simply unacceptable. For me, it's inconceivable—even if I had to be run over by a tractor. This is what resistance means: going beyond roles, not even acknowledging their existence. Here, what truly matters is being present and taking action.* (P2)*"*

This refusal to accept role-based limitations is not chaotic or undisciplined—it is rooted in a strong ethical imperative. The metaphor of "being run over by a tractor" underscores the seriousness and emotional urgency behind these choices. When a child's need is at stake, nothing else—not the rules, not the job title—can justify inaction.

This is a form of resistance that redefines professionalism. It doesn't rely on formal recognition or institutional validation, but on shared responsibility, moral clarity, and relational trust. In this vision, the school is not a place where roles are strictly policed, but a living organism where each person steps in where needed, without waiting for permission or instructions. The boundaries between roles dissolve in favor of collective care.

Ultimately, the flexibility these educators embody is not a compromise or a workaround—it is a declaration of values. It reflects a deep belief that caring for others, especially for children, requires adaptability, humility, and an unshakable commitment to action. Their resistance is not loud, but it is

transformative: it shows that in environments constrained by rigid systems, it is precisely the fluidity of roles, and the moral force behind small acts, that keeps the community alive and thriving.

Caring for one another

School 1

In School 1, *caring for one another* is described first and foremost as an intra-staff practice, rooted in the relationships between colleagues. In a context where institutional support is often absent, solidarity within the teaching team becomes the primary resource that enables educators to endure and continue their work.

Educators highlight how the collegial bond is not only professional but deeply personal, providing emotional safety and resilience. As one educator notes, *"What I like about this work is precisely when we manage to create a network in which we all support each other"* (P16). Here, the image of a "network" refers less to external alliances and more to the daily, lived experience of colleagues holding each other up.

The value of this collegial solidarity is evident in the motivation it provides: *"There are people you work well with who make you want to come to work"* (P20). Such reflections reveal how support among colleagues is not just a background element but the very condition that sustains educators in an otherwise fragile environment.

In School 1, then, *caring for one another* does not take the form of structured institutional practices or formalized networks. It emerges in the everyday gestures of kindness, encouragement, and mutual recognition among colleagues, who rely on each other to face the weight of children's traumas, parental misunderstandings, and bureaucratic neglect. This relational fabric within the staff functions as both shield and anchor, ensuring that even amid degradation, solidarity remains a living force.

School 2

In the often-overlooked spaces of School2, especially within precarious or underserved contexts, caring for each other becomes a vital force that sustains both individuals and communities. When external systems fail to provide security, recognition, or resources, the relationships among educators become not only supportive but profoundly transformative. Acts of kindness and mutual care are not incidental—they are deliberate, radical gestures that affirm human dignity and create networks of emotional and material survival.

One educator's words capture this powerfully:

> *"Despite everything, I have never felt as loved and cared for as I have by my colleagues. Every day, there was a thoughtful gesture, a kind word, a slice of cake… They saved me.* (P3)*"*

In this simple but moving reflection, care emerges as an everyday form of rescue. It is through small, consistent gestures—offering cake, saying a kind word, noticing someone's pain—that colleagues

become lifelines. These are not grand interventions, but rather micro-acts of love that, taken together, create a web of emotional safety. In spaces where stress, burnout, and institutional neglect are all too common, this kind of kindness becomes essential for survival. It fosters resilience not through rules or policies, but through presence and tenderness.

Yet this ethic of care does not stop at emotional support; it extends into collective action and concrete solidarity. During the COVID-19 pandemic—a time when inequalities were sharply exposed and many families were left without basic necessities—educators responded not with despair but with initiative. As one educator recalls:

> *"During COVID, we organized a clothing swap market because there are people here who can't even afford a new pair of shorts for their child. It has remained active, and we still carry it on today, down on the ground floor, behind the stairs.* (P12)"

This act, born from immediate need, grew into an enduring practice of mutual aid. It exemplifies how care is not only emotional but material—how solidarity takes shape in spaces that allow people to give and receive, to share and be seen. The fact that the market still exists, quietly sustained behind the stairs, speaks to the lasting nature of this commitment.

Together, these stories show that caring for each other is not a private or sentimental act—it is a deeply political one. In choosing to be kind, to organize, to support, and to share, educators resist the culture of individualism and scarcity that often defines their working conditions. They build an alternative ethos, one rooted in reciprocity, compassion, and collective wellbeing. This care, exchanged daily and often unnoticed by the outside world, becomes a form of resistance: against alienation, against indifference, and against the logic that says everyone must fend for themselves. In this way, care becomes more than support—it becomes a strategy for survival, a way to rebuild what has been eroded, and a testament to the enduring strength of human connection in the face of systemic fragility.

School as a site of resistance. Among the themes that emerged in this study, the idea of the school as a site of resistance was articulated exclusively in School 2. In fragile and often overlooked social contexts, the school emerges not only as an educational institution but as a powerful site of resistance—against exclusion, neglect, and systemic injustice. Far beyond its formal role, the school becomes a space where communities are held together, identities are affirmed, and futures are reimagined. Table 16 outlines the key themes that illustrate how schools can serve as anchor points in their neighborhoods, foster spaces of belonging and mutual care, challenge dominant narratives, and cultivate hope in the face of adversity. This form of resistance is deeply relational and grounded in everyday practices—from building networks of solidarity to creating spaces of joy, beauty, and

shared knowledge. Through these acts, educators and communities transform schools into places where care becomes political, and where resistance is lived, sustained, and collectively nurtured.

Table 16
School as a site of resistance

Themes	Sub-themes	School 1	School 2
The school as a civic anchor	• A trusted landmark in the neighborhood		x
	• Serving the neighborhood, (not just students)		x
	• Drawing strength from being part of a community network		x
Radical coexistence and belonging	• Living well together beyond institutional inclusion		x
	• Designing spaces where divisions are intentionally dismantled		x
Beauty as resistance	• Teaching beauty as an ethical and educational value		x
	• Creating a school environment that actively resists neglect and invisibility		x
Valuing every voice and role	• Affirming the essential role of every person in the school community		x
	• Centering care relationships as emotional and structural foundations		x
Knowledge from the ground up	• Learning life through lived, daily experience		x
	• Collective professional growth through reflective supervision		x
Building hope together	• Fostering deep belonging through shared presence		x
	• Reimagining the school as a shared home		x
	• Educating as an act of building the future together		x

The school as a civic anchor

School 2

In a world increasingly fractured by inequality, isolation, and institutional disconnection, the school emerges not only as a place of learning but as a critical site of resistance. Within neighborhoods marked by complexity—cultural, social, economic—the school stands as a vital node, anchoring relationships, offering stability, and cultivating a sense of shared responsibility. This resistance does not arise from confrontation alone, but from the deliberate choice to embed the school within the life of the community, to see it not as an isolated service, but as an essential social and cultural infrastructure.

One educator captures this profoundly when reflecting on the everyday presence of the school in the neighborhood:

> *"We understand the importance of this place, the role it holds. The children from [name of the place], when they get hurt, come here asking for a bandage or some ice. Some even ask if they*

can come inside. This school has always been a point of reference, just as we envisioned it from the very beginning. (P9)″

This image of children seeking care from a place they instinctively turn to speaks volumes. The school becomes more than an educational institution—it is a refuge, a home, a reliable presence woven into the rhythm of the neighborhood. Its doors, whether physically open or symbolically so, represent safety, continuity, and belonging.

This vision of the school as a communal pillar is not accidental; it is cultivated intentionally, as one educator expresses in their deeply reflective description of the surrounding area:

> *"This has always been my vision of what a school should be. A school shouldn't just provide education to those who attend—it should create culture for the entire community. It exists within a neighborhood, so how can we ignore the territory that surrounds it, the places it belongs to?* (P10)″

What follows is a powerful reflection on the sheer density and diversity of educational institutions within a few hundred meters: *"From ages two to eighteen, this is the neighborhood… So many cultures, so many languages, a tapestry of stories and opportunities.* (P10)″ This vision resists the reductive idea of school as a service provider. Instead, it imagines school as a cultural and civic hub, a place that recognizes and activates the potential of the territory it inhabits. The educator's question.*"If I don't think about this, who will?* (P10)*"*—is both an act of care and of political awareness. It signals a refusal to accept isolation as the norm and an urgent call for collective action and inter-school collaboration.

But the strength of the school as a site of resistance also lies in its capacity to hold emotional weight, to provide grounding in moments of global or personal crisis. As one educator movingly recalls:

> *"You know that what is happening in Gaza goes beyond imagination... But experiencing it within a network, within a community of people you can talk to, even finding moments to process it together, makes all the difference.* (P5)″

In this testimony, the school is not only a place of action but of shared vulnerability and mutual holding. These are not abstract ideas—they are lived practices that allow educators to carry the emotional and ethical weight of their work without collapsing under it. *"Our work cannot exist without a network.* (P9)*"* These words make visible the invisible architecture that sustains resistance: a web of relationships, built slowly, persistently, and often against institutional misunderstanding or indifference. The network is not a luxury—it is a necessity. It allows educators to face crises together, to stay human in inhuman times, to remain hopeful in places where hope is constantly tested. In all of this, the school is reimagined—not as a building, not as a schedule of lessons, but as a living organism that breathes with its neighborhood, mourns with it, celebrates with it, and grows with it.

Resistance, in this context, is not a singular act—it is a way of being. It is the decision to make the school a space of presence, relationship, and collective memory. And in doing so, these educators remind us that the most enduring forms of resistance are not always loud—they are sustained, relational, and rooted in the everyday fabric of community life.

Radical coexistence and belonging

School 2

In a world increasingly fragmented by nationalism, exclusion, and fear of the "other," this school choose to stand differently: as nurturing places of encounter and common good. These are not schools that merely "include" in the bureaucratic sense of the word, ticking off boxes of compliance. Instead, they reimagine what it means to live together—radically, ethically, and joyfully—in difference. In these spaces, the school becomes not only a site of education, but a laboratory of shared life, where the future is rehearsed in the everyday.

One educator puts it clearly: *"We have no choice to include, because we have children of different nationalities, some with residence permits about to expire, some with citizenship, and some without. But rather than talking about inclusion, we should be talking about living well together.* (P1)*"* This statement challenges the limits of institutional language, refusing the cold, technocratic approach to diversity. Instead of framing children in terms of legal status or cultural category, the educator shifts the focus to *how* we live alongside each other. Inclusion, in this context, is not a policy but a way of being. It calls for recognition of the shared humanity that exists beyond skin color, documents, or language— *"the human species, which is one and the same.* (P1)*"* What is resisted here is not only exclusion, but the entire logic of classification that reduces human beings to status, labels, and borders.

This ethos of radical coexistence becomes even more powerful when we turn to the spatial dimension of education. As another educator says: *"The only way to overcome these divisions is to create spaces where barriers do not exist—where the only differences are cultural and human, meant to be understood and valued.* (P7)*"* Here, the space of the school is not neutral—it is intentionally shaped to defy division. These are spaces that refuse to mirror the violence of the outside world; instead, they become sites of peace-building, where every child, every culture, every story has a place. The act of building *"places of true belonging* (P4)*"* is not only an educational gesture—it is a political one. It is a refusal to accept the logic of separation, war, and territory. As the educator powerfully states: *"By building places of true belonging, we are not just offering refuge; we are actively fighting against war and all forms of separation.* (P5)*"*

This vision suggests that if such places of coexistence were the norm—if people could always *"seek and find a better place* (P8)*"*—then even the structures that support war and domination would

unravel. The school becomes an anti-war space, not through slogans or banners, but through the daily practice of sharing, listening, making room, and refusing to turn away. It becomes a site where children grow up not merely "included," but entangled in each other's lives, learning that difference is not a threat, but a condition of humanity.

In this way, nurturing places of encounter is not about assimilation or politeness—it is about disrupting the systems that divide and replacing them with new forms of common life. The school, then, is not only a shelter—it is a seedbed of the possible. A place where war becomes unthinkable, not because the world has changed, but because we have started living differently inside it.

Beauty as resistance

School 2

In contexts marked by hardship, instability, and systemic neglect, the deliberate act of creating and preserving beauty is not a luxury—it is a form of resistance. For educators who work in such environments, choosing to resist and to build beauty is not about superficial aesthetics, but about affirming life, dignity, and possibility where these are most at risk. Beauty becomes a language of care, a method of teaching, and an ethical commitment to children and to the world they are growing up in.

As one educator firmly states, *"Beauty is a value that can and should be taught.* (P6)*"* This declaration positions beauty not as something decorative or optional, but as a fundamental pedagogical and moral principle. In teaching beauty, educators are not only inviting children to appreciate form, color, or harmony—they are teaching them to notice, to care, to find meaning, and to engage emotionally and ethically with the world around them. In a reality often saturated with violence, division, and scarcity, cultivating beauty is an act of hope and defiance. It says: this too matters. And more than that—it says: you matter enough to be surrounded by beauty.

This ethic of beauty becomes even more powerful when grounded in the lived experience of working within a challenging neighborhood context. One educator reflects with depth and urgency:

> *"This school, in this context, is not just [name of the place] and [name of the street] —it truly represents the world. It is a place of resistance rather than mere affirmation. In reality, we are trying, reflecting, and reasoning not just with our minds, but with our hearts.* (P10)*"*

Here, resistance is not an abstract posture—it is a lived, emotional effort. The school is not merely functioning; it is resisting— *"pushing against the current* (P5)*"* of a society that often devalues children, educators, and the communities they serve. This work is both intellectual and emotional, marked by exhaustion but also by deep purpose.

The educator's words— *"We are not selling shoes in a warehouse. We work with life, with souls* (P3)*"*—are a stark and moving reminder of the ethical weight carried by educators. Teaching in this

context is not transactional; it is relational, affective, and existential. To insist on beauty in such a space is to insist that children are not only safe, but seen, valued, and nurtured. *"They deserve to be in a place that resists.* (P11)*"* This final sentence is quietly radical. It reframes the role of the school entirely—not as a place that simply absorbs the status quo, but as one that stands against it, gently but persistently. A place that doesn't conform to the tide but pushes back in the name of something more just, more kind, and more beautiful.

In this way, building beauty becomes an act of resistance, and resistance becomes an act of care. The school is imagined not as a neutral container for education, but as a transformative space—a place where children can experience a different way of being in the world. One that teaches them that beauty is not a privilege of the few, but a right that belongs to all, and a value worth protecting, especially when the world seems to forget it.

Valuing every voice and role

School 2

In schools that resist fragmentation and hierarchy, one of the most radical and transformative commitments is the choice to recognize the value of every person. This recognition goes beyond the polite acknowledgment of contributions; it is a way of understanding the school as a living community, where every individual—regardless of job title, contract status, or visibility—holds the structure together. In such spaces, resistance is not only about opposing injustice from the outside, but also about refusing to replicate systems of exclusion or invisibility within.

As one educator powerfully explains: *"We manage to stay open thanks to everyone who works with us—not just educators and staff, but every person who, day after day, helps keep this place alive. Without them, we would be in complete chaos.* (P10)*"* These words reflect an understanding of the school not as a hierarchy, but as a collective body, where each person's presence and labor matter. The "place" is not sustained by curriculum or planning alone, but by the steady, often invisible contributions of support staff, caretakers, cooks, and all those who create the conditions for care and learning.

The full weight of this interdependence is revealed when one part of the system is absent: *"We felt this firsthand on the day we were without support staff. When they went on strike—rightfully so—we felt the impact immediately.* (P9)*"* The use of the phrase *"rightfully so* (P4)*"* reveals a deep respect for their labor and a recognition of its value—not just in abstract, but in the daily functioning of the school. Their absence created not just logistical disruption, but an emotional and relational void. Children, who often navigate the school through relationships as much as through structure, instinctively *"run into the arms of those who care for them.* (P11)*"* This line speaks volumes. It tells us that care work, often rendered invisible, is in fact central to the emotional life of the school.

The memory of a child running so forcefully into a support educator's arms that she was injured, leaving her unable to work for two months, is more than anecdotal—it is symbolic. It shows the deep bonds children form with those who care for them, and the physical and emotional toll that such care can entail. And it shows, too, the depth of trust that surrounds these relationships. Within this messiness— *"sometimes there's shouting, sometimes everything feels chaotic* (P5)*"*—there is profound human connection. There is a recognition that every role is vital.

This commitment to seeing each person as essential is not simply pragmatic—it is deeply ethical. It affirms that schools are not machines, and people are not replaceable parts. Rather, they are bearers of memory, relationship, and continuity. As the educator concludes: *"The people who take care of us leave a lasting mark. Even now, I still remember the cook from my school.* (P3)*"* This final reflection closes the loop between present and past, between being cared for and becoming a caregiver. It reminds us that those who labor with love—who cook, clean, comfort, and support—are never forgotten. Their impact goes far beyond the tasks they perform; it is written into the lives of the children they nurture.

In this way, recognizing the value of every person becomes a form of resistance: to invisibility, to hierarchy, to a system that too often divides and devalues. It is a commitment to building a school not just of roles, but of relationships—where each person matters, and where no one is seen as secondary.

Knowledge from the ground up

School 2

In schools committed to transformative education, learning does not belong to children alone. The school itself becomes a space where everyone—educators, staff, and the broader community—engages in continuous learning rooted in lived experience. Creating a shared knowledge base of lived experiences is both a pedagogical and political act. It means recognizing that the most valuable insights often emerge not from manuals or top-down training sessions, but from the real, everyday encounters with children, colleagues, and the community. When these experiences are reflected upon and shared, they become the foundation for collective growth.

One educator captures this beautifully in a simple but profound phrase: *"This becomes a school of life.* (P9)*"* In these few words, the meaning of education expands beyond traditional academic goals. The school is not just a place for cognitive development—it is where values are lived, where emotional intelligence is nurtured, where relational skills are formed, and where resilience, care, and adaptability are modeled. It is a space where both children and adults learn how to navigate the complexities of life together. In this sense, the school becomes not only an institution of learning, but a place of becoming—a living environment where human growth is cultivated at every level.

This orientation toward shared and reflective learning is further reinforced by the intentional use of supervision as a space for collective professional development. As another educator explains:

> *"This year, we invested in supervision, recognizing the importance of building, structuring, and growing as a team. The best kind of training is exactly this: growing together, turning our experiences into a shared wealth of knowledge that everyone can draw from and learn.* (P8)*"*

This reflection speaks directly to the heart of professional practice grounded in solidarity and mutual trust. Supervision here is not seen as corrective or evaluative, but as a space to *build and structure* a deeper collective understanding of the work. It acknowledges the emotional and relational labor of education, and offers a structured way to process, analyze, and transform those experiences into shared knowledge.

What emerges is a vision of the school as a dynamic, co-constructed space of knowledge—not one that merely delivers content, but one that evolves through the lived realities of its people. Educators are not passive recipients of expert knowledge; they are active participants in creating a knowledge system that is relevant, grounded, and profoundly human. This process of reflection and sharing transforms challenges into insight and emotional labor into wisdom. In this way, the school resists static, hierarchical models of learning and instead embraces a more relational, process-oriented view. It affirms that *everyone's* experience matters and that through dialogue, supervision, and daily interaction, a rich and resilient knowledge base can be cultivated. One that doesn't just prepare people for work but prepares them for life.

Building hope together

School 2

In a world where fragmentation, uncertainty, and disconnection often define public life, the school has the potential to offer something radically different: *unity and hope*. Not as abstract ideals, but as lived experiences cultivated daily through care, trust, and shared commitment. In schools where educators, children, and communities feel they belong, resistance takes on a powerful emotional dimension. It becomes the act of standing together, building something lasting, and believing in a future worth creating.

There are moments when this collective spirit bursts forth in its simplest and most genuine form. *"Long life [name of the school]! (all participants)"*—a brief, joyful declaration that carries with it an entire emotional world. It's not just about a person or a place, but about what that place represents: a shared journey, a bond formed in daily presence, and a belief in something bigger than oneself. In that spontaneous exclamation, we hear belonging, pride, affection, and resistance all at once. It's a call to hold on to what has been built together—because it matters, and because it gives meaning.

This deep sense of connection is echoed in the words of a educator who says, *"I don't just come to work—I see this school as my home, a home I share with many others.* (P5)*"* Here, the school is not only a workplace or an institution; it is a shared dwelling, a space of mutual care and everyday life. Calling the school *"home"* means recognizing it as a place where emotional investment, safety, and identity take root. It reflects the kind of unity that is forged not through formal structures, but through shared meals, difficult conversations, laughter in the hallways, and the daily labor of showing up for one another.

And this home is not static—it is a place where the future is being actively shaped. One educator offers a powerful vision: *"A school is not just a place of learning—it is a place of belonging, where the future is built.* (P5)*"* This vision challenges narrow definitions of education that reduce it to outcomes or metrics. Instead, it insists that what happens in schools is foundational to the social, emotional, and economic fabric of our communities. As the educator continues, *"What we do today is not just an educational or social act; it is an economic investment, even if many fail to see it.* (P2)*"* This statement reframes the work of education as a strategic, long-term commitment to justice, equity, and collective well-being. It resists the idea that schools are merely service providers and repositions them as engines of transformation.

The most moving part of this testimony lies in its closing words: *"Because, to me, this school is the future. And this is where I want to work—in the future.* (P9)*"* To work in a school is, in this light, to work inside a hope—to labor not in reaction to crisis alone, but in the service of possibility. The school becomes a site where hope is made tangible, where every act of care, every inclusive practice, and every child's laughter becomes a small but vital investment in a better world.

In this way, unity and hope are not sentiments—they are practices. They are built slowly through belonging, sustained through shared vision, and defended through love. In schools like this, the future is not something we wait for. It is something we build—together, in the present.

12. 5 Discussion

This qualitative study examines the everyday challenges encountered by early childhood education educators working in structurally marginalized and culturally diverse contexts, with particular attention to inclusion, interculturality, and the agentic strategies they employ to navigate and resist these difficulties. The discussion unfolds across three interconnected sections reflecting the core themes emerging from the educators' narratives: (1) the challenges they face, (2) the strategies of survival and resistance they develop, and (3) the school's role as a site of transformation.

Guided by decolonial, feminist, and liberationist perspectives, this discussion situates educators' lived experiences within the broader socio-political structures that shape early childhood education in marginalized contexts. It explores how their personal and collective narratives expose systemic

patterns of oppression while simultaneously illuminating practices of care, resistance, and transformation.

Educators' hardships

The challenges revealed by the educators are not isolated dysfunctions but structural symptoms of broader socio-political contradictions embedded within early childhood education especially in marginalized settings. As highlighted in the previous study of this dissertation (see Chapter 11), discussing interculturality in contemporary ECE becomes meaningful only when viewed through an intersectional and justice-oriented framework. This demands a departure from liberal inclusion rhetoric toward an understanding of interculturality as a radical political practice—one that actively resists the structural, epistemic, and economic inequalities shaping exclusion in both schools and society.

Drawing on Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of *borderlands*, the schools at the heart of this study, both situated on the urban periphery, transcends its institutional role to become an epistemic frontier—where resistance, liminality, and counter-hegemonic knowledge production converge. In this view, interculturality in ECE involves creating counter-spaces that legitimize diverse ways of knowing while directly confronting the historical legacies of colonialism, patriarchy, racism, and capitalism that still delimit the horizon of possibility. In these highly marginalized contexts, the educational labour becomes a profoundly political act. Educators do not merely transmit knowledge—they hold the line against systemic disintegration, enacting forms of care and dignity that challenge both material deprivation and symbolic erasure. This emotional and structural labor is not merely personal; it is collective, relational, and political. bell hooks (1994) characterizes radical care as a refusal of dehumanization—a pedagogy of freedom that insists on presence and vulnerability. In choosing to stay and sustain these fragile ecologies of resistance, educators enact what Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) calls a "speculative ethics" of care: a practice that binds vulnerability to action, and relationality to politics. These are not acts of benevolence but of insurgent survival. This shared labor reflects an acute awareness of the need for cohesion in resisting fragmentation. Following Jabr (2007), we can see how systemic disinvestment not only impoverishes institutions but also corrodes the affective and relational fabrics that hold communities together. The school's commitment to collective pedagogies and mutual support has become its most enduring legacy, one that continues to transmit forms of resilience and solidarity across generations. Yet this cohesion is precarious, continually undercut by institutional restructuring and systemic neglect. The fear that infrastructure changes may scatter staff and disrupt this fragile unity reflects Quijano's (2000) coloniality of power—how postcolonial governance continues to stratify through racial, institutional, and epistemic hierarchies.

As Fanon (1961) contended, the school under colonial conditions can either assimilate or liberate. The schools studied here deliberately chooses the latter. Through its relational practices, it offers not only an alternative narrative about marginalized populations but also a counter-project of subjectivity and futurity. Within this paradigm, even beauty becomes political. Federici (2020) describes how denying aesthetic dignity to working-class and racialized communities becomes a mechanism of disposability. The demand for beautiful and dignified educational spaces thus becomes a radical assertion of value—a claim to belonging, dreaming, and thriving.

Yet the terrain of relationality—often idealized in pedagogical discourse—proves deeply ambivalent. Relationships among staff, and between staff and families, are fraught with complexity. They hold possibilities for solidarity, but also carry latent tensions shaped by history, power, and affect. Audre Lorde's (1984) call to embrace our "yes"—our vulnerability and craving for connection—is vital here. Building relational ties in institutionalized spaces requires moving toward this vulnerability, while accepting that it may wound. Sara Ahmed's (2024) notion of the feminist killjoy illuminates the experience of educators who insist on justice in the face of institutional inertia. These actors often face isolation or mockery from peers who interpret their commitments as excessive. Such internal divergences do not merely disrupt pedagogical cohesion—they threaten the epistemological and affective foundations of the collective project. Relational complexity is even more evident in the fraught relationship between schools and families. Reciprocity here cannot be reduced to administrative routines of "parental involvement." It is a conflictual and slow negotiation of mutual recognition. The phrase "I am with you because I need you" gestures toward Levinas's (1969) ethics of proximity—a radical openness to the Other grounded in shared vulnerability rather than charity. But even well-intentioned gestures can reproduce colonial asymmetries. When a educator tells a parent, "wait, I'm working," the classed and racialized hierarchies embedded in that interaction cannot be ignored. Wekker's (2016) theory of white innocence captures this dynamic: the denial of power asymmetry in the name of neutrality. True reciprocity must confront not only institutional racism and paternalism but also educators' own complicity in these structures. As hooks (2004) and Haraway (2016) remind us, justice requires discomfort. Building transformative relationships means staying present in tension, refusing quick resolution, and acknowledging histories of abandonment and distrust. The metaphor shared in the study—the difference between "the package from Sant'Egidio" and a bureaucratic form—speaks volumes. Where care is tangible, trust flourishes; where care is reduced to procedures, mutuality collapses.

At the institutional level, these dynamics become even more pronounced. Educators describe the municipality not as a supportive structure but as a cold, inaccessible bureaucracy. It is experienced not as a partner but as a regulating force. Mbembe's (2019) concept of necropolitics aptly describes

this dynamic: governance not through care but through abandonment masked as procedural neutrality. Fanon's (1961) critique of colonial institutions that "speak a language they refuse to translate" is echoed in educators' frustrations: "The rules are stronger than humanity." This institutional alienation is not gender-neutral. As Ruddick (1989) and Federici (2020) argue, patriarchal and capitalist institutions systematically devalue reproductive and relational labor, particularly when performed by women. In this school, the vast emotional and pedagogical labor undertaken is met not with recognition but with audit, discipline, and indifference. Wekker's (2016) critique of institutional whiteness underscores how bureaucracy becomes a tool of exclusion—enforcing a logic of cold compliance in the face of human need. In this light, the school staff's insight about the destructive power of borders—geographical, institutional, and psychological—acquires critical weight. Anzaldúa (1987) taught us to see borders as both wounds and sites of resistance. One educator's statement—"States oppress and restrain us… institutions built by men, not mothers"—echoes this decolonial critique. It calls for a reimagination of belonging rooted not in sovereignty or discipline, but in shared vulnerability, care, and resistance.

Mignolo and Walsh's (2018) critique of the colonial matrix of power helps frame this realization: the state does not simply govern—it naturalizes exclusion through borders, bureaucracy, and epistemic violence. In schools, this matrix manifests as the myth of "inclusion." But as hooks (2004) makes clear, freedom cannot be found in frameworks that produce the "Other" as someone to be included. *The goal is not inclusion but transformation*. The most painful manifestation of this matrix is temporal: the erosion of futurity. Educators report the pain coming from the fact that children from these marginalized areas are no longer imagine expansive futures. As one educator recalls, the dreams of becoming pilots, doctors, or firefighters have been replaced by aspirations shaped by scarcity and despair—"a prostitute," "a drug dealer." This is not provocation but a reflection of what Berlant (2011) called cruel optimism: the hollow promise of futures structurally out of reach. Or worse, the outright removal of dreaming altogether. Muñoz's (2009) concept of queer futurity illuminates this loss. In these contexts, the right to envision a different world is systematically denied. The school becomes not a site of possibility, but a place where passivity is transmitted. Freire's (1970) pedagogy of the oppressed is turned inward: students are taught containment, not liberation. Mbembe (2019) warns that in racialized societies, some are treated as if they are already living the afterlife of their own future—discarded, unaccounted for, abandoned.

The toll of this despair is intergenerational. One educator notes that even her own daughter no longer envisions a future with hope. This emotional exhaustion aligns with hooks's (1994) concern about the erosion of liberatory imagination. When systemic neglect is normalized—through underfunding, precarious labor, and institutional abandonment—education stops being a practice of freedom and

becomes a machinery of resignation. And yet, the refusal to succumb to this despair is powerful. Educators who remain in the struggle, who insist on solidarity, beauty, and relationality, are not merely surviving—they are imagining otherwise. Freire's (1970) call for critical consciousness becomes not a tool of analysis but a compass of resistance. In naming oppression, they resist it. In choosing to care, they defy disposability. In remaining present amidst institutional disavowal, they craft a collective horizon where education may once again become the practice of liberation.

Skills of survival and resistance strategies

In a public kindergarten located in a structurally neglected urban periphery, the act of creating beauty emerges as a radical, survival-driven intervention. Here, amid the residues of colonial modernity, neoliberal austerity, and racialized spatial hierarchies, beauty becomes not a luxury but a politics of refusal—a form of aesthetic insurgency. Educators, predominantly women, reclaim neglected spaces through vibrant acts of creativity: painting walls, repurposing objects, and decorating classrooms. These practices, echoing bell hooks' (1994) notion of aesthetic agency, challenge the dominant aesthetic of poverty and reassert that beauty, dignity, and color are rights—not privileges. Such gestures go beyond making do with less. They assert presence in spaces marked for invisibility and erasure, offering what Hamilton (2007) calls a counter-narrative to disposability. When one educator draws a symbol of resistance on a wall, it becomes not just art but a feminist archival act—a permanent refusal of silence and disappearance. Federici (2020) frames these acts as feminist labor, reclaiming both space and the value of reproductive and creative contributions historically devalued by capitalist and patriarchal systems. These acts of beautification are also deeply relational. Whether crafting piñatas, sewing costumes, or sharing materials, educators engage in embodied networks of care. Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) concept of *speculative ethics* captures this dynamic well: care, aesthetics, and repair intersect as political labor that resists institutional indifference and the normalized hierarchies of neglect affecting racialized, working-class communities (Wekker, 2016). This labor is not supplemental—it is transformative. Through joy, festivity, and color, educators craft a *politics of re-enchantment*. As Audre Lorde (1984) writes, the erotic—understood as deep emotional power—can serve as a source of resistance. By infusing everyday spaces with beauty, educators offer children alternative imaginaries and affirm their right to joy.

To deepen the understanding of these practices, this study employs the notion of *skills of survival* to describe the everyday ways in which early childhood educators sustain their professional, ethical, and relational commitments within complex and often fragile educational environments. Emerging in response to structural and emotional pressures—such as scarce resources, institutional neglect, and social inequality—these skills embody educators' capacity to preserve coherence, connection, and meaning in their work.

Grounded in the principles of liberation psychology (Freire, 1970) and collective narrative practice (Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2006), the concept emphasizes the relational and transformative dimensions of human action under conditions of constraint. Within early childhood education, *skills of survival* can thus be understood as relational strategies and ethical orientations through which educators transform difficulty into connection—sustaining care, mutual recognition, and pedagogical purpose even amidst uncertainty.

This interpretation resonates with the work of Guido Veronese, whose studies on communities affected by conflict and displacement conceptualize survival as a psychosocial and cultural process rooted in intergenerational memory and everyday meaning-making. In these accounts, survival is not a matter of mere endurance but a process of reclaiming identity and agency through relational and narrative practices (Veronese, Cavazzoni, & Antenucci, 2018; Veronese & Barola, 2018; Veronese & Cavazzoni, 2020a; Veronese, Sousa, & Cavazzoni, 2021; Veronese et al., 2022). By analogy, educators' daily actions—listening, mediating, creating spaces of belonging—constitute subtle yet powerful forms of resistance that sustain the social and ethical fabric of education in marginalized contexts.

In adopting terms such as *skills of survival*, *resistance*, and *structural neglect*, this study does not seek to dramatize educators' experiences but to interpret them through a critical and decolonial lens. Drawing on liberation psychology (Martín-Baró, 1994; Montero & Sonn, 2009) and decolonial thought (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), these concepts are mobilized analytically to illuminate the often-unseen dimensions of educators' labor—the symbolic marginalization, institutional hierarchies, and affective responsibilities that shape their everyday work.

It is important to note that the notion of *skills of survival* does not appear as an established category within educational literature. In this study, it functions as a metaphorical and analytical construct to capture educators' capacity to sustain meaning, ethics, and connection in the face of systemic constraint. Here, survival refers not to physical endurance, but to the continuity of professional and relational life—the ability to persist in caring, teaching, and creating significance within contexts that often undermine such possibilities. In this sense, survival becomes a lens through which to recognize educators' everyday agency and their contribution to sustaining the moral and social vitality of early education (Scott, 1985; Osgood, 2011; Veronese et al., 2021).

Within this framework, speaking out becomes another essential survival skill. In a context marked by systemic silencing, educators transform speech into an act of resistance. Whether through writing, documenting, or speaking publicly, their testimony becomes a feminist intervention—what bell hooks (1989) defines as "talking back." These are not empty complaints, but acts of witnessing and agency. As Ahmed (2017) suggests, they form part of a feminist survival toolkit: practices of endurance in

the face of institutional deafness. Their speech is also gendered labor, routinely dismissed as emotional or excessive. Yet, as Adrienne Rich (1979) and Cynthia Enloe (2000) note, women's institutional speech often disrupts norms of neutrality. In this school, educators persist in naming injustice—turning grievance into memory, and silence into collective record. Through events like peace marches, they extend their speech into action, modeling for children the link between voice, presence, and struggle. These pedagogical rituals resist erasure and offer new political scripts.

Relationality further emerges as a core strategy of survival. In contrast to neoliberal models that prioritize efficiency and standardization, these educators operate through co-presence and dialogue. bell hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy and Freire's (1970) praxis of dialogue are deeply embedded in this approach. Knowledge is not transmitted—it is co-created. Educators are not authorities but co-travelers, enacting María Lugones' (2003) world-traveling and loving perception. They meet students and families in moments of vulnerability, transforming discomfort into understanding. Such relational labor forms what Lorde (1984) calls communities of difference—spaces where dissonance and diversity become foundations for new coalitions. Educators create time and space for reflection, allowing individual experiences to be transformed into shared insight. Ahmed (2017) frames this as feminist labor: making institutional spaces inhabitable through consistent, attentive presence. This commitment to relationality also manifests in moral clarity. Educators prioritize ethical responsiveness over bureaucratic compliance. Feeding a hungry child—even when rules prohibit it—epitomizes Freire's (1970) pedagogy of conscience. These actions align with hooks' (1994) concept of principled transgression: acts of love and solidarity that defy institutional inaction. Ruddick's (1989) maternal thinking offers a framework here—care as political reasoning grounded in justice and preservation.

Educators do not wait for authorization; they act from a shared ethic forged in daily relationships and lived memory. Lugones (2003) emphasizes *resistant agency* as emerging from communal positionality rather than granted authority. These quiet, consistent acts of care disrupt institutional complacency and unsettle the racialized and gendered hierarchies that shape everyday educational life (Wekker, 2016). Flexibility, in this setting, is not disorganization but moral clarity. Educators cross traditional job boundaries to meet immediate needs—cleaning, cooking, mending—practicing what Tronto (1993) calls ethical competence. Their professionalism is radical: not defined by detachment or efficiency but by solidarity, humility, and action. In rejecting rigid roles, they dismantle gendered and racialized labor hierarchies, embodying Lugones' (2003) playful resistance. Mutual care among staff emerges as the school's sustaining infrastructure. Horizontal gestures—coffee shared, fatigue noticed, encouragement offered—form a ground-up network of support. Piepzna-

Samarasinha's (2018) care work as collective infrastructure captures this dynamic. In a failing institutional context, peer care becomes structural.

These practices are not sentimental. They are deliberate acts of co-resistance. Lorde's (1988) call for self-preservation as political warfare extends here to collective endurance. Love becomes resistance. Horizontal gestures become the architecture of political life. The mutual aid efforts in one of the school during the COVID-19 pandemic exemplify this ethos. The clothing exchange organized by educators persists today, quietly maintained as a space of community care. This initiative reflects Tronto's (1993) insistence on care as justice—not a private act, but a political principle enacted among equals. It disrupts neoliberal narratives that isolate and individualize, replacing them with reciprocal interdependence. These small, sustained gestures are institutional interventions. Feminista Jones' (2019) concept of networked care helps frame this: informal, intentional acts that build institutional resilience from within. These educators reclaim emotional labor as central to professional practice, and in doing so, remake the school not as a service provider, but as a community of resistance.

This resistance, however, is neither easy nor romantic. It is laborious, emotionally taxing, and frequently unrecognized. Yet, as Anzaldúa (1987) reminds us, survival in the borderlands requires a different kind of strength—a quiet, persistent refusal to surrender joy, hope, or solidarity. Through care, flexibility, and mutual support, educators construct a decolonial feminist pedagogy of survival—one that not only withstands systemic neglect but reimagines education as a space of healing, transformation, and collective becoming.

The school as a site of resistance

One of the most radical practices enacted by educators in this school is the deliberate reimagining of the institution not as a neutral space, but as a place—an emotionally inhabited, socially embedded, and politically charged site of memory, care, and resistance. Drawing from critical geography and feminist theory, this shift from abstract space to meaningful place (Massey, 1994; hooks, 2009) enables the school to function not as an isolated service provider, but as a community anchor. The educators reclaim the school as a place intricately woven into the life of the neighborhood, resisting its treatment as a generic, interchangeable institution.

"The school has always been a point of reference, just as they envisioned it from the beginning."

This testimonial captures how the school transcends its administrative definition to become a place of refuge, continuity, and mutual recognition. In doing so, educators resist neoliberal policies that flatten educational space into depersonalized "service hubs." Instead, they embed the school in local relationality, forging it into a common—a shared infrastructure of care and belonging. bell hooks (2009) emphasizes that justice begins with rootedness, and here, educators actively root the institution in the textures of community life, affirming it as a site of protection and collective memory. This

rooting is not ornamental but subversive. It defies the logic of disposability often imposed on marginalized schools. Through practices that cultivate shared space—whether tending to children in need or supporting one another during global crises—educators enact what Federici (2020) describes as a political reappropriation of community. They turn the school into a sanctuary of relational resilience, where mourning, celebration, and political consciousness are held in common.

This practice demands a rethinking of inclusion. Rather than accepting institutional frameworks that position inclusion as a benevolent act from a dominant center toward marginalized others, educators question the asymmetries embedded in this narrative. "Rather than talking about inclusion, we should be talking about living well together." This reframing aligns with Gilroy's (2004) notion of conviviality and shifts focus toward reciprocal cohabitation, where no identity is centered or peripheral. The school becomes a shared home, not a host institution. This move transforms the classroom into a site of peacebuilding—a space where justice is enacted relationally, not through top-down policy but through daily attentiveness to dignity and plurality. In resisting the reduction of education to metrics and managerialism, the school is redefined as an active place of insurgent possibility. Massey's (1994) concept of place as processual and contested is vividly realized here. The school is not a passive setting; it is a terrain of struggle and transformation. Its educators reject spatial neutrality, embodying what Mbembe (2019) calls an "infrastructure of the common," and what Ahmed (2012b) names a "feminist shelter"—a space of staying, surviving, and building alternative futures.

Within this architecture of resistance, beauty plays a central role—not as decoration, but as political refusal. In crafting handmade costumes, rituals, and classroom aesthetics, educators reclaim beauty as a commons, not a commodity. This challenges neoliberal assumptions that aesthetic richness belongs only to the privileged. Federici (2020) and Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) both locate radical potential in the labor of care and creativity. Here, that potential is realized through a pedagogy of joy, where children are taught that they are worthy of delight and imagination, regardless of social neglect.

"Beauty is a value that can and should be taught."

This statement reframes aesthetics as a pedagogical tool of affirmation and resistance. It teaches dignity not as reward but as birthright. These practices refuse austerity's logic of minimalism for the poor and affirm Freire's (1970) call to humanize education. The classroom becomes a site of liberatory dreaming, where educators weave meaning through color, story, and ritual. They do not merely transmit knowledge; they construct worlds. This work is intergenerational, collective, and profoundly gendered. The refusal of beauty's marginalization is a feminist act, reclaiming emotional and aesthetic labor as central to justice. Tronto's (1993) ethic of care affirms this revaluation, recognizing relational labor as foundational rather than supplemental to educational life.

Equally radical is the dismantling of hierarchical structures within the school. Rather than replicating neoliberal governance models, this school functions as a mutual ecosystem. Care labor is distributed and honored. "*We manage to stay open thanks to everyone who works with us*." This affirmation resists the invisibilization of non-instructional staff and redefines the school as a collective of interdependent laborers. Drawing from Federici (2020) and Ruddick (1989), this pedagogy of mutual recognition centers the reproductive labor that sustains daily life. The emotional infrastructure of the school is made visible through gestures that affirm every adult's role in the development of children. The embrace of a support worker is not ancillary to education—it is its foundation. This practice also unsettles the colonial legacies embedded in institutional hierarchies, which assign value based on race, gender, and contract status. By centering all workers, the school enacts a decolonial reordering of institutional life. Anzaldúa's (1987) borderland epistemology is embodied in this interstitial practice, where care cuts across formal boundaries to create new configurations of belonging and value.

Learning in this school emerges through relational practice, not technical compliance. Professional development is redefined as collective inquiry. "*The best kind of training is exactly this: growing together.*" This echoes Haraway's (1988) call for situated knowledges and repositions educators as theorists of their own practice. Supervision becomes a feminist space of reflection and solidarity, where emotions are not distractions but epistemic resources. Lugones' (2003) world-traveling provides a framework for this pedagogical method—an openness to multiple lived realities that informs a shared epistemology. "This becomes a school of life" is both a philosophical claim and a structural intervention. It challenges institutional models that separate learning from living and affirms hooks' (1994) vision of education as the practice of freedom.

Ultimately, this school embodies a pedagogy of counter-hegemony—not through spectacle, but through the persistent, situated, and affective labor of educators. Knowledge is not hoarded but co-created. Care is not peripheral—it is the architecture of transformation. And in these feminist commons, resistance is not declared—it is lived, together.

Comparison between School 1 and School 2

The findings of this study confirm that educators working in marginalized ECE settings carry a profound emotional and structural burden, one that is not incidental but constitutive of their everyday professional lives. This burden emerges at the intersection of multiple forces: the trauma carried by children and families, the fragility of interpersonal relationships within the school community, and the persistent neglect of institutions that are meant to support them. In this sense, educators' work extends well beyond pedagogical tasks; it demands that they constantly negotiate the tension between their professional role and the overwhelming social, economic, and cultural challenges that surround

the school. These results resonate with previous studies showing that early childhood educators in disadvantaged contexts are often compelled to act as social workers, counselors, and advocates, navigating conditions that test both their emotional stamina and professional limits (Osgood, 2011; Haslip & Gullo, 2018).

The narratives collected in this study also illustrate what Ahmed (2012a) has conceptualized as the *cultural politics of emotion*: feelings of exhaustion, frustration, and care cannot be reduced to individual experiences but are shaped and circulated within broader institutional and social structures. Educators' emotions are thus not private reactions, but reflections of systemic inequities—embodied reminders of how marginalization permeates the very spaces of teaching and learning.

Yet, alongside these challenges, educators also demonstrate an extraordinary capacity for resilience and resistance. Rather than succumbing entirely to exhaustion, they develop situated practices that sustain both themselves and their communities. These practices—whether building solidarity among colleagues, transforming decayed environments through color and art, or insisting on the joy and dignity of every child—can be interpreted as forms of everyday resistance. They align with Tronto's (1993) *ethic of care*, which foregrounds relational responsibility as a political and moral stance, and with Veronese and colleagues' (2018, 2020b) accounts of survival strategies in contexts marked by violence and structural oppression. In these testimonies, care is not a passive disposition but an active, resistant practice that challenges systemic indifference.

Such acts can also be read through hooks's (1994) lens of *education as the practice of freedom*. By creating moments of joy and beauty in neglected spaces, or by cultivating networks of support, educators push against the reduction of schools to bureaucratic service providers. Instead, they reimagine them as places of belonging, solidarity, and hope. This capacity to transform oppressive conditions into sites of possibility highlights the profoundly political nature of their work, even when such acts appear modest or routine.

Importantly, these findings also underscore similarities across the two schools studied. Despite differences in context and team culture, both groups of educators articulated a shared conviction that *every child deserves joy and well-being*. This moral stance, voiced repeatedly across narratives, reflects what Abdullah (2009) identifies as a foundational principle of multicultural early childhood education: a commitment to justice and dignity that persists even when material resources are scarce and institutional support is lacking. Moreover, it speaks to a broader body of literature on multicultural and marginalized ECE, which emphasizes that educators in such contexts must shoulder a dual burden—caring for children's complex needs while also navigating bureaucratic systems that frequently undermine their efforts (Banerjee & Luckner, 2014; Busch et al., 2018; Kurucz et al., 2020).

However, the differences between the two schools add a crucial layer of nuance to the analysis. In School 1 (Nursery), the challenges and responses reported by educators are predominantly relational and inward-facing. Educators focus on maintaining solidarity within the team and on the fragile, often difficult, process of building reciprocity with families. These dynamics align with findings by Kess & Puroila (2023), who emphasize how narrative identities and collegial belonging function as protective resources in marginalized ECE contexts. In this sense, the educators' resilience is anchored less in structural change and more in the quality of their immediate relationships—what could be described as a survival strategy based on proximity and mutual recognition.

At the same time, these dynamics can also be read through Ahmed's (2017) notion of the *feminist killjoy*: educators insist on enacting values of care, justice, and solidarity even when such commitments place them at odds with institutional expectations and bureaucratic logics. The very act of sustaining these values becomes, in itself, a form of resistance, though one that remains confined to the relational and ethical sphere rather than expanding into overtly political claims.

Several possible explanations may account for this configuration. One hypothesis, only partially supported by the data, relates to the age group served: working with very young children in nurseries often places educators in a context where challenges are primarily interpersonal and immediate, rather than overtly political or structural. The developmental needs of infants and toddlers demand constant embodied care—feeding, soothing, helping them regulate distress—which makes the work intensely relational and focused on the here and now (Jones et al., 2016). At the same time, the centrality of parents in everyday routines means that tensions often surface in the fragile process of building reciprocity with families, rendering relationships with them a primary site of concern (Kurucz et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023). This is compounded by the fact that nurseries generally occupy a less institutionally recognized position in the education system, which can reinforce a more inward-looking professional identity oriented toward collegial solidarity and coping, rather than toward structural critique or public advocacy (Osgood, 2011; Haslip & Gullo, 2018). Moreover, since very young children are not yet directly engaged in explicitly educational or civic practices, the school's broader role as a community anchor or site of resistance tends to remain in the background. By contrast, in kindergarten settings where older children are present, educators more readily frame their work in terms of structural inequalities and civic responsibilities, seeing the school as a collective and political actor within the neighborhood. In this sense, while School 1 emphasizes solidarity and the immediate ethics of care within the team and with families, School 2 expands these commitments into outward-facing practices that resist neglect and invisibility, aligning more closely with Freire's (1970) vision of education as emancipation and Moss's (2018) call for alternative, justice-oriented narratives in early childhood. However, the present study does not provide sufficient evidence to

confirm this distinction. A more plausible interpretation concerns the relative newness and instability of the team in School 1. Unlike School 2, where a long-standing culture of collective resistance has been consolidated over time, School 1 operates with a younger, less structured staff group. This lack of historical continuity and institutional memory may limit the development of broader resistance strategies, channeling educators' energy primarily into maintaining internal cohesion and navigating everyday relational difficulties. In this respect, the differences between the two schools illustrate how the temporal and organizational dimension of ECE teams plays a crucial role in shaping educators' practices of resilience. While School 2 embodies a more politically articulated and community-oriented stance, School 1 remains focused on relational survival strategies, suggesting that the capacity of educators to move from inward-facing solidarity to outward-facing transformation may depend significantly on the maturity, stability, and historical depth of the team itself.

In School 2 (Kindergarten), by contrast, educators articulate a broader, outward-facing repertoire of resistance that extends beyond the relational sphere. While relational tensions with colleagues and families remain present, the educators' testimonies highlight how their struggles are also deeply intertwined with structural and political dimensions: the scarcity of resources, the lack of institutional support, the precarious conditions of special education staff, and the symbolic degradation of the school environment. These burdens, far from being perceived as isolated obstacles, are reframed by educators as part of a broader terrain of inequality in which the school is both implicated and actively resisting.

Here, the school itself emerges as a civic anchor in the neighborhood, not merely a site of instruction but a trusted landmark and community node that embodies forms of radical coexistence. In this framing, the school refuses the invisibility often imposed on marginalized communities and instead becomes a visible, relational, and political actor. This resonates strongly with Freire's (1970) notion of education as a practice of emancipation: a process that empowers both educators and families to confront structural oppression through acts of critical reflection and collective agency. It also aligns with scholarship on intercultural early childhood education that insists on moving beyond tokenistic models of inclusion toward genuine practices of reciprocity and systemic transformation (Ang, 2010; Abdullah, 2009; Marcos et al., 2023).

Moreover, the Kindergarten's positioning of the school as a site of resistance parallels Ahmed's (2012b) critique of institutional diversity: bureaucratic gestures of inclusion often reproduce existing hierarchies rather than dismantling them. By contrast, the educators in School 2 reimagine the institution as a space of belonging and justice, where every child and every family is entitled not only to services but to dignity, recognition, and care. This echoes the decolonial arguments of Tuck & Yang (2012) and Achiume (2019), who stress that genuine justice-oriented education cannot remain neutral

but must acknowledge structural violence and position schools as political actors that resist marginalization and cultivate new forms of community.

One plausible explanation for this outward-facing, politically grounded stance lies in the maturity and stability of the kindergarten's staff group. Unlike the Nursery, where a younger and less cohesive team has not yet consolidated a strong culture of resistance, the educators in School 2 benefit from a long-standing, intergenerationally transmitted professional ethos. This continuity has allowed the group to cultivate a shared sense of mission that situates the school not merely as a workplace but as a collective project of belonging and transformation. In this sense, the stability of the staff provides fertile ground for fostering practices of solidarity and civic engagement, aligning with what hooks (1994, 2009) frames as education as both a practice of freedom and a culture of place. It also echoes Moss's (2018) call for *alternative narratives* in early childhood education, rooted not in universal models but in situated, historically sedimented practices. The endurance of a cohesive pedagogical community enables educators to resist systemic neglect more explicitly, turning the school into a civic anchor for the neighborhood and a site of what Freire (1970) envisioned as emancipatory praxis. At the same time, this intergenerational transmission of values and strategies recalls Kess & Einarsdóttir's (2023) and Kess & Puroila's (2023) findings on how educators' narrative identities and sense of collegial belonging provide continuity and resilience in marginalized ECE contexts.Taken together, these findings support Moss's (2018) call for "alternative narratives" in early childhood education—narratives that foreground educators' situated practices and political agency rather than universal, depoliticized models. While School 1 primarily relies on internal solidarity and ethical values within the team as strategies of survival, School 2 expands this horizon into a community-facing and explicitly political stance. In doing so, it embodies what hooks (2009) describes as the transformative power of belonging, and what Solnit (2016) calls the fragile but generative work of hope in the dark—the act of holding onto the possibility of renewal even in the face of systemic neglect.

12. 6 Limitations

While this study offers a rich and situated account of educators' experiences within a marginalized, multicultural early childhood setting, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research is context-specific, focusing on 2 ECE services in particular marginalized and multicultural neighborhood Genoa in Northwest Italy, which limits the transferability of its findings to other educational settings. The relatively small sample, predominantly composed of women, reflects the gendered composition of the ECE sector but may have influenced the types of narratives that emerged. Moreover, the study centered exclusively on the voices of educators, without extending the inquiry to other members of the school community—such as children, caretakers, or cafeteria staff. This

represents not only a limit in achieving a more holistic view of school life, but also a missed opportunity to engage the school as a collective and relational ecosystem. By focusing on a single professional group, the risk is to reproduce the very fragmentation that many inclusive pedagogies seek to overcome—separating roles and voices that in everyday practice are deeply interdependent.
Additionally, the narrative methodology adopted—while core to the study's epistemological commitments—entails a relational, co-constructed form of knowledge production that may be seen as a limitation from more traditional or positivist perspectives. However, from a narrative and critically reflexive standpoint, such co-construction is embraced as a generative and situated way of knowing. The researcher's dual role as facilitator and analyst may have influenced the narratives produced, but this influence is seen as part of an ethical, dialogic relationship rather than a source of bias. Finally, while the stories were collected in Italian to preserve cultural and emotional nuance, their translation into English may have entailed the partial loss of certain symbolic or affective layers embedded in the original language.

12. 7 Future Perspectives

Building on the insights and limitations of this study, future research could meaningfully expand the scope of inquiry to include the broader school community—particularly children, support staff, and families—whose voices remain essential for understanding the relational ecology of early childhood education in marginalized contexts. Exploring the interconnected narratives of all actors involved would not only enrich the complexity of the data, but also challenge the institutional fragmentation that often separates roles, responsibilities, and experiences within educational settings. Longitudinal research could also shed light on how survival strategies and practices of care evolve over time, especially in response to shifting institutional policies or social conditions. Additionally, future studies might experiment with participatory and narrative-based approaches beyond the early childhood sector, testing their transformative potential in other areas of public education and community work. Such developments would further strengthen the role of narrative inquiry as both a research tool and a pedagogical-political practice capable of fostering critical consciousness, relational healing, and collective agency within educational ecosystems.

12. 8 Practical and political implications

The findings of this study carry significant practical and political implications for early childhood education in contexts marked by social marginalization and cultural plurality. On a practical level, the narratives underscore the importance of rethinking educator training programs to include narrative, intercultural, and trauma-informed pedagogies. For example, local municipalities and educator education institutions could implement reflective workshops based on narrative

methodologies—such as the “School of Life” —as part of professional development, enabling educators to process emotional burden, share strategies, and cultivate collective meaning-making.

There is also a need to formally recognize and support the emotional and cultural labor performed by educators. Municipal systems might introduce protected time within the school schedule for peer dialogue and relational supervision, rather than relegating these practices to voluntary or extracurricular efforts. Similarly, collaborations between schools and social services could be structured to include non-teaching staff—such as janitors, cafeteria workers, and cultural mediators—who are often overlooked but play a key role in the everyday care of children and families.

Equally crucial is the question of stability within educational teams. The data show how the maturity and continuity of the staff group in School 2 fostered resilience, cohesion, and a shared civic mission, while the younger and less consolidated group in School 1 struggled to build the same culture of resistance. This highlights the importance of preserving and nurturing staff stability in marginalized educational contexts. High turnover, precarious contracts, and fragmented teams undermine the possibility of intergenerational transmission of professional ethos and weaken the relational fabric that sustains educators’ collective strength. Ensuring stable employment conditions, opportunities for long-term collaboration, and recognition of collegial ties is therefore not only a labor rights issue but a pedagogical and political imperative. Stability enables educators to transform their schools into enduring community anchors, transmitting values of justice, care, and belonging across generations.

Politically, the study calls for a reframing of early childhood institutions as not merely administrative units but as relational and justice-oriented communities. This requires moving beyond tokenistic multiculturalism toward structural investments in inclusive practices—for example, guaranteeing the continuity of special education personnel through stable contracts, or funding multilingual educational materials that reflect the linguistic diversity of the classroom. At the policy level, the voices of educators should be integrated into decision-making processes at both local and national levels, particularly when designing intercultural education frameworks. By recognizing educators not only as implementers but as political agents and knowledge producers, institutions can begin to co-construct more just, responsive, and human-centered educational environments.

12. 9 Conclusion

This study has explored how two ECE schools situated in a structurally neglected yet culturally rich urban peripheries can become more than an educational institution. It emerges as a living infrastructure of resistance, care, and hope, where survival is not passive endurance but an active, relational, and deeply situated form of struggle. The schools studied does not offer universal solutions; rather, it provides a powerful lens through which to understand how public institutions can be reimagined from below, even under conditions of systemic abandonment.

In this context, resistance is neither spectacular nor institutionalized. It unfolds through the slow, collective work of educators—mostly women—who paint walls, invent rituals, care for each other, and insist on the dignity of every role and relationship. These everyday acts form a counter-pedagogy grounded in feminist, decolonial, and anti-capitalist traditions. They redefine what it means to teach, to care, and to build community in conditions where those very things are under threat.

What this case offers, then, is not a blueprint but a situated example of what bell hooks (1994) called an "education as the practice of freedom," and what Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) described as care that is speculative, political, and world-making. The school becomes a commons—a space sustained by memory, resistance, and mutual presence—where learning is relational, ethics are embodied, and hope is practiced collectively.

The implications are locally grounded but politically resonant. For the two schools itself, recognition must extend beyond its formal function as a service provider. It must be supported as a critical node of socio-educational care and community resilience. This includes protecting it from fragmentation, securing adequate resources, and valuing all contributors—including precarious staff—as essential members of the pedagogical community.

At the same time, the study invites broader institutional reflection. It calls on policymakers and municipal authorities not to abstract or replicate this experience, but to learn from it—to recognize the invisible labor, relational ethics, and collective intelligence that keep such spaces alive. The reflective and dialogical practices developed within the school should be resourced and institutionalized, not as optional support, but as the very conditions of sustainability and justice in education.

Ultimately, what this case reveals is that the strength of public education lies not in its standardization or efficiency, but in its capacity to hold life in all its complexity. When a educator says, "*This school is the future,*" it is not a utopian fantasy—it is a claim rooted in everyday resistance. It reminds us that the future of education depends on how we care for each other, how we share responsibility, and how we sustain hope in the face of structural disregard. These are just two school. But through their struggle, it illuminates broader questions about what education and justice is, what it could be, and what it must resist. In that sense, it is not an exception—it is a warning, a promise, and a call.

13. Study 4. "*We are like a tree: even when cut, our roots keep us standing".* Narratives of strength and oppression among migrant parents in Italy. A collective narrative study.

13.1 Introduction

In the landscape of early childhood education, the figure of the migrant parent represents a pivotal yet often underexplored dimension of interculturality. Within the 0–6 age range, learning is profoundly relational—shaped through everyday interactions among children, educators, and families. During these formative years, parents play a crucial role in nurturing children's sense of belonging, language development, and emotional security. Yet, for many migrant families, participation unfolds within asymmetrical structures, constrained by institutional, linguistic, and symbolic barriers. In the Italian context, research has highlighted how migrant parents frequently experience a "double exclusion": positioned at the periphery of educational decision-making and simultaneously constructed as cultural "others," whose competencies and values are rarely acknowledged as educational resources (Favaro, 2000, 2001; Portera, 2004; Dusi, 2012; Granata, 2016). Despite policy frameworks that promote intercultural education for all children (MIUR, 2006; 2012; 2018), these principles often remain aspirational rather than transformative, limited by top-down institutional cultures and a lack of recognition of families' epistemic contributions.

Recent international research confirms that this pattern extends well beyond Italy. Across multiple contexts, migrant parents continue to face structural and epistemic barriers that restrict their participation and recognition. These barriers are often rooted in language differences, limited intercultural sensitivity among educators, and institutional norms privileging dominant cultural practices (Curdt-Christiansen, 2020; Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017; Herwartz-Emden, 2020; Lund, 2024; Bilbao et al., 2025). Also here, such conditions give rise to what Fricker (2007) conceptualizes as *epistemic injustice*—the systematic silencing of marginalized voices in processes of knowledge production. Even when inclusion is formally promoted in educational policy, its implementation frequently reproduces assimilationist and hierarchical models that position educators as experts and parents as learners (Bilbao et al., 2025; Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017; Lund, 2024). At the same time, a growing body of work challenges these deficit-oriented perspectives, emphasizing parental agency and relational approaches. Studies grounded in narrative inquiry and digital storytelling show that migrant parents actively negotiate their cultural practices, beliefs, and aspirations to engage meaningfully with educational institutions (Sadownik, 2022; Sadownik & Ndijuye, 2023; Khoo et al., 2023). These methodologies foster communicative spaces that legitimize parents' voices and promote trust-based, dialogic collaboration (Khalfaoui et al., 2020; Sadownik & Ndijuye, 2023; Lund, 2024). In such contexts, *trust* itself emerges as a pedagogical principle—a precondition for epistemic reciprocity.

Parallel research underlines that educators' intercultural sensitivity and their recognition of families' linguistic and cultural repertoires are key to fostering belonging and inclusion. Studies from diverse European and global settings demonstrate that when early childhood environments embrace multilingualism, cultural plurality, and mutual respect, both children's wellbeing and parental engagement increase significantly (Harju & Åkerblom, 2020; Rinde & Kenny, 2021; Pastori et al., 2021; Kim & Kang, 2024; Bilbao et al., 2025). This evidence signals a gradual paradigm shift—from assimilationist frameworks toward relational and decolonial models that foreground reciprocity, co-construction, and educational justice (Phyak & Sah, 2022; Leckey et al., 2021; Lund, 2024).

Taken together, international literature from 2017 to 2025 reveals a clear evolution: from early deficit-focused analyses toward relational, narrative, and decolonial frameworks that acknowledge migrant parents as epistemic resources. Across contexts as diverse as Belgium, Norway, Chile, Italy, and Tanzania, scholars converge on the insight that recognizing migrant parents' knowledge and experience can transform early childhood education (ECE) into a more inclusive, dialogic, and justice-oriented space (Sadownik & Ndijuye, 2023; Khoo et al., 2023; Bilbao et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, substantial evidence continues to document how migrant parents are frequently *passivized*—constructed as recipients of integration efforts rather than co-authors of educational meaning (Abdallah, 2009; Mertens, 2017; Souto-Manning, 2018). These dynamics exemplify how epistemic hierarchies operate within early education, where parental knowledge and moral repertoires are undervalued or filtered through deficit-based frameworks (Aman, 2018; Gorashi, 2005). Even well-intentioned intercultural programs often reproduce a unidirectional logic: educators as experts, parents as learners (Tobin, Adair, & Arzubiaga, 2013). In practice, parental participation tends to be confined to attending school-organized events or supporting pre-defined educational goals, rather than co-designing pedagogical activities or contributing their own cultural perspectives. Initiatives that invite parents to share traditional foods or songs may appear to celebrate diversity, yet often remain superficial, leaving unchallenged the deeper power asymmetries that determine what counts as legitimate knowledge or "good parenting." These asymmetries are further reinforced by Eurocentric assumptions embedded in early childhood pedagogies, which privilege Western developmental norms—such as individual autonomy and cognitive milestones—while neglecting alternative epistemologies of care, interdependence, and community prevalent in many non-Western contexts (de Sousa Santos, 2015; Manathunga, Qi, & Singh, 2021).

To counter these dynamics, relational, decolonial, and narrative approaches call for a fundamental rethinking of how educators engage with family knowledge. Within this theoretical horizon, migrant parents are repositioned not as passive beneficiaries but as *epistemic agents*—bearers of situated knowledges capable of reshaping the educational encounter. Narrative theory, in particular, offers

powerful conceptual and methodological tools for this reconfiguration. Drawing on the work of Michael White and the Dulwich Centre (White, 2007), narrative practice conceptualizes identity as constructed through stories—multiple, dynamic, and relational. It distinguishes between *problem-saturated* narratives, often dominating institutional discourse (e.g., migration as deficit or trauma), and *life stories* that foreground resilience, care, and creativity. Within educational contexts, narrative practice enables practitioners to engage parents as co-authors of meaning, fostering dialogic processes that honor complexity and agency. In this sense, it resonates with decolonial pedagogies (Mignolo, 2011; Milani, 2019), which seek to unlearn hierarchical ways of knowing and create pluriversal spaces where diverse epistemologies can coexist equally.

In recent years, narrative methodologies have gained increasing attention in early childhood and family research as a means to engage with the lived experiences of migrant parents. Storytelling, in particular, has emerged as a valuable strategy for amplifying silenced voices, enabling parents to articulate life stories that coexist with—rather than being overshadowed by—narratives of trauma or displacement (Sadownik & Ndijuye, 2023; Denborough, 2014). However, it is crucial to distinguish between these general uses of storytelling and the structured frameworks of *narrative therapy* and *narrative practice* developed by White and colleagues at the Dulwich Centre (White, 2007; Denborough, 2014). While storytelling approaches often serve expressive or community-building purposes, narrative practice represents a distinct ethical and epistemological stance: stories are not merely reflections of reality but active sites of identity-making and relational change. Through techniques such as externalizing conversations, double listening, and collective documentation, narrative practitioners work to decenter dominant discourses and co-create alternative meanings that restore agency and dignity to those whose voices have been marginalized.

Empirical studies illustrate the potential of these approaches to enhance parental well-being, agency, and belonging. Existential–narrative programs with migrant mothers in China, for instance, have been shown to strengthen emotional connection and parent–child relationships (To et al., 2018). In European contexts, narrative-based initiatives have promoted dialogue between schools and families, supporting the articulation of hybrid cultural identities and fostering trustful partnerships (Santero & Naldini, 2020; Bossuroy et al., 2024; Rousou et al., 2024). Other projects highlight the empowering potential of collective storytelling in redefining parental roles across cultures (Radjack et al., 2020; Puffer et al., 2017; Khaw et al., 2022). Despite these promising findings, explicit applications of narrative practice within early childhood education remain limited. Much of the existing literature relies on storytelling in a broad sense—focused on expression rather than transformation—without fully embracing the dialogic, deconstructive, and community-based principles central to the Dulwich Centre model. Meta-analyses of culturally adapted parenting interventions (Lim et al., 2023)

underscore both the promise and the limitations of current approaches, calling for more context-sensitive, longitudinal, and epistemically grounded studies. As Denborough (2014) and White (2007) remind us, the challenge is not simply to collect stories but to create dialogic spaces *where narratives of trauma coexist with those of resilience, care, and creativity.*

Building on this perspective, interculturality has increasingly been reinterpreted as a dialogic and transformative paradigm—one that moves beyond the management of diversity toward epistemic reciprocity and mutual recognition (Kohan, 2017; Walsh, 2022). As also underlined in this dissertation (Chapter 11), such a perspective challenges traditional, top-down conceptions of inclusion and invites institutions and educators to engage in co-constructive processes with families. Yet, despite this theoretical evolution, few studies have explored how these principles take shape in the lived experiences of migrant parents within early childhood settings. Existing research often treats parental participation and intercultural curricula as separate domains, rarely connecting them through a decolonial and narrative lens capable of foregrounding parents' epistemic and relational roles. This gap conceals a crucial tension: migrant parents are simultaneously marginalized—as outsiders in educational and cultural hierarchies—and potential knowledge producers capable of transforming pedagogical encounters through their narratives, practices, and worldviews. Crucially, this perspective extends beyond their experiences within educational institutions to encompass their broader condition as parents navigating migration, linguistic pluralism, and intersecting social positions within the post-migration context. Recognizing these experiences as both structurally and epistemically situated is essential to reimagining early childhood education as a genuinely intercultural and justice-oriented space.

13.2The study

Aims and objectives

Grounded in these theoretical premises, this qualitative and exploratory study examines the everyday challenges and situated forms of agency enacted by migrant-background parents with young children aged 0–6 living in Italy. The focus extends beyond parents' direct relationship with early childhood institutions to include their broader condition as mothers and fathers navigating life in a post-migration context. It seeks to understand how they experience and respond to physical, structural, and symbolic barriers while sustaining their own well-being and supporting their children's development and growth.

Informed by the narrative frameworks of Denborough (2014) and White (2007), the study pays particular attention to the life storylines through which parents make sense of their experiences, re-authoring identities and relationships in contexts shaped by systemic and intersectional forms of marginalization. As also discussed in Chapter 11, schools and early childhood services are not neutral

spaces: the dynamics that occur outside—social, cultural, and political—are inevitably reflected within them. This study therefore approaches parents' narratives as windows into the broader entanglement between migration, family life, and educational belonging in contemporary Italy.

Study background

The study took place in Genoa, a historic port city in northwestern Italy that has long been recognized as a crossroads of maritime trade and intercultural circulation within the Mediterranean basin. In Italian migration studies, Genoa has been a key case for examining the local impact of international mobility and for understanding how urban societies adapt to demographic change (Torre, 2023). Over the past four decades, the city has undergone a profound transformation: once a point of departure for Italian emigrants, it has gradually become a destination shaped by immigration. Since the 1980s, young men from Africa and Latin America began settling in Genoa, often concentrating in the depopulated historic center, where cheap housing opportunities coincided with processes of urban stigmatization (Erminio, 2023). During the 1990s, female migration, particularly from Latin America, became increasingly significant, as family reunifications and domestic work reshaped the city's social fabric (Lagomarsino, 2023).

These dynamics illustrate what Italian scholars have termed an "implicit model of inclusion": a process of integration not strongly supported by institutional policies but progressively consolidated through labor, family life, and associative networks (Ambrosini, 2001; Ambrosini & Torre, 2023). Although Italian public discourse has often framed immigration as an "emergency" to be managed through securitarian approaches, the Genoese case demonstrates that migration has become a structural component of the city's development. Over the years, migrants have reshaped neighborhoods, sustained local economies, and generated new solidarities, while simultaneously facing precarious housing, irregular employment, and political marginalization (Torre, 2023).

As of 2024, Genoa counted approximately 63,683 foreign residents, representing 11.3% of the total population (ISTAT, 2024). The city's migrant population is highly heterogeneous, including communities from Ecuador, Morocco, Albania, Peru, Senegal, Sri Lanka, and Nigeria. Among these, the Ecuadorian community is the largest, numbering over 7,000 individuals, many of whom reside in Sampierdarena and Cornigliano (ISTAT, 2024). This demographic pluralism has reshaped the city's cultural fabric and, at the same time, redefined institutional realities in the fields of education, welfare, and urban regeneration (Bartolini, 2023; Martini, 2023).

Education has been a particularly crucial arena within these transformations. Schools in Genoa have functioned as spaces of both opportunity and conflict, mediating the integration of second generations while addressing challenges such as linguistic diversity, early school leaving, and the demand for intercultural pedagogies (Bartolini, 2023). Early childhood services, in particular, have played a

pivotal role not only in fostering inclusion for children but also in actively involving their parents, thereby creating opportunities for intercultural dialogue, reducing family isolation, and recognizing cultural and linguistic diversity from the earliest years of life. In this sense, the Genoese experience exemplifies the dual role of education as both an engine of integration and a mirror of broader inequalities that characterize contemporary multicultural societies (Ambrosini & Torre, 2023).

13.3 Methods

Participants

The study involved 51 migrant parents (72%) whose children are enrolled in two municipal early childhood education services in Genoa (the same services of the previous study). Among them, 70% held work permits, 25% were asylum seekers, and 5% had refugee status. Participants age range was from 27 to 42 years, with an average age of 33.8 years (SD = 5.0). Nearly all participants were women (90%), highlighting the central role of mothers in navigating educational institutions and caregiving in early childhood contexts.

All participants had personally experienced migration, having moved to Italy from their countries of origin. The length of residence in Italy ranged from less than one year to ten years, with an average of 6.6 years (SD = 3.2). This variation captures a wide spectrum of migratory trajectories, encompassing both recently arrived families and those with longer settlement histories, whose experiences intersect within early childhood education environments.

The sample was characterized by notable national and cultural diversity, with participants coming from 16 different countries. The most represented were Ecuador (25.7%), Nigeria (20%), and Morocco (14.3%), followed by Sri Lanka (5.7%), Albania (5.7%). Other countries represented by individual participants (2.9% each) included Cape Verde, Tunisia, China, Senegal, Bangladesh, Eritrea, India, Romania, Peru, and the Philippines. This rich heterogeneity reflects a wide range of migratory paths, sociopolitical backgrounds, and linguistic repertoires that intersect with educational experiences and parenting practices in complex ways.

Educational backgrounds were equally varied: some participants held university degrees (32%), while a significant portion had completed upper secondary school (diploma) (50%), and others reported only lower secondary school qualifications (middle school) (18%). This diversity in educational attainment provides important context for understanding how knowledge, skills, and cultural capital are differently recognized—and often undervalued—within institutional interactions in early childhood settings.

Employment conditions were equally varied and offered insight into the intersection of migration, gender, and socioeconomic status. Most of the participants (51.4%) were employed in precarious and low-wage sectors, including domestic work, hospitality, cleaning services, and caregiving—often in

roles marked by instability and limited protections. Approximately 34.3% held more stable or skilled positions, such as healthcare assistants, interpreters, educators, or administrative roles. Finally, 14.3% of participants were unemployed or engaged in informal work or unpaid caregiving, underscoring the structural barriers to stable employment that migrant parents—particularly women—frequently encounter. These labour conditions provide essential context for understanding how migrant families engage with early childhood educational institutions, often while managing other intersecting forms of social and economic vulnerability.

The recruitment of participants was carried out through a co-constructed and relational process developed in close collaboration with the educators working in the two municipal early childhood education settings (the same services of the previous study). Initial contact was established by the researcher through in-person visits to the schools, during which the aims and theoretical framework of the study were shared and discussed with the teaching teams. Following these exchanges, the educators suggested preparing a simple informational flyer to present the project to families. This flyer was co-designed and revised together with the educators to ensure clarity, cultural sensitivity, and accessibility, and was then translated into all the languages spoken by the families involved in the school community—Italian, English, French, Spanish, Arabic, and Chinese.

Rather than relying on written consent forms or impersonal announcements, the recruitment process was embedded in the everyday rhythms and relational dynamics of school life. The educators proposed that the researcher spend time at the school during key transition moments, such as morning drop-off and afternoon pick-up, to allow for informal, face-to-face conversations with parents. These encounters were facilitated by the educators themselves, who introduced the researcher to the families in a familiar and trusted context.

During these individual conversations, the researcher explained that the project aimed to explore the experiences of parents with a migration history who had children aged 0–6. Participation involved two flexible phases: first, an individual narrative session with the researcher, scheduled at a time and place convenient for the participant (either within or outside the school); and second, a collaborative group session, to be organized collectively once all participants had been identified.

This phase of recruitment and relational engagement lasted approximately two months (one month for each school involved), during which the researcher was present at the school every day, actively participating in daily routines and community life. This consistent presence helped build trust and familiarity, and allowed new participants to join gradually, as they learned about the project through word of mouth or additional informal introductions facilitated by the educators. The entire process was intentionally dialogic and adaptive, respecting participants' availability, preferences, and relational comfort, while also aligning with the rhythms and values of the educational community.

This relational and time-intensive approach to fieldwork aligns with methodological perspectives that highlight the importance of trust, presence, and temporal investment in cross-cultural and community-based research (Greaves & Colucci, 2025; Colucci & Lester, 2025). Within this view, meaningful engagement requires researchers to *be with* participants rather than merely *study* them, recognizing that authentic understanding emerges through continuity, shared time, and everyday interaction. The recruitment process in this study was therefore conceived not as a procedural step, but as a dialogic and co-constructed practice embedded in the life of the educational community. Trust developed gradually through repeated encounters, informal exchanges, and mutual recognition, reflecting the idea that rapport is not a precondition for participation but a process built through presence and reciprocity. Such an approach situates research within the relational fabric of participants' lived contexts, allowing the generation of knowledge that is both ethically grounded and culturally responsive.

Instruments and procedures

The methodological framework of this study was grounded in the narrative practices developed by the Dulwich Centre, with particular attention to two specific practices: the *Map of History* and the *Tree of Life* (Denborough, 2008; 2018). These approaches were implemented in two complementary phases. Each participant took part in an individual meeting guided by the *Map of History*, designed to explore personal migration trajectories, family histories, and the ways in which these intersect with experiences of parenting in a new sociocultural context. Subsequently, one collective session was held in each of the two schools involved—thus, two group meetings in total—using the *Tree of Life* as a narrative and symbolic experience to facilitate shared reflection, mutual recognition, and the co-construction of meaning within the group.

Importantly, these narrative methodologies were not employed as mere data collection instruments, but as dialogical and participatory practices that create spaces for reflection, recognition, and self-authorship. They are particularly meaningful for participants whose experiences are often rendered invisible or fragmented by systems of migration, marginalization, and institutional silence—contexts within which these practices can foster voice, connection and agency.

Maps of history. At first, the Map of History was introduced as an individual narrative practice (Denborough, 2008; Veronese et al., 2021), carried out in one-on-one sessions between each participant and the researcher. Conceived as a preparatory step toward the collective work of the Tree of Life, this activity offered migrant parents a personal space in which to begin exploring their life trajectories in relation to both time and place—two dimensions that are deeply intertwined in the experience of those who have crossed borders, navigated multiple systems, and re-rooted their lives in new contexts. Rather than simply constructing a timeline, participants were invited to locate their

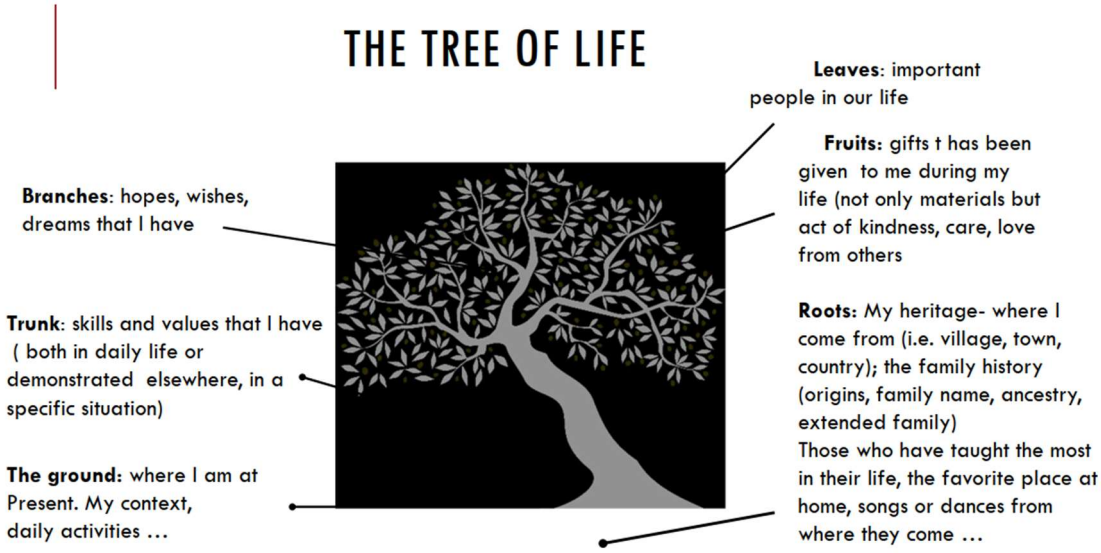
personal histories geographically, by mapping significant events directly onto a physical map. This spatial mapping allowed them to connect life events—such as birth, childhood, migration, family separation, work, education, or encounters with institutions—to specific locations: hometowns, border crossings, cities of transit, or sites of arrival and belonging. Through this process, each participant created a living cartography of memory and movement, rendering visible the complexity of their journeys across lands, roles, and identities. This spatialized narrative work held particular emotional resonance. For many, tracing their movements on a map made tangible the layered realities of uprooting and replanting—of having to negotiate belonging in unfamiliar places while maintaining ties to distant geographies. The timeline, then, was not linear nor fixed; it unfolded in relation to the person's emotional geography, allowing them to move back and forth in time, following memories that emerged through place rather than chronology. The sessions were deliberately flexible and participant-led, offering a protected, relational space where stories could surface organically. While the map served as a visual and structural anchor, the narration itself was open-ended, shaped by each parent's sense of what mattered and how they wanted to be remembered. Importantly, this individual and grounded work laid the foundation for the collective narrative practice that would follow in the Tree of Life. By first anchoring their stories in time and space through the *Map of History*, participants were invited to situate their experiences within broader personal, familial, and migratory trajectories. This process often fostered a greater sense of narrative agency and emotional readiness, enabling some parents to enter the collective *Tree of Life* sessions not only with stories to tell, but with a clearer awareness of their own position—geographical, historical, and symbolic—in relation to others. While this experience unfolded differently for each participant, the individual work provided a foundation from which shared reflection and mutual recognition could emerge within the group setting. The Map of History, in this way, acted as a bridge between individual reflection and shared storytelling, preparing the ground for a collective work (Veronese et al., 2021). In the appendix there are two examples of maps created by parents during the individual narrative sessions, offering a glimpse into the personal geographies they traced as part of this deeply reflective process.

Tree of life. The Tree of Life (Ncube, 2006; Denborough, 2008). was used as the group-based collective activity, through which participants narrated their life stories using the metaphor of a tree—sharing roots, values, dreams, and relationships in a creative and emotionally resonant space that centered both personal strength and collective recognition. The Tree of Life method unfolded as a guided, creative, and relational process in which each participant constructed a personal narrative using the metaphor of a tree. This metaphor did not serve merely as a symbolic frame, but as a structured pathway that gently supported the emergence of stories, emotions, and meanings often silenced or overlooked in dominant discourses about migration and parenting. The process began with

each participant drawing their own Tree of Life. Each part of the tree represented a distinct facet of the individual's identity, offering a visual and reflective anchor for storytelling (Figure 7). The drawing started from the roots, inviting participants to reflect on their origins, both geographically and culturally, as well as the relational foundations that have shaped their lives. For istance, this part may include stories about their place of birth, languages spoken, family traditions, ancestors, and early memories that shaped their sense of identity. For many, this part of the process reconnected them with sources of pride, cultural continuity, and emotional grounding, offering an opportunity to affirm aspects of their heritage often rendered invisible in their current lives. From the roots, the conversation moved to the ground, representing participants' current daily life—the routines, activities, challenges, and concrete conditions of caregiving and survival in the present. It gave space to the complexities of everyday life and to the multiple roles parents juggle while trying to build a sense of belonging in a new and sometimes unwelcoming context.

Figure 7

The three of life



The trunk served as a place for participants to articulate their inner strengths, personal values, and skills—the things that help them "stay upright." Through the trunk, participants were invited to reflect on and name the skills, values, and personal qualities that sustain them in their everyday lives and relationships. The trunk represents the strengths and resources that support individuals as they face challenges and continue to grow, connecting personal histories to the ways they act and care within their present contexts. The branches extended into the future, making space for participants to articulate their dreams, hopes, and aspirations. The branches represented the participants' visions for

the future, offering space to name their hopes, dreams, and aspirations and symbolize the directions in which people wish their lives to grow—what they look forward to, wish for, or imagine for themselves and their families. This part of the process invited participants to project beyond the present moment, connecting personal growth with future possibilities and relational continuity. The leaves were moments of emotional connection, as participants were invited to identify important people in their lives—past or present—who have had an impact on them. This could include family members, mentors, educators, friends, or even people they had lost along the way. It was a space to honor relationships and build continuity across time and space. Finally, the fruits represented the gifts that participants considered meaningful in their lives—whether material or immaterial. Fruits symbolize what individuals have received from others or from their own experiences: gestures of care, teachings, material support, cultural practices, or personal insights that continue to nurture them in the present. This part of the exercise invited participants to recognize and honour these gifts as forms of knowledge and connection that sustain their everyday lives and that they may wish to pass on to others, including their children and communities.

Examples of trees drawn by different parents during this phase of the activity are provided in the appendix.

Throughout each stage of the process, conversations were intentionally open-ended, respectful, and attuned to each participant's own rhythm and comfort. As previously noted, the Tree of Life functioned not merely as a storytelling technique but as a *dialogical space of recognition and re-authoring* (Denborough, 2018). It invited participants to craft narratives that foregrounded not only the hardships they had faced but also the strength, dignity, and care that sustained them—transforming a therapeutic methodology into a politically and relationally meaningful act of self-definition. Rooted in the participatory and community-based tradition developed by the Dulwich Centre (Denborough, 2008), the Tree of Life thus operated as both a narrative and collective practice, enabling participants to reclaim authorship over their experiences and to weave individual stories into a shared fabric of resilience and belonging.

Indeed, while each parent initially constructed their own tree by his own the method was designed to move beyond the individual dimension and generate shared spaces of meaning, recognition, and solidarity. After each participant had completed their tree—representing roots, ground, trunk, branches, leaves, and fruits—the process evolved into a collective phase, where individual trees were brought together to form a forest. This metaphorical forest represented the group's collective presence, diversity, and strength. It became a space in which participants could share their trees with one another, not in the form of formal presentations, but through intimate acts of storytelling, listening, and mutual acknowledgment.

The sharing of the trees was a powerful moment of relational and symbolic visibility. Parents were invited to speak about aspects of their trees they felt comfortable sharing—memories, dreams, values, people who mattered. In doing so, they positioned themselves not as isolated subjects, but as members of a community with shared experiences, emotional depth, and cultural richness. This moment also allowed for new forms of recognition among participants, where similarities and differences could coexist without hierarchy or erasure.

Following the creation of the forest, a critical moment of reflection was introduced: the storm. The storm represents the difficulties, disruptions, and struggles participants had faced along their paths. Rather than framing these experiences as personal failure or deficit, the storm was discussed as something external that had impacted the tree, but not destroyed it. Participants reflected on how their trees had survived and defend themselves from these storms—what protected them, what resources they had drawn upon, and what support they wished they had.

This metaphorical reflection allowed for a collective and symbolic reworking of vulnerability, acknowledging pain and injustice while also reinforcing individual and group resilience and resistance. The forest thus became not only a narrative archive of lived experiences, but also a shared landscape of resistance, care, and hope.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection was intentionally dialogic and relational, grounded in a feminist and narrative epistemology that prioritized presence, reciprocity, and co-agency (Brown et al., 2023). For the individual practice guided by *Maps of History*, the sessions were held in times and spaces carefully negotiated with each participant—sometimes within the school premises, other times in more private or familiar environments, depending on their preferences and comfort. The *Tree of life* sessions, in accordance with the parents and the schools involved, took place within the two municipal schools, integrating into the rhythms of everyday educational life and fostering a sense of shared ownership over the space.

All narrative sessions—both individual and collective—were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The corpus of written materials included these transcripts, along with participants' contributions to the *Map of History* and *Tree of Life* narrative practices.

As in the previous study (Chapter 12), Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) was employed, following a six-phase, iterative process. This approach facilitated the interpretive construction of themes grounded in participants' narratives, with the researcher playing an active role in meaning-making through ongoing critical reflexivity. Throughout the analytic process, detailed field notes were taken after each individual session and following the collective

narrative workshop. These notes captured contextual details, non-verbal cues, reflections on relational dynamics, and emerging insights, thereby enriching the depth and nuance of interpretation.

Grounded in a narrative epistemology (White, 2007), this analytic process acknowledged the situated and co-constructed nature of meaning, positioning each participant's story within broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts. The analysis was inductive and data-driven, fully consistent with the study's narrative and participatory orientation, and was supported by NVivo 12 software for the organization and coding of qualitative data (Lambert, 2019; Veronese et al., 2020b).

The adoption of RTA represented both a methodological and epistemological choice, reflecting the study's commitment to a narrative, participatory, and critically informed framework. In accordance with Braun and Clarke's perspective, this approach rejects the assumption that themes simply "emerge" from the data; instead, it recognizes them as actively constructed through the researcher's interpretive engagement with participants' accounts.

13. 4 Results

Through the application of RTA to the written narratives shared by migrant parents, two overarching thematic dimensions emerged. The first, *"The weight of migration: borders, burdens and daily battles,"* encompasses the lived challenges of moving— including trauma, systemic exclusion, loss of recognition, and profound solitude. These experiences unfold across multiple sub-themes, from the lingering effects of past conflict to the complexities of bilingualism and the emotional toll of being tolerated but not fully welcomed. The second, "*Holding continuity through migration*" captures how parents with a migration background sustain coherence, moral grounding, and affective stability across shifting contexts of life, work, and parenthood. Rather than viewing migration as rupture alone, their narratives reveal ongoing processes of reconstruction — ways of "holding together" values, relationships, and identities through change. Continuity emerges not as passive preservation of the past, but as an active ethical and emotional practice that enables parents to nurture belonging and purpose for themselves and their children within new environments.

These two themes do not stand in opposition, but in dialogue — the first gives voice to the weight these parents carry, the second to the roots that allow them to endure. They are more than analytical categories; they are fragments of lived experience, carried across borders and folded into every packed lunch, every school form completed, every story whispered at bedtime. They remind us that migration is not only a story of loss, but also one of quiet, enduring strength — not the kind that declares itself, but the kind that remains. Following a detailed description of the two main themes.

The weight of migration: borders, burdens and daily battles

This theme encapsulates the complex, layered challenges experienced by migrant parents as they seek to raise their children within unfamiliar cultural, institutional, and social landscapes. Their daily lives

are shaped by the cumulative weight of multiple, often invisible pressures — including the emotional residues of past trauma, structural barriers to inclusion, interrupted professional and cultural identities, and the profound loneliness of parenting without extended support networks. These challenges are not merely circumstantial; they affect the ways parents see themselves, their children, and their place in society.

While Table 17 presents the sub-themes that compose this broader thematic domain, it is important to emphasize that these categories are not fixed, static, or mutually exclusive. Rather, they are in continuous conversation with one another, emerging and evolving in response to the shifting realities of migration and settlement. Each sub-theme offers a different entry point into understanding the burden of migration, but taken together, they form a dynamic and relational whole — a constellation of lived tensions that highlight the deep complexity of parenting while navigating the migration experience.

Table 17

Themes and sub-themes of *"*The weight of migration: invisible burdens, daily battles*"* as identified through RTA.

Themes	Sub-themes
Traces of an unfinished past	Growing up in war and poverty Hunger as a daily memory Journeys that leave scars
Half-open doors: experiences of exclusion	The veil and prejudice: silent islamophobia Skin color and name as invisible Being a foreigner as an imposed
Suspended identities: lost professional lives	Degrees that don't count Invisible professionals, interrupted dreams
Two languages, two worlds	Preserving the mother tongue between the lines of italian The weight of misunderstanding: when bilingualism is misread
The absent home	Absences that echo: parents, grandparents, family The void of community Missing services, denied knowledge Nature as a sensory memory Place as part of identity
Tolerated, not welcomed	Ignored holidays, invisible traditions Everyday gestures that exclude Languages that divide
Solitude as a condition	Parenting without a family network Absence of others: friends, neighbours, community Single parents, never without responsibility

Traces of an unfinished past. When migrant parents enter a preschool, they often do so

quietly and with a certain reserve. Alongside their children, they bring life histories marked by significant transitions—periods of loss, displacement, and endurance. The preschool setting, characterized by bright colors, structured routines, and playful interactions, stands in contrast to many of the experiences they have lived through before arriving in Italy. For some, entering the school system represents not only a new beginning but also a continuation of complex personal and familial journeys.

One mother described her early years in simple terms: *"We grew up in poverty and under the war. We born from that stress." (P14[7])*

Her words place motherhood within a broader life context shaped by instability and effort.

Another participant, a father, recalled everyday life during his childhood:

> *"Sometimes there was no food. My father was struggling just to bring home a piece of bread at the end of the day… But I was friends with the bakery. They used to give me something to eat—maybe some old bread left over from the day." (P1)*

His account combines memories of scarcity with gestures of support, suggesting how social connections and community relations were interwoven with survival.

Migration stories also reflected the emotional weight of separation and family decisions. One mother explained:

> *"We came here because of my family. Back home, among the women, it was just me and my grandmother. When she passed away, before she died, she told my mother, 'Take her with you—she's the only girl. What will she do here alone?' So that's why I left." (P35)*

Another participant recounted her journey to Italy:

> *"Coming to Italy wasn't easy. People don't tell you the truth about the journey—they just say, 'It's easy, in a week you'll be there.' But it can take months, even years. You cross the sea or the desert not knowing if you'll make it. Many people die on the road because there's no food, no water, and nowhere to get help. Especially for women, it's worse. They pay more, they get sold, forced into things… That's why I always say: if someone wants to come here, let them try with a visa, not that road. I was lucky I came for family, not like others. But still, I carry the weight of that journey, and the pain of leaving everything behind." (P7)*

Accounts such as these highlight the difficulties and risks that can accompany migration processes, as well as the persistence of memories connected to these experiences. Across narratives, the idea of "surviving" emerged in multiple forms—economic, emotional, and relational—continuing to

[7] In order to protect participants' anonymity, the individuals involved were identified using alphanumeric codes (e.g., P1, P2, P3).

influence how parents navigate everyday life, including their encounters with educational settings and institutions.

Half-open doors: experiences of exclusion. Experiences of discrimination emerged as a pervasive theme in the narratives of migrant parents. Beyond the hardships of migration and resettlement, participants described a constant confrontation with rejection — not always explicit but embedded in everyday encounters. As one parent explained, exclusion was often less about overt hostility than about subtle forms of distancing: the looks, the silences, the feeling of not belonging. Discrimination, in this sense, was experienced as an everyday structure, present in schools, workplaces, housing, and even casual conversations.

For some mothers, the veil became both a symbol of identity and a focal point for prejudice. One woman reflected: *"People's ignorance can be painful. From the very beginning, you're not accepted. I went through a lot, especially with the veil. (P14)"*. Her testimony illustrates how a personal choice, tied to dignity and belief, could simultaneously function as a marker of exclusion. Another mother added: *"Even though not all Moroccans wear the veil, I made this choice for myself. What I don't understand is why others can't accept that — especially when I accept you the way you are. (P21)"*. Here, her reasoning appeals to reciprocity and mutual respect, yet her daily reality involved repeated challenges to her selfhood.

Workplaces provided another arena where discrimination was sharply felt. One woman recounted her experience in the food sector: *"Before starting my job in cooking aid, I was doing really well. But then they told me, 'If you want to work, take off the veil.' (P14)"*. The requirement to choose between employment and personal identity was reiterated in her story of being admitted to a prestigious program: *"I passed the test in a prestigious school and was paired with a professional cook… But then they said, 'K., if you take off the veil, you'll be fully accepted.' So I walked away — and honestly, I regret it. (P15)"*. Her words reveal the profound tension between maintaining dignity and securing opportunity, and the lasting regret that such enforced choices can leave.

Housing and labor exploitation were also central to the accounts. A father described the experience of trying to rent an apartment: *"So many times they told us, straight out, they wouldn't give it to us because we're Black… They see your skin, or they hear your name, and that's it. (P17)"*. Another parent emphasized the systemic barriers: *"You need documents they know you can't get… Then to rent, you need a guarantor — but who would do that for you when you're new and already struggling? (P2)"*. These testimonies demonstrate how racism intersects with structural obstacles, exacerbating precarity. The same father connected this discrimination to exploitative labor conditions: *"They see you have family back home depending on you, and they say, 'Do this job or leave. Work sixteen hours for €800 or go.' You accept, because your kids need to eat. But they know that — and they use it*

against you. (P17)". Such accounts illustrate how vulnerability is leveraged within systems of economic exploitation.

Even casual social interactions could become sources of perceived exclusion. One parent recalled: *"I remember someone asking me, 'When are you going back? (P13)'*. Although not intended with hostility, the remark signaled a perception of migrants as temporary outsiders. Another added: *"They don't accept you just because you are foreigner. (P20)"*. These everyday encounters reinforced a sense of conditional belonging, where acceptance remained fragile and incomplete.

Across these stories, dignity emerges as a recurring thread. Whether in choosing to wear the veil, refusing exploitative conditions, or persevering despite rejection, parents consistently emphasized the importance of maintaining integrity. Their voices do not only denounce exclusion; they articulate a plea for empathy and recognition. As one synthesis of these narratives suggests, these parents are not asking for privileges, but for their humanity to be acknowledged — and for their children not to inherit the weight of prejudice tied to skin color, name, or cultural markers.

Suspended identities: lost professional lives. Another recurring theme concerned the loss of professional and educational identity. Migration not only disrupted lives through displacement, but also rendered invisible the qualifications, careers, and expertise that participants had worked for over many years. This form of loss was described as subtle yet enduring — not tied to death or mourning, but to the erasure of recognition.

One woman shared her struggle to have her academic qualifications recognized in Italy: *"In Italy, they tell you your studies aren't valid, that you need a different program, because it's not standardized. (P5)"*. She had invested years in study in Tunisia, completed exams, and graduated, but upon arrival in Italy these achievements no longer held value. She explained further: *"They want to see every subject, every lesson, exactly what you studied in each course—which is something we don't even do in my country. (P9)"*. The bureaucratic demands felt both excessive and foreign. In her case, she managed to move forward only because a former professor supported her by reconstructing syllabi and writing letters: *"But that never happens for others,"* she acknowledged. Her account highlights how rare and fragile such exceptions are, leaving most parents trapped in limbo, unable to translate past learning into present recognition.

The consequences of this invalidation extend beyond the individual to entire families. Another woman recalled with sadness her father's trajectory: *"My father was an engineer, while in Italy was a cleaner. It was so painful for him, and for us. (P10)"*. Her testimony reflects the emotional toll of downward mobility: a man who once designed structures reduced to cleaning them, embodying how dignity is often reshaped into necessity. Such transformations do not go unnoticed by children, who grow up

hearing stories of their parents' past professional lives—educators, doctors, architects—while seeing them occupy low-status or precarious roles in the present. This discrepancy can generate confusion, shame, and silence around aspirations that feel unattainable.

Two languages, two worlds. Language emerged as a central theme in parents' accounts, described not only as a tool for communication but as a vessel of identity and memory. For migrant families, maintaining the home language was framed as an act of continuity across displacement and exile, connecting children to their heritage while also shaping their sense of belonging in the host society.

One mother emphasized this intergenerational dimension: *"Teaching our children our original language is so important—it's part of who we are, part of where we come from. It's how we pass on our culture, our stories, our way of seeing the world. (P24)"*. For her, speaking the mother tongue meant transmitting cultural knowledge and ensuring that children could communicate authentically with grandparents and extended family. Yet she also expressed concern: *"They grow up surrounded by another language, another culture. They speak Italian at school, with their friends, on TV… and little by little, our language becomes something they understand, but don't really speak."* This illustrates the gradual erosion of linguistic competence across generations, a process many parents described as both painful and intimate.

Several participants spoke of the emotional weight of linguistic loss—the fading of accents, idioms, or lullabies, which they likened to something slipping away grain by grain. Parents observed that while their children often understood Arabic, Romanian, Wolof, or Bengali, they increasingly responded in Italian, turning the home language into what one parent described as "a ghost": present but not fully alive.

The process of raising bilingual children also intersected with institutional misunderstandings. One mother recalled her son's early development: *"He mixed Arabic and Italian. At first, we thought it was normal, but at school they said he had a language delay. (P22)"*. She continued: *"Also doctors confirmed this and they prescribed us speech therapy. (P22)"*. Her tone, as she recounted this, shifted from explanation to defense: *"It's really hard, because we knew he was just learning two languages at the same time. We felt guilty — we wondered if we had done wrong to speak to him in our language. (P22)"*. Her experience reflects a broader pattern: bilingualism framed as deficiency rather than resource, leading to feelings of guilt and self-doubt among parents.

This dynamic reveals a clash between professional discourses of assessment and parental practices of cultural preservation. While families saw home language use as an act of love and resistance, institutions sometimes pathologized it. Instead of being praised for raising multilingual children, parents felt scrutinized; their homes and speech marked as sites of "problems" rather than strengths.

At the heart of these narratives lies a profound emotional investment. Parents stressed that language is not just about words, but about transmitting memories, affections, and values. As one mother put it, to speak in the home tongue is to carry the rhythm of a bedtime song, the warmth of a grandmother's phrase, or the scent of a kitchen from back home. When children stop speaking it, parents often ask themselves: will they still carry us with them?

Alongside this sadness was a deeper fear: that as children become fluent in Italian, they might drift not only from the language of origin but also from the histories and relationships it carries. Parents worried that family narratives might split into two—one in Italian, one untranslated, and perhaps forgotten.

Yet these practices of bilingual parenting can also be seen as forms of resilience and resistance. Mixing languages is not evidence of confusion, but of cognitive flexibility and the capacity to "reach across worlds." For parents, insisting on maintaining the home language is a way of preserving identity and empowering children to inhabit multiple cultural spaces simultaneously.

For schools, the challenge lies in shifting from a deficit view to a recognition of bilingualism as a resource. As one parent suggested, reassurance rather than pathologization could transform the experience: *"It's okay. Your child is growing into two worlds. It takes time. (P17)"*. Such an approach would validate parents' efforts and relieve the guilt they often described.

The absent home. Migrant parents often described a form of homesickness that is less physical than emotional: a constant, quiet ache beneath everyday routines. Raising children in a new country meant not only learning a language and navigating school systems, but doing so without the presence of extended family, familiar landscapes, and cultural anchors. Nostalgia emerged as both a burden and a form of continuity—an ongoing reminder of what was absent and of what still mattered deeply.

One mother explained: *"For us, as foreigners, it's hard—because we don't have our family here. (P30)"*. She contrasted her current experience with life back home: *"Back home, grandparents are a big part of a child's life… Here, we do everything alone. (P9)"*. Her recollections highlighted how parenting, once a shared responsibility, had become an isolated endeavor. She remembered even basic tasks as overwhelming: *"Even just to buy bread, I had to wake my baby and carry them with me. (P6)"*. These accounts underscore how the absence of kinship networks transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary, amplifying stress and loneliness.

Another mother captured this same sense of isolation when reflecting on her early years in Italy: *"I cried a lot. I had left my job, I had left the things I loved—my friends, my colleagues… to come to a country where I didn't speak the language and didn't know anyone. (P1)"*. Her husband's frequent absences for work deepened her solitude, replacing community with silence.

For some, isolation was compounded by tragedy. One participant shared the loss of her first child due to an undiagnosed medical complication: *"My blood type is negative, and my husband's is positive… but no one told us what that meant. (P11)"*. She later learned in Sri Lanka that an injection could have prevented the miscarriage: *"That's how our son was born safely."* But the knowledge arrived too late. Reflecting on this, she concluded: *"Between the isolation, the lack of support, and the things you're just expected to figure out alone—it's not easy. (P12)"*. Her testimony illustrates how systemic gaps in health communication intersect with migrant vulnerability, transforming grief into a marker of exclusion.

Nostalgia was also expressed in relation to landscapes rather than people. As one parent stated: *"What I miss the most isn't a person — it's the land. (P14)"*. Another elaborated: *"The trees I grew up with, the smell of the earth after rain, the sound of birds I knew by heart. (P1)"*. These sensory memories reveal how belonging is rooted not only in social relations but also in physical environments. Yet this attachment carried with it the fear of disconnection over time. A mother from Cape Verde reflected: *"The place I come from… it's part of who I am. But I haven't been back in nine years. Maybe it's completely different now. (P26)"*. She added: *"I just want to go back, walk those roads again, and show it to my daughter before it becomes a place I no longer recognize. (P26)"*. Here, nostalgia was not only about absence but about the fear that home itself may vanish or become unrecognizable.

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that nostalgia is not a sign of weakness or retreat. It operates as a form of emotional continuity, enabling parents to preserve identity even as they adapt to new contexts. Yet it is also lonely. Parents described raising children in a language that was not theirs, within systems they were still learning, and in cities where their own stories often went unnoticed. They performed the everyday roles of caregiving—school pick-up, homework, packed lunches—while carrying an invisible longing that had no name in Italian.

Tolerated, not welcomed. For many migrant parents, the most difficult aspect of building new life was not the language, bureaucracy, or economic challenges, but the subtle and steady sense of not being truly wanted. Exclusion was rarely articulated openly; rather, it was conveyed through silences, gestures, and everyday encounters. These small but repeated moments accumulated into a persistent perception of being tolerated but not embraced.

A mother described how this invisibility was felt most strongly around religious holidays: *"As a Muslim, we have two very special days each year. These days are incredibly important to us and to our children. But here in Italy, schools don't close for them. That really hurts. (P33)"*. She explained the challenge of making sense of this absence to her children: *"When they will be older, my kids would ask me, 'Why don't we celebrate Natale or Pasqua like everyone else? (P12)"*. Her only answer was: *"We have our own special days."* Yet the rhythm of life around them—school, work, society—

continued without pause. The effect, she concluded, was painful: *"It's uncomfortable and sad for us. Still, I accept it. But if people respect us, if they let us celebrate and share our traditions—especially for the sake of our children—it makes us happy. (P5)"*. This testimony illustrates the tension between cultural maintenance and integration, forcing families to choose between participation in their traditions and alignment with mainstream schedules.

Such experiences were not confined to the calendar but extended into daily life in public spaces. One woman recalled: *"Every time I sit on the bus, people get up and move away. No words, just looks — and then empty seats."* She paused before adding: *"After a while, it gets under your skin. (P14)"*. The repetition of these small rejections communicated exclusion more effectively than explicit words, producing what she called a "quiet rejection" that lingered long after the moment itself.

Language barriers further deepened these dynamics. A parent explained: *"I can feel their discomfort — like my confusion bothers them. They get impatient, their faces change, and suddenly I'm not just someone learning, I'm a problem. (P10)"*. Her words highlight how linguistic struggle is interpreted not as part of a learning process but as a personal failure, reinforcing marginalization in everyday interactions.

These cumulative experiences create a sense of being present but not fully included—*"like being on the outside of a glass window"*, as one participant described. Yet despite this, parents persisted. They continued to attend school meetings, ride buses, and perform everyday tasks while instilling pride in their children's names and traditions. They spoke of telling stories of Eid, Diwali, or Lunar New Year even when no one asked, of small rituals that sustained belonging in the absence of societal recognition. As one parent put it, what they most desired was simple gestures of inclusion: a educator asking, *"Do you want to share your tradition with the class? (P31)"*, or a stranger choosing to sit beside them on the bus. Inclusion, in this framing, is not only the absence of rejection but the presence of care.

Solitude as a condition. Alongside exclusion, parents frequently described loneliness as a constant feature of parenting in migration. This solitude was shaped not only by physical distance from family but also by the absence of the communal networks that once supported them.

One mother expressed this clearly: *"This is something very important. You don't have your family here — no one helps you. (P34)"*. She repeated the ordinary but telling example: *"Even just to get a piece of bread, you have to take your child out of bed and bring them with you. (P32)"*. In her home country, parenting was embedded in collective rhythms, but in Italy every errand, however small, became a negotiation with solitude.

Another woman reflected on her first years in Italy: *"I cried a lot. I had left my job, I had left the things I loved — my friends, my colleagues — to come to a country where I didn't speak the language and didn't know anyone. (P6)"*. With her husband traveling for work, she described her situation simply: *"I was alone all the time. (P14)"*. Her testimony captures the emotional exhaustion of prolonged isolation.

Single parents spoke of this solitude with particular intensity. One woman explained: *"Raising a child alone is one of the hardest things I've ever done. You have no one to lean on, no one to share the weight with. (P35)"*. She added: *"Every decision, every sleepless night, every tear — they all fall on you. (P34)"*. Even the smallest tasks became overwhelming: *"Even the smallest things, like going to the store, become challenges when you have no one to leave your child with. You're never really off, never really resting. (P9)"*.

These accounts highlight not weakness but resilience forged under pressure. Parents consistently emphasized that what they longed for was not rescue, but companionship and shared responsibility. As one reflected, strength born of necessity carries a cost. What they desired was simply a presence that could reassure them: "*you are not doing this alone" (P7).*

Holding continuity through migration

The analysis revealed that the parental narratives in this study are anchored in a sustained effort to maintain coherence, moral grounding and emotional stability in the face of migration. Rather than framing migration solely as rupture or loss, participants spoke of continuity — the ways in which values, memories and practices of care are carried across borders and re-interpreted within new environments. Throughout these stories, continuity appears as both a resource and a practice of resistance: a way for parents to preserve dignity, transmit belonging to their children, and create avenues of stability in contexts often marked by uncertainty and exclusion. This overarching category, "Holding continuity through migration," unfolds through three interrelated thematic dimensions. First, Everyday strength and moral endurance captures the quiet, persistent forms of strength expressed through love, patience, faith and daily presence — moral energies that sustain parents and their families. Second, Values as living roots across generations describes how ethical principles such as respect, generosity and listening are not preserved as static traditions but are reactivated as living resources that connect parents to their past while guiding their relationships in the present. Third, Re-rooting in the present: ground, work and purpose reflects how parents establish new forms of belonging and coherence through work, community and the everyday acts of parenting (Table 18).

Together, these dimensions illustrate that migrant parents' lives are not defined only by fragmentation or survival. Instead, parenthood emerges as a process of *holding-together*: of transmitting coherence and moral continuity where migration might otherwise create discontinuity. Continuity — moral,

relational and emotional — becomes the connective thread through which parents rebuild belonging and meaning for themselves and their children in the context of migration.

Table 18
Themes and sub-themes of "Holding continuity through migration"

Themes	Sub-themes
Everyday strength and moral endurance	Endurance as care and patience Faith and moral coherence across contexts Kindness as quiet resistance Intergenerational wisdom as guidance
Values as living roots across generations	Continuity through care and teaching Multiplicity and layered identity Respect and coexistence in diversity Listening as an ethical stance
Re-rooting in the present: ground, work, and purpose	Children as anchors of continuity Work as dignity and participation Freedom and peace as moral foundations The new ground as chosen belonging

Everyday Strength and Moral Endurance. Narratives consistently evoked a form of strength that differed from conventional understandings of power. Rather than heroic or exceptional, it was described as quiet, steady, and enacted through care. Everyday gestures — preparing meals after long shifts, showing patience with children's homework, or maintaining faith despite adversity — were seen as acts of endurance and love. "*It feels like a gift*," one mother reflected, "*a spark of courage, a sense of determination*" (P14). Another added, "*You need that inner strength to say, yes, I can do this, I can overcome it*" (P1).

Several participants emphasized that such endurance was not innate but cultivated through necessity and love. "*You learn to be strong because someone depends on you*," explained a mother of two (P17). "*Even when I'm exhausted, I tell myself: I have to smile, because if I give up, everything falls apart*." (P17). For others, this strength was described as a form of quiet resistance against despair:

> *"I don't want my children to see sadness in my eyes all the time. So I cook, I sing, I pray — it helps me to keep going." (P28).*

Faith and spirituality emerged as central sources of coherence across change. For many, religious belief was not only a matter of doctrine but of continuity — a way to stay connected to ancestors and moral traditions. "*That is my root,"* one participant said:

> *"I will never forget where I come from… I choose to live as the Christian I am, because it connects me to who I am and where I come from" (P15).*

Another mother, of Muslim faith, described prayer as a rhythm that kept her centered:

"When everything feels unstable, prayer gives me a place to stand. It reminds me that strength comes from patience and gratitude" (P33).

For a Sri Lankan participant, spirituality was inseparable from care: "*When I pray, I think of my mother. I thank her for teaching me that kindness is also a form of faith"* (P12).

Kindness and patience were also understood as moral forms of resistance. In contexts where difference often provoked rejection, kindness became an intentional stance. "*It's the kindness we share with one another that really matters"* (P11). Similarly, a father explained, "*When your child does something wrong, you don't just ignore it — you guide them*" (P15). Another participant framed patience as an act of quiet defiance*: "They may judge you, but if you answer with calm, you show them another way of being strong"* (P24). A mother who had experienced repeated discrimination in the workplace added:

"When they shout or treat me badly, I remind myself — my children are watching. I want them to see that dignity is not revenge, but respect for yourself" (P19).

These small but steady acts of care were described as ways of planting "*seeds of dignity*" in their children's lives, teaching them that love and respect are stronger than bitterness.

Finally, participants drew on intergenerational wisdom to frame their understanding of endurance. One recalled her mother's lesson:

"Life is always full of ups and downs. But we must keep moving forward with hope and honesty in our hearts" (P22).

Another described resilience through the metaphor of a tree*: "Even if it's cut, it stays alive… It keeps standing. That's how I see life"* (P30). Echoing this, a younger participant reflected: "*My grandmother used to say that roots don't complain — they just keep growing underground. That's what I try to do here"* (P9). Others linked endurance to the act of remembering: "*When I feel weak, I think of my mother walking to the market under the sun every day — that gives me strength" (P26).*

Strength, in these accounts, was not triumph but persistence — the ongoing capacity to keep walking through uncertainty, carrying love and faith as steady companions. It was a moral and relational energy: quiet, embodied, and sustained by the invisible labor of care.

Values as living roots across generations. Across narratives, parents emphasized the centrality of values as the foundation of coherence and identity. Even as they adapted to new cultural and linguistic environments, participants described values not as fixed traditions but as living roots that evolve and travel with them.

"I'm raising my children with the same values and principles that my loved ones taught me — because those are the roots I want to pass on" (P18).

Respect and coexistence were recurrent ethical anchors. "*We respect everyone*," one mother said simply (P33). Another elaborated:

> *"We give our wishes, we show respect — even if we don't celebrate [certain holidays]. If you accept me and share your traditions with respect, then I accept you too. That's how we live in peace"* (P9).

In this framing, respect was not submission but mutual recognition — a way to coexist without losing one's boundaries.

Listening was also described as a moral practice. "*We were taught to listen — not just to respond, but to understand"* (P12). Listening, in this sense, was relational and ethical: a way to acknowledge others' experiences without judgment.

Parents spoke frequently of generosity, solidarity, and loyalty — values learned in childhood and carried into their present lives.

> *"I was taught to help those in need, to never turn my back on someone who is struggling"* (P5). "*We share everything — our food, our time, our home"* (P24).

For many, such practices were remembered as survival ethics developed in contexts of scarcity but now reinterpreted as moral frameworks for community life in Italy.

Multiplicity and layered identity were also viewed as sources of strength. As one Moroccan mother stated:

> *"All over the world we are mixed. In Marocco for example, we are not just Arabs; there are Berbers too. That mix is part of our strength"* (P16).

This plural understanding of identity countered assimilationist pressures, framing belonging as multiple rather than singular.

Through these testimonies, values appear not as inherited codes but as relational practices — continuously reactivated through care, listening, and coexistence. They serve as moral and emotional scaffolds, enabling parents to hold continuity in the midst of change and transmit rootedness to their children.

Re-rooting in the present: ground, work, and purpose. Migration, as described by participants, was rarely a random or purely economic event. It was instead articulated as a purposeful act of re-rooting — an attempt to build stability, dignity, and hope for future generations.

> *"The ground is everything*," one mother said. *"It's where we stand, where we live, where we are today. This is my ground, where I'm shaping my future and the future of my children — to make it beautiful, to give them a good life"* (P7, P14).

Several parents emphasized that finding new ground was not simply about physical settlement, but about earning the right to belong through everyday acts of responsibility. *"When I first arrived, I felt like I was floating,"* one father recalled.

> *"No family, no place to go. But every job, every handshake, every word in this new language — it's like putting down roots, little by little. One day you wake up and realize: this is also home" (P18).*

Children were described as the main reason for movement and the emotional anchor of continuity. As one father summarized:

"*We came here for our children's future. That's what gives meaning to everything else" (P3).*

Another mother reflected more at length:

> *"When I left my country, I felt like I was cutting a part of myself. But when I look at my daughter now — how she speaks Italian, how she laughs with her friends — I see that part of me growing again, in her. It hurts sometimes, but it's also healing. I tell her: you are the reason I keep standing tall, even when I'm tired." (P21)*

Work occupied a central place in these accounts, not only as a source of income but as an ethical act — a way of contributing, belonging, and maintaining self-respect. *"When you arrive here, there's no one,"* said one parent*, "but you work, you stand on your own feet — that's dignity" (P19).*

Others described work as a form of self-reclamation.

> *"Back home I was a teacher, here I clean houses,"* shared one woman*. "At first, I felt ashamed. But then I understood — the value is not in what you do, but in how you do it. I do my job with care. I say to myself: I'm building something honest. My children see that, and they learn that dignity doesn't depend on titles." (P9)*

For many, work was also intertwined with gratitude and moral purpose: *"When I earn money, I don't think only about paying rent,"* said a father. "*I think — this money feeds my children, helps them grow. It's sacred in that way. It's work, but it's also love*." (P26)

Many also associated migration with a quest for peace and freedom. *"My dream is to live my life with serenity and freedom,*" said one father.

> *"Back home, even language was controlled. We couldn't speak our own language. Here, I want my children to speak freely, to live freely"* (P1).

For others, peace was the absence of fear: "*That kind of stress and control makes you dream of peace"* (P20). Another parent recalled the silence of fear:

> *"There were nights when you couldn't sleep, because you didn't know if they would come to your door. That kind of stress and control makes you dream of peace. Here, peace is not big*

things — it's being able to walk, to breathe, to plan your week without fear. That's a blessing I never take for granted." (P20)

For some, re-rooting meant learning to balance the old and the new.

> *"I don't want to forget who I am,"* explained a mother from Peru, "*but I also want to learn how to live here, how to respect this place. So I try to keep both — my language at home, Italian outside. It's not easy, but it makes me feel whole"* (P25).

Another participant used the metaphor of gardening:

> *"You can't just plant an old tree in new soil and expect it to live. You must take care, give it water, give it sun. That's how I see myself here — I'm learning what this ground needs, so my family can grow"* (P17).

This theme reveals that re-rooting in a new land is not a process of replacing one identity with another, but of cultivating purpose in continuity with the past. Through work, faith, and the daily care of their children, parents transform migration from an experience of rupture into a space of grounded reconstruction — an ongoing act of building life with dignity and intention. As one father concluded:

> *"You don't start from zero; you start from the roots you carry inside. The soil may be different, but the roots know what to do — they just need time to hold.*" (P13)

13. 5 Discussion

This study explored the everyday challenges and forms of agency enacted by migrant-background parents of young children (aged 0–6) living in Italy. Through Reflexive Thematic Analysis of participants' written narratives, two overarching thematic dimensions emerged. The first, **"***The weight of migration: borders, burdens, and daily battles,"* captures the lived difficulties of displacement — trauma, systemic exclusion, and the emotional strain of navigating life in a society where recognition and belonging are not guaranteed. The second, **"***Holding continuity through migration"* reflects how parents sustain coherence, moral grounding, and affective stability across shifting contexts of life, work, and parenthood. In these accounts, migration is not only a story of rupture but also one of reconstruction — of *holding together* values, relationships, and identities through change. These two dimensions exist in dialogue rather than contrast: the first gives voice to the weight parents carry, the second to the roots that allow them to endure. Together, they illuminate how migrant parents negotiate vulnerability and resilience, continuity and fragmentation, in their efforts to nurture belonging for themselves and their children.

The findings resonate with the broader international literature. In their systematic review of 138 qualitative studies, Merry et al. (2017) identify three interrelated dynamics that characterize migrant parenthood: hardship and loss, resilience, and transnational living. Consistent with this framework, the parents in this study described resettlement difficulties, discrimination, and the constant threat of

instability, which often constrained their ability to parent as they would wish. Yet, they also mobilized resilience through cultural continuity, faith, and community ties, maintaining transnational connections and moral coherence across borders. Viewed through this lens, their experiences within Italian early childhood settings appear not as isolated phenomena, but as part of a broader global pattern in which parenthood under precarious migration is continually negotiated between trauma and endurance, exclusion and belonging (Merry et al., 2017; Rousou et al., 2025).

The following sections discuss each of these thematic dimensions in depth.

The weight of migration: borders, burdens, and daily battles

The narratives of migrant parents reveal a complex interplay of trauma, discrimination, loss, and resilience that profoundly shapes their experiences of motherhood and fatherhood. Parenting in migration is not only about rebuilding everyday life but also about confronting the persistent traces of war, poverty, and displacement. These experiences are not confined to the past—they resurface, often subtly, when parents engage with schools and communities where their children are growing up (Isakov & Markovic, 2024; Rousou et al., 2025).

Institutions, and schools in particular, emerge as deeply ambivalent spaces. They act simultaneously as gateways to rights and belonging and as sites where vulnerability and exclusion are reproduced. For children, schools often represent safety, stability, and hope; for parents, they evoke mixed emotions—spaces of aspiration that also reactivate memories of loss. Many parents interpret school interactions through the lens of their own interrupted educational histories, which intensifies the emotional weight of their children's schooling. At the same time, they encounter subtle forms of everyday discrimination—glances, silences, or omissions—that communicate conditional acceptance and reinforce their sense of being "present but never fully included" (Rousou et al., 2025).

This ambivalence extends to institutions more broadly. Systems meant to protect—such as welfare services, housing programs, and asylum procedures—often generate new forms of precarity. Overcrowded camps, unstable housing, and lengthy bureaucratic processes suspend families in prolonged uncertainty, where stability remains out of reach. Identities are reduced to administrative categories—"refugee," "asylum seeker," "economic migrant"—that flatten complex life stories and obscure the dignity of parents' caregiving roles. This collapse of recognition fosters a deep sense of parental powerlessness.

Comparable findings have been observed across contexts. Research in Portugal shows how schools function both as enablers and as reproducers of inequality, granting access to education while reinforcing exclusionary hierarchies (Ribeiro et al., 2016). Ethnographic work with Iranian refugee families in Finland similarly documents how migration disrupts intergenerational relations, leaving parents dependent on their children's linguistic and social mediation (Karimi, 2019). Such evidence

underscores that institutional encounters are lived as arenas of contradiction—where welcome and exclusion, protection and vulnerability, coexist. These contradictions define parents' everyday negotiations and reveal the fragile balance between disempowerment and hope.

Discrimination, though rarely explicit, is pervasive. It manifests through everyday gestures that constantly remind families of their conditional belonging. Studies show that such experiences heighten psychological distress, producing anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal among parents, and fear or identity concealment among children (Jolie et al., 2021). Mixed-status families face particular precarity: some parents report preparing their children for potential separation due to deportation risks. Discrimination thus emerges not only as interpersonal but also as structural, undermining parental authority and children's emotional security.

These experiences of exclusion are further compounded by processes of racialization and Islamophobia, which shape how migrant parents—and particularly mothers—are perceived and treated within everyday institutional life. Visibility itself often becomes a source of vulnerability: Muslim mothers, for instance, describe how wearing a headscarf attracts unwanted attention or moral judgment, while Black mothers recount being denied housing or facing suspicion in their search for employment or childcare. Such encounters reveal that discrimination is not only cultural but deeply embodied and structural, operating through racialized hierarchies that define who is seen as trustworthy, competent, or "deserving" of care.

As critical migration scholars note, these dynamics reflect intersecting regimes of race, gender, and religion, where motherhood becomes a site of both surveillance and moral scrutiny (Crenshaw, 1993; Essed, 1991; El-Tayeb, 2011; Selod, 2015). The "good migrant mother" is expected to conform to dominant norms of whiteness and secular femininity, while deviations—whether in dress, faith, or language—are marked as signs of cultural deficit or non-belonging. Within schools, these processes are reproduced through what has been called the whitening of secularism—a model in which Christian holidays and moral codes are treated as neutral, while other religious expressions must be negotiated or justified (Abu El-Haj, 2020). This silencing of alternative cultural and religious frameworks constitutes a form of *epistemic violence*—or, more precisely, *epistemicide* (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Walsh, 2018)—through which specific ways of knowing, believing, and educating are rendered invisible, inferior, or illegitimate within dominant epistemological regimes. Rather than fostering pluralism, institutional discourses of inclusion often reproduce hierarchies of knowledge and value, demanding assimilation into a presumed universal norm that is, in fact, culturally and racially situated. What is presented as neutrality thus becomes a mechanism of erasure: inclusion operates not through dialogue, but through the quiet absorption of difference into dominant expectations of civility, respectability, and silence. Within such dynamics, migrant parents are invited

to participate only to the extent that they conform, while their epistemic, moral, and spiritual frameworks are systematically marginalized. The outcome is a subtle yet pervasive form of *everyday bordering*, where access to trust, housing, and recognition is unevenly distributed along racialized and religious lines—sustaining the very inequalities that inclusion discourses claim to redress.

In this precarious terrain, ordinary decisions—what language to speak, what food to send to school, how a child dresses or interacts—become loaded with social meaning. Parents navigate constant trade-offs between preserving cultural integrity and ensuring social acceptance. Many suppress aspects of their heritage to avoid stigma or to prevent their children from being labelled "unintegrated." As Rytter (2019) notes, this reflects the structural impossibility of integration: a system in which migrants are expected to adapt indefinitely while never being recognized as full participants. Parents thus inhabit a dual vulnerability—citizens perpetually under scrutiny and caregivers whose educational voices are easily dismissed.

Migration also disrupts professional identities. Many parents once held skilled or respected positions in their countries of origin—engineers, teachers, or healthcare workers—but face de-skilling and exclusion upon arrival (Zikic & Richardson, 2016; Cormoș, 2022). The loss of professional recognition erodes self-esteem and alters family dynamics, as children witness a dissonance between who their parents "were" and who they have become. This intergenerational dissonance can produce silence, shame, or grief, as parents struggle to reconcile dignity with necessity.

Language further amplifies these tensions. Parents often regard their mother tongues as vital to identity and memory, yet they experience their gradual loss as painful. Within families, heritage languages serve as emotional anchors; within institutions, they are often pathologized as obstacles to learning. This reflects a deficit-oriented approach that interprets bilingualism as a developmental risk rather than a cognitive and cultural resource (Soto-Boykin et al., 2021; Higby et al., 2023). Recent scholarship challenges this paradigm, highlighting the benefits of multilingualism and translanguaging as tools for learning and belonging (De Jong et al., 2019). When schools embrace these perspectives, bilingualism becomes a site of resilience—validating parental efforts at cultural preservation and restoring their sense of authority.

Finally, nostalgia weaves through many accounts—not as mere longing for distant places but as a yearning for the networks of care that once sustained family life. In the absence of extended kin, the burden of parenting intensifies, as tasks once shared across generations fall on individual shoulders. Everyday acts—waiting for a bus, attending a school meeting, buying bread—become reminders of solitude. Yet within this solitude, parents continue to nurture connection through memory, faith, and language, transforming nostalgia from a source of loss into a quiet practice of endurance.

These experiences reveal that the consequences of migration extend far beyond material hardship or institutional exclusion. Beneath the visible struggles lies a quieter, enduring work of sustaining life—what many parents described, implicitly or explicitly, as the effort to "keep going." It is here that the notion of surviving becomes central, capturing the moral, emotional, and relational labor through which families hold themselves together amid instability and constraint. While the notion of resilience often highlights adaptation and strength, it can also risk simplifying or depoliticizing suffering—transforming structural hardship into individual success stories. In contrast, surviving, as it emerged from parents' accounts, evokes something more grounded and relational: the everyday labor of holding life together in the face of uncertainty. From this perspective, survival is not the opposite of agency but one of its most tangible forms—an active, creative, and ethical effort to remain present, to care, and to protect one's children and dignity within constraining systems (Nguyen-Gillham et al., 2008; Veronese et al., 2021; Hagler et al., 2025; Muluneh et al., 2025).

Across narratives, surviving appeared in multiple, intersecting dimensions—economic, emotional, and relational—continuing to shape how parents navigated daily life in Italy and their encounters with educational institutions. Survival was not confined to the past of migration but emerged as a moral and relational practice enacted through care, adaptability, and responsibility. Parents described sustaining hope and dignity amid instability, finding work, feeding their children, and maintaining family unity despite precarity and systemic barriers. These accounts echo Italian and European studies showing that migrant families mobilize flexible survival strategies—balancing work, caregiving, and transnational obligations—while transforming endurance into an ethical practice of care and persistence (Santero & Naldini, 2020; Della Puppa, 2018; Belgiojoso & Terzera, 2018; Deng, 2024). For many, surviving was not merely enduring adversity but redefining parenthood through moral agency: the ability to hold families together, act with integrity, and preserve children's sense of belonging within constrained conditions (Buonomo et al., 2024; Maestri & Mantovan, 2025).

This moral dimension of survival became particularly visible in moments when institutional expectations clashed with personal convictions. One of the most significant examples concerned decisions around religious and cultural celebrations. Mothers, in particular, spoke of the emotional burden of choosing "which exclusion" their children would experience—whether to keep them home to honor a religious holiday and thus miss school, or to send them to school and forgo the celebration. As one participant expressed, "You want your child to belong, to be part of everything—but also not to forget who they are." What may appear as a simple logistical decision reveals, in this context, a profound ethical dilemma—between belonging and continuity, visibility and faithfulness to one's values.

Research on inclusion in Italian schools confirms that institutional calendars and pedagogical routines often mirror dominant cultural and religious frameworks, leaving little room for plural temporalities or traditions (Natalini, 2024; Biasutti & Concina, 2021; Bonizzoni et al., 2016). These structures compel migrant parents—especially mothers—to navigate complex emotional labor, protecting their children's cultural identities while ensuring their participation and safety within the school system. As recent studies show, such dilemmas reflect a broader asymmetry in how educational institutions engage with diversity: families are expected to adapt to dominant norms, while institutions rarely reciprocate by accommodating cultural plurality (Onsès-Segarra et al., 2023; Dusi & González-Falcón, 2018).

What emerges, therefore, is a form of *moral negotiation* (Santero & Naldini, 2020), in which everyday decisions about participation, celebration, or language become deeply political acts—subtle assertions of dignity, continuity, and belonging in contexts that often render difference invisible. These moments reveal the quiet but persistent structural pressures that shape migrant family life. School calendars, pedagogical routines, and institutional rhythms are far from neutral; they embody dominant cultural and religious assumptions that define what counts as "normal." Within such frameworks, parents must continually negotiate whose time, traditions, and beliefs are recognized. The decision of "which exclusion" to accept is thus not simply personal—it is political, a quiet testament to whose presence is acknowledged and whose must remain at the margins.

Holding continuity through migration

This thematic dimension illustrates how migrant parents sustain moral, emotional, and relational coherence across the disruptions of migration. Rather than depicting migration solely as rupture or loss, parents frame continuity as a dynamic, ethical practice—an ongoing effort to "hold together" what movement threatens to fragment. Continuity, in this sense, is not passive preservation but active reconstruction: a moral stance through which parents reweave values, relationships, and belonging across changing contexts of life, work, and parenthood. This perspective aligns with recent research emphasizing that continuity in migrant families is not about maintaining static traditions but about the moral and affective work of reconstruction—transforming care, language, and faith into tools of resistance and coherence (Merry et al., 2017; Thomas & Smith-Morris, 2020; Garabiles et al., 2017). Within this space, strength takes a quiet and relational form. Parents describe endurance not through heroic or exceptional acts but through the constancy of care, patience, and faith in daily life. These gestures—providing for children, maintaining routines, showing kindness despite adversity—reflect what Woods-Jaeger et al. (2018) and Focht-Birkerts & Beardslee (2000) define as relational resilience: the capacity to generate stability and meaning through moral consistency. Similar to the forms of "resilient moves" identified among asylum-seeking families in Europe (Van Acker et al.,

2022), such endurance is not resignation but a moral form of resistance, transforming daily care into ethical presence and preserving dignity in contexts of uncertainty. Faith, spirituality, and transnational social ties often act as threads of coherence, linking parents to ancestral values that persist beyond geography and offering emotional grounding when external systems remain fragile (Thomas & Smith-Morris, 2020; Garabiles et al., 2017). In this way, endurance becomes not only emotional survival but also an ethical practice of staying connected—to memory, to community, and to self.

At the heart of this continuity lies the transmission of values across generations. Respect, generosity, listening, and coexistence emerge as "living roots" that evolve through movement and adaptation. Families do not simply reproduce traditions; they renegotiate them through flexible and context-sensitive practices, balancing their moral responsibilities with the demands of integration (Ayika et al., 2018; Glebova et al., 2024; Gréen & Melander, 2018). Research on transnational family dynamics highlights how this intergenerational transmission often occurs through everyday gestures—speaking a heritage language, observing religious rituals, or maintaining contact with relatives abroad—that embody moral continuity rather than nostalgia (Merla, 2015; Renzaho et al., 2017). Such practices illustrate that values are not only inherited but continually reinterpreted as parents navigate belonging in multicultural environments. In this sense, moral agency becomes a daily exercise of care and persistence, bridging past and present, self and community.

Continuity also unfolds through processes of re-rooting in the present. Migration is portrayed less as departure than as deliberate reconstruction—a way of creating new forms of stability, dignity, and purpose for future generations. Work, caregiving, and children's education are central to this moral project, functioning as anchors of belonging and self-worth. The literature confirms that, for many migrant families, employment and caregiving are experienced as ethical practices, not only as strategies for survival but as forms of participation and recognition within the host society (Gréen & Melander, 2018; Carling, 2024; Gillespie & Mulder, 2020). This moral framing of labor and care resonates with studies showing that migration decisions themselves are often guided by relational ethics—a sense of duty and protection toward one's children that redefines mobility as an act of care rather than pure necessity (Chowdhury, 2025; Hoang & Yeoh, 2012). Likewise, the search for peace and freedom—understood as the right to live safely, autonomously, and with dignity—emerges as a recurrent moral horizon across studies and narratives (Castelli, 2018; Barglowski, 2021).

Taken together, these dynamics reveal continuity as an active and moral form of resistance. Parents do not simply adapt to new contexts—they reconstruct coherence by reactivating ethical frameworks that allow them to live meaningfully within instability. This aligns with a growing body of research viewing resilience and resistance as intertwined processes rooted in care, cultural memory, and relational ethics (Wang et al., 2022; Glebova et al., 2024; Merry et al., 2017). Through faith, work,

and everyday acts of love, migrant parents transform migration from an experience of rupture into a moral project of rebuilding. Parenthood itself becomes a site of ethical agency and quiet defiance—a daily affirmation that life, dignity, and meaning can continue across borders, sustained by the moral continuity that families create and renew through care.

13. 6 Implications

The findings of this study invite us to move beyond the personal struggles of individual families and toward a systemic rethinking of early childhood education as a relational, political, and epistemic space. Migrant parents do not arrive as passive recipients of services but as knowledge-holders, carriers of what Gobodo-Madikizela (2020) calls a *moral inheritance*: values, practices, and strengths forged in contexts of displacement, resilience, and survival. Yet educational institutions too often frame these families as "lacking" or "in need," rather than as stewards of invisible cultural wealth. The challenge, therefore, is not how schools can "integrate" migrants into pre-existing structures, but how they can open themselves to plural ways of knowing, relating, and educating (Salazar, 2013; Stevenson & Beck, 2016).

Recognition as pedagogy and repair

This reorientation aligns with Fanon's (1961) insistence that education must be decolonized by placing silenced histories at the center of knowledge production. Freire (1970) similarly warns against the "banking model" of education, where learners and families are treated as empty vessels to be filled. Recognition, in this sense, means restoring agency by co-creating knowledge, affirming migrant (and not migrant) parents and children not as passive recipients but as contributors to the educational project. Spivak's (1988) famous question — *Can the subaltern speak?* — resonates strongly here. If schools "listen" to migrants only in bureaucratic terms, or translate their experiences solely into narratives of deficiency, then they are not truly listening. Recognition requires epistemic humility: the willingness to engage with voices that do not fit neatly into dominant categories, and to embrace the ambiguity and flux that Bhabha (2004) describes as the *third space* of identity.

At the same time, Mbembe (2019) warns us against forms of recognition that reduce migrants to their vulnerability. When schools recognize families only through suffering, they risk reproducing necropolitical logics that see migrants as lives to be managed rather than voices to be heard. Instead, recognition must affirm migrants as creative, resilient, and political agents. This resonates with Said's (1978) critique of the Orientalist gaze, which has long portrayed the "Other" as deficient, passive, or dependent. In contrast, Anzaldúa's (1987) notion of *mestiza consciousness* offers a powerful alternative: hybridity not as fragmentation, but as a fuller, more complex form of wholeness.

Taken together, these perspectives push us to imagine recognition not as benevolent inclusion or symbolic visibility, but as a radical and reparative practice. It is a way of redefining education itself

— not as the transmission of neutral knowledge, but as justice enacted in daily encounters, where difference is not merely accommodated but allowed to transform the very meaning of belonging and learning.

Trust, community, and epistemic hospitality

Alongside recognition, the question of trust emerges as equally central. For many migrant parents, trust in institutions has been deeply fractured — not by personal disposition, but by histories of forced displacement, exploitation, or systemic violence. In such contexts, what might appear as absence from school meetings or limited engagement is often not apathy but a form of relational self-defense, a way of protecting oneself from further harm (West-Olatunji, 2011). Schools that assume disengagement misread these silences. Trust, instead, must be slowly rebuilt through consistent presence, respectful listening, and pedagogical practices that honor not only speech but also silence as meaningful communication.

Ezeanya-Esiobu (2019) reminds us that in many Indigenous African epistemologies, education is never an isolated or technical activity but an inherently relational, communal, and spiritual process. Within these frameworks, social and community healing does not take place through individual resilience or bureaucratic compliance but through reciprocity, presence, and collective care. This vision reframes the role of the school: not a detached institution that assesses and integrates, but a living part of the community, accountable to the ethical and relational bonds that sustain families.

Ubuntu philosophy gives this insight a sharper edge. Rooted in Bantu traditions, Ubuntu affirms that "*I am because we are*" (Letseka, 2011). It challenges the Western liberal ideal of the autonomous individual and calls schools to embrace responsibility as relational rather than competitive. In an Ubuntu-informed pedagogy, educators, families, and children co-construct trust by embodying mutual care, solidarity, and accountability. Educational success is thus measured not by individual advancement alone but by the flourishing of the collective.

These principles are exemplified by initiatives such as *Together for Mental Health* and the documentary *Harmoni: Healing Together* (Movie-ment.org, 2022). Although focused on mental health, these participatory projects offer critical insights for education, showing how storytelling, ritual, embodied practices, and intergenerational memory can serve as culturally grounded pathways for both personal and communal resilience. Their ethnographic and dialogical methods illustrate what a critically intercultural education might look like in practice: one that values epistemic plurality, challenges Eurocentric and bureaucratic paradigms, and recognizes the knowledge systems and cosmologies that migrant families bring as integral—not peripheral—to the educational experience (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019).

Chávez-Dueñas and Adames (2019) further expand this horizon with their concept of *healing-centered engagement*. Trust, in this view, is not about therapeutic closure or psychological adjustment but about civic recognition: affirming cultural memory, naming histories of violence, and restoring dignity in conditions of precarity. Similarly, Zembylas (2022) cautions that trauma must not be reduced to an individual pathology. In migratory and postcolonial contexts, trauma is a historical and collective condition, and schools cannot foster trust without confronting their own entanglement in colonial residues and systemic exclusions.

Taken together, these perspectives make clear that trust is not a precondition for inclusion — something demanded from parents before they can belong. Rather, trust is the fragile and precious outcome of educational practices that are relational, historically conscious, and ethically grounded. Schools that embrace this vision become not just sites of learning but civic arenas of repair, where wounded trust is slowly reconstituted through presence, reciprocity, and the shared work of restoring humanity to those too often rendered invisible.

Language, Identity, and Justice

One of the most visible terrains of misrecognition in early childhood education is language. Children who take longer to speak the dominant language, who shift fluidly between codes, or who rely on gesture and silence, are too often pathologized. Their practices are read through a deficit lens, interpreted as delay, confusion, or lack. Yet research demonstrates the opposite: bilingualism and translanguaging are not signs of disorder but dynamic resources, forming a unitary linguistic repertoire that enriches both cognition and identity (García, 2009; García & Wei, 2014). When schools insist on monolingual norms, they not only misinterpret children's communicative practices but also enact what Fricker (2007) terms *epistemic injustice* — discrediting certain ways of knowing simply because they do not conform to dominant expectations. At its most extreme, this silencing becomes what Santos (2015) calls *epistemicide*: the erasure of entire knowledge systems that sustain cultural memory and identity.

Reversing this pattern requires more than linguistic accommodation; it calls for what Santos (2014) names *epistemic hospitality*: classrooms where children are invited to draw freely on their full repertoires — linguistic, cultural, gestural, visual — without fear of correction or erasure. Such hospitality demands a profound pedagogical shift: from rigid monolingual models to practices that embrace plurality, ambiguity, and multimodality as constitutive of learning.

Critical scholarship helps illuminate what this means in practice. Austin (2025) cautions against *performative signage* — superficial gestures of inclusion, such as token translations or decorative displays, that mask deeper exclusions and fail to challenge epistemic hierarchies. In contrast, Bucholtz, Casillas, and Lee (2018) highlight the *affective agency* of translanguaging: the ways

multilingual youth use their shifting repertoires not merely to communicate but to craft belonging, negotiate identities, and resist marginalization. Rigney and Rinaldi (2023), drawing from Reggio Emilia pedagogy in postcolonial contexts, push this further by calling for an expanded communicative frame in which silence, gesture, and visual narratives are treated as equally valid forms of meaning-making. This pedagogy of relational listening affirms children not as incomplete speakers but as legitimate knowledge-holders from the very beginning.

Affirming bilingualism, then, is not simply a matter of educational technique; it is a political and ethical act. To recognize multiple modalities of expression — including those used by children with communicative, cognitive, or sensory differences — is to resist the neoliberal reduction of language to efficiency, productivity, or standardized performance. It disrupts the homogenizing logic of schooling, which privileges only certain voices and forms of speech, and instead affirms every child's right to narrate, gesture, remain silent, or improvise in ways that reflect their embodied and cultural realities. In this vision, multilingualism is not a problem to be fixed but a horizon of justice: an opening to reimagine education as a space where difference is not merely managed but generatively embraced.

Migrant families as carriers of knowledge

Migrant families are too often positioned in public discourse as beneficiaries of integration, framed primarily in terms of need, vulnerability, or cultural deficit. Yet this framing obscures a deeper reality: they carry with them rich ethical traditions, pedagogical practices, and forms of knowledge that have been forged through histories of struggle, resilience, and care. As Gobodo-Madikizela (2003) argues in her reflections on post-trauma ethics, survivors of violence are not merely broken subjects but *moral witnesses* — bearers of relational wisdom grounded in practices of solidarity, interdependence, and spiritual depth. These forms of embodied knowledge, often invisible to formal institutions, can profoundly enrich school life if they are acknowledged and engaged.

Walsh (2005) describes such perspectives as *insurgent knowledges*: ways of knowing that emerge from the margins and carry within them the potential to unsettle dominant educational paradigms. Far from being supplementary "cultural differences" to be accommodated, these knowledges are epistemic contributions that demand schools open themselves to pluriversal forms of education — modes of learning that do not seek to homogenize but instead thrive on multiplicity and relationality. Seen through this lens, migrant families are not obstacles to overcome, nor passive recipients of institutional benevolence. They are active carriers of knowledge, ethical agents whose everyday practices — from storytelling and sibling care to communal responsibility and spiritual orientation — offer alternative pedagogical resources. To welcome these contributions requires moving beyond a model of assimilation toward one of co-construction: an education that is not simply *about* migrants

but built *with* them and with all the different subjectivities they belong to the education communities. In this vision, schools become spaces of epistemic justice, where families are recognized not as outsiders in need of help but as co-authors of a more plural, dialogical, and transformative understanding of what education can be.

Rebuilding the Village

Migration often entails the painful disruption of what Breitborde and Swiniarski (2002) call the *educational village*: the dense web of intergenerational caregiving sustained by grandparents, neighbours, elders, and kin networks who collectively share responsibility for raising children. When families move across borders — especially under conditions of forced migration or exile — this village is fractured, leaving parents to navigate child-rearing in contexts of isolation and uncertainty. What is lost is not only material support, but also the everyday rituals of proximity, trust, and shared responsibility that anchor both children and adults in a sense of belonging.

In such circumstances, schools can play a pivotal role in reconstructing these villages of care. But doing so requires a shift in how schools understand their mission: from bureaucratic service providers to relational and communal institutions capable of holding families within networks of solidarity. Dryden-Peterson (2015) underscores that continuity of relationships — not only of curriculum or instruction — is essential for resilience in times of upheaval. Similarly, Veale and Doná (2003) remind us that community reconstruction after displacement is not simply about rebuilding homes or infrastructures, but about restoring meaningful, participatory spaces where people can once again recognize themselves as part of a collective.

In practice, this reconstruction often begins with small, everyday gestures: parent cafés where stories are exchanged over shared meals; multilingual storytelling circles that honor diverse cultural traditions; informal gatherings that invite parents, children, and educators to reimagine the school as a community hub rather than a detached institution. While modest, these practices have transformative power. They become seeds from which new civic imaginaries can grow, fostering a sense of "we" where fragmentation once prevailed.

To rebuild the village, then, is not to nostalgically replicate a past form of communal life, but to engage in an act of future-making. It is about constructing proximity in contexts of dispersion, weaving solidarities across difference, and creating new rituals of belonging where none previously existed. In this sense, the school becomes not only a place of learning but a vital site of social repair — a civic institution that participates in reweaving the fabric of community life in plural, post-migratory societies.

From passive inclusion to transformative belonging

One of the most subtle yet insidious dynamics revealed by this study is what Cappiali (2023) calls *passive inclusion*: a condition in which migrant families and children are physically present in schools but remain epistemically and relationally absent. Documents may be translated, parents may be invited to meetings, diversity days may be celebrated — yet beneath these gestures lies a persistent disconnection. *Presence without reciprocity is not belonging; it is a form of managed visibility that leaves families tolerated but not truly engaged.*

True belonging requires a deeper reorientation, one that begins with the unlearning of prejudice and the dismantling of the colonial categories that continue to frame educational encounters. As bell hooks (1994) reminds us, education that strives for justice must involve not only new practices but also the spiritual and cognitive labor of disarming inherited biases. Lombardi-Diop and Romeo (2012) likewise point to the enduring ties between Italian national identity, whiteness, and cultural homogeneity, showing how these frames silently shape who is considered a "legitimate" participant in school life. Without confronting these structures, inclusion risks reproducing exclusion under the guise of hospitality. Spivak's (1988) warning about "inclusion into alterity" echoes sharply here: when migrants are welcomed only as exotic, deficient, or supplementary figures, they are not being recognized as equals but admitted into a space that still defines them as "other." Against this, Gobodo-Madikizela (2003) calls for an *ethics of decentering* — the willingness to step outside one's own frameworks and to see the world through the stories, wounds, and wisdom of others. This is not about pity or benevolence, but about a radical act of recognition that reconstitutes the self in relation to the other. Transformative belonging, then, is not achieved through tokenistic celebrations or policy add-ons, but through a structural commitment to recognition, relational presence, and shared authorship. It demands that educators and institutions ask not simply, "How can we help?" but the more difficult and humbling questin: *"What must we unlearn in order to truly meet the other and how we can do it?"* Only in this process of decentering and co-construction can schools move beyond surface-level integration and become spaces where difference is not merely accommodated but embraced as constitutive of a shared civic future.

13. 7 Limitations and future perspectives

One key limitation of this study lies in its deep anchoring within the specific context of the city of Genoa, with its unique migratory, social, and institutional dynamics. While the reflections that emerged are generative and rich in insight, it is essential to recognize that other regions may present very different configurations—shaped by their histories, demographic compositions, and the nature of relationships between schools and migrant families. Therefore, rather than considering this model as universally applicable, it would be more appropriate to understand it as a situated and recurring

approach, one that can adapt and regenerate itself based on the specificities of each local context. In this light, the proposed practices should not be standardized but reactivated through dialogical and participatory processes, keeping at their core the active involvement of parents in co-constructing school environments that are equitable, welcoming, and transformative.

Another limitation concerns the scope of participation within the school community. While the study foregrounded the voices of migrant parents, it did not extend to the entire educational community, including non-teaching staff, school leadership, and institutional partners. As a result, the relational and cultural transformation promoted through the project remained localized, limiting the potential for a whole-school approach.

Moreover, even within the group of parents, not all voices could be equally included. Some families were more present and available to participate, while others—due to language barriers, work schedules, mistrust toward institutions, or previous negative experiences—remained on the margins of the process. This uneven participation inevitably restricts the representativeness of the findings and highlights the need for future initiatives to develop strategies that can actively reach and engage the widest possible spectrum of parents, including those who are less visible or less confident in entering school spaces.

It is important to clarify that, although the participating families came from varied cultural and national backgrounds, the project was not designed to highlight a single identity or specific community. Instead, it sought to engage parents with migratory backgrounds as a collective subjectivity, shaped by shared experiences of displacement, adaptation, and the navigation of institutional systems not originally designed for them. This orientation enabled a broader and more nuanced approach to inclusion—one attentive not to cultural essentialism but to the structural dynamics of marginalization. For example, when addressing forms of exclusion such as Islamophobia or the racialization of Blackness, the focus was less on isolating religious or ethnic categories than on exposing how certain bodies, histories, and ways of knowing are delegitimized within dominant educational narratives. Such a perspective reveals the intersectional mechanisms through which belonging is unevenly distributed and opens space for imagining school practices that resist these asymmetries. The group's heterogeneity, while posing challenges for comparability, also reflects the plural and complex realities of early childhood education in contemporary Italy. Far from a limitation, this diversity emerges as an epistemic resource: it illuminates common threads across different migratory trajectories while honoring the uniqueness of each story. This plurality of voices resonates with a decolonial perspective that resists singular narratives and instead embraces multiplicity as the basis for more just and dialogical forms of knowledge.

Future interventions should therefore aim not only to involve all actors within the educational ecosystem, but also to create conditions where all families—regardless of language, availability, or previous institutional trust—can participate meaningfully. This would foster shared responsibility for inclusion and enable a deeper, more community-wide impact.

Beyond the geographical specificity of Genoa, another important limitation concerns the temporal scope of the study. The observed and analyzed practices refer to a limited timeframe, while transformational processes—especially in the field of education—require long-term engagement and continuity. For this reason, longitudinal research would be valuable to track over time the evolution of school-family relationships and the effectiveness of the proposed practices.

From a methodological standpoint, the study could be strengthened by a greater triangulation of sources—combining participant observations, interviews with parents and educators, analysis of school documents, visual materials produced by children, and co-created narrative tools. Finally, a particularly meaningful future perspective would be to actively involve children themselves in the research process, valuing their viewpoints on the school-family relationship and on the educational environment through play-based and expressive methods suited to the 0–6 age group. In doing so, a truly polyphonic vision would emerge, where every participant—adult or child—is recognized as a bearer of meaning, experience, and transformative potential.

13. 8 Conclusion

This study has sought to give voice to migrant parents as agents of knowledge and educational transformation. Their narratives reveal the dual register of the migratory experience: the weight of trauma, exclusion, and solitude, alongside the enduring strength of roots, values, faith, and perseverance. These dimensions are not opposing but intertwined, forming the moral and emotional fabric that sustains care and the education of children within complex, and often marginalizing, social contexts.

Through the use of narrative practices such as the *Map of History* and the *Tree of Life*, this research has moved beyond deficit-oriented representations, positioning families not as passive recipients of intervention but as epistemic contributors. Their stories become acts of *epistemic disobedience* (Mignolo, 2009)—refusals to be confined within dominant Western frameworks of knowledge and parenting. In doing so, parents reclaim their own narratives, transforming lived experience into theory and testimony into pedagogy. These narrative acts make visible forms of knowledge that have long been silenced by colonial hierarchies, inviting a rethinking of what counts as educational expertise and who is authorized to speak within it.

At a pedagogical level, early childhood settings (0–6) can become privileged sites for practicing critical interculturality (Walsh, 2018), understood not as mere coexistence but as a space where power

relations are interrogated and transformed. Here, dialogue, listening, and mutual recognition can act as tools of *epistemic justice* (Fricker, 2007), enabling educators to engage with difference not as a deficit but as an epistemic resource. On the policy level, this study calls for moving beyond compensatory logics to structurally embrace linguistic, cultural, and epistemic plurality as a shared societal resource.

For educator preparation, the findings underscore the need for pedagogical humility and decolonial openness—an orientation that acknowledges parents as co-creators of meaning and partners in shaping educational purpose. Such humility is an ethical stance: to teach and learn *with* families rather than *about* them, to make room for ways of knowing that emerge from experience, migration, and care.

Ultimately, the narratives gathered here remind us that interculturality is not an act of benevolence but a political, ethical, and relational practice aimed at rebalancing power and dismantling epistemic hierarchies. Moving in this direction requires embracing what decolonial thinkers call the pluriverse—a world where many worlds coexist (Escobar, 2018; de Sousa Santos, 2014). In such a pluriversal horizon, education becomes a living practice of encounter, reciprocity, and repair: a process through which differences are not assimilated but held together in dignity and dialogue.

To create these spaces is to engage in the collective work of reimagining education as a commons—a site where care, justice, and belonging can be cultivated beyond colonial and monocultural limits. Within this vision, schools become not instruments of integration but laboratories of coexistence, where every child and every family can stand with dignity, and where the multiplicity of human experience is not merely tolerated but celebrated as the foundation of a more equitable and hopeful future.

Part III – Final reflections and implications

14. Auto reflexivity. Personal reflections on a transformative research journey

14.1 A necessary premise: why reflect on the self in research

Auto-reflexivity, in qualitative and decolonial traditions, is not a supplementary step to be added at the margins of research; it is a foundational epistemological stance that shapes how questions are posed, how relationships with participants are built, how narratives are interpreted, and how responsibility is shared for the meanings produced (Cunliffe, 2003; Finlay, 2002; Smith, 2012). Marco Gemignani (2017) expands this idea into what he calls *critical reflexivity*—a continuous process in which the researcher examines not only their emotional and cognitive engagement with the work but also the ethical, political, and epistemological assumptions that underpin it. This process moves inward, toward one's own positionality and interpretive lenses, and outward, toward the socio-political and discursive contexts that both shape and are shaped by the research. As Gemignani emphasises, reflexivity is not merely a technique but an ethical and performative practice embedded within the very act of inquiry.

From this perspective, reflexivity involves critically interrogating how the researcher's socio-historical location, emotional investments, and institutional affiliations influence both the process and the outcomes of research. It also recognises, as Gemignani (2011) observes, that the research relationship works in two directions: while reflexivity often focuses on how the researcher constructs the researched, there is a less explored but equally significant movement from the participants and subject matter back to the researcher. Research, Gemignani (2011) reminds us, is not done *on* others, but *with* others and *through* us.

It is this second movement—the ways in which the research process acts upon and transforms the researcher—that I address in this chapter. In the first part of this thesis, I examined how my biography, positionality, and lived experiences shaped the methodological and epistemological foundations of my work. Here, I turn to what has changed within me as a result of this research journey. This is not merely a continuation of the earlier discussion, but its complement: if before I traced the influence of who I was on the research, now I reflect on who I have become through it.

Incorporating auto-reflexivity here is therefore not just a methodological choice; it is an ethical necessity. Ignoring the researcher's own involvement risks reinforcing asymmetrical power dynamics, silencing participants, and perpetuating epistemic violence. By contrast, reflexivity creates space for accountability, reciprocity, and transformative dialogue (Gemignani, 2017). Including a reflexive chapter is thus a political and epistemological act: it makes visible the researcher's

participation in knowledge construction and resists the dominant ideal of the detached, "neutral" observer (Haraway, 1988; Pillow, 2003; Veronese & Kagee, 2025).

My own approach to the field has been grounded in the recognition that knowledge is always situated, embodied, and relational (Haraway, 1988). I have not approached research as a disinterested observer, but as someone whose experiences—particularly those related to mobility, belonging, and marginality—profoundly shape the way I connect with people and contexts. This perspective resonates with the feminist assertion that "the personal is political" (Hanisch, 1970) and with critiques that view the separation between researcher and researched as both artificial and ethically problematic (England, 1994).

Working with communities who have been historically othered, misrepresented, or rendered invisible by dominant research paradigms has heightened my awareness of the ethical–political dimensions of reflexivity. As it is reflected in the book *Migrant Scholars Researching Migration* , subjectivity should not be neutralised but ethically situated, because it plays an essential role in the production of knowledge (Gemignani, Hernández-Albújar, & Sládková, 2023, p. xvi). In intercultural and migration studies in particular, researchers must remain attentive to how their power and privileges influence the co-construction of meaning.

Through this research, my understanding of myself as a researcher has changed in fundamental ways. The shift in my methods—from quantitative and clinical models to qualitative and narrative approaches—was not a mere technical adjustment; it reflected a deeper transformation in how I conceive of my role, my responsibilities, and the type of knowledge I want to foster. I have started to learn to listen differently, to unlearn ingrained assumptions, and to embrace the plurality, contradictions, and complexities of the narratives that emerge from the field—not as "data" to be extracted, but as dialogical acts of meaning-making (Andrews, 2007; Denzin, 2013). Dialogue emerged as my most vital tool for navigating this process of inner transformation. Both informal and formal conversations with friends and colleagues—fellow doctoral students, senior scholars, and professors—helped me articulate doubts I had long hesitated to express. Some of these conversations took place within my own institution and country, while others transcended geographical and disciplinary boundaries. My research periods outside Italy in Niger, Australia, and South Africa were particularly transformative: engaging with scholars, activists, and educators from different epistemic traditions challenged me to understand interculturality not as a set of competences to be acquired, but as a dialogical practice grounded in the coexistence and mutual recognition of epistemologies (Walsh, 2018; Gemignani et al., 2023). Alongside these exchanges, keeping a reflexive diary offered me a space to record these shifts—not merely as methodological notes, but as traces of my emotional and ethical journey. Looking back through its pages, I notice how often I wrote words like "out of place,"

"uncomfortable," or "complicit." Over time, these terms shifted in meaning: from signs of dissonance or insecurity to starting points for questioning my assumptions, recognising my positions of privilege, and cultivating more ethically situated research relationships.

By centring auto-reflexivity in this chapter, I aim to bear witness to the profound personal, ethical, and epistemological transformation that the research process has generated in me. This transformation is not incidental to the thesis; it is an integral part of its contribution, showing that the making of knowledge is always also the making—and remaking—of the researcher.

14.2 A Reflexive and critical account of my research trajectory

What I present in this chapter is neither a final point of arrival nor a clearly defined starting point. It is part of a continuing process—one that has transformed me as much as I have shaped the research itself. As previously stated, in the first part of this thesis, I examined how my biography, positionality, and theoretical commitments influenced the design of this project. Here, I move further: I turn inward, reflecting on what has shifted within me—how my ways of thinking, feeling, and inhabiting the role of researcher have evolved through the lived experience of carrying out this work.

From the very beginning, two guiding questions accompanied me:

"Whose voices are we listening to?"

"Whose voices are we allowing to speak in our research?"

They were not abstract prompts but provocations that unsettled me at a personal level. They forced me to acknowledge my own complicity in academic systems that privilege certain voices—including my own—and legitimise certain narratives while marginalising others. This discomfort was magnified by my training in Western academic institutions, where dominant paradigms had quietly shaped not only my methodological preferences but also my sense of legitimacy as a scholar and the assumptions I made about the world. Thus, by the end of this research journey, my reflections had crystallised around two major areas of change: one methodological and one theoretical.

Theoretical reflections

First of all, I focus on the theoretical transformation: a growing unease with some of the central constructs I had initially adopted, which I have come to see as ethically and politically problematic. Chief among these are burnout, intercultural competences, and, more broadly, the concepts of interculture and inclusion.

Burnout. The project began as a quantitative study examining the relationship between intercultural competences and well-being, with a particular focus on burnout among early childhood educators. At first, the idea of measuring competences and stress levels seemed methodologically tidy and comfortably aligned with institutional expectations. It offered clear variables, measurable outcomes, and an apparent neutrality that made it easy to justify in funding applications and ethical

review processes. Yet, as I immersed myself more deeply in the literature, this neatness began to feel deceptive. A persistent knot formed in my stomach as I realised that *burnout*, as a construct, often individualises what are, in truth, collective and structural problems. It translates systemic pressures into personal shortcomings, framing educators as deficient in resilience or coping skills, while leaving unexamined—and thus unchallenged—the political, economic, and organisational systems that create the very conditions for exhaustion and marginalisation (Kagan et al., 2021).

This recognition was not an abstract theoretical shift but a deeply embodied rupture. I can vividly recall the moment: sitting at my desk, reading critical analyses of burnout, I felt an almost physical sense of betrayal—toward my own research design, toward the trust I hoped to build with participants, and even toward the values that had initially motivated me to undertake this work. I realised that to speak about burnout without addressing structural injustice was, in effect, to participate—whether consciously or not—in the depoliticisation of the problem. By focusing on individual-level symptoms and coping strategies, I risked contributing to a discourse that made educators responsible for managing stress, while absolving institutions and policies of their role in producing it (Pillow, 2003; Haraway, 1988).

This awareness forced me into an uncomfortable but necessary self-interrogation. I began to ask myself:

> *"If my research reproduces the same deficit narratives it claims to critique, whose interests is it ultimately serving*?"

The answer was unsettling. I came to see that *accountability* as a researcher cannot be reduced to checking boxes for methodological rigour, ensuring accurate measurement, or maintaining fidelity to data. These are important, but they are not enough. True and genuine accountability requires a willingness to confront the political implications of the concepts we use, to recognise when our tools and frameworks risk reinforcing the very structures of inequality we hope to dismantle, and to take responsibility for the ways our work might be mobilised—intentionally or otherwise—within those structures.

In this light, resisting deficit narratives became, for me, a non-negotiable ethical commitment. It meant refusing to treat structural injustices as invisible backdrops to "individual problems," and instead making those injustices visible as central objects of inquiry. It meant shifting the purpose of my research from diagnosing personal failings to illuminating the systemic, often invisible forces that shape lived experience. And perhaps most profoundly, it meant reimagining research not as a detached act of documentation, but as a situated and relational practice—one that must stand in solidarity with those whose lives it studies, and one that uses its voice to amplify structural critique rather than silence it.

This reframing altered not only how I understood the construct of burnout, but also how I conceived my own role within the broader landscape of knowledge production. It pushed me to see that the questions I ask, the language I adopt, and the analytical frames I choose are never neutral: they have the power to either obscure or expose, to perpetuate harm or to foster justice. From that point forward, the challenge—and the responsibility—was to ensure that my work aligned with the latter.

Intercultural Competences. My discomfort in the quantitative phase was not confined to the construct of burnout. It extended to the very idea of *intercultural competences*. At first, I understood and even appreciated the good intentions behind assessing and strengthening these competences among school staff. Such initiatives often present themselves as progressive, aiming to equip educators to better interact with diverse communities. Yet the more I engaged with the concept, the more I recognised its underlying problems. It is grounded in an unexamined power asymmetry: the implicit assumption is that certain individuals—most often white, Western educators—must "improve" their intercultural abilities, while others—typically non-Western parents and children—are positioned as passive recipients of this competence. In this framing, they are not co-creators of the intercultural relationship but its objects, rendered visible only as the "other" who needs to be understood, managed, or accommodated.

This imbalance is further reinforced by the way intercultural competences are typically operationalised. When extracted from the relational, historical, and political ecologies in which they emerge—isolated, quantified, ranked, and targeted for "improvement"—culture is reduced to a set of discrete skills or attitudes, something one can possess, develop, and tick off a checklist. This technocratic framing strips interculturality of its dynamic and reciprocal nature. It treats cultural engagement as a one-way process of skill acquisition rather than as an ongoing, negotiated, and mutually transformative encounter.

Such an approach also obscures the institutional and structural conditions that shape intercultural interactions in the first place. It risks placing the entire burden of adaptation on one group—those deemed to "lack" competence—while leaving unquestioned the systems of governance, policy, and social organisation that produce inequality in intercultural encounters. Over time, I came to see that this model, far from dismantling inequities, can inadvertently stabilise them. By focusing on the "deficits" of individuals rather than the power relations that frame the interaction, it reinforces the very hierarchies it claims to address.

For me, this was not merely a theoretical critique—it carried tangible consequences for how I engaged with the field and how I understood my role within it. It prompted me to challenge the premise that intercultural competences can—or should—be measured, ranked, and "improved" in isolation from the broader web of relationships, histories, and power structures in which they take shape. It led me

to reconsider interculturality not as an individual asset or professional skill set, but as a co-created, context-bound, and politically situated practice.

This reframing required me to adopt a more relational and dialogical stance—one that treats every encounter as a space where meaning, understanding, and trust are jointly negotiated rather than unilaterally delivered. It also required a shift in where I placed my analytical attention: away from evaluating individual performance and toward interrogating the systemic, institutional, and discursive conditions that make "competence" necessary in the first place.

Over time, I came to see that what is often described as a lack of intercultural competence is frequently a reflection of much deeper structural inequalities—inequalities that cannot be resolved through individual skill-building alone. This awareness made me more cautious about the seductive simplicity of competence-based frameworks and more committed to approaches that centre reciprocity, reflexivity, and shared responsibility. It also deepened my conviction that any meaningful work on interculturality must actively question the asymmetries of power embedded in the very tools, concepts, and discourses we use to address it.

Interculture and Inclusion. My critical reflections on interculture and inclusion deepened considerably during the qualitative, ethnographic stage of the research. One pivotal moment—described in Chapter 12—still resonates vividly with me. During a conversation, a educator remarked: *"Instead of being forced to talk about inclusion and interculture, we should ask ourselves why there is a need to have these conversations and to 'include' someone."* Her words were disarming in their clarity. They interrupted the flow of my questions and lingered in my mind long after the interview ended. In that moment, I felt a subtle but significant shift: I moved from treating inclusion and interculture as self-evident goods to interrogating the political and social conditions that make such conversations necessary in the first place.

This encounter crystallised a growing awareness that discourses of interculture and inclusion—when not grounded in an intersectional analysis—risk becoming hollow. They can operate as symbolic acknowledgements of diversity that leave underlying structures untouched. Without examining how race, class, gender, migration status, disability, and other axes of identity intersect to produce advantage and disadvantage, inclusion can easily become a façade. It may appear to address inequality, while in reality masking and even legitimising the very systems of exclusion it claims to resist.

This realisation pushed me to examine the concept of *inclusion* itself. Too often, inclusion presupposes the existence of a fixed centre—an unmarked, "neutral" norm—into which "others" must be invited. This framing fails to question the legitimacy of the centre or the power structures that

define it. Well-intentioned inclusion initiatives can thus unintentionally reinforce existing boundaries, stabilising the very hierarchies they seek to dismantle.

For me, this was not simply a theoretical insight—it had direct implications for my research practice. It altered how I listened to participants, making me more attuned to the ways my own questions might inadvertently reproduce those boundaries. It also changed how I framed my inquiries, prompting me to move beyond documenting whether inclusion was "achieved" and toward asking whose terms were being used to define it, whose interests it served, and what forms of exclusion it might simultaneously conceal.

Over time, this reframing also reshaped my understanding of interculture. I came to see that intercultural engagement cannot be reduced to celebratory narratives of diversity or to isolated acts of cultural exchange that leave power structures intact. It must be understood as a deeply political and relational process—one that demands a critical interrogation of the histories, policies, and institutional logics that determine whose knowledge counts, whose identities are centred, and whose presence is treated as conditional.

This awareness made me more attentive to the subtle ways that even well-intentioned initiatives can reproduce the very hierarchies they aim to dismantle. It reminded me that inclusion, when it stops at symbolic gestures, risks functioning as a form of containment: offering recognition without redistribution, and participation without a real shift in power.

For me, this was not an abstract theoretical conclusion—it changed the way I occupy my role as a researcher. It sharpened my sensitivity to the assumptions embedded in my own questions, to the positionality from which I listen, and to the forms of legitimacy I implicitly grant or withhold. It taught me to be wary of "safe" conversations about diversity that avoid the discomfort of addressing structural injustice, and to commit instead to facilitating dialogues that make visible the unequal terms on which inclusion is offered.

Ultimately, this shift has become part of my ethical and political compass as a scholar. It has anchored my research in the conviction that intercultural and inclusion work must go beyond integration into an unchanged centre; it must actively work to transform that centre itself. It must move from managing difference to dismantling the hierarchies that make difference a problem in the first place. And it must do so in ways that are co-created with those whose lives are most affected—not as symbolic beneficiaries, but as full partners in redefining the spaces we share.

Methodological reflections

Moving into the sphere of methodological reflections, it is essential to acknowledge a disquieting reality: the structures and procedures that shape academic research are, more often than not, designed to serve institutional logics rather than the people and communities o stensibly at the centre of inquiry.

Far from being instruments of shared knowledge creation, these mechanisms tend to reproduce top-down agendas, consolidating the priorities of funders, universities, academics (and their careers) and research frameworks over those of participants.

From the outset of my doctoral project, I became aware of the structural rigidity that often characterises institutionally funded research. In order for the project to formally commence following the award of the scholarship—and within the established timeframe of the PhD programme, where the first year is devoted to defining the research design, the second to data collection, and the third to writing—the research needed to be clearly specified at an early stage.

In collaboration with the Municipality of Genoa and my academic supervisors, and in compliance with the requirements associated with public funding, the first years of the programme I was therefore required to submit a fully articulated research protocol for ethical approval. This entailed defining research questions, methodological approaches, and data collection instruments before any sustained engagement with participants was possible. At the same time, the project was expected to follow a mixed-methods framework combining quantitative and qualitative components—a structure that reflected agreements established prior to the award of the scholarship between the university and the Municipality, and which thus preceded my direct involvement as the doctoral researcher who would later assume primary responsibility for conducting the study.

This phase of the project offered an early opportunity for reflexive consideration of how academic research is shaped by institutional arrangements that are essential to its feasibility, yet not always fully aligned with participatory or dialogical aspirations. Decisions concerning research structure, timelines, and methodological frameworks typically emerge within institutional contexts where roles, responsibilities, and forms of expertise are differentiated. Within universities, such decisions are closely connected to funding mechanisms, ethical review procedures, and administrative expectations; within municipal settings, they are linked to organisational priorities and service-oriented objectives.

At this initial stage, the voices of those who would later become central to the research—early childhood educators, teachers, and parents with migration histories—were not directly involved in shaping the research questions or methodological direction. This absence does not signal a lack of ethical commitment, but rather points to the structural challenges inherent in integrating participatory co-design within the early phases of institutionally framed doctoral research.

This process was swift, prescriptive, and highly centralised. It left virtually no space for the most fundamental questions:

> *"Whose needs are we serving, and whose questions are we answering?"*

This realisation fuelled a growing tension between my own values—rooted in critical, relational, and community-oriented approaches—and the institutional imperatives I was expected to follow. That tension became not merely a background discomfort, but one of the most formative, and at times disorienting, aspects of my doctoral journey.

During the quantitative phase of my work, I became acutely aware of the epistemological implications of using standardised questionnaires. To measure "constructs" in this way is, by definition, to decide in advance which attributes of people matter, and to impose pre-existing categories that serve the researcher's framework rather than the lived realities of participants. In doing so, the researcher inevitably exercises power—not only by defining the terms of participation, but by narrowing the possible ways participants can be recognised within the research.

This reflection drew me increasingly towards qualitative inquiry and collective narrative practices. These approaches, while not free from power dynamics, are inherently more open to co-construction of meaning. They allow for a more relational, dialogic, and critically reflexive process—one that resists the illusion of "objective" detachment. Over time, I came to see that even if my project could not fully qualify as participatory research, my ethical and methodological aspiration should be to approach research *as if* it were participatory.

However, this aspiration quickly collided with both theoretical and practical limitations within academia. In many academic settings, "participatory research" is operationalised through highly engaging activities—photovoice, storytelling workshops, collective narrative practice—that may create an appearance of shared ownership. Yet these activities are often conceived and framed by the researcher, rather than emerging organically from community priorities. They are participatory and engaging in method but not necessarily in origin.

In my doctoral project, the use of narrative practices did indeed allow me to generate counter-knowledge—surfacing the perspectives of educators and parents with migration histories that would otherwise remain marginalised. Nevertheless, these activities ultimately took place because they aligned with my research aims and, more broadly, the objectives of those funding the work.

Here lies one of the most structurally entrenched contradictions in research practice: funding logics are, fundamentally, logics of power. They rarely start from the principle that communities should define what research is needed or how it should be conducted. Instead, external "experts"—both funders and researchers—propose projects that are then financed, often imposing predefined needs that may not reflect the communities' lived priorities.

This contradiction becomes most visible in the funding cycle itself. Calls for proposals are typically accompanied by strict timelines that leave no opportunity to co-design the research with communities before submission. As a result, participatory approaches are frequently declared in the proposal as a

promise, but only enacted—if at all—once the funding has been secured. By that stage, however, the structure, aims, and methods have already been decided without community input. Participation, in this model, is an afterthought. Such processes reveal the deeper truth: within academic research, there are structural mechanisms that manage and control communities, rather than genuinely integrating them as equal partners in the production of knowledge. Until these mechanisms are critically examined and transformed, the rhetoric of participation risks functioning less as a democratic ideal and more as an institutional performance.

Closing reflections

Looking back, this chapter has been less a linear account of "lessons learned" than a mapping of tensions—between ideals and realities, between institutional logics and community needs, between the safety of familiar frameworks and the discomfort of confronting their political implications. These tensions have been neither incidental nor peripheral; they have been the crucible in which my research practice has been reshaped.

Theoretically, I have moved from uncritically adopting constructs such as burnout, intercultural competences, and inclusion toward interrogating the ways they can depoliticise systemic inequalities and stabilise existing hierarchies. This shift has taught me that concepts are never neutral tools: they are embedded in histories of power, and using them without scrutiny risks perpetuating the very injustices I wish to challenge.

Methodologically, I have come to see that research is never merely a technical exercise in design, measurement, and analysis. It is always a situated, relational, and political act—shaped by funding cycles, ethical review processes, and institutional imperatives that often precede and constrain relationships with participants. Acknowledging these conditions has been uncomfortable but necessary. It has forced me to reckon with the limits of what I could change in the short term, while sharpening my commitment to imagining and enacting more participatory, community-led approaches in the long term.

Across both domains, a central thread has emerged: the need to move from symbolic gestures toward structural transformation. Whether in theoretical framing or methodological design, the task is not simply to "include" marginalised voices within an unchanged centre, but to question and reconfigure the very structures that produce marginality. This requires a form of accountability that goes beyond methodological rigour: one that is attuned to the political life of research, aware of its potential to either reproduce harm or foster justice, and willing to take responsibility for the futures it makes possible.

In this sense, my research trajectory is not a closed chapter but an ongoing practice of reflexivity, doubt, and reorientation. The questions that guided me from the beginning—*Whose voices are we*

listening to? Whose voices are we allowing to speak?—remain with me still, not as boxes to be ticked but as provocations that demand continual engagement. If there is a lesson I carry forward, it is that to answer them with integrity means resisting the comforts of neutrality, embracing the discomfort of critique, and working—imperfectly, but persistently—toward research that stands in solidarity with the communities it studies, not above them.

15. Practical implications

As I conclude this doctoral work, I am compelled to reflect on its practical implications, particularly in relation to the school context and educational policy in the Municipality of Genoa. Consistent with the theoretical and methodological framework that guided the research, the goal is to contribute to the construction of genuinely inclusive (and intercultural) environments.

This reflection is not only the natural outcome of the research path but also responds to the specific nature of the doctoral funding, which is aimed at improving the quality of work within public administrations. In my case, the public institutions involved were the schools of the Municipality of Genoa (Northwest Italy), specifically its early childhood education sector, and the central theme of the entire research project has been inclusion and interculturality. From this perspective, it is essential that the research does not remain solely at the theoretical level but rather translates into concrete and contextualized proposals capable of influencing institutional practices and educational relationships.

Before outlining these implications, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by *interculturality*. Providing a definition is neither a neutral nor a secondary act: it is an epistemic and political choice that shapes the direction of action and defines its transformative potential. Therefore, I find it essential to adopt a conception of interculturality that reflects both my own theoretical positioning and the findings of the qualitative phase of this research. These findings have clearly shown that speaking about interculturality without addressing its historical and structural roots—without asking why we are required to talk about it today—risks reducing the concept to a superficial, depoliticized practice. Likewise, failing to consider its intersectional nature, and its connection to dynamics of power, racialization, gender, and class, strips it of its critical force and reduces intercultural policies to simple strategies for managing diversity.

For this reason, I find it necessary to refer to a postcolonial definition rooted in the decolonial thought of Catherine Walsh (2022).

In one of her writings, I*nterculturality and (De)coloniality: critical and political perspectives* (2022), she opens her discussion with two evocative quotations. The first, from the *Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca*, frames interculturality as:

> *"The possibility of dialogue between cultures.*
> *It is a political project that transcends the educational dimension and is aimed*
> *at building different societies […] through the creation of another social order."*

The second, from Virgilio Hernández, a social movement activist and member of the National Assembly of Ecuador, expands this vision:

> *"Interculturality is simply the possibility of a life, of an alternative project […] that profoundly challenges the irrational instrumental logic of capitalism that we see at work today.*

Accordingly, she describes interculturality as a critical, political, and epistemic undertaking aimed at reshaping the power dynamics inherited from colonialism by recognizing, fostering dialogue among, and interweaving diverse forms of knowledge, practices, and worldviews. It goes beyond the mere coexistence of cultures, envisioning instead a process of decolonization and the collective creation of alternative ways of living, knowing, and coexisting.

This is the lens through which I intend to analyze and propose possible lines of action. These are not ready-made recommendations or technically defined objectives, but rather directions for action that align with a transformative vision of education and citizenship.

Building on this theoretical framework, the convergences across my doctoral studies highlight five interrelated dimensions that shape interculturality in early childhood education (Table 19).

First, adopting an intercultural approach requires more than the acquisition of technical skills; it calls for a *shift in consciousness* (Study 1). Educators must engage in sustained processes of reflexivity, confronting their own positionalities, acknowledging how their cultural backgrounds shape practices, and sharing this awareness in collective dialogue. This deeper orientation contrasts with superficial diversity training, which risks reinforcing stereotypes or reproducing "us/them" divisions rather than fostering genuine transformation.

Second, interculturality must be embedded into the daily life of schools rather than confined to symbolic gestures or occasional events (Studies 1, 2, and 4). Narrative and relational practices, multilingual storytelling, and the recognition of diverse family histories represent ways of weaving plurality into the everyday fabric of schooling. By contrast, initiatives limited to "cultural festivals" or token displays of difference risk reducing diversity to decoration, leaving underlying inequalities untouched.

Third, structural and labor conditions emerge as a foundational dimension of inclusion (Studies 2 and 3). Precarious contracts, fragmented teams, and bureaucratic rigidity undermine the continuity of care, the cohesion of pedagogical projects, and the wellbeing of educators. Stability and recognition of educators' work—both emotional and professional—are not peripheral issues but prerequisites for equity and justice. Schools cannot be inclusive spaces for children and families if they are sites of precarity and burnout for those who work within them.

Fourth, the relationship between schools and families is revealed as a crucial site of transformation (Studies 2 and 4). Migrant parents should not be framed as passive recipients of integration but as carriers of knowledge and co-constructors of educational practices. Everyday gestures of reciprocity,

shared projects, and dialogical encounters can rebuild trust, counteract experiences of marginalization, and expand the school's role as a civic community rather than a bureaucratic service provider.

Finally, interculturality is always political and epistemic (Studies 3 and 4). Schools are not neutral spaces but institutions embedded in broader social and historical contexts. Recognizing migrant families as knowledge-holders, embracing multilingualism as justice, and enabling educators to act as political agents and producers of knowledge all point to a vision of interculturality as a critical and transformative project. This implies moving beyond symbolic multiculturalism to practices that dismantle colonial logics, redistribute power, and affirm schools as arenas of epistemic justice and democratic participation.

Taken together, these five dimensions provide a bridge between the critical conception of interculturality outlined above and the concrete directions for action that follow.

Table 19

Core implications of the four studies across micro, meso, and macro levels

Dimension	Core Insight	Level	Studies
From competence to consciousness	Interculturality requires a *shift in consciousness* through reflexivity and critical awareness, not just acquisition of skills. Superficial diversity training risks reinforcing stereotypes and "us/them" divisions.	**Micro** individual educators' self-reflexivity and relational practices	1
Everyday practices beyond tokenism	Inclusion must be embedded in the daily life of schools (narratives, multilingual storytelling, plural histories). Symbolic "diversity days" or cultural festivals reduce diversity to decoration.	**Meso** school culture, daily routines, pedagogical practices	2, 4
Structural and labor conditions	Stability of teams, fair contracts, and reduced bureaucratic burdens are prerequisites for sustainable inclusion. Precarity and fragmentation undermine both educator wellbeing and continuity of care.	**Macro/Meso** labor policies, institutional organization, funding structures	2, 3
Family–school relations as co-construction	Migrant families are not passive recipients but carriers of knowledge and co-authors of education. Reciprocal practices and shared projects foster trust and belonging.	**Meso** relational practices between schools and families; institutional climate	2, 4
Interculturality as political and epistemic project	Schools are not neutral: they must dismantle colonial logics, affirm multilingualism as justice, and recognize educators as political agents and knowledge producers.	**Macro** policy frameworks, epistemic justice, socio-political discourses	3, 4

Indeed, from this perspective, three deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing areas of intervention emerge. The first concerns the shift from traditional *training* to the cultivation of communities of practice. Rather than positioning educators as passive recipients of external expertise,

these communities create sustained spaces of dialogue, co-construction of knowledge, and critical reflection on the historical, political, and ethical dimensions of education. Rooted in reciprocity and collective responsibility, they nurture the *conscientização* (Freire, 1970) necessary for educators, families, and students to recognize and challenge structural inequalities, while building the trust and solidarity essential for coordinated action.

The second area addresses organizational and structural change within early childhood education services. Schools cannot simply "add" diversity into existing frameworks; they must reorganize their governance, structures, and daily practices so that equity and participation are structurally possible. This involves reducing bureaucratic burdens, granting greater pedagogical and financial autonomy, creating rotating leadership models, and fostering inter-school networks—particularly across marginalized areas. Such changes not only enable educators to respond flexibly to their communities' realities but also signal institutional recognition of their agency and expertise.

The third area concerns political participation as an ethical and professional responsibility. Schools are not neutral service providers; they are public institutions embedded in broader social and political ecosystems. Building alliances with families, community groups, and other schools, engaging in advocacy, and confronting structural precarity are essential to transforming education into a driver of social justice. Crucially, this participation must be supported—not imposed—by municipal institutions, which have a responsibility to create enabling conditions, provide resources, and ensure that bottom-up initiatives can flourish.

These three dimensions—communities of practice, organizational change, and political participation—are not sequential steps but interdependent processes. Critical awareness cultivated in communities of practice requires supportive organizational structures to be sustained, while such structures, in turn, make political participation more accessible and effective. Together, they form a transformative ecology capable of embedding equity, and epistemic justice into the daily life of schools. Following a detailed description of each area.

15.1 From training to communities of practice

In educational discourse, *training* has long been regarded as a foundational element of professional development. Yet, like all social practices, it is far from neutral: it can produce very different outcomes depending on how it is conceived and implemented. Too often, training operates as a tool of control and standardisation, reinforcing top-down hierarchies and positioning educators as passive recipients of "expert" knowledge delivered from above. Alternatively, training can become a powerful catalyst for transformation—but only when it breaks free from this vertical paradigm and reclaims a more participatory, dialogical form.

The very etymology of "education"—from the Latin *ex-ducere*, meaning "to lead out"—evokes a generative vision: one that draws out and values the knowledge already present within individuals, nurturing their awareness and capacity to act. This idea resonates with Freire's (1970) rejection of the "banking model" of education and with decolonial perspectives that view learning as a relational, co-constructed process (hooks, 1994; Walsh, 2018).

When considering training in the school context, especially in relation to interculturality, a crucial question emerges: *"What should educators be trained on?"* A common—yet deeply problematic—answer is to design sessions focused on "cultural differences," where educators are given information about traditions, customs, or religious holidays. As the first study in this doctoral research demonstrates, such approaches often reinforce hierarchical logics of cultural superiority and otherness. The "other"—typically non-Western, non-white, or non-affluent—is presented as the bearer of a fixed, exotic culture to be learned about by those in the dominant group. This process is asymmetrical, leaving unexamined the structural conditions that produce and sustain difference, and ultimately reinforcing unequal power relations between knowledge systems (de Sousa Santos, 2014).

A further limitation is the tendency to fragment interculturality into a checklist of competences, detached from its historical, political, and intersectional dimensions. This dilution not only empties the concept of its critical force, but also reduces it to a technical skill set that can be "delivered" and "completed." As argued throughout this research, interculturality cannot be reduced to isolated modules or measurable outputs. Intercultural competences are inherently relational: they emerge within equitable interactions in which all individuals have the opportunity to speak, be heard, and co-create knowledge. Both educators and parents in this study echoed this view, describing interculturality not as a list of cultural facts but as a process embedded in wider struggles for social justice, equity, and recognition (Gemignani et al., 2023).

From this standpoint, the limits of traditional training become clear. While "training" implies a vertical transfer of competences from expert to novice, critical intercultural work demands a model grounded in reciprocity, shared responsibility, and the situated co-production of knowledge. For this reason, I propose reframing educator training as the cultivation of communities of practice (Smeplass, 2025)

Communities of practice are not a terminological update but a structural shift. They are collaborative spaces in which educators, parents, and students engage in sustained dialogue, mutual support, and critical reflection on the political, historical, and ethical dimensions of education. Within such communities, educators are not mere implementers of pre-defined programmes; they are co-authors of context-specific, transformative practices. By integrating diverse forms of knowledge—local,

experiential, and academic—into a living ecosystem of exchange, communities of practice expand the scope of professional development beyond the delivery of standardised content.

Themes such as multilingualism, religious practices, and care—often framed as "issues" to be managed—are re-signified as shared resources for pedagogical co-design. This approach strengthens educator agency, affirms education as a collective project of justice and recognition, and positions schools as spaces of healing and social transformation. Crucially, communities of practice are co-constructed from below, valuing the professional insights and lived experiences that educators already possess. They require continuity: not one-off workshops, but ongoing processes embedded in the daily rhythms of school life, integrated into both individual and collective professional identities.

These spaces should also be open to the wider school community. Parents—particularly those from migrant backgrounds—are often long-term residents of the neighbourhood but experience schools as temporary, external institutions. Their participation, together with that of students, can broaden and deepen intercultural dialogue, shifting it from a top-down initiative to a collective, co-designed project of structural change. This vision aligns with whole-school approaches such as Cefai's (2021), which emphasise wellbeing as a shared responsibility and inclusion as a relational practice.

When lived experiences are welcomed not as problems to be managed but as cultural resources to be shared, diversity becomes a common heritage, cultivated through listening, dialogue, and mutual transformation. In this way, moving from "training" to "communities of practice" is not simply an organisational change—it is an epistemological and political choice, one that reshapes how we think about knowledge, power, and the collective work of building inclusive schools.

Educators' well-being

Communities of practice also opens the door to addressing another critically important issue: the mental health and wellbeing of educators. Too often neglected in educational discourse, educator wellbeing is not a peripheral matter but central to the ethical and political mission of education. Any conversation about equity, justice, and inclusion must also consider how the people asked to enact these principles—educators—are themselves treated, supported, and recognized.

In the Italian context educators, while occupying a different institutional role than families or students, are also a marginalized professional group in many respects. They are often underpaid, overworked, and underappreciated in public discourse (Angelini et al., 2024; Scarzello & Prino, 2025). The emotional labor they perform, the constant pressure to "do more with less," and the bureaucratic burden placed on them, all contribute to conditions that erode wellbeing and agency. Educator burnout, stress, and professional isolation are not individual failings—they are systemic symptoms of an educational model that undervalues the very people it relies on (Rizzo et al., 2024).

Thus, educator wellbeing must be understood as a matter of social justice. Mental health—both individual and collective—is not a private concern, but a public indicator of how rights, dignity, and recognition are distributed within institutions. Promoting educator wellbeing means ensuring that schools are places where educators are listened to, where their work is valued, and where their emotional and professional needs are taken seriously. It also means creating time and space for educators to reflect, express vulnerability, and engage in meaningful dialogue with colleagues, parents, and students.Ultimately, a school cannot promote equity for its students if it fails to uphold equity for its educators. Asking educators to lead inclusive, intercultural practices while neglecting their own lived realities amounts to a contradiction. Only when educators feel supported, seen, and empowered can they become true agents of transformation.

In this vision, what is often referred to as *educator training* is reimagined as the cultivation of communities of practice. This shift is not merely semantic: while *training* can suggest a vertical model in which knowledge is transmitted from expert to novice, *communities of practice* foreground reciprocity, collective responsibility, and the co-construction of meaning, sense of purpose and solidarity. Within such communities, educators engage in sustained dialogue, mutual support, and shared critical reflection on the political, historical, and ethical dimensions of their work. Rather than positioning educators as passive recipients of pre-packaged competences, these spaces nurture them as active participants in an ongoing process of transformation—one that seeks to reclaim the emancipatory potential of education

The role of institutions here is critical: they must actively support these communities by ensuring the time, resources, and spaces needed for sustained exchange and collaborative inquiry. Without institutional commitment, the risk is that such initiatives remain isolated or dependent on individual goodwill. By embedding communities of practice into the rhythms of school life, professional learning becomes a site for solidarity, dismantling exclusionary practices, and reimagining the school as an active participant in building a more democratic and inclusive society.

Collective narrative practices and collective storytelling as a transformative process

Building on the principles of equity, relationality, and democratic knowledge production, one particularly promising approach for facilitating *critical auto-reflexivity* is the use of collective narrative practices (White & Epston, 1990; White, 2007; Denborough, 2008, 2018). These practices, which I have also integrated into part of the empirical work in this thesis (Chapter 12 and 13) , can act as powerful catalysts for fostering both critical consciousness (*conscientização*, Freire, 1970) and critical action (Cavazzoni et al., 2023).

Originally developed to support communities affected by collective trauma (Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2006), collective narrative practices have since expanded into a broader pedagogical and

political approach. They create spaces where lived experiences are not only voiced but collectively examined, enabling recognition, transformation, and solidarity. Rooted in principles of inclusion, social justice, and wellbeing, these practices treat knowledge as something generated *with* participants, rather than delivered *to* them.

In this sense, *critical consciousness* refers to the ongoing process through which individuals and groups learn to perceive and question the social, political, and economic contradictions that sustain inequality, and to act collectively against them (Freire, 2000). As Cavazzoni and colleagues (2023) explain, critical consciousness unfolds through two interrelated and cyclical dimensions: *critical reflection*—the awareness of how systemic and historical forces shape oppression—and *critical action*—the engagement in individual or collective practices that seek to transform those conditions. Within feminist and intersectional frameworks (hooks, 1994; Moane, 2009), this process links the personal, the collective, and the political, moving from the recognition of everyday subjugation to shared acts of resistance and change.

Within this perspective, *collective narrative practices* may serve as a concrete methodology for cultivating such awareness and action. Through storytelling, participants are not merely recounting events—they are actively constructing new shared meanings, renegotiating roles, and surfacing emotions, tensions, and insights that might otherwise remain invisible or scattered. In this way, narrative practices perform a role comparable to that of pedagogical supervision. Yet, the term "supervision" inadequately captures their horizontal, dialogical, and relational nature. What is envisioned here is a form of professional learning that is lived and co-created—a formative process emerging directly from the voices, contexts, and realities of those involved.

For such practices to be effective, they must be continuous rather than episodic. Occasional workshops, while valuable, are insufficient to build the trust, depth, and collective memory necessary for genuine transformation. Embedding narrative practice sessions into the rhythm of the school year allows group dynamics to mature over time, facilitates deeper self-disclosure, and anchors reflection in the ongoing realities of educational work.

The impact of these practices unfolds across multiple levels:

- Individual level – They nurture self-awareness and professional reflexivity, encouraging educators to examine their positionalities, assumptions, and emotions.
- Cultural and social level – When extended to the broader school community, they enable dialogue between diverse epistemologies, fostering spaces where multiple cultural perspectives can coexist equitably and be woven into shared projects, the so called pluriversal world advocate by postcolonial scholars (Mignolo, 2018).

- Political level – Narrative practices create conditions for counter-narratives to emerge—stories of schooling and inclusion told by those who live them daily. In these spaces, participants move from being objects of discussion to *subjects who narrate*, articulating their own interpretations, challenges, and aspirations. These narratives can contest normative discourses, expose structural inequities, and imagine alternative futures.

Ultimately—and most importantly—collective narrative practices should not be understood merely as a *training technique* or professional development tool. Rather, they represent a sustained, everyday practice of reflection, care, and renewal. By emphasizing dialogue, relationality, and shared meaning-making, these practices reimagine professional learning as a democratic and participatory process of knowledge-building—one that places care at its centre, values diversity as a source of collective enrichment, and recognizes the ethical and political agency of every member of the educational community.

15.2 Organization

Another crucial aspect intimately connected to the wellbeing of educators concerns the organizational structure of municipal early childhood education services (0–6 years). This issue is particularly significant in light of the findings from the qualitative phase of this doctoral research, which highlight that educator wellbeing is shaped not only by interpersonal relationships—with colleagues, families, children, and other staff—but also, and profoundly, by the relationship with the institution itself, at multiple levels.

Educators often describe a perceived lack of institutional support and recognition from higher-level administrators, coupled with rigid bureaucratic procedures and the imposition of standardized rules that frequently clash with the specific realities of their work environments. These tensions create a climate of frustration and disempowerment, eroding the capacity of schools to respond flexibly and compassionately to the real needs of their communities.

Decentralizing governance and strengthening school autonomy

In this regard, a move toward a more decentralized governance model appears not only desirable, but necessary. Each school is a unique ecosystem, shaped by its social, cultural, and economic context. As such, granting individual schools' greater autonomy in both pedagogical and operational decisions is essential to ensure responsive and effective educational practices. While the municipality of Genoa has already taken steps in this direction—such as dividing the city into territorial zones, each overseen by designated coordinators—there remains much room to expand and deepen this approach.

One proposal, emerging directly from fieldwork, is to introduce a rotating leadership model (Davis & Eisenhardt, 2011) within each school, whereby a educator—someone already embedded in the daily life of the institution—assumes the role of internal coordinator or "school leader" for a set term

(e.g., one academic year). This figure, drawn from the teaching staff, would be intimately familiar with the pedagogical realities and contextual challenges of the setting. The position would not be imposed from the outside but conceived as a form of community stewardship, shared in turn among educators as part of a collective commitment to the school's development.

To make such a model viable, it is also imperative to ensure that each school is equipped with a degree of financial autonomy, allowing staff to collaboratively decide how best to allocate resources based on local priorities. These decisions would be made in dialogue with the school community, promoting not only flexibility but shared responsibility and democratic participation.

Reducing bureaucratic burdens and increasing flexibility

A further pressing concern, widely reported by participants, is the excessive bureaucratization of daily tasks, which drains time, energy, and creativity from educators. Many report spending disproportionate amounts of time on documentation, reporting, and compliance with administrative protocols—tasks that, while important, often feel disconnected from their core educational mission. To address this, a co-designed process of bureaucratic simplification—developed in partnership with educators and school staff—could serve as a starting point for reclaiming time and professional autonomy.

Moreover, the issue of rigid and uniform regulations presents significant obstacles to the realization of truly inclusive and equitable education. Take, for example, rules governing arrival and dismissal times or restrictions around food consumption. These regulations, though well-intentioned, often reflect assumptions about the lives of stable, full-time working families—an assumption that does not hold in many urban and highly marginalized areas.

Educators in this study observed that many families, especially those with migrant or precarious employment status, face highly irregular and unpredictable schedules. Expecting these families to comply with fixed entry times—designed around normative, stable work hours—can lead to unnecessary exclusion or shame. Rather than penalize deviation from the norm, schools should be empowered to adapt schedules and procedures based on the lived realities of their communities, recognizing that equity sometimes requires flexibility, not uniformity.

Similarly, food policies can have exclusionary effects when not rooted in local knowledge and common sense. In some neighborhoods, children arrive at school without having eaten—and may not have access to food outside of school hours. While schools are not legally obligated to provide additional meals, acts of solidarity and care—such as allowing families to share food, or organizing informal support among staff and parents—can make a profound difference. As several educators suggested, enabling children to bring food from home and share it in community moments, when appropriate, could offer dignity and nourishment without bureaucratic rigidity.

These examples reveal the limits of one-size-fits-all regulatory frameworks, which are often designed around a "standard" user profile that excludes many of the most vulnerable. What is needed, instead, is a paradigm shift: from rigid, top-down compliance models to guiding principles and flexible protocols that can be interpreted, negotiated, and adapted by those closest to the ground.

Ultimately, this is not a call for disorder or institutional chaos, but for context-sensitive governance, where local knowledge, professional trust, and democratic participation guide decision-making. Educators are not merely executors of policy—they are co-constructors of public service. Their insight into the community's needs, combined with a deep understanding of pedagogical processes, makes them uniquely positioned to lead meaningful change—if they are given the trust, tools, and autonomy to do so.

Building networks and bridging communities

Additionally, another crucial organizational strategy is to foster stronger connections between different schools—particularly those operating in marginalized areas. Building inter-school networks and promoting peer-to-peer exchange among educators, staff, and families can act as a form of 'bridging communities,' where knowledge is not imposed top-down but circulates horizontally, rooted in shared experiences and local practices. These networks offer opportunities for co-learning, collective problem-solving, and the co-construction of pedagogical approaches that respond to diverse realities.

In the framework of this research, which centers on epistemic justice and transformative educational spaces, such horizontal exchanges are not peripheral—they are essential. They break the isolation of individual schools, enable the recognition of plural knowledges, and foster solidarity across different contexts. Bridging communities can thus become both a method and a metaphor: a way to connect struggles, amplify voices, and build a more resilient and reflective educational ecosystem.

In reimagining the organization of early childhood education services, especially in socioeconomically diverse and structurally marginalized areas, we must recognize that structural justice begins with institutional flexibility. Only when schools are empowered to adapt to their local realities—supported by educators who feel valued, resourced, and recognized—can we begin to build accountable, responsive, and socially just educational ecosystems.

However, institutional empowerment must not be limited to the internal functioning of single schools. It must also extend outward—toward the creation of inter-school networks and alliances that break isolation and foster solidarity. By bridging communities, we can generate horizontal spaces of knowledge exchange, where the everyday wisdom of educators, families, and students circulates beyond institutional boundaries. These connections allow schools to co-construct educational strategies grounded in shared struggles and aspirations, rather than imposed templates. In this way,

structural justice is not only a matter of what happens within schools, but also of how schools relate to one another—as agents of collective transformation within the broader public sphere.

15.3 Institutional responsibility, structural precarity, and political participation

The wellbeing of educators and the creation of inclusive, supportive environments for children cannot be ensured through interpersonal care or classroom practices alone. They are directly shaped by institutional responsibility—by how schools are resourced, staffed, and governed. Starting from this premise, one of the key findings from the qualitative phase of this research concerns the absence or precarious positioning of essential support staff in early childhood education.

In Genoa, as in many other Italian cities, support educators (*insegnanti di sostegno*) are frequently outsourced to private cooperatives contracted by the municipality. While this outsourcing model is often more cost-effective for local governments—given that cooperative-employed staff receive lower wages and weaker contractual protections—it has profound and far-reaching negative consequences.

Support educators face chronic job insecurity, low pay, and lack of recognition, which prevent them from investing in long-term school projects or committing fully to a shared educational mission. Contracts are typically renewed on a yearly basis, forcing many to seek secondary employment to survive. For children, this instability means a revolving door of reference figures, which undermines the stability and continuity essential for emotional security, cognitive development, and meaningful inclusion.

A constantly shifting support workforce fragments the educational community, making it impossible to form stable teams capable of co-constructing and sustaining a long-term vision for socially just education. Support educators—central to the inclusion of children with disabilities, language barriers, or complex socio-emotional needs—are often excluded from staff planning and professional development, further marginalizing their role.

These human resource challenges are compounded by structural deficits. In socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, school buildings are often old, deteriorating, and architecturally unsuitable for contemporary pedagogical needs. Some are spread across multiple levels or separate buildings, physically dividing staff and children and limiting collaboration. Chronic understaffing forces educators to absorb multiple roles, intensifying burnout and reducing their capacity to address children's needs with care and intentionality.

Such conditions are not simply the result of logistical oversights—they are the outcome of political choices. Funding allocations, contractual arrangements, and infrastructure investments reflect broader social priorities. The fact that schools serving marginalized communities receive fewer resources, less staff stability, and minimal infrastructure renewal is a clear symptom of political neglect. As long as

cost-saving takes precedence over justice and sustainability, inequality will remain structurally embedded in the educational system.

From this perspective, political participation is not optional but an ethical and professional responsibility. It is not enough for schools to adapt to scarcity—they must also challenge it. This means engaging in advocacy to demand fairer funding models, long-term workforce investment, and equitable infrastructure planning. Participation can take many forms: formal petitions, voting, meeting with local and national representatives, organizing collective campaigns, forming alliances between schools and civil society groups, collaborating with unions, and building cross-sector coalitions.

However, in contexts where participation is weak or absent—due to isolation, burnout, or fear of retaliation—specific strategies are needed to make it possible:

- Create safe internal spaces. Before educators can engage in external advocacy, they need protected spaces within their own institutions to share concerns, reflect on experiences, and explore collective solutions. “Safe” here means free from fear of retaliation, administrative sanction, or interpersonal conflict, and governed by agreed-upon principles of confidentiality and mutual respect. These spaces could take the form of regular peer-led meetings, facilitated dialogues, or reflective practice groups. They allow educators and support staff to identify shared problems, reduce feelings of isolation, and build the trust and solidarity necessary for sustained political engagement. In early childhood contexts—where emotional labour is high and resources often scarce—such spaces are vital for recharging, strategizing, and transforming frustration into coordinated action.
- Form inter-school alliances. Individual schools—particularly those in marginalized communities—often face similar challenges but work in isolation. Inter-school alliances break that isolation, enabling educators to pool resources, share strategies, and coordinate advocacy. These networks might be geographic (linking schools within a district) or thematic (linking schools facing specific inclusion challenges). Regular exchanges, joint events, or collaborative projects can create a stronger collective voice, harder for policymakers to ignore. They also prevent the “divide-and-conquer” dynamic, where institutions compete for limited resources rather than working together to expand them. In early childhood education, this could mean a cluster of municipal preschools jointly advocating for stable support staff contracts or shared access to specialist services.
- Include families and community members. Sustainable change in education systems requires the involvement of those most affected by inequalities: families and local communities. Including them means moving beyond token consultation to genuine co-design of advocacy

goals and strategies. Families can bring first-hand knowledge of how policies play out in daily life, especially regarding arrival times, food policies, and access to support services. Community participation also lends legitimacy and broader social reach to campaigns, reframing issues as public concerns rather than "educator complaints." In contexts with high migrant or racialized populations, involving families can also challenge dominant narratives and ensure that advocacy agendas address the structural racism and exclusion these groups face.

- Encourage unionization. Union membership remains one of the most effective mechanisms for negotiating structural improvements in pay, working conditions, and staffing levels. In early childhood education, where many support workers are outsourced or employed on temporary contracts, unionization can be particularly powerful for addressing job insecurity. Collective bargaining shifts negotiations from individual requests to formalized agreements backed by collective power. Unions can also provide legal advice, organize strikes or work-to-rule actions, and link local struggles to national campaigns for public education investment. Importantly, union advocacy should be connected to broader social justice aims, aligning improvements in educator wellbeing with demands for equitable, high-quality education for all children.

This form of engagement goes beyond advocating for better working conditions—though that remains essential. It also involves solidarity with the communities schools serve, particularly racialized, migrant, and marginalized families who face systemic discrimination in housing, healthcare, and employment. Educators in this study reported daily encounters with such injustices: mothers stigmatized for wearing the hijab, Black families denied housing due to racialized stereotypes, migrant parents juggling multiple precarious jobs without any institutional flexibility.

These structural oppressions do not stop at the school gate; they shape children's learning, identity, and sense of belonging. A child whose family is denied dignity and rights will carry that burden into the classroom. Educators, therefore, must respond not only pedagogically but politically—recognizing the interdependence between educational wellbeing and broader social justice.

Importantly, political participation should not rest solely on the shoulders of educators or individual schools. Municipal institutions must also play an active role in promoting and sustaining it—while ensuring that it remains grounded in bottom-up processes. This means creating structures for ongoing communication between schools, local authorities, and community actors; providing resources and logistical support for collective initiatives; and recognizing advocacy as a legitimate and necessary part of educational work. While participation cannot be imposed, it can be actively nurtured through these enabling conditions.

In conclusion, the political and the pedagogical are inseparable. Addressing structural precarity, ensuring stable and valued workforces, investing in adequate infrastructure, and fostering collective advocacy are not peripheral to education—they are its foundation. Participation is both the means and the outcome: by engaging collectively in political life, educators, institutions, and communities can transform schools from spaces of managed scarcity into institutions rooted in dignity, equity, and the real possibility of change.

These three dimensions—communities of practice, organizational change, and political participation—are not separate or self-contained; they form an interconnected ecology that both sustains and amplifies transformative potential. Communities of practice cultivate what Freire (1970) terms *conscientização*—a shared critical awareness that enables educators, families, and students to unveil the structural roots of exclusion and imagine alternative futures. As Walsh (2018) reminds us, such spaces are not merely arenas of dialogue but political and epistemic projects that disrupt inherited hierarchies and weave together plural knowledges.

Organizational and structural transformations, in turn, provide the tangible conditions—time, resources, autonomy, and recognition—necessary for this critical awareness to take root in daily life. They operationalize the *ecology of knowledges* described by de Sousa Santos (2014), where local, experiential, and academic insights coexist and shape the governance, routines, and relationships within schools. When institutions reorganize themselves to be more flexible, equitable, and responsive to local realities, they not only remove practical barriers to inclusion but also signal that participation is possible, valued, and effective.

This institutional groundwork makes it easier for the reflective practices emerging within communities of practice to move beyond internal dialogue and into coordinated political action—whether through advocacy, alliances, or collective campaigns. In this way, professional learning, structural change, and civic engagement form a virtuous cycle: critical awareness nurtures the capacity and will to act; organizational transformation legitimizes and facilitates that action; and political participation, once activated, feeds back into the learning cultures and governance models that sustain it.

Through this interweaving of pedagogical, organizational, and political work, interculturality may cease to be a technical objective or a superficial celebration of diversity. It becomes what Walsh (2018) describes as a “critical, political, and epistemic project”—a living, collective practice that actively reshapes power relations, deepens epistemic justice, and affirms the shared responsibility of educators, institutions, and communities in building schools rooted in dignity, equity, and the real possibility of transformation (Contini, 2023).

The reflections developed in this dissertation converge toward a single point: education cannot be transformed in isolation. Pedagogical practices, organizational change, and collective participation are essential, but they remain fragile if they are not supported by structural and political commitment.

15.4 From critical consciousness to critical action

This section presents a consequential implication that emerged after the collective narrative experience with one of the two participating schools — the kindergarten.

At the end of the analytical phase of the PhD, following the principles of community psychology (Alby, F. et al., 2014; Colucci & Lester, 2025) and drawing on the theoretical insights of feminist and situated research (Haraway, 1988; Hill Collins, 1990) which informed this part of the work, I returned to the participating schools to share the findings with their respective communities. When I entered the kindergarten, ready — and admittedly a little afraid — to condense three years of work into a thirty-minute presentation, something happened that rendered that synthesis unnecessary.

The educators welcomed me with a disarming sentence:

> *"Chiara, we've changed everything! There are no sections anymore!"*

They then guided me through what had once been the "red," "blue," and other classrooms, showing me that those fixed sections had disappeared. In their place stood open ateliers: symbolic play, graphic-motor, sensory, and more.

Unlike before — when children began the day divided into fixed groups, remaining in the same classroom with the same teacher and peers — now children could freely choose which atelier to join. Educators rotated across spaces, engaging with different groups and activities. Movements are guided by one simple, relational rule: if an atelier is full, those inside and those waiting would talk, agree, and take turns. The doors remained open; everyone moved with awareness and consideration of others.

That scene deeply moved me. I immediately recalled a reflection about the States and the borders that had surfaced during our collective narrative work, as we discussed the "storms" occurring in our lives and schools:

> *"States oppress and contain. They are constructions made by men — not by women, not by mothers — who decided to divide the world in two. […] We are forced to talk about inclusion because there are borders, residence permits, uncertain citizenships. But it shouldn't be like that. We should simply be able to live well together. […] Yet the cuts, the leaking roofs, the cold food, the dirt, the precarity… they all tell us: manage on your own."*

By examining the image of their storms (Chapter 12, Results section, Image 5), it is also possible to grasp the magnitude of this storm that they identified and discussed—it was the largest of all.

Standing in those open ateliers, I realized that what I was witnessing was far more than a pedagogical reorganization. It was the passage from critical consciousness to critical action — a practice that transforms premises: a concrete attempt to undo the very boundaries that make "inclusion" necessary in the first place.

This local, everyday transformation speaks directly to the broader politics of migration and borders. In a world where many cannot move, settle, or belong where they might live well — while others can — those open doors quietly rehearse a different order of things: movement as a shared right, belonging as a relational process, negotiation instead of gatekeeping, and care instead of surveillance. Within the microcosm of a municipal kindergarten, educators were experimenting with ways to dismantle internal frontiers and to cultivate spaces where circulation, choice, and encounter are both possible and meaningful.

For this reason, I have placed this episode at the end of the practical implications of this dissertation. It represents the lived hinge between critical consciousness and critical action. The three areas of intervention outlined above — communities of practice, organizational change, and political participation — find in this example a tangible synthesis. The *conscientização* nurtured in dialogical spaces becomes institutional design (open ateliers, rotating roles, shared rules) and, at the same time, a civic stance that challenges the logic of fixed borders by modeling reciprocity, negotiation, and shared responsibility.

This moment also reminds me that research does not end here. Returning to the field did not close a cycle; it opened a conversation. Research can indeed be a space of oppression — when it extracts, categorizes, and distances. Yet it can also be a space of liberation and transformation — when it returns, listens, co-constructs, and stays. This is only one among many powerful examples that make me believe in the generative potential of research when it remains accountable to those who inhabit the everyday life of the communities we are working with.

Therefore, rather than offering a final word, I prefer to keep the doors open: to sustain the communities of practice that made this shift imaginable; to advocate for organizational arrangements that protect time, trust, and autonomy; and to engage, together with families and local actors, in the political work required to confront structural precarity and the injustices of bordering.

If the title that opens this dissertation asks, *"Why are we forced to talk about inclusion and interculturality?"*, this epilogue offers a response in practice: we transform the premises — hoping that, one day, we may no longer need to talk about inclusion because no one is kept at the threshold.

16. Conclusion

This thesis has traced a complex path that weaves together theory, lived experience, and empirical research. Conceived within an institutional project on interculturality in early childhood education services, it gradually evolved into a transformative journey—personal, professional, and collective.

The research began by engaging with mainstream paradigms of interculturality, which often frame cultural difference as something to be managed through individual competences. While these models offered useful starting points, they proved insufficient to capture the realities of educational contexts marked by inequality, marginalization, and systemic injustice. Through dialogue with critical, feminist, and decolonial frameworks, I came to understand interculturality not as a neutral technique, but as a political practice and a space of resistance.

The four empirical studies illustrated this shift. They revealed that educators' well-being is inseparable from recognition and validation of their intercultural practices; that interculturality and inclusion emerge in everyday negotiations entangled with power relations; that both educators and parents develop subtle yet powerful strategies of resistance and care which remain largely invisible to institutions; and that migrant parents, far from being passive recipients, are active agents who reshape educational spaces and community relations.

Taken together, these findings suggest that interculturality cannot be reduced to "diversity management." It must instead be understood as a collective process of renegotiating power relations, challenging structural inequalities, and co-creating just and plural educational environments.

The Genoese context, which also served as the fieldwork site for this thesis, offers a telling example. As Bartolini (2023) reminds us, projects such as *Laboratorio Migrazioni* were extended to nursery schools and kindergartens (for example, at the Garrone preschool in Valpolcevera), where migrant parents were actively involved in educational activities and intercultural programs. These initiatives opened spaces of dialogue between educators and families, helped reduce parental isolation, and allowed institutions to recognize cultural and linguistic pluralism from the earliest years. Yet, despite their positive outcomes, such projects seldom continued beyond their pilot phases: constrained by cuts to local welfare budgets, dependent on short-term project logics, and lacking sustained political commitment, they gradually disappeared. As Ambrosini & Torre (2023) also argue, the Genoese case illustrates how education, from preschool to secondary school, functions simultaneously as an engine of integration and as a mirror of broader inequalities in contemporary multicultural societies.

This case demonstrates that meaningful and lasting change cannot be achieved if we limit our gaze to individual or meso levels alone—educators' competences, parental involvement, or local school dynamics. Without political commitment, structural investment, and epistemic reorientation, even the most innovative projects risk remaining fragile, temporary, and easily erased. As Contini (2023)

reminds us, schools are not neutral containers: they are public spaces where inequalities, conflicts, and possibilities are negotiated daily. Interculturality, therefore, demands not only pedagogical adjustments but also political responsibility and epistemic shifts: a willingness to question which knowledges are legitimized, which futures are imagined, and whose voices are heard in the making of education.

Here Walsh's (2005) notion of *interculturalidad crítica* becomes central. Interculturality must not be reduced to celebrating diversity or promoting tolerance within existing structures. It requires confronting the coloniality of power and knowledge, and working toward structural transformation that recognizes other ways of knowing, being, and relating. Without this epistemic and political horizon, intercultural programs risk becoming symbolic gestures rather than engines of social justice.

Crucially, this awareness does not emerge from theory alone but from the situated knowledge of educators themselves. As one educator poignantly remarked during fieldwork, *"we should ask ourselves why we are forced to speak about inclusion at all."* This statement captures the essence of a critical turn: the problem are not the children , the families or the educators, but the structural conditions that marginalize them and make "inclusion" a necessity. Educators' lived expertise thus becomes epistemic resistance, a resource for reimagining education beyond deficit perspectives.

These reflections resonate with Haraway's (2016) invitation to *stay with the trouble*: to resist the temptation of neat solutions and instead remain with the contradictions, tensions, and partial visions that define educational and social life. This dissertation, too, is situated—born out of specific institutional conditions, political choices, and personal trajectories. Acknowledging this situatedness is not a limitation but an ethical stance: it is a way of resisting the illusion of neutrality and instead embracing accountability, relationality, and responsibility in knowledge production.

From a practical perspective, the thesis highlights the importance of:

- recognizing and valuing the competencies already present among educators and parents, rather than imposing top-down training models;
- addressing structural barriers such as precarity, hierarchical divisions, and the invisibilization of experiential knowledge;
- fostering participatory educational communities where care is practiced as a shared, relational, and transformative act.

Ultimately, this thesis does not close with definitive answers but with openings. Interculturality remains a site of struggle, marked by tensions, resistances, and possibilities. Future research should explore how practices of resistance can be translated into institutional and policy change, and how universities themselves can unlearn colonial complicities to become allies in broader struggles for justice.

If there is one conviction that has emerged through this journey, it is that **inclusion does not mean adding differences to an unchanged system**. It means **imagining and co-creating new forms of coexistence, grounded in dignity, justice, and solidarity**. To embrace Haraway's provocation, it means learning to *stay with the trouble*—remaining with complexity, contradictions, and the unfinished work of building more just and caring educational worlds, holding onto the hope that this shared work of ours might, in some small way, help transform the very conditions that *"force us to speak of inclusion and interculture today"*.

"Our struggle today does not mean that we will necessarily achieve a change but, without our struggle today, perhaps future generations would have to struggle much more.
History does not finish with us. It goes beyond"
(Freire, 1999)

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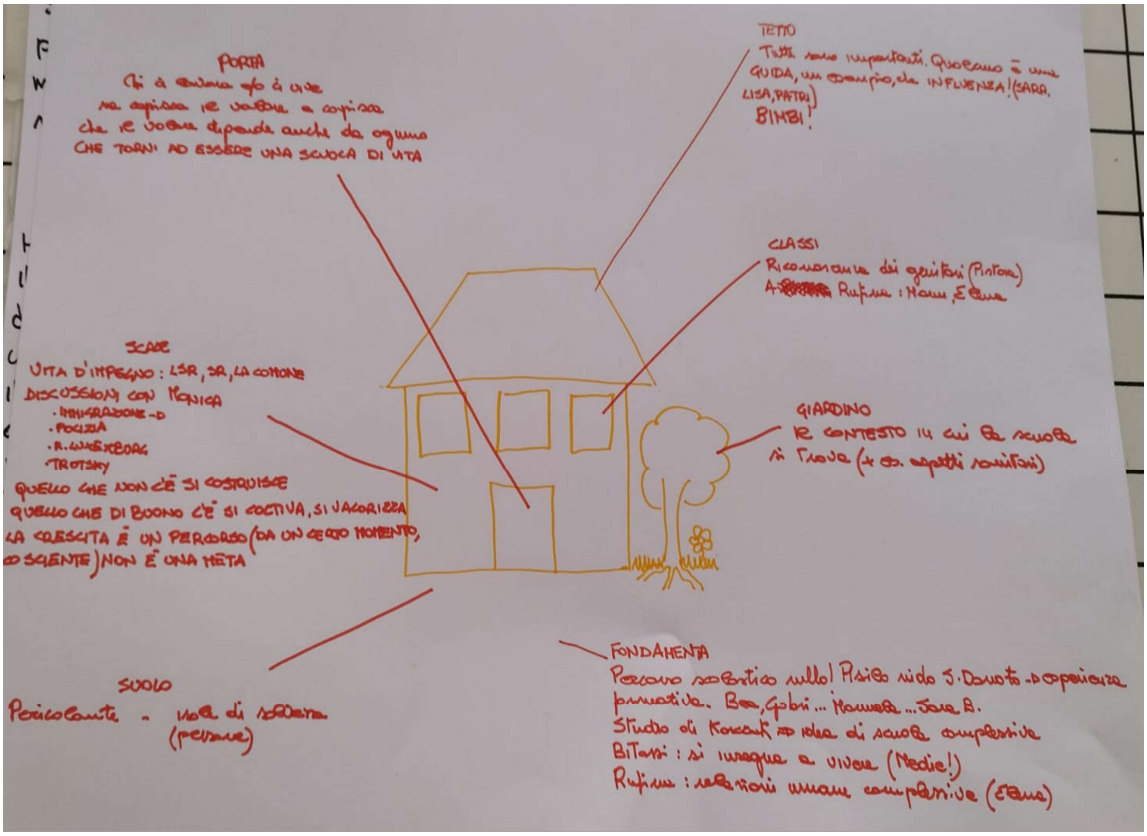
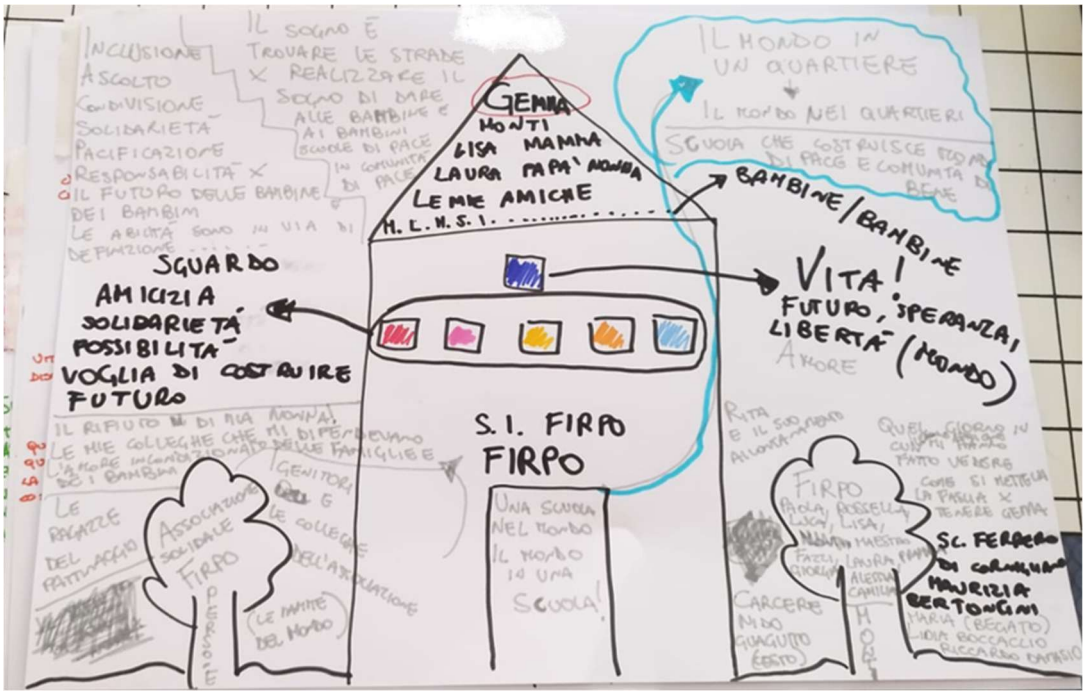
APPENDIX

Appendix A – Examples of School of life created by educators

Example of the school of life created by P12.

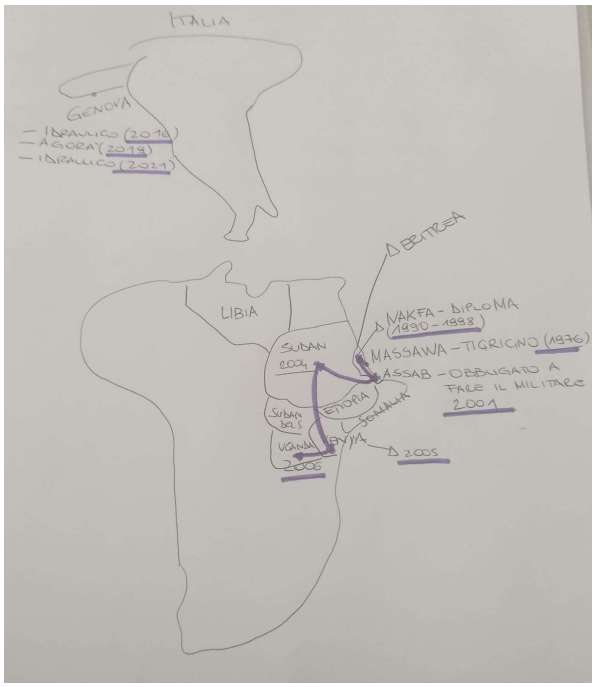


Example of the school of life created by P7



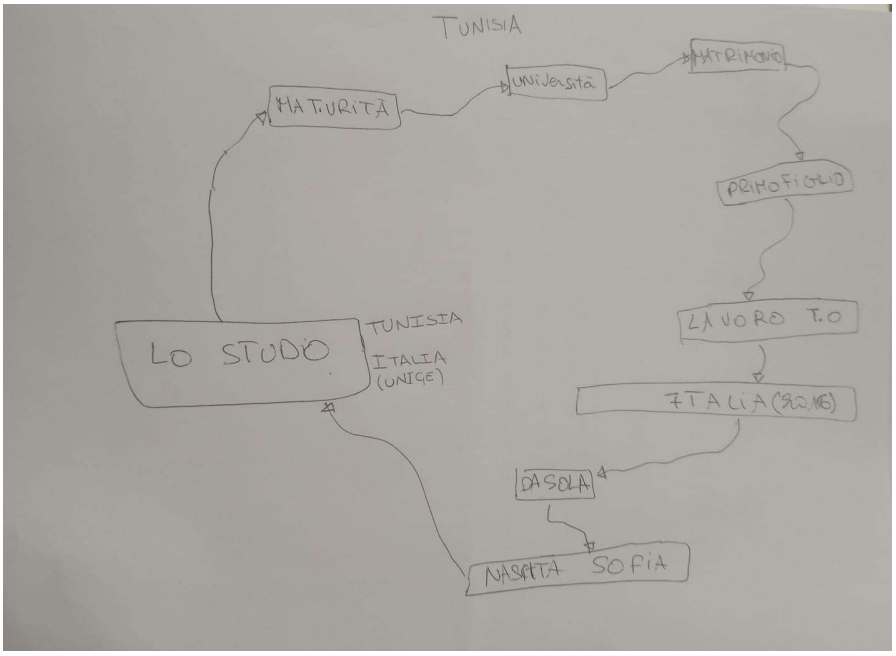
Appendix B – Examples of Maps of history created by parents

Maps of History of P1



A parent from Eritrea which their map and stories speak of the absence of freedom, the realities of war, a harrowing journey, and a profound sense of strength and dignity.

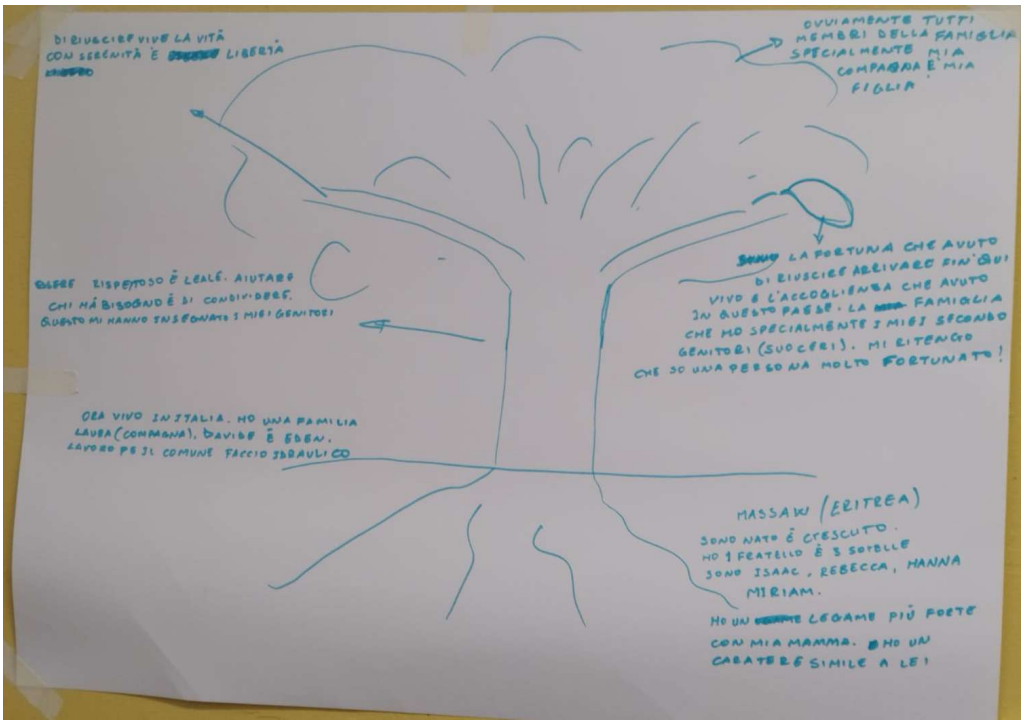
Maps of History of P22



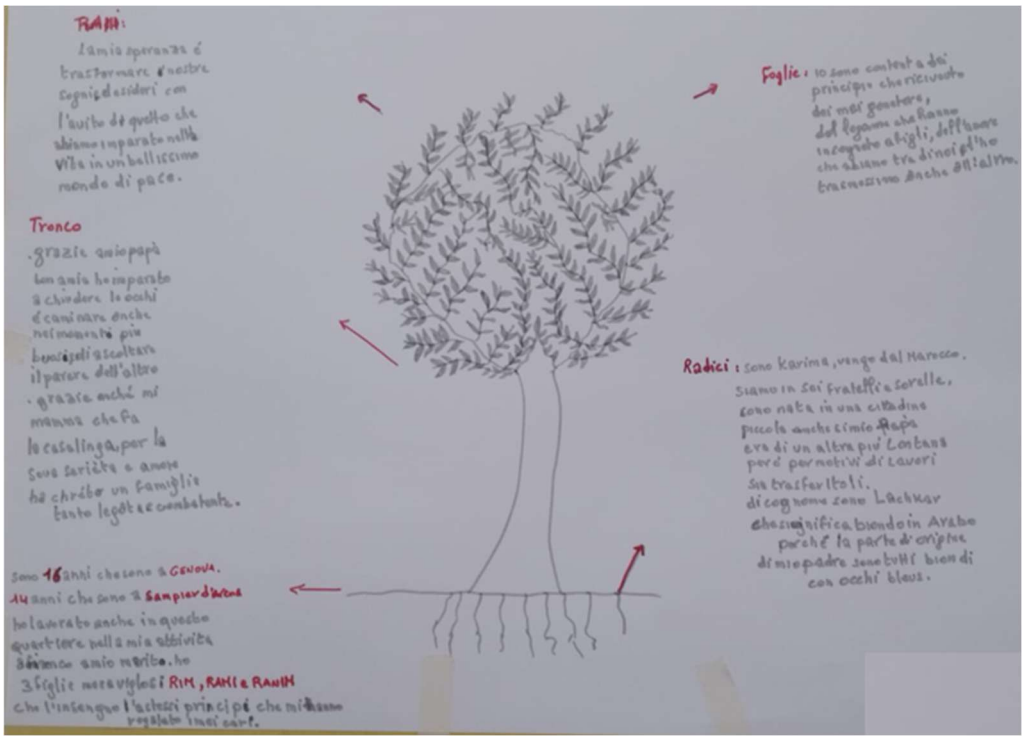
A parent of Tunisian origin, mapped a story centred on the importance of work and education, alongside the deep sense of loneliness she experienced upon arriving in Italy.

Appendix C – Examples of Three of life created by parents

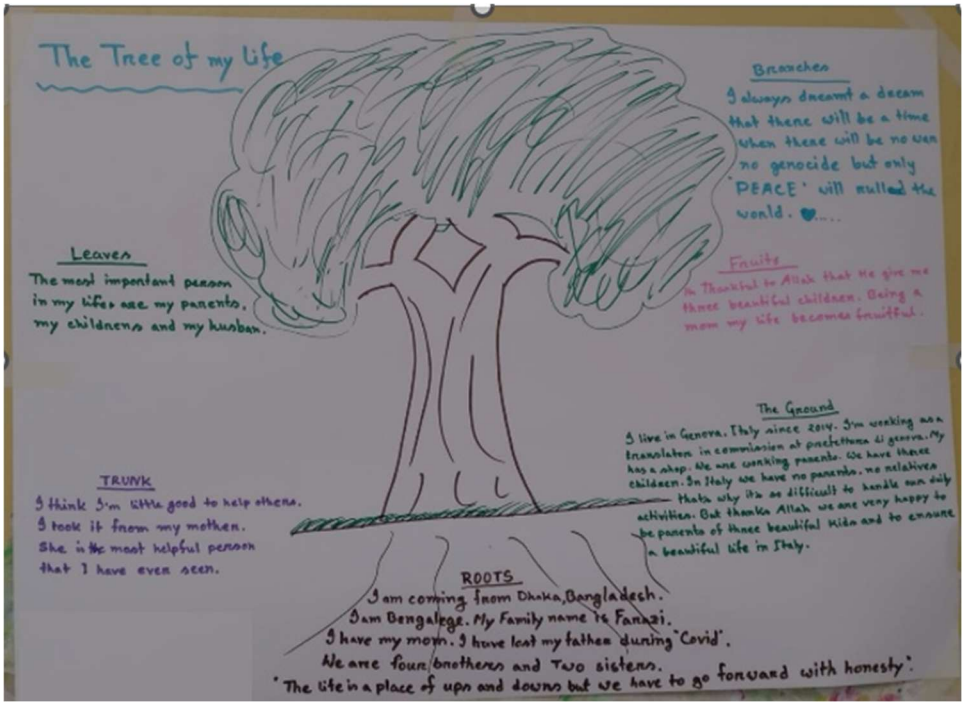
Three of life of P1.



Three of life of P13.



Three of life of P30



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