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ARTICLE

Intercultural education and linguistic and cultural diversity: navigating the tension between policy and grassroots implementation in schools

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Abstract

Over the years, cultural and linguistic diversity in schools across Europe has significantly increased due to migration and refugee flows. In response, international organizations, such as the Council of Europe and the European Commission, advocate intercultural education as both an educational strategy and a social policy tool to foster inclusion, address inequality, and build cohesive societies. This study contributes to the intercultural education literature by addressing an underexplored area: the process of translating intercultural policies into school practices. Using Street-Level Bureaucracy theory and qualitative research in Trento, Italy, it highlights the mechanisms and challenges shaping teachers' practices and the extent of the policy–practice gap. Furthermore, the research also contributes to the Street-Level Bureaucracy theory. It shows that teachers can act as innovators in the policy implementation process. By engaging civil society members, notably students and members of migrant communities, as co-implementers, teachers reshape policy ecosystems through participatory and bottom-up approaches.

Keywords: intercultural education; social inclusion; social policy; migration; integration

Introduction

Over the years, cultural and linguistic diversity in schools across Europe has significantly increased due to the growing number of students with migratory backgrounds,[1] a phenomenon largely attributed to rising immigration and refugee flows (OECD, 2024). In response to these dynamics, prominent international organizations, including the Council of Europe, UNESCO, and the European Commission, have advocated for intercultural education. Their respective initiatives, including the 2008 White Paper, the 2006 UNESCO Guidelines, and the European Commission's 2021–2027 Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion, emphasize intercultural education as the principal paradigm and strategy for addressing and engaging with cultural and linguistic diversity and supporting the integration of migrant students.

Adopting the definitions from the Council of Europe, UNESCO, and the European Commission, this article conceptualizes intercultural education as an educational paradigm aimed at fostering understanding, respect, and dialogue among students, teachers, and families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (UNESCO, 2006, p. 18; Council of Europe, 2008). This focus on dialogue and

[1]I use the term 'migration background' to refer to both students born in the host country and those who arrived later (differences and similarities are detailed in the analysis). While I acknowledge its limitations, I adopt this term heuristically due to its widespread use and recognizability in the literature.

active exchanges distinguishes intercultural education from other educational paradigms, such as multiculturalism, multicultural education, and the assimilationist approach (CoE, 2008; Kymlicka, 2010; Zapata-Barrero, 2016; Joppke, 2018). Multicultural education has been criticized for primarily promoting passive acceptance or tolerance of different cultures without actively fostering dialogue and interaction (UNESCO, 2006; CoE, 2008; EC, 2021). Assimilation, on the other hand, prioritizes the integration of cultural and linguistic minorities, including migrant groups, into the host countries' mainstream language and culture, often with limited consideration for preserving their cultural and linguistic heritage. In contrast, interculturalism emphasizes exchange, dialogue, and mutual engagement between minority and majority groups (CoE, 2008).

By promoting these values, intercultural education aims to reduce segregation by combating prejudice and fostering mutual knowledge and understanding. Additionally, it equips all students with the tools to participate meaningfully in society, regardless of their origins or cultural differences (UNESCO, 2006; CoE, 2008). The promotion of these goals and values constitutes indeed "a strong means for social inclusion and more cohesive societies" (EC, 2021, p. 20). In light of this, intercultural education functions as a social inclusion policy, aligning with the broader goals of social policy to address inequality and exclusion (CoE, 2008; EC, 2021). Fostering social cohesion and inclusion plays a pivotal role in creating a more equitable and integrated society, beginning with the classrooms (CoE, 2008; EC, 2021).

This study contributes to and situates itself within the existing body of research on intercultural education. While most of the existing studies have explored the effects of intercultural-oriented activities on students' intercultural skills development, they have often overlooked the actual intercultural implementation process. In other words, they have left the specific empirical practices and the mechanisms and processes influencing them largely underexamined. Moreover, some of the existing studies have identified a tension (or gap) between intercultural policy and schools' intercultural practices. However, this gap is conceptualized and measured based on student outcomes, such as the development of intercultural skills. By contrast, greater attention is needed on the characteristics, challenges, and loopholes inherent in the actual process of translating intercultural goals from abstract policies and guidelines to concrete school practices. These factors can ultimately lead teachers' practices to either comply with or diverge from intercultural goals and guidelines.

The present study addresses these research gaps by drawing on inductive qualitative research conducted in the city of Trento, in Northern Italy, paired with an interpretation of emerging findings informed by the Street-Level Bureaucracy (SLB) theory (Lipsky, 1980). Based on teachers' own accounts, the article examines how teachers and headmasters translate intercultural education frameworks into concrete practices to deal with and engage with cultural and linguistic diversity in their classrooms. Moreover, it aims to shed light on the processes and underlying mechanisms behind teachers' practices. Grounded in an interpretivist approach, the purpose is not to identify objective, causal, and generalizable explanations. The research instead intends to interpret and highlight the individual experiences and meaning-making processes of participants, and to explore what these accounts reveal about how intercultural education policies are implemented in practice, within the broader policy framework of intercultural education.

In other words, the focus is on teachers' own understanding and meaning-making of the practices they implement, as well as on how they perceive the factors and underlying mechanisms that influence their decisions within the broader policy context. This is done by taking into consideration the specificities of the case study (Trento) and the complexity and variations of human experiences. Teachers' experiences and understandings, initially explored inductively, are then theoretically redescribed in light of the conceptual resources provided by the SLB literature (more detailed explanation in the methods section).

These broader aims are summarized by the following research questions (RQs):

1. Do teachers adopt divergent or compliant intercultural practices in addressing cultural and linguistic diversity?

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2. If a gap exists between formal intercultural education policies and teachers' practices, what is the extent of this gap?
3. How do teachers make sense of the processes and mechanisms that influence or shape their practices and the extent of the policy–practice gap, based on their own understandings and experiences?

Intercultural education in action: student outcomes and gaps

Beyond theoretical debates, empirical research has explored some empirical aspects of intercultural education policies and guidelines, across disciplines such as sociology, pedagogy (e.g., Busse and Krause, 2015; Lau, 2015), and linguistics (Chao, 2013; Santos et al., 2014; Wilbur, 2016). These studies examine the effects of school activities inspired by the intercultural framework on primary and secondary school students. A central focus is how these practices foster interactions between native and migrant students and develop "intercultural skills" (CoE, 2008), that is, multiperspectivity, empathy, tolerance, openness to dialogue, and plurilingual skills. Findings are mixed. Some studies show that these activities enhance intercultural competencies and interactions between students with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Chao, 2013; Wilbur, 2016), while others find skills are superficially acquired and interactions occur independently of these initiatives (Lau, 2015).

Several amongst these studies have identified a tension (or gap) between multi-level intercultural education policies and their practical implementation in schools (Chao, 2013; Lau, 2015; Rapanta and Trovao, 2021). These studies conceptualize the policy–practice gap primarily as a lack of intercultural skills development among students, measured through both qualitative and quantitative methods. Allegedly, interculturally oriented practices are deemed successful when students demonstrate these skills. Conversely, if these practices fail to foster meaningful interactions among students, they are considered ineffective. In such cases, it is argued that a gap exists between intercultural education policies and their practical application (Lau, 2015).

Revisiting intercultural education: exploring the policy–practice gap and implementation process in the eyes of teachers

While most of the existing research on intercultural education focuses on the effects of intercultural education on students, we still miss an in-depth and systematic account of how the intercultural education implementation process unfolds in practice. The majority of these studies seem to assume that intercultural activities are effectively carried out in schools. However, these studies fail to critically examine the specific practices employed and the extent to which they comply with or diverge from relevant policy frameworks. Furthermore, they overlook the processes, mechanisms, and factors that underlie these practices and influence the varying degrees of alignment or gaps between intercultural practices and official policy goals.

A further limitation concerns how the policy–practice gap is understood. Existing studies on intercultural education typically measure this gap by assessing the outcomes of intercultural-oriented education activities, particularly the development of students' intercultural skills (see previous paragraph for details). Nevertheless, this approach overlooks the characteristics, challenges, and loopholes inherent in the actual process of translating intercultural goals from abstract policies and guidelines to concrete school practices. These factors can ultimately lead teachers' practices to either comply with or diverge from intercultural goals and guidelines. An additional significant limitation of this understanding of "gap" is that it conceptualizes the policy-practice tension in a binary way – either the gap is present or absent. No study considers the extent or varying degrees of this gap, which may emerge given the complexity of social reality (Rapanta and Trovao, 2021).

Against this background, the present research intends to shift the focus to how the implementation process actually unfolds in practice. Specifically, the analysis explores **teachers' experiences** in

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translating intercultural goals and principles into everyday school realities, to address and engage with cultural and linguistic diversity, especially linked to migration. The research sheds light on the specific practices teachers put in place, their compliance or divergence from relevant policy frameworks and guidelines, and the varying degrees of alignment or gaps between intercultural practices and official policy goals. Furthermore, this article aims to understand the processes, events, and underlying mechanisms that lead teachers to adopt certain practices and that influence the varying degrees of alignment or gaps between intercultural practices and official policy goals.

Linked to that, the study also wants to introduce a new understanding of the policy–practice gap in the intercultural education research, based on the way the implementation process is carried out, rather than on its effects and outcomes on students. This understanding offers a more nuanced perspective, viewing the policy–practice gap as a continuum of varying degrees, rather than a strictly binary or outcome-based concept. To achieve these purposes, the research integrates intercultural education research with another strand of literature, that is, the Street-Level Bureaucracy literature (Lipsky, 1980).

Key insights from the street-level bureaucracy tradition

The policy–practice gap in the street-level bureaucracy framework

The Street-Level Bureaucracy (SLB) framework, rooted in Lipsky's *Street-Level Bureaucracy: The Dilemmas of Individuals in Public Service* (1980), examines policy implementation as the study of "policy-as-produced" and the mechanisms and "sources of influences" (Gofen et al., 2019) shaping it. In this framework, street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) are frontline workers who interact directly with policy beneficiaries. Applying this to education, teachers are conceptualized as street-level bureaucrats-SLBs (Lipsky, 1980; Tummers et al., 2015). The article adopts this perspective since it helps identify policy–practice gaps or compliant practices and the factors, influences, and mechanisms that underpin these practices, in teachers' experiences and perspectives.

A central concept in SLB literature is discretion – the autonomy SLBs have in applying policies (Lipsky, 1980; Van der Leun, 2003). This discretion allows SLBs to adopt practices that may diverge from official policy goals, potentially creating tensions between policy frameworks and actual practices. In this research, teachers' practices are analysed to determine whether teachers put in place practices that align with intercultural principles and goals – that is, compliant intercultural-oriented practices – or whether they exercise discretionary power to adapt, modify, or even contradict these goals – that is, divergent discretionary practices. Widespread divergence is interpreted as evidence of an intercultural policy–practice gap (Van der Leun, 2003).

Unpacking teachers' discretion: contextual factors, mechanisms, and different extents of discretion in daily practices

The existing literature presents a fragmented understanding of the elements and factors that may influence how street-level bureaucrats exercise discretion, as scholars differ in their perspectives and findings (Meyers and Vorsanger, 2003; Brodkin, 2011; Meyers and Nielsen, 2012; Gofen, 2014; Hupe and Buffat, 2014). To navigate this complexity and integrate the diverse theoretical, methodological, and analytical approaches, this article draws significantly on the recent systematic review by Gofen et al. (2019). This study offers a comprehensive and integrative overview of the extensive body of literature on the topic, providing valuable insights into the interplay of discretion and contextual influences in street-level bureaucratic practices, looking especially at teachers, policemen, and social workers. To the end of the present research, I will focus especially on the key aspects and findings pertaining to teachers as SLBs.

Based on a comprehensive review and synthesis of existing SLB research, Gofen et al. (2019) emphasize the pivotal role of context and contextual elements in shaping how teachers (as well as other SLBs) exercise their discretion. To provide a theoretical and analytical framework, the authors categorize these various contextual elements across multiple levels of analysis (micro/individual, meso, and macro),

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reflecting the complexity of the bureaucratic environment. For clarity, Table 1 in Supplementary Appendix 2 provides a concise summary of contextual factors that impact teachers' practices and use of discretion at the different levels of analysis. The table is not found like that in Gofen's chapter, but consists of my own elaboration, based on the findings reported by Gofen's review study, which in turn incorporates findings from various relevant studies, offering a comprehensive overview of factors influencing teachers' autonomy and discretion.

As street-level bureaucrats (SLBs), like teachers, engage with diverse contexts, their discretionary practices may adapt and evolve, leading to different *mechanisms of discretion.* Among the scholars who have explored these issues, the studies of Gofen et al. (2019), Bruquetas-Callejo (2014), and Tummers et al. (2015) are particularly relevant and insightful for the purposes of this research. As before, I will focus especially on the key aspects and findings from those studies pertaining to teachers as SLBs.

The first mechanism, *coping discretion*, emerges when teachers face one or more types of constraints like the ones illustrated in Table 1 in Supplementary Appendix 2 (e.g., resource and/or financial shortages, organizational deficiencies, unclear policies, etc.). The presence of one or more of these constraints creates action *dilemmas*, forcing teachers to balance strict policy adherence with practical adaptations that address immediate challenges. In such cases, teachers may modify policies to deal with challenges and pressures and to improve their working conditions (Lipsky, 1980; Hargreaves, 1984; Bruquetas-Callejo, 2014; Gofen et al., 2019). The second mechanism, *ethical discretion*, arises when teachers' values or beliefs conflict with official policies. Here, teachers adapt policies to align with their ethical commitments (Osborn and Broadfoot, 1992; Woods, 1994; Bruquetas-Callejo, 2014).

Tummers et al. (2015) further deepen the study of coping strategies during public service delivery. They conduct a systematic review of the main contributions in the field, leading to the development of a classification of coping strategies. This classification identifies five families and nine ways of coping in public service delivery. To synthesize and present the key findings in a concise manner, I include in Supplementary Appendix 2 the original summary table provided by the authors (cf Table 2 in Supplementary Appendix 2). Interestingly, the review also reveals that frontline workers frequently resort to the coping strategy of "moving towards clients" (Tummers et al., 2015, p. 12), demonstrating a strong commitment to providing meaningful public service even under stressful conditions.

Finally, the SLB literature provides tools to explore the extent of discretion and the intercultural policy–practice gap in teachers' practices, building on the work by Evans and Harris (2004). By synthesizing Lipsky's views with those of his critics (e.g., Howe, 1991), they argue that discretion is not an "all-or-nothing" phenomenon. Instead, it operates on a spectrum, influenced by various contextual factors and elements, such as the one highlighted in the relevant literature (e.g., Gofen et al., 2019 – also see Tables in Supplementary Appendix 2). Therefore, the exercise and extent of discretion must be evaluated contextually and, on a case-by-case basis, acknowledging varying degrees of discretion (Evans and Harris, 2004). This nuanced understanding informs the present analysis.

Research site and methodological approach

Using a purposive selection strategy (Patton, 1990), I select Trento as the research site, the capital city of the autonomous Province of Trento, northeastern Italy. Trento offers an ideal setting for this analysis. Namely, while part of the national education system, the province operates under an Autonomy Statute and has been a pioneer in integrating intercultural education into provincial law. Furthermore, foreign students make up 11.9% of the province's student population – above the national average of 10% (IDOS, 2023) – with the highest concentrations in Trento. The city's migrant communities, including Romanians, Albanians, Moroccans, Pakistanis, and Ukrainians, reflect this diversity in local schools. The selected schools are two comprehensive school clusters (*Istituti Comprensivi*):[2] School 1, comprising one primary school and one middle school, and School 2, again comprising one primary school and one

[2]In the Italian education system, this is a unified institution that groups together primary and middle schools.

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middle school. Both Institutes have some of the province's highest proportions of foreign pupils (IDOS, 2023) and explicitly endorse the provincial intercultural education model in their programmatic documents.

Normative context in Italy and Trentino

Since 1999, Italian schools have gained greater autonomy under Decree No. 275/1999, allowing them to adapt structures and practices to local needs. This makes school principals key leaders, tasked with strategic and operational decisions to balance local needs with institutional effectiveness. Key regulatory frameworks for intercultural education are the 2007 Ministry of Education's Guidelines, *The Italian Way for Intercultural Schooling and the Integration of Foreign Students* (MIUR, 2007). They emphasize democratic values, social inclusion, and a cross-curricular approach to intercultural education. The document does not specify how teachers should achieve these goals but grants schools' autonomy to adapt strategies to diverse social and educational contexts, consistent with the 1999 framework.

The 2022 report by the National Observatory for the Integration of Foreign Students, *Intercultural Guidelines: Ideas and Proposals for the Integration of Students from Migrant Backgrounds (National Observatory for the Integration of Foreign Students, 2022)*, reaffirms these principles and highlights two key roles in intercultural education: the linguistic facilitator, who teaches Italian to recently arrived pupils and aids with subject-specific content, and the intercultural mediator, who bridges communication between students, families, and educators. Facilitators are trained internal teachers,[3] while mediators are external figures. The report also outlines two essential actions for intercultural education. First, targeted linguistic support for recently arrived pupils, limited to the initial 3–4 months after their arrival, was carried out primarily by linguists. Native language courses are likewise encouraged, highlighting their role in improving second-language acquisition and fostering cultural/linguistic diversity. Second, multilateral, inclusive activities for all students, migrants, and natives alike, organized by both standard teachers and facilitators, and aimed at fostering intercultural skills, appreciation of diversity, and dialogue.

The normative framework for intercultural education in Trento is established by Provincial Law 5/2006, which governs the Educational and Training System. Article 75 focuses on the enrolment and integration of foreign students. This law aligns with the EU, the Council of Europe, and national guidelines, reflecting similar principles, strategies, and objectives (Legge provinciale 7 agosto, 2006).

Methodological approach

This study adopts an interpretivist research perspective. Accordingly, the purpose of this research is not to identify objective, causal, and generalizable explanations, but rather to interpret and highlight the individual experiences and meaning-making processes of participants (Maxwell, 2009), and to explore what these accounts reveal about how intercultural education policies are implemented in practice – through the lived experiences of frontline school practitioners such as teachers and headmasters.

The research approach is initially inductive, supported by qualitative methods. That is, the research does not begin with structured hypotheses, but instead it allows patterns and themes to emerge spontaneously from the analysis, based on what teachers themselves report. This is also done considering the full complexity of people's experiences and diversity. Thereafter, the teachers' experiences, understandings, and meaning-making processes that emerge inductively for analysis are "theoretically redescribed", that is, read and interpreted in light of the conceptual resources and relevant findings offered by SLB literature.

The analysis relies on semi-structured interviews (between September 2023 and March 2024), structured around three macro-topics. First, teachers are asked about their familiarity with the

[3]Once qualified as facilitators, they exclusively take on this role and no longer teach their original subjects.

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intercultural education paradigm. Second, they are questioned on its relevance to their daily work, particularly in addressing linguistic and cultural diversity in classrooms, and how it informs their practices (first and second RQs). Third, teachers are asked about how and why they adopt certain practices, whether compliant with or divergent from the paradigm, to uncover the processes and mechanisms underpinning their choices, rooted in teachers' own understandings and meaning-making (third RQ). The two headmasters are also interviewed to assess their familiarity with and endorsement of the intercultural paradigm.

Using a purposive selection strategy (Barglowski, 2018; Patton, 1990), I chose 42 participants (details in Supplementary Appendix 1), including headmasters and teachers across various subjects, reflecting intercultural education's cross-curricular emphasis. Thereafter, interviews are analysed using Braun and Clarke (2006)'s six-step reflexive thematic analysis (familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, definition and naming, and writing up). That has ensured theoretical sensitivity and critical engagement (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

As a white, Italian female researcher conducting this study from a position of relative institutional privilege and from outside the immediate school communities studied, I recognise that my social location may have influenced both access to participants and the way data were interpreted. My identity as an external observer—non-local, non-educator, and based abroad—may have shaped how participants chose to represent their practices and perspectives during interviews. At the same time, my shared linguistic and national background with participants may have created a sense of familiarity that facilitated open dialogue. Throughout the research process, I aimed to remain reflexive about these dynamics, aware of how my positionality intersected with power relations and meaning-making in the field.

Findings and analysis

Building on Braun and Clarke's six-step model, in the initial coding phase, I coded all relevant segmented units (i.e., parts of the transcribed answers to interview questions that are relevant to the article's research questions) inductively. Each code captured a single idea, and even similar responses by different participants were coded separately, resulting in numerous overlapping and repetitive codes with low abstraction.

During the theme development phases, I grouped similar codes based on their semantic meaning, eliminating duplicates, to create initial provisional themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). These themes were then refined and theoretically reinterpreted in light of Street-Level Bureaucracy (SLB) literature (i.e., during the definition and naming phase of thematic analysis, cf Braun and Clarke, 2006 – more detailed explanation in Supplementary Appendix 1). The final output consists of a set of main themes – supported by sub-themes where relevant – that synthesize the empirical findings and elevate them to a higher level of abstraction, rooted in SLB research. For clarity and simplicity, only these final themes and sub-themes are presented here, following the full analytic process. A more detailed overview of the thematic analysis process and theme formation is provided in Supplementary Appendix 1.

1. **Familiarity and endorsement of the intercultural education**
2. **Organizational characteristics**
    1. Lack of specialized personnel to deal with language barriers
3. **Client pressures**
    1. Pressures and complaints by parents
4. **Policy characteristics**
    1. Policy vagueness
    2. Policy unresponsiveness to schools' reality
5. **Coping strategies and mechanisms**
    1. Prioritization of unilateral language-learning activities
    2. Arbitrarily Extending linguistic facilitators' role

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6. **Intercultural-oriented practices**
   1. Debates and discussions on culturally significant or controversial topics
   2. Exploring different languages and traditions across cultures.
7. **Practical adaptations fostering intercultural goals**
   1. Strengthening pupils' native languages through foreign communities' involvement
   2. Intercultural exchanges through peer tutoring.

The following paragraphs offer an in-depth explanation of each of these themes, alongside the illustration of the related findings.

Familiarity and endorsement of the intercultural education paradigm

Both headmasters express familiarity with intercultural frameworks and values. Drawing on the leadership role assigned to them by relevant legislation, they have endorsed this paradigm and formally integrated it into the *Piano dell'Offerta Formativa*, the schools' principal programmatic document. The headmaster of School 2 demonstrates particular sensitivity to this issue, citing his prior experience in a resource-constrained school as motivation to ensure adequate resources in his current role. To address potential shortages, he has actively promoted multiple calls for linguistic facilitators, including hiring private facilitators. He has also established training courses on intercultural education to support teachers' implementation strategies. Similarly, most teachers interviewed also demonstrate familiarity with and support for the intercultural education paradigm and its underlying values.

When asked about the relevance of the intercultural education paradigm in their daily practices and the elements influencing their practices (divergent/compliant to intercultural education), an interesting scenario emerges. Several teachers report a number of elements and characteristics that affect (by facilitating or hindering/challenging) their actual capacity to carry out intercultural-oriented activities. The configuration of these factors and influences appears to be highly context-dependent, shaped by the unique features of each educational setting involved. Although these factors emerge inductively and organically from teachers' accounts, a deeper analytical perspective reveals strong alignment with existing street-level bureaucracy (SLB) literature, particularly within the field of education.

Context-related influences and pressures affecting intercultural education's implementation

Access to human resources: shortage vs. availability of linguistic facilitators

Access to human resources, and notably linguistic facilitators, emerges as a significant element in teachers' understandings of their own experiences, particularly in relation to their ability to carry on actual intercultural activities. Drawing on existing literature, this issue can be understood as a meso-level organizational characteristic (Gofen et al., 2019) – that is, as structural and functional elements inherently embedded within schools as institutions. Linguistic facilitators are important due to the growing number of migrant pupils requiring cultural and linguistic support in all classrooms.

The main languages spoken in classrooms include Arabic, Albanian, Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian, and several languages from Pakistan. Recently arrived pupils often struggle significantly with basic oral and written communication. Those born in Italy or settled for several years likewise still face challenges in understanding and using the specialized language of school subjects, both orally and in writing, as used by teachers and textbooks. Due to pupils' varying language difficulties, teachers report difficulties in communicating with them, teaching subject content, ensuring all students can follow lessons, assigning meaningful homework, and effectively assessing student work.

While facilitators are supposed to help with all that, by providing language support, many teachers complain about the insufficient number of these resources (only two per school), compared to the actual number of foreign students and language diversity in classrooms. As a result, it becomes difficult for

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teachers to ensure that migrant pupils can effectively follow lessons and efficiently communicate with them and their families. Against this background, many teachers report increasing difficulty in prioritizing and implementing activities aligned with broader intercultural objectives. Instead, teachers' main priority often becomes to find immediate solutions to the challenges arising from language barriers and limited human resources, to improve their daily working conditions.

While still an important element in teachers' experiences and understandings across both institutes, the shortage of human resources is perceived as less problematic – and it is, in fact, less pronounced – in School 2, in both the primary and the middle schools. Although the number of linguistic facilitators in School 2 remains insufficient to fully meet the schools' needs, the situation is perceived as manageable. This is largely attributed to the presence of a higher (although still not sufficient) number of facilitators compared to School 1, in both the primary and the middle schools. This is due in turn to the headmaster's proactive attention and sensitivity to the issue. The headmaster indeed engages in the promotion of multiple calls for linguistic facilitators, including hiring private facilitators. The discussion section elaborates further on the relevance of this challenge and the differences between the two contexts.

Policy characteristics: vagueness and unresponsiveness vs. improved clarity

Another key factor shaping teachers' capacity to implement intercultural initiatives is the very formulation of the intercultural policy framework itself. For many teachers, the vagueness, inadequacy, and unresponsiveness of intercultural policy frameworks represent a significant challenge to the implementation of intercultural activities. This finding is consistent with key insights from the SLB literature, which highlights policy characteristics as a meso-level influencing element shaping teachers' practices and use of discretion – distinct from school-level organizational factors, such as those discussed previously (cfr Gofen et al., 2019 and Table 1 in Supplementary Appendix 2).

Several teachers reported that existing intercultural policies – whether at the European, national (Italian), or local levels – limit the role of linguistic facilitators to supporting only newly arrived pupils with minimal Italian proficiency. These regulations, however, fail to reflect the realities of the classroom, particularly overlooking the needs of students who were either born in the country to migrant parents or who have been settled in the country for a considerable period. As previously mentioned, many of these students still face significant challenges with Italian and would benefit from specialized language support.

Policy vagueness likewise emerges. Indeed, teachers point out that supranational and national legal guidelines and school programmatic documents lack detailed clarification and concrete examples for organizing intercultural practices. Additionally, according to teachers' responses, this lack of training leaves the guidelines ambiguous and open-ended, failing to clarify how and to what extent, in practice, unilateral activities (Italian language learning) carried out by facilitators should be daily balanced with multilateral activities (such as intercultural exchanges) carried out jointly by teachers and facilitators. Both facilitators and teachers openly say that they would need clearer strategies on how, when, and how much they should work jointly to allocate time and resources between these activities, in empirical terms. Moreover, teachers note that existing guidelines remain ambiguous regarding their role in unilateral language-learning activities for recently arrived foreign pupils. While such involvement is not explicitly encouraged, it is not discouraged either – especially when deemed necessary.

As for the previous findings, policy vagueness and unresponsiveness are perceived as more problematic – and are in fact more pronounced – in School 1. While teachers in School 2 also report such issues, they seem overall less concerned and worried by them. Several teachers in School 2 highlight that the headmaster has organized training courses on intercultural education, by hiring specific personnel to conduct them. These courses are designed to offer practical explanations and examples of intercultural-oriented methods and activities. They likewise provide guidance on how to balance material resources and time between unilateral language learning activities (by facilitators) and multilateral activities (by teachers and facilitators jointly). They also explicitly suggest that, while teachers should collaborate

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with facilitators on multilateral activities that promote intercultural exchange, they should preferably leave unilateral language-learning activities exclusively to facilitators, as these professionals are more adequately prepared and are specifically designated for this role under the current multi-level intercultural framework. Most teachers tell me that after attending such courses, they generally feel they have a clearer and more precise understanding of how intercultural education could be effectively applied in practice and of how to balance the different types of activities in their classrooms. In contrast, such training initiatives have not been organized in School 1.

Clients' pressures: complaints and pressures from parents

A further challenge reported by teachers across all schools is that they occasionally face complaints from parents – both migrant and, particularly, Italian – who view intercultural education as an "extra" that detracts their children from core learning objectives. An additional concern raised by some Italian parents is that the presence of non-native speakers in the classroom slows down the educational progress of their own children. This finding aligns with the general SLB theory individual level contextual factor (e.g., Lipsky, 1980; Gofen et al., 2019), although its relevance to teachers is less pronounced and less commonly emphasized compared to other professions. In this context, parents can be considered clients.

Parents' pressure presents a dilemma for teachers: whether to integrate intercultural education into lessons, risking conflict, or avoid it to prevent confrontation. Again, this challenge is highly context-dependent. Teachers in both institutions acknowledge the presence of this issue, although those in School 2 report feeling less pressured. They attribute this to the training courses, which equip them with strategies to manage conflicts with parents and enhance their confidence and optimism. As previously mentioned, such training initiatives have not been organized in School 1.

Practices and activities carried out by teachers

Coping strategies deviating from the goals of intercultural education policies

When the aforementioned dilemmas and challenges become particularly acute, teachers often report a pervasive sense of frustration and a feeling of being overwhelmed by excessive workload demands. In such contexts, the need to identify immediate solutions and practical strategies to cope with stressful working conditions – and to avoid conflicts with parents (particularly Italian parents) – becomes especially pressing, even at the expense of pursuing intercultural objectives. In light of existing literature, this can be interpreted as an instance of a *coping mechanism* of discretion (Bruquetas-Callejo, 2014; Tummers et al., 2015). That is, the adoption of pragmatic solutions that ultimately lead teachers to deviate from the intended goals of intercultural education policy.

Across the schools, in both the primary and the middle schools of School 1, a common coping strategy is for teachers to use their personal resources – particularly their own time and availability (Tummers et al., 2015, cfr also Table 2 in Supplementary Appendix 2) to tackle the problem of the shortage of available linguistic facilitators helping with language barriers. Specifically, many teachers increasingly take on roles alongside linguistic facilitators in the delivery of Italian language instruction by volunteering extra afternoon hours to organize Italian language classes for non-Italian speakers to further help them with the language (students and parents).

In these same schools, several teachers go even further. In order to devote more time and resources to these extra afternoon teaching hours, they deliberately forgo the implementation of inclusive activities targeting the entire student body – activities intended to cultivate intercultural competencies, mutual understanding, and dialogue. Consequently, such initiatives are largely absent from everyday classroom practice. Teachers who do that explicitly tell me this type of strategy becomes almost inevitable, given the vagueness of intercultural policy guidelines – particularly regarding how to balance unilateral language instruction for foreigners by linguistic facilitators with inclusive, intercultural activities carried out jointly by facilitators and standard teachers. In this context, it is often considered more efficient to

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abandon such activities altogether and to redirect time and energy towards more urgent goals, such as teaching Italian to newly arrived foreign students, rather than investing resources in figuring out how to interpret vague intercultural indications. Additionally, for several teachers, cutting off intercultural activities also serves to minimize potential tensions with parents, by signalling that instructional time is not being diverted from the standard curriculum by intercultural activities.

This strategy can be interpreted as a form of rule-breaking coping strategy. That is, it entails a deliberate disregard for intercultural policy directives that emphasize the importance of balancing language learning activities for non-Italian speakers with intercultural activities for all students. Similarly, linguistic facilitators tend to concentrate almost exclusively on teaching Italian. By contrast, they do not engage in other types of language-related activities that are strongly encouraged by the schools' programmatic documents and by the relevant provincial legislation on intercultural education, such as organizing courses in pupils' native languages.

Finally, another common strategy observed among teachers at the primary school within School 1 is to extend the support of linguistic facilitators to pupils who are not officially entitled to it, thereby *bending* formal intercultural policy rules ("rule-bending" coping strategy, cf Tummers et al., 2015). This includes students no longer classified as "recently arrived" under existing guidelines – such as those born in Italy who continue to face language difficulties, or those who have lived in the country for an extended period but whose eligibility for such support has expired. Teachers tell me this can be a strategy to overcome the lack of linguistic facilitators and the generalized responsiveness of existing guidelines regarding this topic (cfr previous paragraph).

Coping strategies tend to emerge less extensively in School 2. Unlike in School 1, none of the teachers interviewed reported neglecting the implementation of multilateral inclusive activities for all pupils, including both migrants and natives. On the contrary, most teachers prioritize promoting these activities over focusing solely on addressing immediate challenges. Moreover, teachers explicitly state that, when carrying out these activities, they strive to draw inspiration from the intercultural paradigm and reproduce some of the intercultural practices outlined in the documents mentioned above. Some teachers in the school the primary school within School 2 volunteer extra hours, often in the afternoons, to organize Italian language classes (rule-bending coping). Finally, the rule-bending strategies previously illustrated (extending the supervision of linguistic facilitators to students who are not officially designated for support) do not occur in these schools.

Overall, the coping strategies identified here are consistent with previous research on frontline workers, which shows that professionals like teachers tend to cope by "moving towards clients," even under conditions of stress (Tummers et al., 2015). In other words, they often pragmatically adjust – or *bend* – formal rules to prioritize students' needs and well-being, particularly in the case of migrant students facing language barriers.

Interculturally oriented practices

For several other teachers, implementing the principles and objectives of intercultural education takes clear precedence over addressing existing dilemmas and challenges, especially in School 2.

Most of the Italian language teachers interviewed in School 2 report organizing specific classroom activities to explore linguistic and cultural diversity, encouraging students to reflect on the importance of dialogue and mutual respect. These activities include structured debates and discussions on culturally significant or controversial topics, such as the role of women in society and diverse cultural and religious practices, aimed at fostering understanding and preventing prejudice. An example:

> Just a few weeks ago, for instance, a Pakistani girl came to school wearing a headscarf and traditional clothing. Some of the boys started teasing her, so I decided to pause the lesson and try to open a discussion, or at least encourage some shared reflection, on different religious customs and the importance of understanding them […]. I think it made some difference. The girl explained that no

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> one had forced her – it was her choice – and she shared her reasons with us. It was really interesting. I think her classmates also gave it some thought afterward […]. (Teacher from School 2)

Furthermore, several teachers organize group work to bring together students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, fostering a positive approach to embracing diversity. For example, a linguistic facilitator at the middle school within School 2 encourages recently arrived students from various countries to learn basic greetings and common phrases from one another, despite challenges posed by differing language levels.

Other activities, particularly by religious education and Italian language teachers, focus on exploring family traditions across cultures. An Italian language teacher at the primary school within School 2 asked some of her students (ages 9–10) to investigate their family's typical meals, holidays, and ceremonies and present their findings through short presentations. Similarly, at the middle school within School 2, another Italian language teacher is organizing (at the time the interview is conducted) a group project involving students of diverse backgrounds to explore and share traditional music and dances from their respective regions.

Practical adaptations fostering intercultural goals

An additional interesting and unexpected finding emerges consistently in School 1. In their efforts to address existing constraints and challenges, several teachers and facilitators adjust their daily practices in ways that ultimately produce alternative and often unintentional means of achieving intercultural objectives.

Three out of four linguistic facilitators interviewed, working in School 1, report that, since roughly 1 year, they have started to occasionally ask some people belonging to the same minority communities as the migrant pupils they are teaching to assist in teaching Italian to recently arrived pupils. These community members can be pupils' relatives (siblings, uncles, etc.) but also non-family members. Since they have been living in Italy since more time, they are able to support by serving as translators for those pupils. The facilitators tell me that their views on these activities have changed over time. When they started doing it, they saw it primarily as a pragmatic response to the insufficient number of facilitators available. Over time, they started to understand that communities' involvement can even support the implementation of interculturally oriented activities and objectives. Specifically, by involving community members, facilitators feel encouraged and better able to organize and carry out additional activities that would otherwise be difficult to implement. For instance, they have initiated courses not only for teaching Italian but also for strengthening pupils' native languages. These courses are designed and planned by the facilitators, while community members are primarily involved in the practical implementation.

These practices closely reflect and align with the measures and intercultural goals strongly recommended by the relevant national and provincial legislation, reflected in the schools' programmatic documents. Indeed, these documents explicitly encourage teaching native languages alongside the host country's language, recognizing that proficiency in the former enhances the latter while fostering flexibility, curiosity, and an appreciation of diversity – key goals of intercultural dialogue. Thus, these adaptations – though driven by necessity – end up not only tackling practical challenges and dilemmas but also fostering the intercultural objectives embedded in the relevant intercultural policy guidelines at multiple levels. Consequently, at the beginning of the new academic year, the facilitators have requested that school principals formalize these collaborations through temporary paid contracts for community members involved.

Moreover, some general education teachers also implement similar strategies. During regular classes, some teachers rely on students to serve as peer tutors, assisting by translating and helping classmates who struggle with basic Italian or more advanced academic language. Peer tutors can be Italian students or Italian-born students with foreign parents who possess stronger language skills. While the explicit intention of these practices is to address language barriers and compensate for resources and policy limitations, they frequently promote unintended intercultural benefits and goals. They often create new,

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unexpected spaces for promoting veritable dialogue and exchange among students that go beyond purely academic exchanges and support. This dynamic is illustrated by the following quote.

> At first, I simply asked X, a student born in Trento to parents from southern Italy, to help Y, who had recently arrived from Pakistan, with homework during class. But something more started happening. The two became inseparable, curious about each other's lives – X wondered about Y's traditional clothing and dietary restrictions, and Y asked about X's lifestyle. They began visiting each other's homes, bringing their families closer. X's mother even started helping Y's mother with Italian. One day, Y told me, 'Teacher, our families are so similar! X's parents migrated from Calabria and struggled to integrate because they spoke a different dialect, similarly to my family! And both our families have the same tradition of big Sunday lunches, it is amazing, is not?
>
> (Teacher from School 1)

Other teachers reported similar activities, although not all. Others continued to carry out merely language-centred practices, like the ones illustrated above.

Discussion

As for the first RQ (**compliant practices vs. policy–practice gap**), the findings reveal a **nuanced scenario**. Several teachers carry out practices that intentionally deviate from intercultural educational goals set up by the relevant policy documents and schools' programmatic documents. These practices resonate with coping strategies commonly identified in the literature, particularly rule-bending (in School 1, comprising one primary school and one middle school), use of teachers' personal resources (both in Schools 1 and 2), and rule-breaking practices (in School 1, comprising one primary school and one middle school). Instead, other teachers (mostly in School 2) implement activities that intentionally reflect and are inspired by the intercultural education goals. In line with the SLB literature, I interpret the presence of these divergent discretionary practices as a signal of the presence of an intercultural policy–practice gap (Lipsky, 1980; Bruquetas-Callejo, 2014). At the same time, some teachers in School 1 develop innovative, initially unintentional practices that align with intercultural goals, ultimately adhering to the intercultural paradigm through alternative means.

While teachers in all schools engage in divergent practices, **they do so to varying degrees, resulting in different extents of the policy–practice gap between the two Institutes observed** (second RQ). Emerging divergent practices range from adaptations of intercultural principles and goals to meet teachers' practical needs (rule-bending and the use of teachers' personal resources) to coping activities that end up *de facto* empirically contradicting the very intercultural principles and goals (rule-breaking coping strategies). These findings align with Evans and Harris' (2004) argument that discretion exists as a "gradient" (p. 881), influenced by several factors, mechanisms, and processes.

With regard to these mechanisms and processes (third RQ), teachers' own views and experiences underscore the importance of context, in line with findings from previous studies (cfr, e.g., Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2023; Hupe and Hill 2007; Hupe and Buffat, 2014; Gofen et al., 2019 ext.). Specifically, from teachers' accounts, it emerges that the different configurations of contextual meso- and individual-level elements and characteristics (Gofen et al., 2019) are important to understand: (1) whether teachers are compelled to adopt coping strategies or enabled to engage in genuinely interculturally oriented practices; and (2) when such strategies are adopted, the extent to which they simply adapt and bend intercultural rules or go further to even neglect (and somehow contradict) them. The importance of context and contextual factors has already been highlighted in the analysis section. The following section delves further into specific aspects of this discussion.

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The role of context and contextual factors

With regard to point 1 – the importance of context in determining whether teachers are compelled to adopt coping strategies or enabled to engage in genuinely interculturally oriented practices – the analysis reveals that teachers in School 1 consistently identify certain contextual elements (i.e., access to human resources, policy characteristics, and parental pressures), and their unfavourable configuration and interplay in schools, as significant elements impacting their ability to implement actual intercultural activities.

This leads to strong pressures and dilemmas for teachers who respond by seeking immediate coping solutions. These are often perceived by teachers as necessary to manage highly stressful working conditions, even when this comes at the expense of intercultural objectives. Conversely, in School 2, the same contextual elements assume a configuration that is more favourable to the implementation of intercultural education. While teachers still perceive existing policies as inadequate, they feel less pressured and face less pressure from resource shortages, policy vagueness, and language barriers. Consequently, the need for coping mechanisms is less urgent and widespread, leading to a reduced reliance on them (cf. Findings and Analysis section).

As far as point 2 is concerned (the extent of discretion in teachers' coping strategies), the different configuration and interplay of the various contextual factors across the two institutes play again a key role in shaping distinct trajectories of discretionary coping practices. In School 1, the lack of specialized personnel, coupled with the persistent ambiguity surrounding intercultural guidelines – and further compounded by insufficient training on their implementation – acts as a "channel" (Evans and Harris, 2004) for amplifying teachers' discretionary space. In other words, this leads teachers not only to adopt adaptive coping strategies but also to engage in practices that ultimately neglect, and at times even contradict, the principles and objectives of intercultural education. As seen in the analysis, many teachers deliberately cut off from curricula interculturally oriented activities in order to redirect time and resources towards organizing additional extracurricular language classes. They feel justified in doing so, as this strategy allows them to address the shortage of facilitators while simultaneously avoiding the need to invest time and resources in interpreting vague intercultural guidelines.

This particular rule-breaking practice ends up being, *de facto*, more aligned with assimilationist goals (especially from a linguistic perspective) and visions than intercultural ones, thus clashing and contradicting the very core of intercultural education. The idea of re-directing teachers' time and resources towards Italian teaching promotes, in fact, an effort to integrate migrant pupils into the Italian language with minimal attention to, or dialogue with, their own cultures and languages. In contrast, the Council of Europe's, 2008 White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue explicitly rejects an exclusive focus on the host country's language. Instead, it emphasizes exchange, multilateral engagement, and the appreciation and understanding of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Opportunities for mutual dialogue are indeed more likely to emerge through genuinely intercultural activities in the classroom (CoE, 2008). Here, however, we observe an interesting mismatch between teachers' own understandings and accounts and the notions of interculturalism and assimilationism as in the relevant policy frameworks. Indeed, teachers never explicitly mention aligning and/or pursuing any assimilationist purpose but only the need to redirect resources where they are more needed.

A different scenario emerges in School 2. Through the hiring of additional resources, the need for extracurricular Italian language teaching is reduced – though not entirely eliminated. Moreover, by offering concrete examples and guidance, the practical training courses provided in these schools help reduce ambiguity and constrain the discretionary space available to teachers (Evans and Harris, 2004). Interview data confirm this effect, with teachers stating that such training offers much-needed clarity and practical direction on how to balance intercultural activities with language learning. These courses also help define the specific roles of both facilitators and teachers in managing this balance (see previous section).

As intercultural guidelines become more clearly defined and additional human resources are provided, it becomes difficult for teachers to justify the need to redirect time and energy towards

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language instruction by cutting intercultural activities (as in School 1). Not surprisingly, we observe rule-bending practices, adapting intercultural goals to teachers' needs, but we have no instances of rule-breaking coping practices resembling quasi-assimilationist efforts. On the contrary, several interculturally oriented activities are regularly organized, as illustrated in the findings Section.

Conclusions

These findings offer theoretical advancements and practical insights that significantly enrich both the field of intercultural education research and that of Street-Level Bureaucracy literature, too. However, it is important to note that the article does not aim to produce generalizable claims. Instead, it aims at offering a situated and interpretive account of how intercultural education policy is experienced and enacted by frontline school practitioners. By focusing on participants' perspectives and meaning-making, the analysis highlights the importance of context, process, and lived experience in shaping educational practices. Future research would benefit from further exploring these themes in other settings, considering the specific socio-cultural, institutional, and policy environments in which such practices unfold.

Intercultural education as social policy: bridging gaps and promoting inclusion in practice

This article enhances the theoretical discourse on intercultural education by shifting the focus from the traditional subjects investigated – such as theoretical notions or empirical student outcomes – to a detailed examination of how intercultural education unfolds in practice. This process-oriented perspective has revealed the specific practices put in place and the extent to which they comply or diverge from the official intercultural objectives and goals. It has also highlighted the processes, events, and mechanisms driving the implementation of intercultural education. These are all aspects that remained largely under-investigated by existing research on intercultural education.

By exploring these aspects, the study introduces a more nuanced perspective of the policy–practice gap in intercultural education research. While most studies conceptualize the gap in a binary way, based on the effects of intercultural education on students, this article moves a step forward, going beyond simplistic or binary interpretations of success and failure. Building on the SLB, the understanding of the "gap" is based on the way the implementation process is carried out, rather than on its effects and outcomes on students. This perspective provides a more refined understanding, framing the policy–practice gap as a spectrum with varying levels rather than a purely binary or outcome-focused concept. Furthermore, the present research offers a more holistic and grounded approach to intercultural education, highlighting the significance of real-world constraints, adaptations, and contextual factors in translating policies into actual practices.

Beyond its theoretical implications, the findings offer practical guidance for policymakers. While implementation in this article is intended fundamentally as a bottom-up process, policies grounded in practical realities can help bridge the gap between policy and practice, highlighting where targeted support is needed. In cases such as Trento, this gap and the use of discretion often stem from existing material and policy constraints and pressures from parents. By providing teachers with adequate resources, targeted training, and linguistic facilitators, one can reasonably assume that the need for discretionary actions will be reduced. Additionally, the development of adequate strategies to deal with parents' pressure can also support teachers.

All these measures can empower educators to create inclusive, culturally diverse, and cohesive learning environments where all students feel valued and included. By favouring teacher empowerment, these actions fully leverage the potential of intercultural education as an effective social policy tool for promoting social cohesion and inclusion.

Given the key role of intercultural education as a social inclusion policy, analysing the mechanisms, processes, and challenges driving its implementation can offer a deeper understanding of the underlying

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factors that contribute to the success or failure of these policies. This, in turn, can help design policies that are not only inclusive on paper but also applicable in real-world settings. Such policies should address implementation, practical insights for developing effective social policy challenges, and provide educators with the necessary support to foster cohesive, inclusive, and culturally appreciative learning environments.

Understanding intercultural implementation through context: the interplay of micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors in shaping teachers' practices

Most of the results confirm findings from previous literature, while also highlighting specificities that emerge from the cases observed. In line with earlier studies (for example, Bruquetas-Callejo, 2014; Gofen, 2014; Hupe and Buffat, 2014), the present findings further confirm the crucial role of context in understanding the implementation process. Teachers' own views and experiences underscore how contextual factors, and their interplay, shape not only whether they are compelled to adopt coping strategies or are instead enabled to engage in genuinely interculturally oriented practices, but also the degree to which they engage in divergent coping practices when such strategies are adopted. As discussed in the previous section, practices appear to be shaped by a complex interplay and specific different configurations of contextual factors and characteristics – some shared across schools, others more locally specific.

Unlike other studies (Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2023; Riccucci, 2005; Tummers et al., 2015; Gofen et al., 2019), however, teachers' individual characteristics do not clearly emerge as decisive contextual elements behind discretionary mechanisms – at least not for the teachers interviewed in this case study. Instead, other types of individual-level influences appear more relevant, such as parental pressure, as discussed earlier. Nevertheless, due to the qualitative and exploratory nature of this research, this finding may reflect the particularities of the case study and the limited number of participants. Future research could expand on this, involving more schools and teachers, and assessing the role of individual-level teachers' characteristics in shaping implementation and varying extents of discretion in teachers' practices. A mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative insights with a broader quantitative overview, could provide more robust generalization across cases. Instead, meso-level factors, and their different configurations, emerge as particularly influential – a dynamic discussed in the previous section.

Finally, some reflection is warranted on the role of what the literature defines as macro-level contextual factors – namely, national or regional policies, and the broader cultural and social context of a given country or region. These factors do not explicitly emerge from the interviews. That is, teachers and school leaders did not explicitly identify the broader, systemic national or provincial-level characteristics as factors behind their implementation or coping strategies. However, I argue that such macro-level elements exert an indirect influence, which becomes apparent when we examine the empirical findings more closely.

Specifically, the decision of the headteacher in School 2 to organize training courses and to involve additional professional figures to support teachers should be understood within the broader institutional framework in which schools operate. Since 1999, Italian schools have had increased autonomy under Decree No. 275/1999, which allows them to adapt structures and practices to local needs. This reform has positioned school leaders as key actors in strategic and operational decision-making.

Nevertheless, while this policy framework formally grants equal autonomy to all school principals, it does not automatically translate into the promotion or successful implementation of intercultural education. This is evident when comparing School 2 and School 1. Although both headteachers operate under the same policy conditions, only in School 2 has this autonomy been mobilized to support intercultural goals. As the analysis shows, this difference is likely shaped by the individual dispositions,

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sensitivities, and prior experiences of the headteacher in School 2 – particularly his previous work in another school with a strong intercultural focus.

Innovative intercultural practices: teachers as policy innovators and migrant communities as collaborators

The present findings lie at the intersection of studies on street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) and policy innovation, and the more recent scholarship on co-production. The analysis of teachers' views and experiences shows how they, under the pressure of material and organizational constraints, create space for innovative intercultural practices that also redefine the boundaries of state policy ecosystems and traditional implementation. While Lipsky's (1980) framework focuses on state actors, it overlooks the role of non-state actors and community collaboration. This study demonstrates that teachers and facilitators can act as policy innovators by collaborating with civil society actors and students themselves. They do that by fostering a participatory, bottom-up approach where students are asked to work as peer-tutors for their colleagues and, at the same time, external actors from civil society become co-implementers of intercultural education, enhancing policy effectiveness.

The role of SLBs as policy innovators is well acknowledged in the literature. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2023), for instance, conceptualize frontline workers as switching between two roles. That is, the "state agent" and the "citizen agent." The former follows rules and enforces administrative consistency, whereas the latter responds to individual needs with discretion and empathy. Zhang and He (2024) extend this framework by examining the case of taxi officers in Guangzhou, China. They argue that SLBs are not merely individual moral actors but can operate collectively through what they term "collective mindfulness" – mutual support among peers in using discretion to advance policy innovation over time. Building on this, Arnold (2015) bridges the gap between the street-level bureaucracy literature and policy entrepreneurship, a field previously focused on elite actors such as politicians and administrators. She introduces the concept of Street-Level Policy Entrepreneurs (SLPEs) to describe SLBs who do not simply adapt or resist policy, but actively create, promote, and institutionalize new practices during the implementation phase.

While all these contributions emphasize SLBs' capacity for innovation and their responsiveness to broad social pressures – including those arising from unorganized civil society – they largely overlook how such interactions with civil society actors can become structured and sustained. Specifically, existing literature fails to overall to identify structured mechanisms for integrating these interactions into policy implementation. This study advances the discourse by demonstrating how teachers not only adapt policies and engage informally with non-state actors but also, in the case of linguistic facilitators, occasionally systematize collaboration and co-production of intercultural policies implementation with these actors (by means of temporary paid contracts for community members). These findings provide practical examples and suggest pathways for future research to systematize collaborative practices within policy implementation frameworks.

The emphasis on interaction and sustained collaboration positions this research within the broader field of co-production studies. Brandsen and Honingh (2016) distinguish between co-production (citizen participation in implementation) and co-creation (citizen involvement in design and planning), emphasizing citizen engagement for more inclusive, context-specific public services. However, they focus on **service delivery outcomes** rather than policy implementation processes. This research extends co-production to policy implementation, showing how teachers, as frontline practitioners, navigate constraints by collaborating with students in the class and (for facilitators) external actors throughout the entire implementation process. This bottom-up approach highlights the potential for collaborative mechanisms to reshape policies themselves.

Finally, Spillane et al. (2002) highlight that policy implementation depends on how frontline workers, such as teachers, interpret directives based on their knowledge, beliefs, and context. While this sense-

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making process is crucial, their framework focuses on adaptations within the existing school-based ecosystem and does not expand to a community-driven approach. This research advances their work by showing how teachers, especially facilitators, engage with external stakeholders to drive collaborative, systemic change. Moving beyond classroom-level adjustments, these collaborations can reshape the policy landscape, offering a scalable model for participatory policy implementation across public services like healthcare, social services, and administration.

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