

The relational integration of immigrant teens: the role of informal education

*Paola Bonizzoni*¹ and *Sonia Pozzi*²

Abstract: While the issue of cultural diversity in the field of formal education is receiving growing attention from scholars, after-school programs still qualify as under-researched educational contexts, despite the strong role they can play in terms of social integration of both native and immigrant youth. The aims of this paper is to understand how intercultural integration in the field of informal education can be concretely achieved, managed and enacted in two “typical” research contexts - an Italian Oratorio and a Juvenile Aggregation Centre (CAG) -, characterized by different strategies to deal with ethnic diversity. This qualitative study, carried out through participant observation and in-depth interviews with teens and educators, shows that specific organizational patterns (both in terms of recruiting strategies and educational offer) can lead to very different outcomes in terms of intercultural relations and social cohesion of native and immigrant youth.

Keywords: informal education, relational integration, immigrant youth, youth sociability, interculturality

¹ Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan. E-mail: paola.bonizzoni@gmail.com

² Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan. E-mail: sonia.pozzi1@gmail.com

Promoting relational integration in multicultural settings

Over recent years, the number of minors of foreign origin residing in Italy has risen considerably, growing from 125,565 in 1997 to 993,238 in 2011. They now represent more than a fourth of the whole legally residing immigrant population (www.demo-istat.it): more than a half of them were born in Italy (61.4%). These changes are also reflected in the ethnic composition of the school population: in the school year 2010/11, nearly 8% of the under-age children enrolled in Italian schools are of foreign origin; they were only about 1% in 1996/97 (Miur & Fondazione Ismu, 2011).

The issue of the so-called “second generation” in Italy – as in other Mediterranean countries – is a “new” topic which is receiving increasing attention from scholars (*i.e.* Andall, 2003; Ambrosini & Molina, 2004; Cologna & Breviglieri, 2003; Queirolo Palmas, 2007; Dalla Zuanna *et alii*, 2009; Ricucci, 2010; Caneva, 2011; Barbagli & Schmoll, 2012). While the issue of cultural diversity has been widely addressed in the field of formal education (Chaloff & Queirolo Palmas, 2006; Gilardoni, 2008; Giovannini, 1996; Giovannini & Queirolo Palmas, 2002; Mentasti & Ottaviano, 2008; Queirolo Palmas, 2003, 2006; Ravecca, 2009), after-school programs still qualify as under-researched educational contexts, despite the strong role they could play in terms of social integration of both native and immigrant youth and therefore in promoting social cohesion.

Despite the European Union’s repeated efforts to establish guidelines in terms of youth policies and intercultural relations (Council of Europe, 2008; European Commission, 2001), the historical legacies of the EU’s member states in terms of welfare and characteristics of the immigrant population has led to the emergence of very different outcomes. Italian juvenile policies, in this respect, have for quite some time been oriented toward the prevention of crime and delinquency (Tagliaventi, 2003, 2006): from the law 285/1997³ onward, however, policies have placed more attention on the issue of promotion of youth sociability. Article 6⁴ proves critical in this respect, since it aims to sustain the development of

³ “Disposizione per la promozione di diritti e di opportunità per l’infanzia e l’adolescenza” (“Provision for the promotion of children and adolescents’ rights and opportunities”).

⁴ “Servizi ricreativi ed educativi per il tempo libero” (“Recreational and educational leisure services”).

educational and recreational services which actively promote youth sociability nationwide.

This law – and the numerous Regional laws that have followed it – have favoured the diffusion of several extremely varied projects directed at both Italian and immigrant youth, often located in peripheral and problematic urban areas (Santagati, 2006; Mesa, 2006, 2010). These educational projects are rarely the outcome of exclusively public intervention but, more often, the result of public-private partnerships, while a relevant role is also played by private and religiously inspired organizations. Centri di Aggregazione Giovanile (CAG: youth after-school centers) and Oratori (Parish Recreational Centers) are the most typical after-school programs available on the national territory: in recent years both of them have witnessed a growing presence of children and families coming from diverse cultural, ethnic and also religious backgrounds⁵ (Orlando, 2002). The range of activities and programs offered by these organizations varies considerably, as well as their diffusion throughout the country.

While the European Union's concerns on interculturality and social cohesion in the field of formal education (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 33) have been addressed by the public authorities⁶, the organizations active in the field of informal education operate without referring to any kind of national guidelines. As a consequence, each institution can define its own way of dealing with the challenge of cultural and ethnic diversity, leading, therefore, to very different outcomes and patterns of action. Most observers agree that the immigrant population poses new challenges to educators and programmers: for instance, worthy of attention is the risk of ethnic-ghettoization as well as the “problematic integration” of immigrant youth with the most disadvantaged Italian population (Santagati 2006, p. 148; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001a, 2001b). However, only a limited number of studies has been devoted to grasping how intercultural dialogue and encounter is concretely promoted, enacted and managed in such places

⁵ In this regard, the experience of some Salesian Oratori (in Palermo, Turin and Schio, near Vicenza) which offer their space for meetings, parties and special occasions to other ethnic and religious communities, shows how an ethnic and religious place can also become an inter-ethnic and inter-religious place.

⁶ See for instance the national document “La via italiana per la scuola interculturale e l'integrazione degli student stranieri” (“The Italian approach to intercultural schools and the integration of foreign students”) (MPI, 2007).

(Blangiardo, 2000; Caritas Ambrosiana, *et alii*, 2000; Cologna & Breviglieri, 2003; Favaro, 2000; Granata & Novak, 2003; Pozzi, 2009; Zappa, *et alii*, 2009).

The aim of this paper is to understand how intercultural integration in the field of informal education is concretely achieved, managed and enacted in two “typical” research contexts – an Italian Oratorio and a CAG – selected for the different strategies they have chosen – in terms of recruiting strategies and educational activities – to deal with ethnic diversity. While the CAG is programmed as a social intervention explicitly targeted at immigrant youth and managed through an intensive and well-defined program of activities built around a “strong” integration agenda, the Oratorio’s intercultural integration strategy is enacted through a weekly-structured and “open” educational approach. The research shows that these organizational patterns lead to very different outcomes in terms of intercultural relations and social cohesion of native and immigrant youth: understanding both the risks and opportunities of these interventions can represent a useful step toward the definition and implementation of more inclusive informal educational policies.

The relational side of integration: the role of recreational spaces

The concept of integration is widely used – while often not clearly defined – to account for the “mutual accommodation” taking place among natives and newcomers (Spencer & Cooper, 2006; Favell, 2003): it is characterized as a complex and biunivocal process enacted within and across varied societal levels, from everyday interaction to market and state institutions (Biezeveld & Entzinger, 2003). More specifically, the idea of “relational integration” has been coined to refer to the construction of intra or inter-ethnic informal ties in multicultural social settings between natives and newcomers but also among immigrants of different ethnic origin: friendships and neighbourly relations, but also ethnic or religious networks built up in mixed or ethnically-connoted social contexts (Eve, 2010). Integration therefore has a sort of “private” side (Entzinger, 2000), enacted through the social ties that immigrants and natives as well as immigrants coming from different countries have the chance to concretely build up in local contexts characterized by the repeated negotiation of identity and

difference (Colombo & Semi, 2007; Amin, 2002; Harris, 2009). The social integration of immigrant youth takes place therefore not only through education and participation in the labour market, but also through leisure and recreational activities. The role played by recreational spaces – shopping malls, gardens, gyms, youth centers, clubs and associations... – is crucial, but often overlooked, while it has been rightly argued that in such contexts ethnic, cultural and class boundaries may prove to be especially critical challenging and difficult to address through policies (Shinew *et al.*, 2004; Philipp, 2000).

Families have different means to influence their children's choice of after-school activities, drawing on varied cultural and economic resources enabling them to take advantage of the private and public services available (Way, *et al.*, 2007; Vincent & Ball, 2007). However, children growing up tend to become more independent and to find wider opportunities to build their social ties in specific times and places. Informal education offers, in this respect, a critical tool to influence the construction and development of intra and interethnic ties among immigrant and non-immigrant youth: however, as it has been argued by Amin (2002) "mixed" spaces are not always characterized by truly intercultural interaction. The risk of "turf war", ghettoization, racism and conflict is in fact often reported in research dealing with multicultural leisure places (Les Back, 1996). As has been observed, in order to understand the dynamics of the intercultural relations in mixed contexts it is necessary to consider how they are embedded in specific organizational practices (Shinew, *et al.*, 2004; Fine, *et al.*, 1997): in other terms, it is necessary to consider how organizations deal with the issue of ethnic difference and how they concretely address it through practices. In the case of informal education, targeting and recruiting strategies play a critical role: for instance, organizations have to choose between "ethnic/immigrant-specific" or "universalistic" educational actions. Moreover, the choice and organization of a specific range of activities, the concrete regulation of time and space determine what kind of social interaction is going to take place in such – more or less selective – social contexts.

The aim of this paper is to analyze how inter-ethnic friendship and opportunities for reciprocal knowledge and intercultural encounters have the chance to emerge in two informal educational contexts characterized by different strategies used to deal with social diversity. With a methodology

combining observation and in-depth interviewing, we have tried to grasp the effect of organizational practices on group dynamics, paying specific attention to the role played by ethnicity in defining the boundaries of belonging and to the meanings teens attach to the place in which they meet.

Methodology

This paper is built in part of the data collected for a research project funded by ORIM (Regional Centre for Integration and Multiethnicity) in 2010⁷. Here we will compare two of the six cases which originally made up the study, an Oratorio located in an ethnically-mixed neighbourhood of Milan and a CAG located in the periphery of a medium sized city of the Lake Como area. Our choice derives from the specific educational strategies these organizations followed to deal with the issue of ethnic diversity, which were especially suited to a comparative perspective.

The Oratorio is located on a big and busy road not very far from the city center, in a neighbourhood which has experienced an impressive growth of the immigrant population over the last 15 years. It takes place in some buildings adjacent to the Church and it is provided with both outdoor and indoor facilities. The outdoor playground is the biggest area available, and it is equipped for several different sports (basketball, volleyball and soccer). Another outdoor area is located behind the main building: it is a small terrace on which a group of teens tends to congregate almost every day. Indoor facilities include a small cafeteria, a room set up with some personal computers, the office staff and several other rooms which are sporadically used for laboratories, reunions and the homework help provided to children enrolled in compulsory schools. Having conducted the observations in June, the indoor areas were almost always deserted except for some occasional billiard matches. The structure opens at 4.30 p.m. and closes at 7 p.m.: after the closing time, several teens would occupy some benches located in front of the Church and stay there chatting for a while. The educational staff was made up of the priest (a young man who was there almost every day) and two young educators, a boy and a girl who took turns in monitoring the place during the opening times. The educational project developed was aimed at giving free access to and free use of the space available, following an “unstructured” educational

⁷ For an overview of all the data collected see Ambrosini M., Bonizzoni P., Caneva E. (2011).

approach which was combined with the offer of some specific and not binding structured activities. Due to the mainly informal use youth made of the place and to the weak control educators exercised on inflows and outflows, it was not easy to determine how many users there were. During our observation, there were days when the place was almost empty (10-15 people at most) and days when there were even 50 people or more aged between 10 and 20.

The structured educational offer mainly consisted in a training program directed towards those teens who wanted to become peer educators during the Grest (Summer Oratorio). When the schools close for the summer period, for seven consecutive weeks the Oratorio radically changed its daily organization, hosting dozens of children enrolled in the compulsory schools of the neighbourhood for the entire day. The teenagers of the Oratorio are therefore invited to enroll in an training program to become peer educators during those weeks. The training program varies year to year and it consists of both discussion groups held *in loco* (one every three weeks), and of educational trips (to the mountains, bicycle rides in the countryside...) and meetings with other Oratori of the city. Although the Oratorio qualifies predominantly as an informal leisure space (comparable, in some respects, to a square or a park), those activities contribute, as we shall see, to shaping a very specific way to define and manage the issue of ethnic diversity.

The CAG is located in a peripheral suburb of a middle sized city in the Lake Como area: it takes place in a building owned by a secular association whose president is a Claretian priest. This project is the outcome of a partnership among the public sector (the Town Council and the Region, who provided the funds⁸), a secular NGO (a cooperative active in the field of education) and local Catholic institutions that offered the location (the home of the priest).

The structure makes use of the three floors of the house. On the first floor there is a meeting room and a hall, where homework, meetings, dinners or parties take place. On the second floor there are the teachers' offices and a computer room where youth can also find help with homework: here all the initiatives of some interest to users are promoted through flyers and posters. There is also a bulletin board where daily educational activities (laboratories, homework shifts...) and cleaning shifts are organized. On the same floor the young people can also take advantage

⁸ Funds allocated by the regional law n. 23/99.

of a kitchen in order to prepare lunch and snacks. On the third floor there is the priest's home and a small space dedicated to prayer. Outdoor facilities comprise a courtyard and a squared-off grass arena, used on sunny days. The CAG is a service explicitly targeted at the teenagers of foreign origin residing in the province. The formal access is therefore strictly controlled as well as the programme of structured activities: in order to participate in workshops and laboratories (dance, theater, music, percussions, bicycle repair...) teens have to take part in homework activities. The homework help takes place 4 days a week from 3 pm to 5 pm and is mandatory. The CAG was attended by nearly 80 young people between the ages of 14 and 21: they come from an extremely wide range of nationalities (about 30). Also Italians attended the CAG, but they were enrolled as volunteers: there were approximately 20 people of extremely varied ages (from teenagers to retired elderly) helping kids with homework. While Italians and foreigners were assigned different roles in the structures and followed different recruiting strategies, we observed some cases (two) of younger volunteers who happened to establish friendships and romantic attachments with the users. Other than the priest and the Italian volunteers, there were also five educators working in the CAG: 2 boys and 3 girls, 2 of them of foreign origin (from Belgium and Cameroun). The CAG opens at 2 p.m and closes at 7.30 p.m from Tuesday to Friday.

The research strategies that we followed combined a cycle of observations with in-depth interviews of users and educators. We introduced ourselves to the youth as researchers interested in investigating how they made use of the leisure spaces available. Eight observation sessions were held in the CAG and six in the Oratorio, between April and June 2010: while the young people knew we were researchers, we tried to keep our presence there as least intrusive as possible, asking only generic questions and paying attention to the issues that spontaneously emerged from their conversations, observing group dynamics and gathering comments from educators. When the cycle of observations concluded, we asked some of the participants and educators to be interviewed. The interview guidelines focused on the same thematic issues (how the young people happened to discover the place, how frequently they attended it, their networks of friends inside and outside the structure, experiences of other recreational spaces, the extent to which they took part in structured activities, the meanings they associated to the place, the relationships they

established with other peers and educators...): the questions however make reference to what had been observed during the observations. The interviews were recorded and fully transcribed.

Interviewees were selected on the basis of some relevant factors: age, gender, length of presence in the country and – in the case of the Oratorio – belonging to the different groups that clearly composed, as we shall see, the population. Our aim was to reflect in the sample the same range of diversity observed among the users. The following table summarizes the main characteristics of the young people interviewed.

Table 1. Characteristics of the young people

Name	Case study	Gender	Age	School/job	Parents' country of origin	Years in Italy
Chiara	Oratorio	F	16	Lyceum	Italy	born in Italy
Rosa	Oratorio	F	16	compulsory school	Ecuador	4 years
Jiao	Oratorio	F	16	vocational school	China	born in Italy
Li	Oratorio	F	16	vocational school	China	9 years
Edoardo	Oratorio	M	18	technical school	Italy	born in Italy
Xavier	Oratorio	M	16	compulsory school	Ecuador	4 years
Andrea	Oratorio	M	19	part-time worker	Italy	born in Italy
Diego	Oratorio	M	16	vocational school	El Salvador	4 years
Ahmed	Oratorio	M	14	compulsory school	Morocco	12 years
Alejandro	Oratorio	M	16	vocational school	Ecuador/Colombia	1,5 year
Xavier	Oratorio	M	14	compulsory school	Peru	2 years
Tawfiq	Oratorio	M	14	compulsory school	Morocco	4 years
Gianni	Oratorio	M	16	vocational school	Italy	born in Italy
Etienne	Oratorio	M	18	vocational school	Tunisia/France	born in Italy
Irina	C.A.G.	F	16	vocational school	Poland	2 years
Yulia	C.A.G.	F	17	technical school	Moldova	1 year
Sofia	C.A.G.	F	20	vocational school	Macedonia	6 years
Aisha	C.A.G.	F	15	vocational school	Morocco	4 years
Christine	C.A.G.	F	16	vocational school	Ivory Coast	2 years
Leyla	C.A.G.	F	18	vocational school	Italy/Tunisia	born in Italy
Vassily	C.A.G.	M	16	technical school	Moldova	2 years
Juan	C.A.G.	M	16	technical school	Peru	born in Italy
George	C.A.G.	M	17	vocational school	Senegal	2 years

On the whole, we interviewed 23 young people (10 males and 13 females) aged 14-20. Most of them are of foreign origin: 6 come from Latin America, 5 from North Africa, 4 from Eastern Europe, 2 from China and 2 from Sub-Saharan Africa. Most of the interviewees had been re-united with their families (some of them quite recently: 2 years ago or less), 4 were born in Italy (two of them from mixed couples). Just one interviewee was

working part time: all the others were enrolled in schools. Most of them were enrolled in secondary schools (12 in vocational schools, 4 in technical schools and one in a Lyceum); 5 are still enrolled in compulsory schooling.

Ethnic diversity, youth sociability and educational practices

A first striking difference between the two educational contexts concerns the tendency of the users to aggregate and socialize in groups more or less characterized by ethnic homogeneity. The social segmentation of the Oratorio's population was easy to detect, being clearly reflected in the use youth made of the space available. A first well defined group was formed by some Chinese teenagers who tended to occupy the Northern side of the playground, where the basketball court was located: the number of people varied considerably day to day, ranging, during the observations, from a minimum of 5 to a maximum of 15 boys and girls aged approximately 15-18. They usually arrived early in the afternoon and they spent their time playing basketball and chatting, listening to music on their mobiles and smoking cigarettes sitting on some benches located around the court. They usually spoke in Chinese, but their language competence was extremely varied: while some girls – born in Italy – spoke excellent Italian, recently arrived teens could not even understand very simple questions. A second well defined group tended to occupy a small terrace located in the back of the main building. It was composed of approximately 15 young people, two of them were born in Italy from immigrant parents, one had experienced migration himself and the others were from Italy: all of them usually spoke Italian and they were aged 14-20. The remaining population of the Oratorio was concentrated on the main playground: such space was shared by several small (mainly composed of 2-3 people) and circulating groups of Italian, North African and Latino boys and girls. These users did not come to the Oratorio everyday nor did they spend the whole day there. All the groups tended to sporadically interact (playing football and chatting on the main playfield) and they seemed to know each other quite well (as the exchange of greetings and handshakes showed), but a very limited interaction among the Chinese and the remaining population of the place was observed.

When the youth of the Oratorio were asked to express their personal views on the people that attended the place (if they felt at ease with everybody, if they thought it was a place where making friends was easy, if

they experienced any discrimination...) it was evident that the social segmentation was clearly perceived and it was often judged as inherently problematic.

And what about the people here, I see that they come from very different countries... is it easy to socialize or... does it happen that you just stay apart, without interacting that much...

Er... well, in the end... I mean, that is what happens. Because... you can see that, for instance, they tend to form gangs of Peruvians and obviously... I mean, they don't stay with us, they just mind their own business.

And what do you think about this situation? I mean, do you think it is just normal, in such a big place to...

No, it is not normal because the more you socialize the better it is, but they don't show any kind of interest toward us and therefore...

[Edoardo, 18 years old, Italian]

And what about the Chinese guys... Do you know them?

No, I just know the names of two of them. They're a closed group, they only speak Chinese and they keep to themselves. Honestly, I really don't care anything about them, if they respect the rules and if they don't make a mess... for me it's ok if they stay there playing basketball.

Do you think it's difficult getting to know them a bit better?

Well... yes, however... They have their own character, they speak Chinese among themselves and you can't really understand.

And what about the Latin American guys, do they speak Spanish?

Yes, but when we arrive they speak Italian.

And what about you, do you socialize with them?

I know them, I greet them, but I don't hang out with them.

Why?

Because I come from Salvador and I know how these people behave...

Are you referring to gangs?

Yes, I really can't understand. If you move away from your country it's to find something better, isn't it? But they just keep on doing the same...

[Diego, 16 years old, born in El Salvador, in Italy for 4 years]

As the words of Diego and Edoardo (two boys belonging to the group

which tended to meet on the terrace) show, ethnicity plays a relevant role in orienteering group relationships. Auto-segregation and seclusion interact with labeling processes keeping the groups apart, and ethnicity is, moreover, often associated with deviance, as the case of Latino groups – defined “gangs” – clearly shows. The negative view the interviewees tended to express in relation to such an ethnically-segmented sociability also derives from a recent conflict that involved Chinese and Latinos a couple of weeks before the observations started and it was a recurrent issue in the interviews collected.

On the contrary, in the CAG we observed neither such a clear ethnic segmentation, nor the appropriation of specific places by groups of friends: we noticed boys and girls who tended to form groups of “best friends” who chose to spend more time together but they were not usually characterized by ethnic homogeneity. These small groups (2-3 people) were rather more often homogeneous in terms of gender and place of residence. All the youth observed, moreover, spoke Italian with each other.

In their view, ethnicities tended to “melt” into a common perceived condition of “foreignness”.

I spend all my spare time here. Here we are all foreigners; while there [she’s making reference to a local Oratorio, n.d.a.] there are also Italians. Here there are foreigners and it is easy to make new friends, over there instead there are more Italians, and they stick to themselves, I don’t know if I would feel at ease, not as much, anyway, as I feel here. Also in school I didn’t make many friends among Italians... I’m doing really well with friends only here.
[Yulia, 17 years old, born in Moldova, in Italy for 1 year]

As the words of Yulia show [*here we are all foreigners*] the presence of Italian volunteers is not enough to make the social environment truly “intercultural”. It is also interesting to observe that Yulia clearly enjoys a reassuring sense of belonging after having experienced exclusion in several social environments (such as in school) from Italian people. The sense of protection and reassurance offered by the place (which is often called “home”) was a very common feeling expressed by the teenagers interviewed. Several the interviewees also agreed in defining the CAG as a place where it was possible to be known and judged without prejudice and stereotypes.

This is a home where you can feel you're welcomed, it's a place where you're not judged for the color of your skin but for what you really are... first of all, you're not discriminated against. There's no discrimination here... here you are judged for what people perceive talking with you, not just for your origins and for the place you come from.

[Sofia, 20 years old, born in Macedonia, in Italy for 6 years]

Institutional practices were crucial to understand such outcomes. As we shall see, recruiting practices and the organization of specific activities contribute to shape not just the ethnic composition of the users, but also to actively influence the formation, consolidation and dissolution of social ties among individuals and groups.

Recruiting practices are critical in understanding the composition of the populations in the two contexts.

As mentioned, the Oratorio doesn't formally bind or control the access to the place: young people are free to enter and exit as they wish, but this formal openness risks translating into a particular form of closure. All the teens interviewed, in fact, happened to hear of and to attend the place for the first time after having being introduced by other friends who knew it and who had already established social relationships there. This network-driven recruiting strategy partly explains the presence of such cohesive and ethnic-homogeneous groups and it also excludes youth who are poor in social relationships (as those who have recently arrived in Italy). The unintended "closure effect" of the recruiting practices typical of those institutions was an issue frequently reported also by several users of the CAG.

And why don't you like the Oratori?

I don't know, they don't inspire me that much... And anyway, I don't know anybody there. I wouldn't feel at ease going there.

[Aisha, 15 years old, born in Morocco, four years in Italy]

The CAG followed a completely different recruiting strategy. Initially conceived as a form of after-school support targeted to the most disadvantaged foreign students enrolled in the secondary schools of the Province (as such, they actively asked teachers to send them who they

thought might be in a situation of need), in time they shifted from a help-centered perspective to a more widely-conceived promotion of foreign youth sociability. Instead of relying only on teachers recommendations, they started to directly involve youths by distributing leaflets in schools. As a consequence, several teens were recruited individually and happened to meet most of their friends there, also due to the fact that they came from different schools and cities. The target remained, however, teenagers of foreign origin: Italian youth were recruited not as users but as volunteers. The different role they played in the structure, as already mentioned, together with their limited number and varied ages, did not easily work to integrate Italians on a peer-to-peer basis.

While the absence of ethnic-specific groups can also partly be explained by the less marked presence of numerically dominant countries/areas of origin, and by the fact that group affiliations were crosscut by other factors (such as gender or place of residence), a relevant role was also played by the educational offer. Since the afternoon session was organized around several different laboratories in which the youth were involved both as users and organizers, group boundaries had the chance to be constantly reworked thanks to the new occasions of social interaction offered. Despite the relevant number of people attending the CAG it was interesting to observe that all the users were very familiar with each other, as shown by the repeated exchanges (greetings, games, knowledge of reciprocal names...) observed.

The Oratorio also offered some kind of “structured” educational offer, whose effects on the social relationships of the users were, however, much more ambivalent, leading to the dissolution of some social cleavages and contemporary to the formation of new ones.

The main channel of involvement in a set of group activities is a training process finalized to become volunteers of the so-called “Summer Oratorio”. During the summer period (when the schools are closed) for seven weeks the Oratorio radically changes its daily organization, hosting dozens of children enrolled in the compulsory schools of the neighbourhood for the whole day. The teenagers of the Oratorio are therefore invited to enroll in a training program in order to become peer educators during those weeks. The training program varies year to year and it consists both of discussion groups held in loco (one every three weeks), and of educational trips (to the mountains, bicycle rides in the

countryside...) and meetings with other Oratori of the city. These occasions represent a very relevant means of involvement and promotion of group relationships, as was evidenced by some accounts:

Do you think these activities (we were talking about a trip they recently organized with the other trainees, n.d.a.) are helpful in order to make new friends, to get to know each other a bit better?

Yes, of course, because you don't go there only with your friends, but also with other groups of people and you're forced to stay together, to talk, to get to know each other...

[Gianni, 16 years old, Italian]

And when did you start to enlarge your network of personal relationships here?

Well, it was when I started attending the Summer Oratorio, I attended the same course with the others and I got to know the whole group...

Do you think that experience was useful in making new friends?

Yes, definitely.

[Rosa, 16 years old, Italian]

However, just a limited segment of the population was involved and even aware of such an educational offer. In fact, another clear distinction which could be traced among participants was inherent to their "participatory styles" and sense of belonging to the institution. The bulk of the regular attenders was composed of 20-25 boys and girls, mainly of Italian origin, who attended the place almost every day and who had established a very close relationship with the educators and the priest. They developed a strong sense of belonging to the place, very similar to those experienced by the attenders of the CAG reported above.

How would you describe this place?

I would describe it as welcoming. I mean, if they don't know who you are... you can feel you're welcomed, here the people want to get acquainted with you. It is very welcoming.

[Gianni, 16 years old, Italian]

Several other attenders, however, perceived the Oratorio only as an off-and-on meeting place for their social relationships following a logic of

opportunity in terms of opening times and places available in the neighbourhood.

Why do you come here only on the weekends?

We come here when the CAG is closed because it's very close, otherwise we go over there (in another Oratorio, n.d.a.), where we know other people.

Do you go there alone?

No, I go with my friends but I know people everywhere...

[Andrea, 19 years old, Italian]

How would you describe this place?

For me it's just a place where I can play basketball with my friends.

[Li, 16 years old, born in China, in Italy for 9 years]

These attenders tended to adopt different strategies to resist the attempts of involvement deployed by educators: for instance, as one of the educators told us, the Chinese youth pretended not to speak Italian in order to avoid contact with them. Other teens simply preferred a more "nomadic" and uncommitted attendance style (avoiding responsibilities and control that a more intense participation would entail).

It should also be noted that the educational offer of the Oratorio were aimed at promoting sociability, but also at progressively familiarizing youth with religious content and practices. This can of course limit "full" participation and inclusion of youth coming from different religious backgrounds. As it emerged from the narratives of two teenagers of North-African origin interviewed, the Catholic connotation of the place can lead to auto-exclusion or resistance from families.

Do you know the priests?

Yes, I know them by name.

Do you talk to them?

Yes, sometimes, when I meet them.

Don't you take part in the meetings they promote from time to time...

No, because I'm Muslim.

[Tawfiq, 14 years old, born in Morocco, four years in Italy]

When I enrolled in the Summer Oratorio and also when I went on the bicycle ride my father came here and asked to talk with the educator.

I mean, at the beginning my father didn't accept this, due to religion,
he said you're Muslim, they have a different religion!
[Etienne, 18 years old, Tunisian and French, born in Italy]

As the priest explained to us, both during the Summer Oratorio and the trips, youth are expected to take part in common prayers or liturgies. In those cases, no alternative activities are offered to those who can't or don't want to take part to them. Concretely, children and teens are in those cases expected to attend but not to actively participate (they are not expected to pray): through those "non-participant inclusion" situations youth can, in the priest's words, have "a spiritual experience transcending the specificity and a good command of the Catholic and Christian language".

Conclusions and policy recommendations

What role can informal education play in promoting social cohesion and relational integration of immigrant and non-immigrant youth? How can different organizational strategies adopted to address increased ethnic and social diversity translate into specific outcomes in terms of intercultural dialogue and intergroup relationships? What best organizational practices can be suggested to enhance interethnic relationships in informal educational contexts and to avoid the risk of conflict, ghettoization and downward assimilation signaled by research? Our research identified both strong points and pitfalls of the different strategies adopted by the organizations studied in terms of potential for intercultural education and social cohesion. These are briefly summarized in the following table.

On one hand, both recreational contexts qualify as extremely relevant places for the development of inter-ethnic friendship ties, promoting, albeit in different ways, the relational integration of immigrant youth. Both the Oratorio and the CAG, moreover, emphasize the central role of young people giving them the chance to test their skills through the direct management of activities and the taking up of leadership roles (i.e. CAG laboratories and the organization of the summer Oratorio).

The CAG was able to promote a strong feeling of identification with the place and a sense of belonging among young people of different ethnic origins under the commonly experienced condition of "foreignness". The users could enjoy an environment protected from the racial stereotyping and prejudice experienced "outside", showing the relevance of extra-school environments to counterbalance the phenomena of exclusion widespread in schools and in other social contexts in which trust and the sense of

belonging are difficult to build (Scardigno, 2009).

However, the strategy of inclusion deployed by the CAG makes interculturality work only among immigrant youth of different ethnic origins: the assignment of different roles to Italians and foreigners does not facilitate the development of horizontal relationships and the establishment of the friendships among them, also due to the varied social characteristics of Italian volunteers. In such a scenario, it may be said that integration is achieved through seclusion and the construction of a positive environment is built at the price of segregation.

Table 2. CAG-Oratorio

	<i>Strong points</i>	<i>Pitfalls</i>
<i>CAG</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting strong identification and sense of belonging among people of different ethnic and national origins under a positive perceived condition of shared foreignness; • Building a positive social environment protected from racial stereotyping and prejudices; • Promoting a “strong” social and relational integration agenda through a well-defined set of activities; • Favouring the inclusion of the weakest youth (in terms of access to social relationships) through a selected targeting strategy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assigning different roles to Italians and foreigners does not facilitate the development of horizontal relationships; • Integration is achieved through seclusion and protection through ghettoization;
<i>Oratorio</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity to intercept the most “difficult” users, those youth who are more reluctant to engage in a structured demanding educational program; • It offers the opportunity for a “true” intercultural encounter to emerge among Italians and foreigners of different national origins; • The religious affiliation can provide the basis to promote aggregation among Catholics of different national origins. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The lack of control on recruiting and the weakness of structured educational programmes favours the birth and maintenance of internally cohesive groups leading to the risk of “turf war” and conflict; • The religious identity and mandate limits the full integration process of non-Catholic users.

On the contrary, the Oratorio provides the chance for a “true”

intercultural encounter among both Italians and youth of diverse ethnic origins. Through such an “open” access policy, it is accessible also to the most difficult potential users population, those teenagers who are most reluctant to engage in structured educational programs. However, this “open” strategy has the unintended effect of excluding youth poor in social relationships and to reinforce internally cohesive groups leading to the risk of “turf war” and inter-ethnic conflict. Also the religious identity of the context has both an including and excluding side: while it can provide the basis for aggregation among Catholics of different national origins, it can provide a limit for the “full” integration of non-Catholic users.

Our study therefore confirms the strategic role informal education can play in promoting positive intercultural encounters among people of different ethnic origins. This study qualifies as a first partial attempt to map the multiple strategies organizations can follow to build inclusive and sensitive educational environments, capable of dealing with the radical and irreversible transformations taking place in Italian society. We hope that this insight will be of some help in promoting new research and interest around such a crucial – though still underestimated – topic.

References

- Ambrosini, M., Bonizzoni, P., & Caneva, E. (2011). *Incontrarsi e riconoscersi. Socialità, identificazione e integrazione sociale tra i giovani di origine immigrata*. Milano: Fondazione Ismu.
- Ambrosini, M., & Molina, S. (eds.) (2004). *Seconde generazioni: un'introduzione al futuro dell'immigrazione in Italia*. Torino: Fondazione Agnelli.
- Amin, A. (2002). Ethnicity and the multicultural city: living with diversity. *Environment and Planning*, 34(6), 959-980.
- Andall, J. (2003). Italiani o stranieri? La seconda generazione in Italia. In G. Sciortino, A. Colombo (Eds.), *Stranieri in Italia. Un'immigrazione normale* (pp. 281-307). Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Back, L. (1996). *New ethnicities and urban youth culture*. London: UCL Press.
- Barbagli, M., & Schmoll, C. (2012). *Stranieri in Italia. La generazione dopo*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Biezeveld, R., & Entzinger, H. (2003). *Benchmarking in Immigrant Integration*. Rotterdam: Report for the European Commission.
- Blangiardo, G. (2000). *L'universo dei giovani extracomunitari nella diocesi di Milano*.

- Caratteristiche strutturali e livello di integrazione nella vita comunitaria.* In Caritas Ambrosiana, Fondazione Oratori Milanesi (F.O.M.), Segreteria per gli Esteri (Eds.), *Costruire spazi d'incontro. Comunità cristiana e minori stranieri* (pp. 13-62). Milano: Centro Ambrosiano.
- Caneva, E. (2011). *Mix generation. Gli adolescenti di origine straniera tra globale e locale.* Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Caritas Ambrosiana, Fondazione Oratori Milanesi, & Segreteria per gli Esteri (eds.) (2000). *Costruite spazi d'incontro. Comunità cristiana e minori stranieri.* Milano: Centro Ambrosiano.
- Chaloff, J., & Queirolo Palmas, L. (eds.) (2006). *Scuole e migrazioni in Europa. Dibattiti e prospettive.* Roma: Carocci.
- Cologna, D., & Breveglieri, L. (eds.) (2003). *I figli dell'immigrazione. Ricerca sull'integrazione dei giovani immigrati a Milano.* Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Colombo, E., & Semi, G. (2007). *Multiculturalismo quotidiano. Le pratiche della differenza.* Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Council of Europe (2008). *Libro bianco sul dialogo interculturale - Vivere insieme in pari dignità.*
- Dalla Zuanna, G., Farina, P., & Strozza, S. (2009). *Nuovi italiani. I giovani immigrati cambieranno il nostro paese?.* Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Entzinger, H. (2000). The lure of integration. *European Journal of International Affairs*, 4, 54-73.
- European Commission (2001). *Libro bianco sulla gioventù «Un nuovo impulso per la gioventù europea».*
- Eve, M. (2010). Integrating via networks: foreigners and others. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 33(7), 1231-1248.
- Favaro, G. (2000). Bambini e ragazzi stranieri in oratorio. Riflessioni a partire da una ricerca. In Caritas Ambrosiana, Fondazione Oratori Milanesi (F.O.M.), Segreteria per gli Esteri (Eds.), *Costruire spazi d'incontro. Comunità cristiana e minori stranieri* (pp. 63-90). Milano: Centro Ambrosiano.
- Favell, A. (2003). Integration nations: the nation-state and research on immigrants in Western Europe. *Comparative Social Research*, 22, 13-42.
- Fine, M., Weis, L., & Powell, L.C. (1997). Communities of difference: A critical look at desegregated spaces created for and by youth. *Harvard Educational Review*, 67(2), 247-285.
- Gilardoni, G. (2008). *Somiglianze e differenze. L'integrazione delle nuove generazioni nella società multietnica.* Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Giovannini, G. (ed.) (1996). *Allievi in classe, stranieri in città. Una ricerca sugli insegnanti di scuola elementare di fronte all'immigrazione.* Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Giovannini, G., & Queirolo Palmas, L. (eds.) (2002). *Una scuola in comune. Esperienze scolastiche in contesti multietnici italiani.* Torino: Fondazione Agnelli.
- Granata, E., & Novak, C. (2003). Città e spazi di vita. In D. Cologna, L. Breveglieri (Eds.), *I figli dell'immigrazione. Ricerca sull'integrazione dei giovani immigrati a Milano* (pp. 87-144). Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Harris, A. (2009). Shifting the boundaries of cultural spaces: young people and everyday multiculturalism. *Social Identities*, 15(2), 187-205.
- Mentasti, L., & Ottaviano, C. (2008). *Cento cieli in classe. Pratiche e simboli religiosi nella*

- scuola multiculturale*. Milano: Unicopli.
- Mesa, D. (2006). L'incerto statuto delle politiche giovanili. In M. Colombo, G. Giovannini, P. Landri (Eds.), *Sociologia delle politiche e dei processi formativi* (pp. 111-132). Milano: Guerini&Associati.
- Mesa, D. (2010). Le politiche giovanili in Italia: attori, prospettive e modelli di intervento. *Autonomie Locali e Servizio Sociale*, 2, 261-274.
- Miur & Fondazione Ismu (2011). Alunni con cittadinanza non italiana. Verso l'adolescenza. Rapporto nazionale A.s. 2010/2011. *Quaderni Ismu 4/2011*. Milano: Fondazione Ismu.
- MPI - Osservatorio nazionale per l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri e per l'educazione interculturale (2007). *La via italiana per la scuola interculturale e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri*. Roma: MPI.
- Orlando, V. (2002). Un servizio educativo territoriale aperto alla diversità culturale e religiosa: l'oratorio salesiano che accoglie giovani immigrati. In R. de Vita, F. Berti (Eds.), *Dialogo senza paure. Scuola e servizi sociali in una società multiculturale e multi religiosa* (pp. 262-274). Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Philipp, S. (2000). Race and the pursuit of happiness. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 32(1), 121-124.
- Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R.G. (2001a). *Legacies: the story of the immigrant second generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R.G. (eds.) (2001b). *Ethnicities: children of immigrants in America*, Berkeley, University of California press; New York, Russell Sage foundation.
- Pozzi, S. (2009). *Appartenenze, identità e ruoli di genere negli adolescenti di origine immigrata. Uno studio qualitativo nel territorio di Monza e Brianza*. Ph. D. thesis, Sociology, University of Bologna, unpublished.
- Queirolo Palmas, L. (2003). *Classi meticce: giovani, studenti, insegnanti nelle scuole delle migrazioni*. Roma: Carocci.
- Queirolo Palmas, L. (2006). *Prove di seconda generazione. Giovani di origine immigrata tra scuola e spazi urbani*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Queirolo Palmas, L. (2007). Figli dell'immigrazione in Europa. *Mondi migranti: Rivista di studi e ricerche sulle migrazioni internazionali*, 1, 41-134.
- Ravecca, A. (2009). *Studiare nonostante. Capitale sociale e successo scolastico degli studenti di origine immigrata nella scuola superiore*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Ricucci, R. (2010). *Italiani a metà. Giovani stranieri crescono*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Santagati, M. (2006). *Le politiche socio-educative per i minori stranieri in Italia*. In M. Colombo, G. Giovannini, P. Landri (Eds.), *Sociologia delle politiche e dei processi formativi* (pp. 133-165). Milano: Guerini&Associati.
- Scardigno, F. (2009). Il ruolo della risorsa informale nelle politiche giovanili: un'indagine nazionale. *Autonomie locali e servizi sociali*, 2, 233-242.
- Shinew, K.J., Glover, T.D., & Parry, D.C. (2004). Leisure Spaces as Potential Sites for Interracial Interaction: Community Gardens in Urban Areas. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 36(3), 336-356.
- Spencer, S., & Cooper, B. (2006). *Social Integration of Migrants in Europe: A Review of the European Literature 2000-2006*. COMPAS, Oxford: University of Oxford.
- Tagliaventi, M.T. (2003). *Interventi ed esperienze per il tempo non protetto dei ragazzi in Italia*. I. Colozzi, G. Giovannini (Eds.), *Ragazzi in Europa tra tutela, autonomia e responsabilità* (pp. 233-252). Milano: FrancoAngeli.

- Tagliaventi, M.T. (2006). *Le politiche italiane per l'infanzia e l'adolescenza*. In M. Colombo, G. Giovannini, P. Landri (Eds.), *Sociologia delle politiche e dei processi formativi* (pp. 93-109). Milano: Guerini & Associati.
- Vincent, C., & Ball, S.J. (2007). Making up the middle-class child: families, activities and class dispositions. *Sociology*, 41(6), 1061-1077.
- Way, N., Greene, M.L., & Mukherjee, P.P. (2007). Exploring adolescent perceptions of parental beliefs and practices related to friendships in diverse ethnic communities. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 116, 35-50.
- Zappa, M., Romano, G., Caneva, E., & Moretto, F. (2009). "...Ma lui non è straniero!", *Report finale ricerca-azione del progetto "Culture in Comune"*, unpublished research paper. Milano: Caritas.