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Performing the good (im)migrant: inclusion and expectations of linguistic assimilation

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes how language is framed as a route to full inclusion, particularly for unaccompanied asylum-seeking students labelled as disabled. It is based on a qualitative study carried out in the Italian city of Rome, which, although cosmopolitan, is often characterised by nationalistic political landscapes. The manuscript reveals how institutional biases (re: race, ability, and migration) about unaccompanied forced migrant youth, often manifested in their construction as disabled and foreign by local professionals, hinder the likelihood that they successfully participate in the life of the host society. The paper also shows how the inclusion of migrant and refugee students living in foster care homes is conceptualised as a violent integration into monolingual and monocultural education settings. Drawing on Disability Critical Race Studies and Raciolinguistics, this contribution analyzes how unaccompanied forced migrant students respond to their linguistic urgency, learn power majority languages, and simultaneously devalue their home language to perform the 'good (im)migrant.' Lastly, the contribution shows how processes of racialization of disabled unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee students influence how western communities perceive their linguistic capacity and effort.

Introduction

This paper explores how current models of inclusion of disabled unaccompanied forced migrant youth in Italy produce educational and social exclusions and inequities as a result of the normalising processes of racism and ableism. It considers the interworkings of race, disability, migratory status, and language to account for ways in which disabled asylum-seeking and refugee students are positioned at the margins of Italian educational institutions and society. The paper attempts to document how their inclusion often implies violent forms of integration into monolingual and monocultural education

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settings (Alba and Nee 1997). It also shows how disabled forced migrant youth are positioned as embodying deficits through linguistic and pedagogical practices that spirit murder rather than nurture them (Love 2014). In examining how migratory status interacts with race, disability, and language, this paper illustrates how predetermined neoliberal notions of inclusion, that place a value on autonomy over interdependence, combine to channel refugee and asylum-seeking teens into low-paid and low skilled jobs, despite the teens' own desire to attend college and pursue a broader range of professional careers. This paper also focuses on forms of linguistic agency, illustrating the values that disabled forced migrant youth have regarding their own linguistic practices.

Drawing on Raciolinguistics (Flores and Rosa 2015; Vigoroux 2017) and the intersectional framework of DisCrit (Annamma, Connor, and Ferri 2013), this paper highlights how the racialization of disabled forced migrant youth influences how dominant Italian communities perceive not only their linguistic capacity but also their linguistic efforts. DisCrit and Raciolinguistics are used in this paper to understand how external attitudes regarding language, race, disability, and immigrant status influence young forced migrant perceptions of linguistic inclusion in schools and society, and how adoption of power majority languages (i.e. European languages) is considered the preferred vehicle to inclusion. This paper draws from a qualitative Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2014) study conducted in Rome with 10 forced migrant youth and 17 Italian professionals operating in educational and social services between 2014 and 2017. This paper uses a portion of the data collected in the main study to shed light on how the construction of refugee children's illiteracy by Italian professionals serves as a dog whistle for their racialization and disablement.

The paper starts with contextual information that will facilitate readers' understanding of settlement policies in Italy, and how this influences the construction of an 'Italian' identity. This modern historical information sets the scene for an analysis of the affordances of the intersectional interdisciplinary frameworks of DisCrit and Raciolinguistic to highlight migrants and forced migrants' attitudes toward language acquisition. This is followed by a description of the method used to collect data in the main study. The research questions that guided the analysis of data presented in this paper are:

1. What does language learning look like in the host country for migrant and refugee communities, especially those labelled with a disability?
2. What are the disabled migrant and refugee children's perspectives on language learning in terms of purpose, meaning, and their agency in this process?

The findings section is organised around two major themes: (1) refugee children's agency in the language acquisition process and (2) the divide between professional/institutional expectations and actual services provided. Lastly, the paper intends to highlight how language is used as a performative tool through which (im)migrants are granted and denied entry into new countries where they are the linguistic minority.

The authors of the present contribution come to this work, as co-first authors who contributed equally to this work, with different experiences and perspectives. Migliarini is an English Language Learner, and her constructions of dis/ability, diversity, and education are tied to Western conceptualisations. As a white, able-bodied, non-colonised, young academic and ciswoman, she holds more significant privileges than the

colonised and migrant communities considered in this paper. In her research work with refugee communities, she engages with critical literature, epistemologies, theories, and methods. Cioè-Peña identifies as an Afro-Latinx ciswoman with a disability who emigrated to the US in 1990 from a historically colonised nation in the global south. As such, Cioè-Peña tangentially understands the experiences and topics presented here while recognizing the privilege and protection that emerged from her age, immigration, and accompaniment status at the time of her arrival. The authors came together based on shared interest around the experiences of minoritized students who are language learners and experience special education. Migliarini collected the data, and together, Cioè-Peña and Migliarini analyzed the data to reveal the findings presented here (for more, see methods).

Context: refugees & language in the literature and in Italy

According to Cabral (2022), 'in mainstream institutional contexts […] such as schools, courts, and medical contexts, language often serves as an assessment or indicator of a person's status position as either marginalised or advantaged within racial, linguistic, or economic hierarchies' (1). This truth is particularly relevant for refugee youth who must come in contact with many of these institutions as part of their refugee-asylum seeking status (Phuong and Cioè-Peña 2022). Refugees, across age ranges and backgrounds, are often evaluated on their 'belonging' through language and, by extension, a perceived desire vis-a-vis effort to belong within the new host country (Al Ajlan 2021; Baynham 2006; Warriner 2007; Morrice et al. 2021).

In many ways, the evaluation of linguistic practices is used as a 'legitimate' assessment of refugees while being deeply rooted in racist and ableist ideology (Schissel 2019). Issues related to language and negative perceptions of language practices do not occur in isolation and have been cited as having an impact on the socio-cultural and psychological well-being of refugees in ways that differ from other immigrant youth (Buchanan et al. 2018). Additionally, refugees' experiences are deeply rooted in negative perceptions tied to their (perceived) race, religion and country of origin (d'Abreu, Castro-Olivo, and Ura 2019; Warriner 2007) with Black youth experiencing negative effects across a range of host countries (e.g. USA, Australia, England; Warriner 2007; Buchanan et al. 2018; Morrice et al. 2021; Al Ajlan 2021; d'Abreu, Castro-Olivo, and Ura 2019). Often, the refugees encounter racial, ability and linguistic politics deeply engrained in the host countries policies and practices.

In the Italian context, the concealment of racism and race is popularly attributed to the trauma caused by the publication of the racial laws and the existence of concentration camps during the two decades of fascist domination (1922-1943) (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2013; Pes and Deplano 2014). The post-war antifascist hegemony[1] rejected fascist language and ideology as 'obscene', especially in relation to the colonial empire, the nation and race. The dissimulation trend leading to the use of terms such as 'diversity', 'xenophobia' or 'alterity' – instead of race – originates in the refusal of the semantics of the latest fascism. Race and figures of race, however, remained active and reconfigured themselves through collective memory, senses of territorial and class belonging, gender discrimination, sexual orientation, forms of social self-representation, cultural capital and political discourses (Migliarini 2018). Despite being largely dissimulated by Italian

institutions and society, race and figures of race seems to be recognized only accidentally at the occurrence of episodes of extreme racist violence, especially against migrants and forced migrants.

The concealment of race and race figures in the Italian context has historically produced, not only a single state of 'exclusion', but also a set of prismatic positions of greater/lesser proximity to the hegemonic condition. 'Othered' and racialized subjects are not simply excluded from white privilege – like the colonised after the publishing of *Codice Unico*, the 1936–1937 policy for the Italian colonies – but the tensions that define their citizenship status are located between lines of internal exclusion, differential inclusion, segregation and their eventual promotion within the social and racial hierarchies (Migliarini 2018). These exclusionary dynamics seems to be rearticulated today through migration legislation, such as the Decreto Minniti, governing and policing 'bogus' refugees through their confinement in the suburbs of big Italian cities, re-evoking East Africa colonial camps during fascism.

The contemporary limits of differential inclusion are set on the Italian coasts of the Mediterranean Sea, as we can see from the institutional practices that discipline the reception of migrants in Lampedusa, and their labelling as asylum seekers, refugees, or economic migrants. On the migrants' and refugees' bodies in Lampedusa, and more generally within the Italian territory, a 'line of colour' is traced, and this defines the phenotypic absorbability (or not) of specific race figures within the nation's colour (Cuttitta 2012). The production and reproduction of race figures, on migrant bodies contribute to the rearticulation of the Italian national identity, and of the privileges that accessing whiteness entails. In the study presented here, participants' narratives are located in such a background.

Theoretical framework

A critical disabilities raciolinguistic (CDR) perspective (Cioè-Peña 2020b), an integrated and critical theoretical framework, based on DisCrit and Raciolinguistics, is used here to illustrate both the intersecting and enduring patterns of educational inequality and exclusion of forced migrants in the Italian context, and the theoretical tools that can help highlight and support the discursive agency necessary to counter diffuse forms of marginalisation. The framework is conducive to understanding how the overrepresentation of forced migrant students in the categories of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and their social disablement happens in Italy because of their perceived cultural, social, and linguistic 'disadvantage' (Migliarini, Stinson, and D'Alessio 2019). It exposes the ableist attitudes and Eurocentric views on language learning of Italian professionals, as institutional representatives vis-a-vis agents of the state, when judging current forced migrant youth as 'illiterate' and different from the stereotypical view of the intellectual refugee, escaping political persecutions. This section starts with an analysis of the affordances of DisCrit and Raciolinguistics before discussing how they come together and are enacted through a CDR perspective (Cioè-Peña 2020b) in the present contribution.

Foreign; disabled; refugees: labels as social constructions

Building on Critical Race Theory and Disabilities Studies, Dis/ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit; Annamma, Connor, and Ferri 2013) emphasises that the experiences of disabled

refugees is not a product of any singular marker (race, refugee, disabled) but rather the amalgamation of these labels (Crenshaw 1991; Solorzano and Yosso 2001). As such, we understand that regardless of how 'good' an immigrant adopts the power majority's social (and linguistic) practices, they are still subject to exclusionary practices on account of their disability and their race and/or immigrant status. This allows us to explore how local perspectives position youth as outsiders regardless of their efforts to assimilate.

DisCrit offers us the opportunity to understand the function of the labels. The first tenet of DisCrit centers on the idea that both race and disability are social constructs that allow power majorities to pathologize minoritized people to maintain historical distributions of power. DisCrit allows us to understand how labels and performative expectations function to subvert any attempt refugee children make to become part of the power majority in their new country of residence. The first tenet of DisCrit presents how prescribed identities for children of colour with disabilities – vis-à-vis assigned labels – function to uphold both racist and ableist ideology, which counter the enumerated opportunities that these children (and their families) had expected in their adopted country/community. This means that the subject is not only performing an identity, they are also beholden to its expectations and limitations. DisCrit also allows us to understand the 'material and psychological impacts of being labelled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms' (Annamma, Connor, and Ferri 2013, 11). That is to say that the labels of race in conjunction with ability are weaponized in order to manipulate power relationships and uphold systems of oppression in meaningful and tangible ways. For the participants showcased in this paper, their racialization is also impacted by their immigration status and mode of entry.

Just as DisCrit offers us the framework with which to understand the experiences of these subjected populations, it also pushes us to privilege the 'voices of marginalised populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research' (Annamma, Connor, and Ferri 2013, 11). Using the perspectives of 'Nothing about us, without us' (Charlton 2000, 3), DisCrit pushes researchers to include the experiences of marginalised people with disabilities in ways that focus not only on the deficits but also on the strengths and contributions of these communities. DisCrit 'invites understanding of ways students respond to injustices (i.e. being constructed as deficient, or being segregated and stigmatized) through fostering or attending to counter-narratives and explicitly reading these stories against the grain of master narratives" (Annamma, Connor, and Ferri 2013, 14). In order to meet this demand, this paper not only presents the characterisations of those in the power majority but also those being targeted by them and the policies they promote. Expanded within the Italian context, DisCrit helps in recognizing the limits of current policies and practices of inclusion for forced migrant youth, and shows how SEN policies tend to identify, categorise and stigmatize differences of individual students, while leaving unchallenged normative education settings.

Raciolinguistics: linguistically belonging yet socially excluded

Drawing on the work of Flores and Rosa (2015), this paper also elicits the understanding of raciolinguistic ideologies, which produce racialized speaking subjects who are constructed as linguistically deviant. This happens even when engaging in linguistic practices positioned as normative when produced by privileged white subjects (Flores and Rosa 2015, 150).

Raciolinguistics argues that regardless of the actual practices of the racialized subject, they are often seen as inferior based on their racialization rather than their actual linguistic development/performance. A critical disabilities raciolinguistic (CDR) perspective (Cioè-Peña 2020b) extends this framework by integrating the principles of DisCrit in order to position the gaze as both White and normative. As such, asylum-seeking students with disabilities are subject to a particular kind of raciolinguistics that positions their linguistic practices as inferior both on account of racialization and pathologization. A CDR perspective extends DisCrit by specifying how race and language interact to further classify and ostracise culturally and linguistically diverse people with disabilities. With this in mind, we understand that the refugees featured in this paper have an extremely limited capacity to participate in the life of their host country regardless of their cultural, linguistic, and academic performance.

This integrative framework allows us to unpack the experiences of the refugee students as well as those of the Italian professional participants, as institutional representatives, along with the constructed principles that undergird race, disability, and linguistic proficiency. In enacting Annamma et al.'s DisCrit, alongside Flores & Rosa's raciolinguistic ideologies, we are able to understand that the identity markers used to create boundaries that alienate refugees and insulate Italian professionals are all socially constructed and as such can be socially dismantled. Finally, a CDR perspective is needed in order to understand how the amalgamation of labels placed upon refugee and migrant bodies, across dominant/neo colonial contexts, contributes to their positioning along multiple continuums of *belonging* (Yuval-Davis 2006, 2010) with most being placed with greater proximity to 'outsider' rather than 'insider' on the basis of their perceived race, linguistic practice, ability, and migration status. This positioning is not only reflective of their social exclusion/oppression but is often also a byproduct of the exclusion resulting not just in loss of social networks but also a lack of awareness of, and access to, opportunities and services that could support/facilitate their integration.

In many ways these patterns highlight the fact that host countries are more supportive of, and/or interested in supporting, the needs of refugees more likely to 'assimilate' and adopt to host/dominant culture. These perceptions regarding belonging are also used to uphold deservingness and, often, humanity without reflection on how labels also construct expectations for what it means to belong, therefore setting the meeting of standards as a requirement for social inclusion and, ultimately, mobility (Yuval-Davis 2006).

Methodology

To account for ways that disabled unaccompanied refugee youth are positioned at the margin of Italian society, DisCrit and Raciolinguistics are used as sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1969) for analyzing data gathered in the Constructivist Grounded Theory study presented here. Developing theoretical sensitivity is a necessary precursor to theoretically rendering one's analysis. Being theoretically sensitive means being aware of a wide range of theoretical constructs across disciplines and utilizing them in one's theory to relate categories (through theoretical coding) to the overall theory (or within aspects of the theory). DisCrit and Raciolinguistics as sensitizing concepts provided an initial idea to pursue as well as questions to raise These are important first steps, or point of departure, to look at the data, listen to interviewees, and think analytically

about the data. Throughout the analysis process, the fit between the initial interests, sensitizing concepts, and the emerging data has been carefully scrutinized.

Participants & data collection

The data featured here is a subset of data collected during a larger Constructivist Grounded Theory study (Migliarini 2017). Constructivist Grounded Theory offers integrated theoretical statements about the conditions under which injustice or justice develops, changes, or continues. The main study is based on nine refugee services in the city of Rome. Data collection involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with 27 participants, 17 professionals in the roles of managers, educators, teachers, social workers, psychologists, neuropsychiatrists, and cultural mediators, with varying levels of previous work experience in the field of migration, and 10 unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children, aged 12–16, from West African countries at different stages of their asylum request process (e.g. preparing for an audition to the local immigration commission, waiting for a final decision from the local immigration commission).

Professional participants were all Italian from Rome and different regions of Italy. They all shared a common linguistic background, and socio-economic status. The youth participants were from different countries in West Africa, mostly Gambia, Mali and Senegal. They were all male, as females from those regions either get discouraged to embark in such a dangerous journey, or they get stranded in the prisons in Libya (Migliarini 2017). All participating youth were identified as having a disability during their asylum/refugee process in Italy.

Participants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowballing sampling. Access to unaccompanied refugee youth was granted by the Italian professionals working in the selected services, including foster care homes. While written consent was obtained by the Italian professional participants, oral consent was obtained from forced migrant youth, to participate in the study. The study followed ethical guidelines of research set by Roma Tre University.

In doing Constructivist Grounded Theory in refugee organisations in Rome, I (Migliarini) made use of the usual methods of semi-structured interviews. While gathering the data, attention was given to the participants' accounts, as 'rich, detailed and complex tapestries into the wefts and warps of which are woven personally held and more widespread cultural values and meanings' (Henwood and Pidgeon 2003, 142). I (Migliarini) was not necessarily asking participants to explain their understanding of the context and relations within it. I was looking for moments in which the subjects are constituted and in which constituted subjects act. I was also looking for discourses and what their effects may be. Most of the interviews with refugee youth were conducted in multiple languages, including Italian, English, French, and some Wolof (the indigenous language of Senegal). Translation into English was executed by Migliarini.

Data analysis

The analysis of the data presented in this paper was conducted by both authors and consisted of different coding strategies, memo writing, comparison of codes and categories, and categories with extant literature to be able to define variation. Constructivist

Grounded Theory coding requires asking analytical questions of the data gathered and helps direct subsequent data-gathering toward the analytic issues to be defined in the research (Charmaz 2014). The initial coding process, or line-by-line coding, was used for this paper as a heuristic device to lead the way into the very first interaction with the data. Initial coding allowed for the careful study of each fragment of data and helped define themes for further exploration. In vivo codes, which used research participants' terms, were deployed as codes to uncover their meanings, and understand their emergent actions (Charmaz 2014). The adequacy and conceptual strength of initial codes were determined through focus coding and comparative analysis. Focus coding facilitated data organisation and emerging analysis. The comparison of codes supported the identification and confirmation of the theoretical centrality of identified themes. Both early and advanced memos were reviewed and analyzed as part of this step in the analytic process. The following section explores the two critical identified themes.

Findings

In this next section, we present two findings: one related to the youth's own perceptions of and internal motivations for language learning; the other relates to the perceptions and understandings of administrators and institutional representatives. We do this in order to highlight the complex ways in which language, race, and disability impact migrant youth outcomes.

Grounded in our use of DisCrit, we have intentionally chosen not to include statements in which the professionals make claims about the refugees' abilities or intellectual capacity, linguistic or otherwise, because we understand that, historically, linguistic practices have been used as a premise for the existence of a disability (Cioè-Peña 2020a, 2020c, 2022).

'I'd like to speak Italian better': migrant children's views on language learning

Asylum-seeking and refugee youth interviewed in the study presented here consider learning Italian an important daily activity. This perception might be influenced by the external pressure they receive from Italian professionals, as representatives of the state, to master the language in order to enter the job market and become 'autonomous' subjects. Asylum-seeking youth were conscious about the relationship between race and language and understood/felt that this can serve to lower linguistic expectations within the host country. Understanding the struggles of speaking Italian as West African asylum seekers, the youth feel compelled to perform language proficiency by first answering the questions in Italian and then using the language to express appreciation for the teachers, convey their sense of isolation and the motivation/urgency not only to learn but, ultimately, to adopt the language:

> At the beginning it was very hard, but now I understand but slowly slowly. The teachers have a lot of experience to help us in studying [...]. (Djibril, AS_Serv7)

> Ehm for me it was not so hard in the beginning, because Italian is similar to French, so I understand quickly and I know how to speak, even if I don't speak properly and I still

make a lot of mistakes […]. When we finish level A1, we'll start the A2, and we will learn to write in Italian […]. (Yakub, AS_Serv7)

[…] It is difficult to find friends ehm, you know ehm they don't talk to me, people here don't talk to me a lot if I don't speak Italian well. Nobody talks to me on the bus […] I dunno, maybe it is for this I don't go to central Rome […] (Papis, AS_ Serv 3.1)

Asylum-seeking and refugee youth also refer to the necessity of speaking the language and understanding the Italian culture correctly, perhaps to counter the narratives that position them as disposable subjects whose opportunities are often limited to manual and/or low-wage labour (Migliarini 2018):

I would also love to have a job like X [referring to a social worker in a foster care home], but to do that you need to speak good Italian. I want to become good at speaking Italian, like him.

(Chérif, AS_Serv9)

First, I'd like to study and learn Italian, because if you don't have a degree and if you don't speak Italian well, finding a job in Italy is very difficult. I'd like to learn how to make pizza. But when I'm going to continue my studies seriously, and I'm speaking Italian well, I'm not going to work to make pizza anymore […].

(Dembelé_ASServ7)

I don't think it's going to be difficult to find a job here or interacting with other people that ask you where you are from. I think it's going to be easy, we can talk Italian well ehm it depends on the people ehm but I don't think it's going to be hard if you speak the language well.

(Yakub, AS_Serv7) [emphases added]

Here, the youth express how their visions of the future and personal and professional growth are tied to their Italian proficiency. As such, they understand that language is an important way to communicate their intent not only to be contributing but 'good' citizens to their host nation. Interestingly, for some of the asylum-seeking and refugee youth participants, learning Italian is not merely a means to find a job or to become autonomous; it is also a way to build significant relationships with their Italian peers. As Papis nicely puts it:

Yes, I'd like to speak Italian better. I don't have any friends here you know? Ehm I think I'd like to learn Italian to talk to boys of my age and going around Rome.

(Papis, AS_Serv3.1)

For Papis, learning Italian would help him establish his belonging, longevity, and his very own community. Italian proficiency is a vehicle for him to build a new home and create new friendships. Thus, for Papis, learning the power majority language also serves a social-emotional function. Italian proficiency is then also understood as facilitating youths' integration into Italian society and abandonment of their 'asylum-seeking refugee' identity. Thus, it is no wonder that with the pressure of learning Italian for work and socializing purposes, they also attempt to create distance from their home language; the home language often serving as a symbol for a difficult past and an unstable present:

> I have studied for 10 years in my country, but I think it is more important to study here in Italy, to study Italian A2 course. Sometimes I feel confused, and I would just like to speak Italian perfectly, so I can start my life. (Dembelé, AS_Serv9)

Here Dembelé presents how the time spent learning a language within a host country can often result in youth feeling like their life is in limbo – they are unable to engage in the life they had in their country of origin, nor can they start a new life in their host country. This life in limbo is not only frustrating but also isolating as another asylum-seeking participant stresses the importance of Italian proficiency in order to communicate that 'as a Black immigrant', he is not a threat:

> You know I think that learning Italian would help me a lot, especially in not getting lost in the streets. One time I got lost, and I stopped a person, and I was asking to help direct me to the bus stop, but he ran away. Ehm, I think he might have been scared of me [laughs], I mean, as a Black immigrant, maybe if I would have spoken in Italian, he would have had another impression […]. (Adrame, AS_Serv9)

Here we see how Adrame perceives Italian as a multipurpose tool. On the one hand, it helps him navigate the geographical landscape of Italy, but on the other, it also facilitates his social interactions with others. In essence, for him, like other refugees, mastering Italian is as much about function as it is about safety, both his and his host's. Adrame's, as well as other asylum-seeking teens' accounts, show how mastering the Italian language constitutes a central aspect of the acceptability process within the local communities and generally the society. Adrame's quote shows examples of the externalities of difference in the context of race and bias. Adrame is one of the few participants to explicitly identify his race as a factor in language learning, thus highlighting how messages of performing the good immigrant are often communicated as racially neutral possibilities without accounting for the systemic barriers that language learners may encounter.

Beyond adopting this idea of linguistic neutrality, youths also adopt perceptions of the language as the first *and* most important step, one that often happens in isolation of other necessary markers of inclusion/integrations like vocational training:

> Since I came here […] I started school, now I'm still in school, learning Italian. I did the A1 course, and now I'm doing the A2. I still don't know what I'm going to do when I turn 18, but *I'm studying Italian*. […] Before I leave here [the foster care home] *I'd like to do a course to bake pizza, or as a baker. You know, this can help you so much to find a job here* […]
>
> (Djibril, AS_Serv 7) [emphasis added]
>
> […] Right now, I'm doing the Italian course and the *Terza Media*. I still have to figure out what I want to do, but I know I *have to find a house ehm a place to stay*, maybe when I live here [the foster care home], I'll go to Rome, I'll go to the immigration office so they can help me to find a proper job […]. *I'd like to find a job as a baker, so that I'll be ok, I won't be nervous about my future* […] I don't think it will be difficult to find a job here and to talk to people […] but you know *we need to speak Italian very well, we need to behave and to show respect to Italians if we show respect and if we learn how to talk with Italians we will not have any problems* […].
>
> (Yakub, AS_ Serv 7) [emphasis added]

In these excerpts, Yakub and Djibril highlight the system of 'social integration' or 'social inclusion' of disabled asylum-seeking and refugee children in Italy, which are organised around three pillars: learning Italian, finding a house, and finding a job. As argued earlier, these three pillars are thought to bring migrants and forced migrants to autonomy to avoid their stagnation within the welfare services. These pillars are not just a central concern for the state but are very much at the forefront of the migrants themselves, even as they commit their time and energy to language learning. Additionally, another pillar is identified by Yakub when he introduces the concept of respect. Here we see language function not just as an integrative tool or tool for independence but also to communicate intentions from the refugee to the new host country.

We now shift to the institutional and systemic practices within Italian society as conveyed through professional participants' perceptions and experiences of Italian language teaching for migrant students. Here we will see the racialization of language learning, the assessment function of language, as well as language education as assimilation.

Institutional expectations versus services provided

Asylum-seeking and refugee children (i.e. ages 3–10) arriving in Italy are required to enroll in a mainstream community-based public school, preferably one close to the host reception centre. Participant D, the director of a refugee organisation in Rome, explains the setup:

> […] The children are normally placed in schools next to the reception centre. There are not special schools for refugee children. There are schools with more foreign children because they are in neighbourhoods where more foreigners live. These schools have projects and experimental programs. (Participant D, Prof_Serv1)

Contrary to their younger peers attending community-based public schools, asylum-seeking and refugee youths – who constitute the majority of underage asylum seekers[2] – are obligated to enroll in a one-year middle school course. In this course, they will be able to reach a basic level of Italian and access compulsory subjects to attain the equivalent of a middle school diploma (*Terza Media)*. The diploma and certification of language proficiency, grants forced migrant youth the possibility of entering the job market. Before the implementation of the 2018 Decree on Immigration and Security, this one-year course was offered through public institutions called *Centri Territoriali Permanenti* (i.e. Permanent Territorial Centers), renamed in 2017 as *Centri per l'Istruzione degli Adulti* (i.e. Adult Learning Centers; CI.PI.A). These institutions were organised to provide adult education for all, but migrants' participation outnumbered that of Italians. Additionally, these do not consistently provide disability-related support.

The professionals working in foster homes and reception centres for unaccompanied forced migrants often encourage teens to learn Italian within institutions like the CI.PI.A. However, some of the practitioners interviewed expressed an open criticism about these adult education institutions. Participant Ps2, a psychotherapist for migrants, considers them 'special schools' that were not developed to include migrant and refugee children:

> […] The kids we see are kids that go in special schools to get the *Terza Media,* and they are not included in normal public schools, they are in class with all migrant students where they do special programs to obtain the diploma, sometimes they do it in few months, they don't

do it in three years […]. In normal schools, you could get second-generation migrants, the children of refugees, while our refugees don't go to normal schools because they don't speak Italian. They are not included in classic school pathways […]. (Participant Ps2, Prof_Serv6.2)

Ps2's argument rests on the principles from the 1971 (and following amendments) inclusive education policy of *Integrazione Scolastica*, which established the closing down of all special schools all over Italy (D'Alessio 2011). The very existence of these learning centres has long been justified through the introduction of integration policies that make language learning and middle school education a compulsory requirement for migrants and forced migrants (Programma Integra 2013). On this matter, Participant V, a secondary school teacher, observes:

For what concerns the teaching of Italian, 4 years ago it was established that all migrants should master level A2 in order to get the residence permit and to be able to work […], so for the young people this certification becomes important […]. (Participant V, Prof_Serv8.1)

The existence of these 'special' institutions reinforces the idea that the teaching and learning of Italian for migrant and refugee children has an assimilatory neoliberal function. While the purpose is to assimilate to the culture and society, these centres do not offer adequate opportunities for migrant and refugee children to socialize and interact with Italians. Thus, they further marginalise migrant children under the guise of assimilating them into Italian society. This quote also highlights the ways in which messages that promote Italian and devalue the home language are communicated to the youths through compulsory requirements.

Some of the organisations/agencies featured in this study provided Italian courses in unaccompanied migrants' foster care homes, using qualified teachers and educators, thus, relying on the adult learning centre only for the final certification exams. This provision is helpful, especially for reception centres and foster homes outside the city centre. However, in order to do this, organisations/agencies must use additional funding, which is not always feasible. As such, many centres were forced to eliminate these service and direct students back to the adult learning centre. Only those organisations/agencies with robust internal funding could continue offering the language courses on site:

[…] In 2011 in the centre M., we started to do Italian classes because it was an important need for all the kids that arrived from foster care homes or from the neighbourhood […]. From 2011 thanks to European Funding, we have activated a series of courses of Italian language to respond to the needs of young migrants. […] When the EU funding finished, we decided to continue with the Italian school, organising it better, adding some days for the classes, and now we start from September […].

(Participant V, Prof_Serv8.1)

Here Participant V further stresses the difficulties that asylum-seeking and refugee youths encounter in accessing language courses and education more generally, even in the CI.PI.A (i.e. adult learning centres), due to the scarcity of available funding. This limited funding presents an often-insurmountable obstacle to an already fragile and biased social integration model.

Furthermore, some professional participants, such as Participant N, a neuropsychiatrist in Rome's migrants' hospital, highlight how the lack of economic resources has a significant impact on the services youth can access and where but also on professional training and competencies development:

> […] Italy is not a country for children because a lot of resources have been taken off from schools, health, and social services, so even if we have good theoretical models, in the end, these models are not applied because we don't have the economic resources and thus the services don't have all the professional competencies required […]. […] There is a lack of monitoring and […] absence of coordination, so I contextualise our service so that you understand that it is not our fault, but we operate in a difficult context for coordination.
>
> (Participant N, Prof_ Serv5)

Similarly, Participant X, director of an inclusion service for asylum-seeking youth, and Participant Z, a secondary teacher, talk about 'fragmented' and 'sectoral' approaches to the integration of unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children:

> There is no systemic approach to unaccompanied migrant and forced migrant children at local level. The local health services do not have long-term projects to deal with mental health problems of unaccompanied children. They do not have the training or the competencies. […] What we have is a series of fragmented interventions, and I mean, if you are an unaccompanied refugee child, you are already internally fragmented, and this disorganised system at the local level just makes your situation worse. […] I mean, if you go to the local health service and you start talking about ethno psychiatry, they look at you and say, 'What are you talking about?' […]. (Participant X, Prof_Serv2)
>
> The networks are a resource beyond the institutions, and the associations try to lobby politically, and on this, there is a lot of connection […]. The weak points are that these networks are sectoral, they last for each single problem at the time, and then we lose it as a new problem comes up […].
>
> (Participant Z, Prof_Serv8.2)

The absence of systemic coordination between social, educational, and health services designed for refugees, and the resulting compartmentalisation, mirrors the neoliberal and parsed approach of addressing problems at the individual, rather than systemic, level. The compartmentalisation of partnerships and services subsequently has a negative impact on the lives of young asylum-seekers and refugees and reinforces the 'neoliberal' character of integration. This instability also augments their already heightened feelings of isolation, uncertainty, and disorientation with respect to future life plans, education, and wellbeing within Italian society. The fragmentation also denies asylum-seeking and refugee youth a sense of autonomy, as the model of social integration proposes; on the contrary, it leaves them in an institutional 'limbo', where they never fully understand the rules and practices but are still beholden to them and ultimately, punished for failing to attain full integration, a process that is viewed by Italians at the individual and systemic level. In other words, while the host nation fails to offer systematically integrated services, refugee and asylum-seeking youth who fail to integrate are then used as representatives of the failure of migrants rather than the failure of the Italian system to adequately support and integrate the youth.

Discussion

In the findings section, we highlighted the limits and discrepancies of the current inclusive model for asylum-seeking and refugee youth. Further, we showed contradictions between Italian institutional expectations for migrant youth (i.e. acquiring Italian language proficiency, a job, and accommodations within a year), and the quality of the language and educational services provided (condensed program, segregation from Italian youth, and inconsistent/insufficient funding).

Yakub and Djibril were among the asylum-seeking and refugee youth participants waiting for their audition to the Territorial Commission for refugee status. Importantly, their accounts were gathered at an initial stage of the study when they were still nervous about the interview and [Migliarini]'s role as an 'outsider' to the foster home. Most of the youth shared a sense of confusion about their future in a new country, which is justified by their age and superficial knowledge of Italian society. Despite the uncertainty about their actual life plans, they recite and attempt to perform the 'good asylum seeker' discourse for both safety and acceptance in Italian society. They live, as Butler (1993) puts it, in performative processes, and they attempt to be transformed into the fully-functioning migrants in the host society: arguing that it is essential to go to school to learn Italian and master the language to find a proper job, as well as accepting required for vocational training, even though it results in low-paying jobs, such as baker, pizza-maker, electrician or mechanic rather than the more 'serious' careers they ultimately desire. However, taking up a CDR perspective, we understand that the evaluations Yakub and Djibril encounter are rooted in the perceptions and values of a white normative gaze (Cioè-Peña 2022), which set standards for asylum-seeking youth rooted in the host country's goals, without properly ensuring that the services being provided meet students' actual needs.

It is possible to ascertain from the economic and socio-political circumstances in their homes that these youth may willingly engage in these tests/trials because this life, and these lines of work, feel like advancement in relation to the opportunities available to them in their country of origin. Still, the positionality of the receiving government is not focused on providing these youth with better opportunities so much as it is concerned with ensuring that these children do not become public charges. Using a CDR perspective, we understand that this fear of youth as charges is rooted in devalued perceptions of disabled bodies (Annamma, et. al., 2016) as well as racialized speakers of minoritized languages (Flores and Rosa 2015). As such, they are given the basic requirements needed to begin to build independent lives: the local language, a service-industry job, and a supplemental education. Interestingly, this neoliberal understanding reverberates in Yakub's argument about self-surveillance of his behaviour and forced migrant children's behaviour in general. According to him, if young asylum-seekers show a high level of self-surveillance of their emotions and behaviour, and if they always show respect for the host society – even when this society discriminates against them-, then they will be perceived as decent *human beings,* and they will manage to assimilate. In this way, Yakub and Djibril's argument reinforces the argument that regulatory power not only acts upon the pre-existing subject but also shapes and forms that subject. Moreover, every juridical form of power has its productive effects. To become subject to a regulation is also to be brought into being as a subject precisely through being regulated (Butler

1993). Nonetheless, it is important to contextualise and localise not only the children's experiences but also their perceptions.

While one could presume that these boys do not seem to have high aspirations, this perception would be squarely rooted in a deficit-centreed perspective of Black and/or migrant youth. It is more likely that their aspirations are reflective of the limited access they have been granted and an internalisation of the ideologies promoted by the professionals and institutions with which they interact. Using a CDR perspective, one is able to understand how the systemic pathologization and racialization of these young men is not absolved by their ability to learn the local language. Instead, we see how their racial and disabled categorizations function to supersede any intellectual capacity that is exerted by their ability to relocate to a foreign country alone, apply for refugee status, master the local language, and attempt to learn a trade. This reduction of capacity was also noticeable in Italian professionals' foregrounding of interpersonal and regional violence in the country of origin as predictive factors for the youths' out-comes and ascribed as a personal flaw in these refugees, unlike political and social unrest encountered by traditional asylum seekers in Italy who are often positioned as victims of systemic failure. Alternatively, when their political and social contexts are con-sidered, they are used to further characterise the teens as incapable. As such, the linguistic practices of the speakers, migrants like Yakub and Djibril, are overshadowed by racial and ableist perceptions of the listening subject: the Italian professionals and institutions. These perceptions about capacity, which may reflect larger, nationally held perceptions of refugees – rooted in racist, ableist, and potentially ageist ideology, primarily implicit, could still heavily influence how professionals as institutional representatives not only interact with refugees but also the policies they develop and the services they provide. As such, a CDR perspective allowed for the uncovering of the complex ways in which refugee status, nationality, race and language came together to construct students as broken with minimal interrogation of the systemic and colonial roots of these framings.

Migrants, particularly youth, must take on many performative aspects both in their departure from one country and their entrance into another. Migrants must, in many ways, adopt behaviours and practices that may feel foreign to them in order to become a part of the host country, either to avoid exclusion or to seek acceptance. Still, the experiences of these migrant youths require consideration for the plurality of values and needs. On the one hand are the needs of the youth and, on the other, those of the receiving nation. An acceptance of plurality and multiplicity would aid in under-standing when actions are performative, in the interest of assimilation, as opposed to rejection of their home culture. These understandings will greatly aid in the development of holistic and intersectional policies and practices that honour the desires and needs of all participants (e.g. establishing norms, developing structured mentorship opportunities, social exchanges) as well as developing more equitable community-refugee partnerships (Symons and Ponzio 2019).

Limitations and recommendations for further study

As previously stated, we have intentionally chosen not to include statements regarding the refugees' abilities or intellectual capacity, linguistic or otherwise. Thus, in not pre-senting disability labels, we are attempting to distance ourselves from ableist perspectives

that aim to frame these youth's experiences as deserved (Clark 2018) and these institutional practices as appropriate/supportive, regardless of the youths lived experience and actual capacity, thus erasing core tenets of DisCrit. Similarly, due to our enactment of a CDR perspective, we choose not to give credence to the idea that accents, dialects, and registers influence perceptions of linguistic legitimacy, particularly given the awareness of how linguistic fidelity is used to reinforce coloniality between the global north and the global south (Crowley 2006). Additionally, as Flores and Rosa (2015) and Schissel (2019) have noted in their work, evaluations of linguistic practice are more reflective of systemic issues and practices than linguistic proficiency; another highly contested concept. Another limitation to this study relates to gender, given that we were using a CDR perspective to guide our analysis we did not account for the way in which gender also influences perceptions, particularly as the overwhelming majority of the professionals were women and the youths were almost exclusively male. As such this is an area of study that needs further exploration with regards to how gender may also influence how the professionals and their youths approach their roles in Italian society.

Still, we invite other scholars to make use of a CDR perspective to examine critical issues related to inclusion in the broader fields of special education *and* language education. The use of a CDR perspective in this paper allowed us to identify 'how languages and language practices are co-opted for the promotion and enforcement of ableism, particularly within immigrant communities' (Phuong and Cioè-Peña 2022, 130). Society is increasingly more linguistically diverse as is indicated by current migration patterns shared in the United Nations World Migration Report of 2022 which stated that:

> Europe is currently the largest destination for international migrants, with 87 million migrants (30.9% of the international migrant population), followed closely by the 86 million international migrants living in Asia (30.5%).9 Northern America is the destination for 59 million international migrants (20.9%), followed by Africa with 25 million migrants (9%). Over the past 15 years, the number of international migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean has more than doubled from around 7 million to 15 million, making it the region with the highest growth rate of international migrants and the destination for 5.3 per cent of all international migrants.

> (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021, 24)

Based on this statement, it should be expected that classroom demographics, and as such student needs, will also change and will increasingly be reflective of diverse linguistic practices, even within nations, like Italy, that historically/traditionally identify as monocultural and monolingual. Thus, there is an pressing need for scholars, regardless of orientation or discipline, to look at the role of language in relation to, but not limited to, disability and inclusive education, particularly since research has long shown that language is often used as a proxy for disability among marginalised learners (Artiles et al. 2005; Blanchett, Klingner, and Harry 2009). Using integrative theoretical frameworks, like a CDR perspective, will help ensure that we move 'beyond responsiveness to identity badges' which often centres the attention on the learner's needs and a desire/need to 'fix' the learner (Artiles 2015). Using a CDR perspective enables us to (1) uncover issues of ableism, linguicism and racism embedded across policies and practices developed and enacted under the guise of support, and (2) 'understand how the constructs of learning, ability, and culture get increasingly intertwined with damaging

consequences that perpetuate historical injustices' (Artiles 2015). Lastly, areas for further study include critical issues like the validity of special education evaluations and language-based assessments for students with complex immigration statuses? and, the influence of race and gender on perceptions of ability and linguistic performativity?

Conclusion

Drawing on a qualitative empirical study conducted in the city of Rome, Italy, this paper has shed light on how language learning in urban school context is framed as a route to social and educational inclusion of migrant and refugee youth, as both an inclusion and normalising practice in the host society. We have revealed how institutionally biased approaches to serving migrant youth influence the likelihood of their inclusion within the host society. Using the integrated framework of a CDR perspective (Cioè-Peña 2020b), this paper has emphasised how forced migrant youth react to perceived linguistic urgency and learn the host language while 'shedding' their home language to transform into, and perform, the 'good (im)migrant.' We chose to centre the values and opinions that migrant and refugee youth labelled as disabled have regarding their own linguistic practices, as well as on how their racialization influences how western communities perceive their linguistic capacity and effort.

The findings highlight how forced migrant youth performance of monolingualism is an indicator of their effort to be included in the host society. This assumption is framed within the premise that migrant and refugee youth, especially those labelled as disabled, are disinterested or incapable of mastering the language of the host society. Thus, their fidelity to the national language becomes evidence of their cultural assimilation. However, for these migrant and refugee youth, language learning is a vehicle for them to build significant relationships with peers and build a sense of safety in the new community. A further significant finding identified from the study is the distinction between identity persecution and political reasons for the persecution that educational professionals make as institutional representatives. This distinction clarifies the process of racialization and pathologization of current refugee youth. All 'political reasons' are tied to identity, but the interrupted schooling background and social class of certain migrant youth are used to position them as less worthy of support and protection. Lastly, the paper highlights the disconnect between what the State requires from young refugees to be included and what is actually provided to them in order to fulfill the expectations.

The findings also speak to the global urgency for teachers and professionals in urban contexts to rethink and reframe language learning and inclusive education in more radical ways. Instead of succumbing to the pressure of neoliberal educational reforms, putting emphasis on students' performance and achievement, there is a need for DisCrit-informed teaching practices (Annamma and Morrison 2018). These will help create an environment that encourages positive social interactions and active engagement in learning focused on creating solidarity in the classroom.

Notes

1. As a cultural hegemony, antifascism banned the use of the term race within the colloquial and the scientific language, without a real process of investigation and deconstruction of race and figures of race characterizing the idea of nation until then (Giuliani 2015).

2. For an overview of the percentage of unaccompanied asylum seekers youth, see the data published by the *Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali* in 2015, available at: e [http://www.lavoro.gov.it/AreaSociale/Immigrazione/minori_stranieri/Documents/Report %20di%20monitoraggio%20dicembre%202014%20(2).pdf].

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