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**Changing the social dialogue through education:
the experiment of Italian students in the Liceo
Scientifico Statale E. Majorana**

A Research Paper

by:

Fulvia Mastrocesare

S664423

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Supervisor:

Sunil Tankha

Second Reader:

Rodrigo Mena Fluhmann

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In this research paper we will explore the conceptualization that young minds have of Italian past and its connection to modern issues of racism and immigration, analysed through the lens of education. By exploring the Italian context, a particular emphasis will be placed on how it is understood, taught and remembered by the people, and its role in shaping collective memory and identity. To do so, a “before and after” knowledge intervention will set the ground to understand the change in the quality of the discourse. It will touch upon some of the most engrained Italian myths and discourses, to later explore its instrumentalization in today’s far-right agenda. The importance of the topic is to be found in the fact that social understanding, beliefs and perceptions can be changed, provided in-depth information. The main findings of the study show a significant change in the quality of the social dialogues among the students, towards a more critical and humane view the presented topics.

Keywords:

Colonialism, education, collective memory, social dialogue, information, Italy

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Inquiries:

International Institute of Social Studies
P.O. Box 29776
2502 LT The Hague
The Netherlands

t: +31 70 426 0460
e: info@iss.nl
w: www.iss.nl
fb: <http://www.facebook.com/iss.nl>
twitter: [@issnl](https://twitter.com/issnl)

Location:

Kortenaerkade 12
2518 AX The Hague
The Netherlands

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Nature of the problem

“...but we were never as bad...” is the discourse that is still reproduced and perpetuated in the minds of Italian people when they are asked about the colonial role of Italy in Africa. This narrative is the representation of a larger phenomenon that represents the raw reality in the country. The starting point of this research is to be found in personal experience as an Italian student and citizens that has been exposed to the reality of Italian colonialism only years later, during the seeking of the bachelor’s degree. Many questions followed this realisation trying to understand how it was possible that a part of history so crucial was thought to students so superficially and dismissively in history textbooks. Is this affecting how I, and students view the colonial past of my country, and the world around us? Would our attitudes towards colonialism change given more information? All these questions had served as foundations to identify the research problem for this piece.

The country diverges considerably from other European fellows regarding the way in which colonial discourse of history is presented, remembered, and thought. Some of them have embarked the process of coming to terms with the past, practising the culture of *Erinnerungskultur* – “culture of remembrance” (Helfer 2021,79). Others, like Italy, have been characterised by a period of collective amnesia, leaving the country free from any type of public accountability (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012, 5). Many are the factors that allowed Italians to lack this burden in their construction of a national identity. In first place, the “spectacular failure” in many of their colonial conquests, like in Ethiopia (Ghiglione 2020). Secondly, the abrupt end of a short era of Italian colonialism, marked by the loss of its colonies following the peace treaty of 1947 of WW2 (Su La Testa 2022). This has allowed the country to avoid undergoing all the decolonizing processes and anticolonial struggles that followed that period (Ibid). Therefore, the basis for the post-war construction of an Italian identity mainly revolved around acclaiming the acts of resistance and fight against fascism (Ibid). Differently from many postcolonial countries, Italy has witnessed a lack of eminent voices of intellectuals that were challenging the role of the country and its crime during colonial times (Ghiglione 2020). This is not to say that the topic of colonialism was erased from collective memory – if it did not involve Italy, the topic was adequately debated in public environment and politics (Ibid).

Italians' conceptualization of their past includes a vision that sees Italy having a marginal and non-harmful presence in the colonial era, especially when compared to other countries, which derives from a severe lack of colonial discourse and surrounding debate in the public scene. Its impact is undeniable: it has caused Italian society to never acknowledge historical wrongdoings or face the consequences of their presence in the colonies, while reinforcing this engrained image of *Italiani Brava Gente*—good-hearted people—free of any moral obligation (Del Boca 1998,591). Such an image, that encapsulates how Italian conceptualises their colonial past, is perpetuated across the social fabric and reproduced through institutions: for example, in the political discourse by far-right parties like Fratelli di Italia and Lega Nord or through the education system and its curriculums. Education represents one of the biggest tools through which subjects are shaped and formed. It plays a crucial role in the formation of their national identity, values and beliefs, which are all elements that guide individuals when operating in the surrounding world and are at the base of social interactions.

Therefore, there is a need to understand how the way of teaching colonial history can influence the understanding of students regarding the colonial past and the role of their country. From a broader perspective this problem, the way Italians are educated about colonial history, has not only repercussions on the conceptualization of their past, but it is also linked/connected to the way in which they understand other modern issues, such as integration, immigration, diversity, that find common components rooted back in the colonial conquest (Unangst and Martinez Aleman 2021,5). The example employed for this research will be race and racism: key elements in both colonialism and immigration (Ibid). Such connection with the highly debated issue of immigration will be later touched upon in the research, in order to provide the reader with a holistic overview. Therefore, the research will aim at investigating the colonial knowledge of students through a before and after experiment to assess the conceptualization of such a past given a certain discourse, created through the educational system.

1.2 Case Study Context

This experiment, conducted in 5 classes of the Liceo Scientifico Majorana, will represent the case study for this investigation. Before proceeding, this paragraph will provide some key information in order to set the context for such case study. In particular, presenting some useful insight into the structure and functioning of the educational system in the context of Italy. The secondary level of education is divided into three types of schools: *Istituti Tecnici*, *Istituti Professionali* and *Licei* (Miur 2018). The former are secondary school systems that are imprinted on a more practical oriented process. These formational schools educate students on hands-on skills and workshops activities tailored for a professional career into the main economic sectors of the country (Ibid). The latter aim at providing students with an in-depth cultural and methodological understanding of reality, while developing critical and creative thinking (Ibid). The lyceums are provided with different tracks that students can choose from, each of them revolving around a particular theme: *Liceo Artistico*, *Classico*, *Linguistico*, *Musicale*, *Scienze Umane and Scientifico* (Ibid). The Scientific Lyceum will provide context of analysis for the research of the paper. According to national guidelines provided by the Italian Ministry of education, there are some “thematic objectives” in each subject that students must be acquainted with (Miur 2012). In the discipline of History, the guidelines state how: “it is useful and desirable to pay attention to themes such as “non-European countries” conquered by European colonialism between ‘700 and ‘800 (Ibid).

An assessment of the context in which this research is going to take place will be provided in order to situate the study. The institute of interest is Liceo Scienentifico Statale Ettore Majorana. It is a public secondary school founded in 1971 as a complementary track for an already existing High School, from which it then officially separated becoming its own independent self. They preach the rule of the three “P”: Innovation, Inclusion and Internationality, according to their website (La scuola, *n.d.*). This secondary school hosts 1186 students that are aged between 14 and 19 years old. The choice of this Liceo is to be connected to a personal motive, as it is the institution that I attended, during my five years of secondary education. Further, the classrooms investigated for the experiment are being selected according to the following criteria: (i) they are “Classi di Quinto”, meaning in their final year of schooling, (ii) they have a fair distribution of female and male students, (iii) they have the same history and philosophy teacher, so that the curriculum taught remains consistent. The institution is located in the Lazio region, more specifically in Rome, in the

heart of the Spinaceto district name. The city of 2.8 million residents counts 13,4% of foreign residents (TuttiItalia.it 2021). The Spinaceto area in particular, is part of the IX *Municipio*, the 9th Municipal area in which Rome is divided, where only 8.8% of the residents are of foreign origins (Roma Capitale). Even if the Lazio region, is the second most populated region in the country, it only accounts for 10% of the country's economic power.

1.3 Research question

This research poses its roots into a far bigger dilemma, that is unravelling how the past is conceptualised and taught, influences the present. The vastness of such a problem necessitates the focus on a particular strand, which is the interpretation that young people have of the colonial era and the links they make between this era and modern society based on what they learn through the schooling system. The lens of analysis that this paper will employ, will be educational policy and the following research question will serve to guide the process.

Research Question:

How does (secondary) students' understanding/conceptualization of their colonial past change as they engage with new historical information on Italian colonialism, in the case of Liceo Scientifico Statale E. Majorana?

1.4 Objective of the research

Given the ambitiousness and intricacy of the problem in focus, the objective of the following research will be to understand the power of education, through a knowledge intervention and the consequent study of the reaction of students to in-depth information about the topic. More specifically, it will analyse how the quality of the social discourse of high school students around their understanding of colonialism, changes after providing reliable and additional text information.

1.5 Justification and relevance of research

The relevance of this study is to be revealed as follows. It pivots around obtaining new data on the current conceptualization of young students of their colonial past and possible changes in the quality of their social understanding. Such data can shed light on two aspects. On a more positive side, it shows that the political and social discourse surrounding Italian colonialism and immigration can indeed be changed with the introduction of new information provided through readings, in a given social context, such as the school classroom. On a more negative side, it has revealed that it can also take more time to change the pre-established discourse, rather than a short-term knowledge intervention. This means that if we were to change the social understanding throughout generations of Italians it would take a longer framework of time. Moreover, it has also demonstrated how volatile discourse can be: it can always change to its origin, and it can be stirred as easily. It can become a dangerous yet powerful tool, through which political parties can create their own politically charged discourses about the Italian colonial past.

The lens through which the problem will be approached, namely educational policy, provides a new route through which the topic has not been yet explored. It will reveal the repercussions that a lack of discourse on colonial history has on a hot topic that dominates the current foreign and internal policy of the country: migratory flows, in terms of perceptions and prejudices towards the latter, considering the insight provided by young students. This will include the deconstruction of what it means to be “Italian” through the eyes of the young population. Education represents one of the roads through which a country constructs and perpetuates their national identity, in order to construct a collective memory (Chun 2018, 571). Analysing the way history is portrayed and represented in curriculums and textbooks provides an insight into the country’s perspective on such a past (Ibid).

2.0 Italian context for the experiment

With the following section we shall then set the ground to understand the conceptualization of the colonial past in the minds of Italians. This will be done by exploring the image of the Italian Coloniser within the current public discourse, while providing an overview on the ongoing immigration discourse and its connections with colonial memory. Such a step will allow us to understand where the current understanding of those students comes from and to shed light on how the current conceptualization and image is still present and reflected into modern issues of Italian society. Most importantly, it will provide clarification on how the historical narrative of Italian colonialism has been portrayed in the public discourse.

2.1 *Italiani Brava Gente*: setting the discourse

The discourse surrounding the politics of memory has been deeply shaped by the nation state (Fuchs and Otto 2013, 3). Although it is crucial to understand how this process does not only relate to “official forms” through which the state engages with its past. At a larger scale it includes all the actors that are somewhere involved in the “strategic” action of politics of memory and identity building (Ibid). Nowadays, Europe with many of its countries has embarked on a slow process of recognising their colonial past and trying to “increased awareness that they are de facto postcolonial societies of immigration” (Fuchs and Otto 2013, 2). To understand the present is crucial to unravel how each nation state has constructed their identity while engaging with the past and its colonial legacy. In the context of Italy, the colonial discourse relates to the notions of race and racism, in a way that they become significantly problematic due to the country’s history, while preventing any space for public discussions on race privilege and past accountability (Unangst and Martínez Alemán 2021, 142). Differently from other Imperialist powers, Italians were never held accountable for their colonial past, in the sense that their role in the colonial undertaking was never openly condemned, especially in the public debate (Ben-Ghiat 2007,390). Nonetheless, like in many other cases of former colonial nations, the absence from public debates of their colonial history has fostered a lack of any psychological or legal consequence and repercussion for such matters (Ibid). Therefore, moving towards the construction and reinforcement of a self-perception as good-hearted people, while permitting historical oblivion on the atrocities of the past (Ibid, 391).

Before moving any further, a separated section must provide some context for the myth of "Italiani Brava Gente" and the notion of Italianness to understand the implications of what it means to be a "true Italian". The premises for this myth are rooted back into a narrative that became more prominent during the Fascist era, when the country strengthened its domination over its colonies (LSE 2020). The characterising element of Italian colonisation was indeed the element of racism (Ibid). Here, the image of the ruthless British or French soldiers, created and spread among Italian society, was juxtaposed to a compassionate and benign compatriot soldier, bearer of new values (Ibid). One of the biggest obstacles towards an increased awareness of the past, while developing a critical memory of it, is rooted in the collective construction and perpetuation of the myth of Italians as "good-hearted people" (Ibid). This is one of the stereotypes that is most radically ingrained into the Italian understanding of its colonial vicissitudes. This narrative is constituted by a group self-representation based on the ideology that sees the Italian as an individual, whose nature is cultured and kind (Lancellotti 2020). Therefore, he is unable to commit any kind of atrocious crime, and he is always compassionate towards enemies—most importantly, immune to racism (Ibid). As a matter of fact, this self-perception of a "humane and benevolent" Italian coloniser, exporting culture and building infrastructure, would be representative of a larger discourse that seeks to justify the civilising mission of white men (Lancellotti 2020). Forging of a homogenous national identity is the result of a union between these collective myths and memories. The identity that results out of this, establishes a fundamental dichotomy that divides the population between "pure Italians" and "half-caste" Italians (Triulzi 2006, 433).

A significant space must be given to understand the role that power plays in constructing the "public representation of history" (Festinger 1962). Such power is to different degrees retained by the education systems and mass media in our modern society (Liu and Hilton 2005, 540). Here, a selected group of professionals, educated through the schooling system, can stir public opinion through the use of mass and social media and other means (Ibid). Nonetheless it is important to distinguish two kinds of professionals that have the power to "lay representation of history": on one hand there are historians and political scientists and on the other, politicians (Ibid,541). Differently from the former group, politicians will base the representation of historical facts on persuading the public opinion, rather than scientific research, in order to legitimise a certain action (Ibid, 541).

2.2 Italy: a unique case of (non) decolonization

Italian colonialism represents one of the most hidden episodes in the country's, and its colonial memory still finds difficulties in earning its rightful place in modern debates. Yet, compared to other colonial rule, its dominance was, and still is, considered less atrocious, less racist and more progressive. The pressing question remains: Why is Italy considered an anomalous case? The answer to this is to be found in the country's uniqueness in the process of decolonization compared to other former powers in Europe, and its lateness in coming to terms with its past. With the demise of the colonial empires, many countries experienced a slow process of decolonization, causing a breach into the social fabric due to the need to reflect atrocities of the colonial era (De Michele 2011, 105). Nonetheless, in Italy such a process did not seem to have the same effect: the "vicissitudes" in the conquest of Africa were largely not condemned by public opinion, rather still looked at with a positive outlook and a charitable eye (Ibid). Its decolonization was not the result of a forced process pushed by independence movements scattered among former colonies (Ibid). Indeed, the country did not transform into the final destination for many of the people migrating from its ex-colonies (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2014,4). This means that Italy did not undergo a consequent change in demographics of the post-colonial period (Ibid). The process of decolonization started only due to the country's loss of World War II and when Allies took away the colonies from them (De Michele 2011, 105). Several mitigating factors seem to infringe upon condemning these events. Firstly, the widespread understanding of the Italian conquest as smaller therefore, less destructive, and less racist: a clear reinforcement of the current self-image of a "colonialism that was different" (Ibid, 107). The administrative law in place in colonies and the experience of the *Madamato*, a temporary relation between an Italian citizen and a native (colonised) woman, are only few examples that confound this vision (Gabrielli 1997, 78). Secondly, the presence of many "positive effects" on conquered countries. The development of agriculture, industrialization, infrastructure, and bureaucracy are only some of the cited improvements that classify this chapter in the history of the country as different (Ibid)).

This was clearly reflected in educational manuals, where chapters of European imperialism are thoroughly explored and criticised: the Belgian, German, French, Spanish empires always find exhaustive explicative paragraphs in history textbooks (Ibid, 108). Contrarily, Italian colonial expansionism does not seem to find space in the books, where it is either depicted as "different" and less influential or as a marginal episode in the sequence of

events. Its anomaly resides in the tardive expansion, compared to many European powers, supported by few poor resources, at times unorganised and dilettantish. This vision often overshadows the main pillar that allows to elevate the Italian conquest at the same level of other colonial rules: the brutal slavery and dehumanisation of subjugated populations in this relationship of coloniser/colonised, together with the destructive force of profound exploitation (Ibid).

2.3 Immigration from *Oltremare*

Especially during Fascist times, the construction of the colonial Other by prominent figures such as Mussolini, De Bono, Starace and many others, played a fundamental role in the justification for a “transplant of civilization” and legitimation for colonial invasions. Unfortunately, this is not a trend that can be buried in a faraway chapter of Italian history. Nowadays, with the new security and integration crisis several power-holding figures such leaders and political parties have been leading the way of a “distorted representation of the Italian past” (Griffini 2022, 479). A clear example is portrayed by the anti-immigration campaign and the propaganda glorifying the “imperial past”, that the radical right parties have been spreading ever since. Analysing the memory of cardinal parties in the country’s political arena, such Fratelli di Italia, Lega Nord, Forza Italia have of the Italian past, showcases a racially driven nationalism discourse coloured by national identity that is grounded onto a “sanitised representation of its past”, where only some (positive) elements are chosen to be remembered and glorified (Ibid, 481).

Italy has been characterised by an ongoing paradox that is everyday more evident: a changing demographic landscape. On one side there is an increasing racist and xenophobic attitude, that is revealed through public opinion, against the incoming migration flows (Dal Lago 2010, 6). On the other, the exponential increase of the latter, in a small-time framework (Ibid,7). In less than ten years the number of immigrants coming to the shores of Italy has jumped from barely 1.5 million to more than 4 million (Ibid,7). Many are the instances where the image of the immigrants has undergone through a criminalising and inferiorization process of “Othering”, depicted in rhetoric of far-right parties as “threats to Italian identity” (Ibid,2). These processes find their similarities with the discourses used during colonial times to invade the colonies, where the “Other”- colonised - was framed as the grotesque problem that needed to be controlled (Faso 2015,183; Griffini 2022, 483). The “Superiority of the Western civilization” (144) cited by the former Prime Minister from Forza Italia, Silvio Berlusconi, in

the context of supporting the US lead occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, uncovers familiarity with the colonial rhetoric and the creation of a “dangerous enemy” (Favero 2010, 144).

During these last few years, the narrative carried out by notorious media platforms and relevant public figures, has been facilitating closed-minded and distrustful perceptions towards immigrants (Asgi 2022). With the rise of a populist wave, Italy has seen members and leaders of far-right parties construct and perpetuate to the public a narrative that criminalizes those who “come into our country to steal our jobs and freedom”—the immigrants (Griffini 2022, 8). Parties such as Lega and Fratelli di Italia have been at the forefront of these anti-immigration rhetoric, where there is a widespread belief that immigration increases rape, theft, diseases, drug dealing activities and many others (Ibid,9). Particularly worrying is the kind of exclusionary rhetoric that is employed by key figures leading the country; the current Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni is an example. The PM’s discourse has been characterized by a more subtle and yet effective manner of constructing and fostering this distorted framing. Recurring words such as “us vs them”, “different”, “invasion”, “Islamification”, “danger” are at the base of the dialectics used in her promotional campaign (Il Manifesto 2018). Often episodes of rape or killing become the bastions of this propaganda. They are strategically posted in the PM’s social media account and highlighting the foreign nationality of the perpetrators (Associazione Carta di Roma 2022). Another example is represented by the Vice President of the Council of Ministers of Italy, Matteo Salvini, who has taken a more direct approach. In many interviews has been caught openly evoking “controlled ethnic cleansing” and “burning down all detention centres” (Panorama 2017).

Media platforms serve as a mirror, reflecting the trends of the political arena. The narrative finds itself divided into two typologies: on one side the banalization of systemic racism and xenophobia, on the other the criminalization of these people (Associazione Carta di Roma 2022). Major outlets such as Il Messaggero, La Repubblica, never cease to specify the nationality of the violators, in cases where the latter are foreigners (Ibid). Many newspapers, rather play with disturbing titles like “*emergenza stranieri*” or “*porte aperte al prossimo stupratore*” (Ibid). Others, like La Verità, have been caught reporting false news: more than 2/5 of the rapes in the country are by the hand of foreigners (Ibid). These considerations provide ground for reflection on the kind of example that is being set for the Italian citizens.

Two major instances are fundamental to understanding the current legacy of colonialism and of race-based systems (Juang, Schwarzenthal, Aral, and Pevec 2022, 13). Firstly, the implementation and perpetuation of the racial law— based on the belief of the existence of a pure race, superior to all others and secondly, the legacy of colonial rule that still shows its consequences on today’s socio, political and cultural context (Ibid). The present racist system of perception is perpetuated through the constructions of self-reinforcing myths such as the *Oltremare*—over there. It embodies one the many debates that products of the colonial legacy were simply “swept under the rug”. This myth is a representation of how the construction of a far “Other” was depicted in order to juxtapose the construction of a pure national and cultural identity of the Italian state (Griffini 2022, 3). The historical nostalgia for a “great past” was used as a tool to claim the need to go back to a time where the Italian identity had not been contaminated by the Other—nowadays used on immigrants (Ibid,4). This rhetoric has resulted to be significantly harmful in terms of social, political and economic inclusion of minorities, while reinforcing an ethnic and cultural racism in the country (Ibid, 3). During colonial times, the figures of the colonized Other was a necessary element to co-constitute the Italian identity. With the fall of Fascism and the shift into modern times, the figure of the colonial Other has been replaced by the immigrant Other (LSE 2020).

This construction of the Other, delineates a narrative based on the dichotomy of belonging. Here, two groups are formed. Those who are considered ethnically Italians—the ingroup, and those who are not—the outgroup. The latest survey conducted by Pew Research has revealed how, compared to most of the European countries, Italy finds itself having the highest percentage of hateful answers towards the topic of immigration- 38% (Asgi 2022,2). This picture is just a snapshot into the diffused and deeply rooted racism that dismays the country. Nationality and skin color remain the two main factors enablers of racist attitudes and discrimination (Ibid). Nonetheless, numbers help navigate an inequality existing within this pressing issue: there are some groups of immigrants that are more stigmatized and marginalized compared to others.

The Osservatorio Sul Nord Est (2019) reports that 72% of Rom people, 60% of Muslim people and people of color, specifically from Sub-Saharan and North Africa are the top three groups majorly at risk of experiencing racism. Moreover, another significant differentiation is to be made in terms of semantics: whether you are classified as

Extracomunitario or Expat. They are both groups formed by people that have left their origin country to seek a better life in a new reality, yet their experiences in the new land are quite different. The former, refers to a category of immigrant people who come from outside the European Union. There is a salient difference between the two. The “Extracomunitario”, a once upon a time neutral term, now withholds a negative connotation for someone who is an “outsider to the community” (Andall 1990, 153). The pejorative meaning that gets attached to this word dehumanizes the individual who is carrying that label (Lenius 2014). Such terminology is often associated with an illegal dimension of the immigration status – clandestine – and used to express an immigrant involved in criminal activities (Solano 2014, 3). Whereas the term Expat, refers to a group of non-European immigrants, but holding Western values and norms. For that, they are believed to be educated, from a wealthy economic background, that usually emigrate due to high collar opportunities or to study, therefore worthy of being an “insider in the community”. The narrative that is created by this division created the image of good and bad immigrants, who will be treated accordingly to this label (Natella 2015).

3.0 Current state of academic debate

There is a significant, yet conflicting way through which countries come to terms with their past and how they perpetuate a certain connection with them. Some take the route of collective memory, where its connection with the past is strong and vivid, crowned by a common sense of fear of forgetting. The “never again” philosophy is the mantra for what the country wants to encourage: a self-definition process to explain the present - where they are now. Others decide to establish a type of connection that resembles an “collective amnesia and nostalgia”, based on highlighting the greatness of this lost past, with its achievements, discoveries, while shing away from the atrocities

3.1 Colonial past and textbook knowledge

How the past is approached is one of the key elements in understanding and shaping the cultural identity of a nation (Wertsch 1997). As highlighted by Wertsch (1997), history cannot be considered as an objective tool that can report the events of the past accurately and unbiasedly. It is rather one of the most significant and effective instruments to influence and construct an individual’s ideas, views and emotions that constitute the foundations for the everyday role that citizens have in “voting, going to war or paying taxes” (Ibid, 6). Therefore, the teaching of history, its content, and ways through which it is thought exerts a great deal of influence on the perception that individuals have on the present and on their identity. Education is representing the mirror that reflects how a society wants to be portrayed. For this reason, De Michele (2006) highlights how through the analysis of past educational policy the connection between the past and present of the country of Italy and the construction of its national identity can come to the surface. Her latest work of 2011, cites how the content of history books pertaining to the past war era, remains crucial in the way colonial history is perpetuated, as it provides future generations of students the main link to connect them with past events. Investigating how post-war educational books depict colonialism can be revealing regarding the persistence of stereotypes and a mystified perception of the colonial events (Ibid). But what relations do Italians have with their past history? Its colonial memory represents a topic that is not very debated, yet it is highly controversial. Bianchi and Scego (2014), might say that colonial and imperial history that resiles in collective memory of Italian society is almost forgotten, if not absent. Others, like Ben-Ghiat and Fuller (2006), advocate for a colonial

memory that has been fiercely suppressed. The authors Leone and Mastrovito (2010) associate this attitude as one of the many coping mechanisms for perpetrators of violence, where Italy is the most salient case. Azada-Palacios (2022) notes the current trend into the academic world in debates to understand how during the past two decades educational curriculums have been used as a vehicle to install and a sense of national identity and values into the minds of students and how that has shaped the rise of nationalist and far-right movements.

A first sign of the relation between past and present is evident in the fact that topics such as colonialism, coming to terms with the past and admitting responsibility, are still a topic of heated discussion. In the astonishing work of Del Boca (2003), he recognizes a lack of discourse on colonial past and the role Italy has played, especially in “taking a piece of the cake” in Africa. Its involvement has for long been put aside or distorted, to the point that literature regarding such a topic was close to non-existing up until the late seventies (Ibid). Nonetheless several are the voices of scholars that have embarked on the process of analyzing history textbooks for Italian education. Some of the scholars have focused on how historical events are presented. Tappi and Leoni (2010) together with De Michele (2006) stress how there is a certain uniformity in the way through which the experience of colonialism is narrated. The first colonial experience of the country is briefly mentioned, and it is characterized by textbooks that still contribute towards depicting the image of Italian colonizer as a magnanimous individual. His duty towards colonies was to bring positive change, cultural and technological advancement to those uncivilized territories (Ibid). Novati (2003) in his research, takes a step forward and demonstrates how there is an underlying commonality on which the past of colonies is narrated: the “colonial outlook” of these educational manuals. This is evident in the lack of a section that presents the point of view of the colonized populations. The colonial approach follows the vicissitude of kings, military men, explorers, colonizers but the voice to the colonized is never considered.

3.2 History education and public discourse

Since the invention of the printing system, society has been relying on knowledge that was inscribed and transcribed through books and texts in general (Luke, De Castell and Luke 1983,113). In the realm of education, this knowledge takes up the name of curricular knowledge, which refers to the package of information that is transmitted every day in the

setting of the classroom, especially through manuals and schoolbooks (Ibid, 114). Even if the historical times change and the institutional approach to it mutates, school text always remains the official knowledge of reference for societies (Ibid). Rydren (2007) stresses the importance of how people are collectively educated on their past history because it creates links between beliefs and what people consider historically relevant. In contrast, it provides a space to comprehend the magnitude to which new acquired information can impact the pre-established myths and narratives (Ibid). Similarly Foster (2011) shows that information taught during history classes contain shapes the collective understanding of students and their historical knowledge. The schooling system plays a fundamental role in shaping social discourse, which allows students to form their perspective and views, and change their understanding (Luke, De Castell and Luke 1983,114). Andall (1990) further emphasises that shedding light on the how a country's colonial legacy is taught trough education, reveals to be a crucial asset in order to understand the attitudes that citizens have towards foreigners and people with different ethnic backgrounds, and the public discourses that are created around such perceptions. The public discourse and the derived social relationships of people within a society are greatly influenced by history education (Korostelina 2008,25). The latter supports the creation of a shared space and a feeling of belonging to the nation (Ibid,26). Moreover, the ethnocultural essence of a society is based on how connections between different groups are shaped by such history (Ibid). It would be not too far of a stretch to assess that History portrayed in books could represent one of the greatest vehicles to (re)transform and (re)shape official knowledge (Ibid,26).

4.0 Conceptual Framework

The following conceptual framework will aid the reader in comprehending the main concepts that are at the core of this investigation. Such concepts find their most usage in the realm of different disciplines, such as psychology, medical studies, nonetheless in this case they will be utilized to support the understanding of how the social discourse in the classroom changes, providing new knowledge.

4.1 Conceptualization of the (colonial) past

The past has two main characteristics: it can be found anywhere, and it is irreversible and unchangeable (Seixas 1998, 736). As a result, what humans have to face is not the past itself, rather traces of it. The presentation and representation of the past are examples of these traces (Ibid). As individuals, we are driven by the need to categorize and order these traces of past events in a way that makes sense and in a way that provides meaning to the present context (Ibid). This is also known as historical understanding. Indeed, the latter can be defined as the collection of interpretations, conceptualization of past events, organized in a way that gives meaning to the present and that is systematically under continuous change (Ibid, 737).

Social representations represent a vehicle that enables individuals to make sense and understand the surrounding social phenomena, for example the country's history (Bobowik, Valentim and Licata 2018, 2). These social constructions constitute how the past is represented and embodies a fundamental component for the creation of a group identity and for the society as a whole (Ibid). Cultural values, norms, beliefs are nourished by the collective memory that groups have of them and prescribe normative behaviors between different groups (Ibid). A key element that enables the construction of the social group's identity is the representation of the past that happens through social constructions (Festinger 1962,2). The chapter of colonialism is central for both the social identity of colonizers and colonized groups (Bobowik, Valentim and Licata 2018, 2). Depending on the role of the group, the social representation of this historical past may vary. How these two groups remember the colonial past contributes to the perception and formation of the group's collective identity and behavior towards each other (Ibid). Commemorating notorious colonizing figures as national heroes is just an example of how some social representations establish narratives that see "good and benevolent" colonial rulers, and the role that colonizing group played in the matter (Ibid,3). For this reason,

unravelling the way in which the past is understood and conceptualized, especially destructive and extremely violent events such as colonialism, is crucial in order to understand contemporary issues of racism, xenophobia, conflict biases etc (Licata and Volpato 2010, 6). The conceptualization of the colonial past can be defined as the bridge that connects those present issues with ways of representing, operating and thinking about such past events (Ibid). Such understanding of the past has a great influence on the present. It moulds and shapes the collective identities of groups that were directly and indirectly involved and their social dynamics (Ibid, 7). A naturalisation process of such social dynamics is triggered when these relationships are not explored, rather taken as universal true values/realities (Ibid, 8).

4.2 The construction of the Other and its discourse

A fundamental characteristic of political discourses, beliefs and attitudes towards certain social groups in the setting of the European arena, has been the countries' colonial history (Givens 2020, 520). As well known, many European countries were implicated in the imperial and colonial conquest of territories off sea, in establishing their presence and power over (Ibid). Many of these colonized territories could not see their independence from their colonizers before the treaties that followed the end of the Second World War (Ibid,521). These colonial histories represent a key in the framing of social and political discourse for salient topics and issues such as immigration, nation state and ethnicity (Ibid).

The two notions of nationalism and ethnicity represent one the antagonist of the other, as framed in the latest debates. The political nature as of which the notion of nationalism is conceived, is considerably recent (Hobsbawm and Kertzer 1992, 4). It lies upon the notion according to which groups of individuals, who gathered together obtain the label of nation, have therefore are entitled to establish a sovereign state, rule over a defined area of territory while exercising control over the latter (Ibid). Without the latter base, the concept of nationalism would not find its significance. If one is to view nationalism as a political program, that would include a politically unifying process through which the population or group of individuals living in these territories must be made into the official inhabitants (Ibid,5). It is here where their national identity, official language and common history are combined to form something that was not existing before, it was rather constructed into being (Ibid). The acclaimed sentence by D'Azeglio: " We have made Italy: now we must make Italians" perfectly encapsulates this process of forced formation (Favero 2010,143). It is in this process that the

notion of ethnicity comes into play (Hobsbawm and Kertzer 1992, 4). Nationalism needs to link a nation with a particular ethnicity, derives from this inescapable division that creates between who is part of this group and who is not (Ibid). The Us vs the other dilemma finds its strengths in making itself the core identity of a nation identity (Ibid). It is funded by this segregation.

The relentless search for the construction of a racial Other is what has been articulating the definition of the European self. In the context of Italy, whether the immigrant, the colonized or the “Meridionale”- Southern- there is always a group of people upon which the definition of Italianness is built against (Giuliani 2013, 254). In the public arena a lot of space is given to these discourses as they become focal points for the development of defining concepts of whiteness, Italianness, identity: fundamental in order to frame who belongs to the in-group, but also crucial in this research to understand from where Italian racism develops from (Ibid). With the exponential increase of influxes of migrant and refugees landing in the European shores, the old categorization purely based on race, replaced by new ones based on ascribed characteristics and a moral inferiority, are resurrecting a colonial discourse that gravitates on the white’s man and his moral burden (Faso 2015, 183).The new dialogues draw many parallels with colonial frameworks. “ We will never be able to civilise them” are among the common phrases that one can hear in regards to the immigrants arriving (Ibid). Here, the constructed Other- the immigrant- is always seen as an active agent only in the context of negative stories or problematic behaviours (Ibid).

4.3 Confirmation bias

In the setting of this knowledge intervention, the concept of information processing constitutes the basis for understanding the development of the experiment. Wickens and Carswell (2021), place the processing of information at the core of societal interaction. The world system in which humans operate, the subjects receive information and then decide to engage accordingly: for example, by accepting the information, rejecting it or to operate according to that information (Ibid, 115). Among these different ways of processing information, we will focus on confirmation bias. It refers to a mostly involuntary process that individuals undergo when they search, select or remember information that continues to reinforce their hypothesis (Pohl 2004,79). This process ensures that all the rest of the information that could potentially refute their understanding or conception, is dismissed (Ibid).

Similarly, in his book, Klayman (1995) established that CB develops at any stage of the hypothesis testing development, therefore he distinguishes between different types of confirmation biases for different stages. A first case is where the way the information obtained is understood is biased itself, supporting the individual hypothesis (Klayman 1995,386). Therefore, the person would classify data in support as trustworthy and data that disproves as unreliable (Ibid). Another case is represented by the search for information that reinforces the present hypothesis, while refraining from any data that could potentially disprove it (Ibid, 387). A last example is the case where even if the individual would like to generate a new hypothesis, moving away from the old one, they have difficulties in doing so, therefore they stick to the old one (Ibid).

Therefore, as Hart (2013) highlighted, humans are inclined into believing statements that confirm their already existing beliefs. Such statements, the more they are repeated and spread and the more they acquire the status of truth within an individual or a society (Ibid, 204). This is also known as validity effect, and it is based on the frequency to which a proposition is repeated (Ibid). The more a statement is met, the more its truth-value increases. Both elements, the confirmation bias and the validity effect, contribute to forming what are known as true values. The rejection of some knowledge while incorporating some other in the existing discourse, leads to the creation “of self-fulfilling truth simply by virtue of itself” (Hart 2013,204). It is a hardship task to then challenge these high true-value claims, which become increasingly more used in human knowledge. This naturalisation process explains how certain claims or beliefs are so deeply entrenched in some social dialogues (Ibid, 205). Therefore, following the presented framework, the selected students for the knowledge intervention ought to be considered as active participants that decide whether or not to accept the historical knowledge presented during the learning process of the knowledge intervention.

4.4 Cognitive Dissonance

Wallis (2017) theorises social facts as overarching characteristics of the world around us, that includes norms, values and the institutions that replicate them. Understanding the concept of norms as “a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity” (891), sets out the connection between what is socially considered bad or good, therefore defining a justified pattern of human action of “what ought to be ” and what is not. These behavioural patterns are collected and organised in what is known as institutions (Ibid). The

present institutions guide the agents by setting out a series of collective practices and rules of behaviors that are appropriate for certain actors in certain settings (Finnemore and Sikkink 2022, 892). Norms undergo through a life cycle, that can be summarised as the following: firstly, a norm emerges and there is an attempt to convince the masses to embrace the new norm, then the norm cascades meaning that there is an attempt to socialise the norm up until the point when the norm is internalised by the masses (Ibid, 896). The underlying assumption of this concept, as elaborated by Festinger (1957), assesses that individuals are driven towards the maintenance of consistency. But when they are presented with situations or norms that are not consistent, they undergo this process of rationalisation in order to reduce this inconsistency—dissonance (Metin and Metin Camgoz 2011, 132).

Another fundamental pillar lies in the fact that the knowledge and understanding that individuals have of this world is indeed an assemblage or package of ideas, facts, values, norms, interactions (Baviskar et al. 2009, 543). If a mismatch is found when comparing, for example, their own package of beliefs with the ones of others, the individual will experience a phenomenon called cognitive dissonance (Ibid). Consequently, the individual faces a crossroad. On one hand they can either choose to refuse the new set of information presented. This would be explained by the fact that people tend to assimilate and seek information that supports previous beliefs or attitudes (Hart 2013,204). On the other they can assimilate them into their knowledge assemblage (Baviskar et al. 2009, 543). The way in which the individual faces this choice falls under the umbrella of process theories. Nonetheless, the permanency of new knowledge can only be assured if the individuals apply it in a new situation where it is validated by peer's feedback (Amineh and Davatgari 2015,14). This means the first instance of cognitive growth actually takes place on a social and not individual level (Ibid).

Festinger (1957) offers a conceptualization of cognitive dissonance. It assumes that individuals are beings who aim at maintaining consistency in their lives. Therefore, when they are faced with a situation where cognitions are opposing each other they try to reduce any dissonance—or inconsistency. This can be done by avoiding situations that cause rupture, as it is psychologically stressful (Metin and Metin Camgoz 2011, 134). Sometimes, in order to reduce that stress and make sense of the dissonance, individuals can also change their cognitive elements or add new ones. Similarly, the element that is causing this dissonance can also be devalued (McKimmie 2015, 202). The dissonance can be found in many instances: knowledge inconsistency, cultural norm or rule, or a dissonance between present and past events (Metin and Metin Camgoz 2011, 134). According to the importance of elements that undergo

dissonance, whether a belief or simple information, the degree of the dissonance varies (Ibid). When deeply ingrained cognitive elements are put into revision, such as beliefs, values or norms, the coping mechanism of dissonance takes place (Bobineau 2017,111). An example of this, is when individuals are presented with incriminating historical facts that are incompatible with the rooted belief they had of those historical facts (Ibid). In the context of colonialism, the negative emotions that are attached to it might serve as a spark in the former colonizing group, a set of group-based emotions such as shame or guilt for the wrongdoing committed in that period. Consequently, to alleviate psychological discomfort generated by such dissonance, they might tend to remember only positive aspects of colonial times, putting a great emphasis into the civilizing mission that brought health, education, democracy etc (Bobowik, Valentim and Licata 2018, 3).A socially constructed idea of the (Italian) past is perpetuated through the social fabric. When this idea does not match with the new information provided, individuals might either undergo a process of cognitive dissonance or experience a process of reinforcement of their pre-existing package of knowledge and beliefs.

5.0 Methodology

5.1 Research design

The aim for the experiment- knowledge intervention- is to understand how much change can be done through the introduction of the reading, therefore with new and more in-depth information about the topic. Specifically, how a particular intervention can change the social dialogue. In the context of education, the choice of the experiment is justified as the following: interventions allow for a more focused teaching session, on a particular theme, that is different from the mainstream modalities of teaching (Hawthorne 2023). Considering the different types of interventions, this experiment had employed a group setting (Ibid). This research paper has aimed at investigating the above-mentioned research question, where the education, namely new information, is the independent variable and (change) social discourse of the classes is the dependent variable. Qualitative based research was conducted, and it gathered the necessary primary data from qualitative interviewing of students. Such intervention was then applied to the case study of secondary school students of the Liceo Scientifico Statale E.Majorana, in Rome. More specifically the focus was on high school students belonging to the last year of high school (age between 17 and 18). This choice is justified by the fact that the school curriculum, touching upon the modules of “colonial history”, is covered in those two years.

The following research design has guided the procedure: 1) The study was centred on a particular segment of students, namely those belonging to the final year of the secondary education cycle. Therefore, only classes of 5th grade had been selected for the collaboration. 2) The criteria according to which the students had been selected are (i) they are attending the final year of high school, (ii) they attend the Liceo Scientifico Statale Ettore Majorana (iii) they have the same history and philosophy teacher. Each of the classes hosts between 19 and 22 students. 3) The site where the focus group interviews have taken place in one of the quiet rooms available in the Liceo, suiting the feasibility and comfort of the students.

The setting of the experiment unfolded in the Liceo Scientifico Majorana, a Scientific High School that is situated in the heart of the Spinaceto District, in Rome. For the experiment 5 classes, aged between 17 and 18 years old were interviewed, for a total of 110 students. Nonetheless It is important to consider that being a group interview, not all 110

students engaged directly with the questions. All the students were attending the last year of high school and were selected because during the last year they have studied the module of colonialism in general and a brief introduction on chapter of Italian colonialism. Moreover, the classes had the same history teacher, which ensured some continuity of curriculum content, and for the students to be at the same level of knowledge regarding the topic, throughout the 5 classes. The selected tool to conduct the investigation was an experiment based on a “before and after” knowledge intervention, to see immediate change in the dialogue of the students. To assess the latter, a setting of 5 focus groups (one in each class) was organized for several reasons: firstly because of its group element, that permitted it to create an informal and more serene conversation. This created a horizontal relationship, rather than vertical, reducing the distance between the researcher and the students, allowing me to position myself more as a moderator of the discussion rather than an authoritative figure. Secondly, considering that not all students were willing or interested in the participation, or simply timid, the focus group allowed them to create an open arena where they were not forced to engage if they didn’t want to. Lastly, the discussion setting, allowed also to create a situation of dialogue where students were not only engaging with the researcher but also, interacting with each other’s answers.

Furthermore, the typology of method employed- focus groups- aims at showing how if we change the terms of the discourse discussion, the social dialogue also changes. The methodology was evaluated as adequate because it allows to “draw upon respondents’ attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences” (Gibbs 1997, 2). In other words, it permits investigating the collective perspective of the group of students (Gill and Baillie 2018,669). It grants the opportunity for in-depth data, while still maintaining the possibility of obtaining a variety of multiple answers (Ibid). This design shall also consider that, as students might not always be willing to provide extensive and exhaustive answers, the group setting that enables a social exchange between the participants can spur a richer discussion (Ibid). Moreover, this particular setting might witness the presence of stronger few elements that due to charisma or social hierarchies, might determine the overall consent or disagreement of the rest of the group (Sim 1998, 348). This should be considered in addition to the presence of an external figure, myself as researcher and their history teacher, both present during the focus groups. Considering the possible loss of interest or attention during the process, conducting focus group interviews will allow me to keep the respondents engaged and the conversation interactive, while leaving manoeuvre to stir its direction (Gibbs 1997,3).

The experiment evolved as the following. Firstly, through a focus group discussion, they were asked a set of questions to captivate their current understanding of the topic prior to the knowledge intervention. Subsequently, single copies of a predefined reading will be handed out to each student and the class will be asked to dedicate a short amount of time to read the text. After they had finished with the reading, we had to resume and another set of questions was posed again, containing distinctive questions that were aiming at developing a discussion and reflection on the presented reading. This was to be conducted with the intention to reveal if any change has occurred after the reading, considering the provision of more knowledge, therefore, to see how the attitudes have changed and towards what direction. Nonetheless, a possible obstacle for this particular procedure was lying in obtaining the approval and necessary permissions to conduct these focus groups, fortunately it was a smooth procedure.

The material selected for the “knowledge intervention” consists of single reading. Due to the limited knowledge of the English language, the readings will be in Italian. For the purpose of the intervention, the reading provided is a brief chapter “Il Fenomeno del Madamato e i Meticci” extrapolated from the book written by Di Sapio and Medi (2020) titled “Il Colonialismo Italiano in Africa tra Passato e Presente”. This reading has been selected among many as it covers in greater detail the topic of race, institutional racism, and half-caste people. The latter topic did not have a section dedicated to in the used textbook, and nor it was covered as an additional topic in the curriculums of the classes by the history teacher. In addition, the reading was part of a book that had already been used by the students and their teacher to cover topics that were not present in the main history textbook, like for example the phenomenon of the *Madamato*. Therefore, the students were already familiar with the writing style of the book, which was intelligible for their level of age, yet able to shed information on a new topic. Nonetheless there is another element to consider. The original experiment was set to also include a survey questionnaire to pose to the students together with the discussion to assess anonymously their beliefs, but unfortunately due to limited timing imposed by the teacher and the difficulties in keeping the classes under control, it was possible to only perform the knowledge intervention based on the reading.

The data collection process unfolded through the posing of 4 questions at the beginning of each session, to which students could spontaneously reply by raising their hands and the recording of those answers. Later, after the reading was provided, 4 more questions

were posed to the interviewees, who replied by raising their hands and allowing for the recording of those new answers. The qualitative data analysis method operated is discourse analysis. To understand and investigate the quality of the change in the social debate, it is necessary to understand how the language is used. Firstly, it aligns with the goal of this research: to research the construction of meaning. Secondly, discourse, employed in a particular social context, represents the means to trigger societal change or to achieve a specific objective. It represents the most suitable choice of analysis as it is based on one main pillar: reality is socially constructed. Therefore, the understanding that students have of Italian colonialism is subjective and context sensitive.

5.2 Limitations

Having outlined the peculiarities of the context in which this research project will take place, differences are the preliminary limitations that must be underlined in order to proceed.

Firstly, this research will not aim at trying to change Italian (students) attitudes towards the topic, as the latter is a very slow process, which can be observed over generations. I will observe and evaluate how the quality of the debate has changed. Attitude change on colonial history and migration does not only depend on the teaching of such topics and the provision of new information, which can trigger a change in the mainstream discourse. It also depends on many different factors such as political views, religious beliefs, social context, economic background. Other factors include issues related to current beliefs about security, about legality (of migrants) etc. Moreover, the change might also depend on the type of government in place in this particular instance and how they reproduce certain ideas.

Secondly, it must be noted that, although Italy is a relatively small country, it is still very segregated and differentiated. This results in having to adjust to many variables in the research, namely in a great variation in terms of geographical location, socio-economic status and political view. For this reason, this project will not aim at drawing generalizations from the results obtained, that can be extended to the totality of the country. Nonetheless, for the sake of this research the focus will be limited on a particular classroom in the city of Rome from the Liceo Scientifico Ettore Majorana. Thirdly, it must be highlighted how the case study selected is not necessarily representative of the current trend in the country, rather

informative for the specific case selected. The objective will be to understand the power of a knowledge intervention on the students view of colonial past, while connecting it to salient contemporary issues such immigration and racism, undeniably intertwined with the colonial legacy and experience.

Thirdly, due to the kind of methodology selected for the study, my presence as researcher is necessary, during the development of the focus groups, in order to moderate the discussion, present the questions and the needed readings for the experiment. However, my presence could have involuntarily steered the answers provided, as students might feel that a certain type of answer is expected from them. Following this, the issue of authority must be touched upon. The presentation of this text in the pre-established formal setting of the classroom could play some role in the way in which the students interpret the validity of the new information given. According to Luke, De Castell and Luke (1983) this change can be pinned to the level of trustworthiness that the students attach to the source that gets presented to them. The social relations created in the schooling setting create a situation where the provided reading will be seen authorised valid knowledge that they can trust (Ibid, 113). The more the setting is formal and authoritative, the more students might be prone to reflect on the new information, as they might see it as more trustworthy. Therefore, results might be different in a setting that is less authoritative.

Having to consider these limitations, it is clear how these are areas that could be discussed and spur further research. Moreover, provided the above-mentioned specificities, this piece of work is not meant to be generalized into other settings, considering that the observations and results may be only pertaining in this set of circumstances involved.

5.3 Ethical Challenges

A preliminary ethical challenge that might surge in this process is the power dynamics that might be in place. It must be considered that for example that students might feel pressured to provide a positive outcome to questions as they fear there might be repercussions according to the kind of answer they provide. In order to tackle such issues, the students will be reassured of the confidentiality of their answers. Moreover, to respect their privacy, anonymity will be used by utilising *aliases*. For the purpose of the study, informed consents will be handed out to each student, prior to the study, where the theme and objectives of the research will be clearly

stated. A consideration in regard to the voluntary nature of research: participants will be reminded of voluntary participation into the project and the possibility of withdrawing at any point of the experiment.

A second challenge is connected to a possible power structure in place between students and the researcher. For this reason, an introduction with both focus groups will be made where I present myself. The focus will be in highlighting a horizontal rather than vertical structure, where I position myself as a peer, who is only a few years older and as a former student of that high school. Moreover, the students will be asked if they feel comfortable conducting the experiment with the presence of the teacher in the room. A third ethical challenge regards the possible bias that might be in place as a researcher, in regard to the way through which some questions are posed or interpreted for the analysis.

Lastly, the possible obstacle that the role of gatekeeper retains, in this case the history professor of the class that will be interviewed for the research, is not present anymore. The personal connection with the history teacher, as my former professor, has allowed me to gain access to the classroom and the approval to gather data from that setting.

5.4 Positionality within the research

The following section will inform the reader regarding the epistemological position that has been taken within this research project, to investigate the posed problematic. The latter will be from a thick constructivist perspective of the issue, as it will support explaining how the current mainstream conceptualization of an Italian past and their role in colonialism is portrayed, formed and perpetuated. “The human world is not simply given/and or natural”, rather “it is constructed” (Agius 2013, 71). In order to fully capture the importance that ideas, human interactions and identity play in constructing this world, social constructivism shall be explained. The social interaction-based theory is anchored on several constitutive elements: 1) human activities construct the reality, therefore it does not exist prior to that 2) sees the process of meaningful learning as a social process that can happen only when individuals are confronted with others 3) human interactions is pivotal in the construction of knowledge of individuals (Amineh and Davatgari 2015,14). We will focus on the last two points of social constructivism. One of the ontological claims of social constructivism states how agents and

structures are mutually constituted. Such understanding is to be situated into the agency structure debate.

In order to understand and explain the problem of this research, a premise on the structure-agency debate must be made. Following Hay (2002) understanding of such a topic, this debate refers to the fact that social action is contingent on context and human conduct: it explains how individuals see the surrounding world and consequently how they interpret its economic, social, political mechanisms. Within this continuum, many are the strands to be recognised: simple and complex strands (Knio 2022,7). The former sees the denial of both structure and agency, or the prevalence of either structure or agency over the other, where one determines the other (Ibid). It might be tempting to use the simple strand in which structure—namely the institution of school—exerts influence on the agents—namely the students— where certain ideas that are impeded in the schooling system, shape the way students see the world, and therefore see and perceive the Italian past. Nonetheless, this will not be used because it does not take into account the influence that context exerts on agency/structure (Knio 2022,7). In this case, it would not take into the analysis the fact that the way Italy conceptualizes its past is also due to a lack of postcolonial debate in the social, political and academic sphere (Del Boca 2003, 19). Differently from countries such Germany, England or France, Italy has not been successful in its colonial mission, bearing the shame of defeat, which has led the country to never face public accountability for their actions (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012,6). Therefore, the conceptualization of the past and how students see this past and the role of their country, has not solely been shaped by the educational system and by the different actors involved, but also by the context in which Italy has developed this discourse of colonial times.

The latter strand, also known as complex, as defined by Hay (2002), is driven by a co-constitutive argument and divides itself into four strands. The fourth strand—thick constructivism (TC)—will be the point of view that this paper will employ. The underlying assumption is that structures do not have properties/characteristics per se, they get co-created when they interact with actors. (Simultaneously, actors get influenced by these structures) (Knio 2022, 7). Its main argument is based on the mutual constitutive basis of structure and agency. The choice of such theory is validated by three reasons upon which TC is built: structures (i) get mutually constructed in relation to agents, through the vehicle of ideas; (ii) but also, they exist within agents in the form of social fact (Ibid). In the context of

this research such affirmation aims to explain how the image of a collective past is constructed through teaching history, and at the same time it is co-constructed by the experience, beliefs and values of the Italians (students) in classrooms. History notions in school curriculums are absorbed by society as social facts, playing a special role in how people give meaning to present events and situations (Korostelina 2008, 26). They might advance a particular standpoint for the exclusion of certain groups, the role of a nation in a conflict, justification for a powerful regime etc (Ibid). Lastly, it considers the role that context plays in the debate (Knio 2022, 7). The context in which this image is constructed is a context that sees a lack of self-guilt, which gets reflected in the teaching of history (Favero 2010,140). Firstly, we must consider the pre-existing beliefs, where some premises are assumed to be true and therefore accepted (Egan 1998, 315). Secondly, the social interaction that students have with other people and with the socio-cultural Italian context in which they grew up, contributes to cultivating the knowledge they retain of (national) history (Leo 2019, 293). This process of learning results to be crucial as often the information is enriched by pre-existing biases, beliefs, social representations etc, which may affect students' prior understanding of history (Ibid). Adler (1997)'s understanding of ideas as “collective knowledge, institutionalized in practices” (Adler 1997, 325) sheds light on the fact that the idea of “Italiani Brava Gente” (good-hearted people, immune to racism), and of an immaculate Italian past, is being collectively remembered in a certain way, which is institutionalized and reproduced through the schooling system. Consequently, the social reality of (young) Italians is constructed, shaped and maintained by these ideas embedded into everyday practices and routines (Ibid).

This premise constitutes the ontological base upon which this paper will try to understand the results obtained following the knowledge intervention among the understanding of the students and the social dialogue that they create around it.

6.0 Results and analysis

The following analysis will be guided by the need to investigate a change in the social dialogue of the classrooms after the provision of new in-depth information about the topic of Italian colonialism. In order to see if there has been a change in understanding of the topic, the gathered data from the experiment will be divided into two data groups: before and after the intervention. Following such division, 4 main codes were generated to support the analysis: general understanding of colonialism, Italian role in the colonial experience, the discourse of *Italiani Brava Gente*, immigration. These are the most common themes that could be extrapolated from interviews. The discussion was guided according to these four themes as each of them represents a key part to answer the main research question. Firstly, there was a need to assess the general knowledge that students possessed on colonialism, in order to map out current understandings. Secondly, to capture how this narrative has been particularly relevant in the context of Italy, the discussion focused on the Italian role within colonialism. Thirdly, to unveil some of the widespread images that are constructed within the current discourse of Italian colonialism can change, the theme of “*Italiani Brava Gente*” was taken into consideration. Lastly, the topic of Immigration was proposed in the intervention to assess the current beliefs of the treated youth and its relation to multiculturalism and cultural inclusion.

6.1 General understanding of Colonialism

Before

Throughout the 5 classes the topic of colonialism was referred to by students as a necessity of powerful countries to expand their territories or to spread a nation’s culture. When asked to describe in their own words their understanding of what colonialism is, there was a widespread understanding and description of it from an economic and political perspective. Therefore, the natural resources and the trade benefits with the colonies were brought up, along with the necessity to conquer many territories and build an empire to assert power and dominance. An interesting point was noticing how none of the students connected colonialism as based on any ideology. A student even enhanced the innovative way of controlling a new territory, “in ways that were not seen before”, proposing colonialism as an avant-guard process. The answers lacked a mention of any social aspects linked to the subjugation of other populations based on race, skin color or any other social differences.

When asked about how they would picture a person of color, the students described the image using poor, weaker, less developed, in need, brown as main distinguishing elements. This image will be later compared with the adjectives used to describe an immigrant person.

After

Following the reading of the provided text, students were asked to provide their new insights in regard to how they would interpret and explain the concept of colonialism. The conversation included several elements. Firstly, the violence and crime of colonialism were mentioned, as distinctive traits of the conquest. Secondly, the framing included the subjecting and invasion of other territories. Several voices expressed this invasion as based on a specific ideology, namely the superiority of the white race. Lastly, the students from two classes discussed on how there was a certain social hierarchy based on the color of the skin, aligning with the rest of the group in recognizing the white race at top of the social pyramid. Student C noted that, during colonialism, black people were seen as inferior due to their skin. The overall discussion was now enriched by terms such as race, superiority, discrimination. The language used to describe colonialism comprised terms such as genocide, war crime, massacre, invasion etc.

Analysis

The answers provided underwent a significant change in how the concept of colonialism was framed by the same students. In first place, the most evident change is represented by using “race” and “discrimination” in conversations and a present connection of colonialism based on the white race supremacy ideology, dictating the invasions. Secondly, after the reading students did not frame colonialism as a purely economic and resource based necessity, as they did before, rather focusing on the skin color element. The after discussion pivoted towards the social/human aspect that comes into play in colonialism: the physical feature of people, on which the distinction is made. This shows their understanding that colonialism was expressed and conceived as exploitation and slavery of other populations, based also on the racial component, and not purely on the economic base. Thirdly, it can be observed from the discussion following the reading, a realization of the element of violence and exploitation that characterized colonialism, that in the previous discourse was completely lacking. This is visible by the fact that students started to mention some examples of wars where the indigenous population was completely and atrociously conquered by the

colonizers. Now students referred to one, namely the battle of Adwa, between Italy and Ethiopia, reflecting on its atrocities and on its fatalities. Lastly, a new conceptualization of the theme is also to be seen in the different definitions of the latter, where sentences such as “seeking the control of territories” and “controlling the society” showcase a less passive framing of the colonial actions.

6.2 Italian Role

Before

Students were asked to brainstorm words related to Italian colonialism. In doing so, the word Italy and Mussolini were only mentioned 1 time each by two different students. England, Germany, France, America, Hitler, Africa, Roman Empire and history were the most common answers. In regard to the role, they believed Italy has in the colonial conquest, there was in each class a unanimous consensus that Italy has a marginal role in the colonial tale, as it was defined several times as a failed attempt of the country to gain new territories, reinforcing this view of colonialism from a purely economic/political perspective. Diving deeper into the conversation, the topic of colonial legacy had surfaced. Students therefore reflected on the visible consequences of Italian colonialism. The answers were quite divided into no legacy, positive aspects, negative aspects. The first group expressed its understanding that there were no visible consequences or legacy of Italian colonialism as “Italian is not spoken anywhere”, and “we don’t have institutional racism like in the US”. The second group recalled the existence of positive aspects such as the infrastructures built and the economic prosperity brought to Africa, together with the exporting of Italian culture. The last group, instead, discussed the negative aspects of the colonial legacy, as being negative only for the country of Italy, as it employed all its resources in many battles that were lost, therefore creating a shameful experience. The overall language adopted by the students when referring to what Italy did in the colonial experience catches the recurring words of conquering, obtaining. Moreover, Italian colonialism was often referred to as the “African Adventure”.

After

Moving to the second theme of the debate, a small fraction of the crowd interviewed did not show sign of changing their positions in regard to the role of Italians in the colonial experience. Their understanding remained shifted towards a “marginal role”. The rest of the answers provided, mentioned a role of oppressor, connecting the answers to specific

sentences in the reading. An example is Student D's reference to "the damage that we caused to the local population and to the women that were violated", indicating the section of how half-caste people came to be. The countries of Ethiopia and Libya were now part included in the discourse in reference to the Italian colonies overseas and acknowledged as such. When discussing the legacy of Italian colonialism, many students indicated the presence of consequences in modern Italian society. In first place, the ongoing racist perception of Italians towards who is different. The difference was further explained with race, religion, and culture. In the answers, the provided reading was mentioned by students as a tool for them to understand how institutional racism is still existing. On the other hand, a different strain of thought characterized some answers that still saw Italian role in the colonial embargo as marginal due to the lack of profits, economic and territorial. Lastly, students had stopped referring to Italian colonialism, as the "African Adventure".

Analysis

Although some students do not seem to change their opinion regarding the role of Italian in colonialism, an overall change in the discourse can be observed when comparing the before and after data. Students demonstrated to be more aware and to actively acknowledge the Italian position. This shows that the reading served as an instrument for them to move beyond the idealized Italian intervention of a "life changing experience for the colonies". The process of acknowledging is evident in several instances. Firstly, it is evident in how students changed and, in their answers, talked about Italy as the oppressor, therefore grasping the role of someone who uses their power to control and submit other groups, showcasing an acceptance of this new image. Before the specific term was never mentioned. Secondly, a new sense of collective guilt emerged from the answers provided by students, especially regarding the violence committed towards the local women. Notable for the analysis is how the process of acknowledging the colonial wrongdoing and role in them is vivid especially when students started to mention specific countries that were Italian former colonies. It displays quite a contrast from the beginning where, when asked, students expressed their lack of familiarity with what the Italian colonies were. This shows that the colonies are not a faraway reality, rather by mentioning exactly the names of the colonies, they became a concrete history instance in the mind of the students. Lastly, students were now highlighting a sense of severity when discussing the legacy of colonialism. The use of the word "consequences" rather than "legacy", demonstrates the gravity perceived by the interviewees. The legacy was

not framed from the perspective of the Italian country, for example “Italian is not spoken anywhere”, but rather from the stance of Libya, Ethiopia and Eritrea, in phrases like “the damage we caused”. This shift in perspective, from colonizers to colonized point of view, is exemplary of how, following the reading, students started impersonating themselves more in the colonized position. Moreover, a step further was taken in the recognition mechanism, when the pupils engaged with present consequences, such as engrained dislike towards who is different, rather than framing the colonial consequences as a problem present only in the past. This did not only include the race-based discrimination coloring Italian society, but students went beyond mentioning also culture and religion-based ones. Lastly a remarkable shift in the framing of the historical events can be observed from the before and after. The students had stopped referring to the Italian role and its colonialism as the African Adventure, a phrasing that was clearly downplaying the gravity of the events.

6.3 Italiani Brava Gente

Before

Connected to the previous aspect, for this part of the questionnaire, the students were asked to discuss and provide their understanding of the image of the Italian as a good-hearted person. However, the students were not provided any other context or explanation in regard to the controversy of the myth. They found themselves in alignment with the image of “Italiani Brava Gente”, explaining that Italian soldiers were not known for any crime or violence, as they were in that situation strictly due to their job. “We were not savages” and the compassionate aspect of Italian soldiers is an aspect that came up in the discussions, while no one mentioned any episode of genocide or massacre against the local population. Again, the caring and saviour aspect of Italian colonizers was perceived in sentences such as “we built roads for them and even helped in their development”. When inquiring about the topic of half-cast people, generated from the union of Italian soldiers and local women, students expressed how it was not an issue as they believed they were seen as Italians and therefore socially accepted. Others did not believe they existed. Shifting conversation towards the comparison with other colonial empires, this sentiment of magnanimity seemed to be amplified: the “we were never that bad” was presented, especially in comparison to other countries like England or France, as student highlighted.

After

In this section, the majority of the answers found a disagreement with the figure of the Italian soldier as good and kindhearted. Student F claimed how they did not realize that Italians might have been just “as bad as the other imperialist powers”. Some others specified the ability to hide the cruel nature better than others. The students proposed such answers, before referring to the section which was explaining the creation of a “strategic” third race, the half-caste people, in order to maintain the purity of the Italian white race. Indeed, the topic of half-cast people sparked a considerable discussion. A part of the interviewees highlighted aspects related to the existence of racial laws in the country, that were enabling the perpetuation of such discrimination. The other part of the group discussed how discrimination and xenophobia towards people of color was and still is entrenched into the Italian individual, due to the need to maintain a pure race. Both groups specified their strong belief that this image is not that widespread and relevant today. Student G and Student L further developed the conversation by drawing up some parallelisms between how half-caste people and “non-white” Italians are both discriminated against, as they are often not considered fully Italians.

Analysis

For this part of the discussion, what emerged from the discussion with students is the creation of a new discourse, which reinforces the component of social change through discourse (Luke, De Castell, and Luke 1983,113). The latter was created in substitution to the image of the “*Italiani Brava Gente*” after the intervention, which means that it was no longer suited for the post intervention understanding of the classes. This new discourse is characterised by an image where Italians are good-hearted people, therefore moving away from their conceptualization of white man saviour complex that was shining through the previous answers. “We helped them in their development” transitioned to the realisation that “we were as bad”. The shift moved away from conceptualising Italians as not being a real coloniser to a greater accountability of the actions. The interviewees became more critical of the situation, stating how Italian were as responsible as the others, just better at hiding their misconduct. The many examples that were present in the conversation, such as the creation of a third race to classify half-caste people, sustain this observation. The new discourse created also sees the image of the Italian as inherently racist, as pointed out by the crowd, as

often non-white Italians have to endure discrimination as they are not considered Italian. Although, notable of discussion is how students do not believe that the image of “Italiani Brava Gente ” still exists today, highlighting who Italians are aware of their role in the colonial wrongdoings. This is a substantial contradiction with what was experienced before and after the same intervention. The same students before the reading expressed their alignment with the Italian being magnanimous and charitable towards the conquered populations, yet they do not believe that this image still exists today.

6.4 Immigration

Before

The hot topic of immigration was able to engage the majority of the students, even timid ones. To begin with, when asked to describe the figure of the immigrant, in juxtaposition with the figure of the Italian, students based their distinction based mainly on physical, social and economic basis. The color of the skin represented a salient distinction: Brown and black in comparison to the white Italian. Moreover, a couple of students did not refrain themselves from adding that “smell” was a distinctive characteristic of immigrants. The students described the immigrant as someone who “behaves differently from us”, and when asked to deepen their explanation they stated how “they are so strict with religion”. In addition, the immigrant embodied a person who was lacking economic means and resources, together with a lack of education. From the answer it is deductible how immediately students thought about extra-communitarian immigrants rather than expat immigrants, when given no specification about the type of immigration. Worthy of attention is how students unconsciously assumed that all Italians are of white race, without leaving space for any doubt. Moreover, as precisely analyzed, the figure of the immigrant and the colonized do seem to overlap in the way in which students have described both. Moving beyond the mere description in terms of similar terminology, it is interesting to notice how in both cases, there is the creation of two separate groups: us vs them, colonizer vs colonized. The process of the othering is seen first in the colonized and then in the immigrant. A strong sense of belonging to the Italian nation was deductible from the discussion. The distinction between who was Italian and who was not was very clear in the classroom (Italianness). This is also clear in many of the students’ opinions on the topic. Student A stressed how “they need to integrate with us and adapt to our world when they decide to come”. Others, like Student B, when

describing the issue of immigration flows in Italy, highlighted how criminality has substantially increased since their arrival. Although Student B recognized that there is a widespread sense of xenophobia in the country, the immigrants “feel discriminated against and yet continue to act like this”, in reference to the criminal behaviour. Student C instead expressed that immigration was not a problem per se, rather the adaptation to the religion of the hosting country.

After

When the topic of discussion was again re-proposed based on what the students had conceptualized from the reading, diversity and cultural mix were found to be fundamental pillars in the discussions, whereas an Italian society should be important to embrace and learn from. The need for more inclusivity and openness seemed to be now reoccurring themes in the discussion, when touching upon the issue of embracing different cultures. In particular, interviews recognized the existence of many positive aspects that can be drawn from the union of different cultures. In this setting 7 students spontaneously reflected on such positive aspects and shared with the group instances or episodes where they could recall learning from such diversity. The discussion touched upon the lessons that could be drawn from colonialism and applied nowadays, in regard to the acceptance of “who is different”. “Putting ourselves into each other’s shoes” emerged as a concluding life lesson in order to be more understanding and empathic. Moreover, when discussing the situations of millions of people dying when trying to reach Italian shores, Student M stated that “it was our fault” that so many people are dying and “the current policies enacted by the Italian Government are not working”. Recalling the text, 17 students bridged a connection between the propaganda that was popular during colonial time demonising the half-caste people, and the public discourse pursued by far-right parties and the media to criminalise the upcoming immigrants. Nonetheless, from the conversation, students highlight several times their beliefs that racist attitudes were only present in the older generations, parents and grandparents, rather than in younger ones, pinning to the past the intolerant mentality and biased attitudes towards foreigners.

Analysis

For this theme, a clear change can be observed in the lens through which the figure of the immigrant was perceived by the interviewees. The intervention has shifted the discourse

of students surrounding their perception of an immigrant person from a passive to active figure. If before it was discussed and described as someone poor and vulnerable, now the conversation has expanded more towards all the aspects that an immigrant person has to offer. Embracing the diversity that gets created in this cultural exchange represents the main focal point that can be concluded after the experiment. Students shifted from a closed off and aggressive reasoning towards immigrants, to then move towards a more embracing stance. The positive episodes of cultural exchange shared in the dialogue, are exemplary of a movement beyond their initial beliefs and position towards a greater acceptance. In addition to this, what the reading was able to do is a reframing of the problem: before immigration was not so much seen as a problem, rather the unwillingness of immigrants to adapt to Italian customs and traditions etc. Afterwards, the reading allowed the content of the answers to move away from the strong national sense of being Italian, and the need for newcomers to adapt to this. The shift was directed towards a more inclusive stance, that did not see religion and cultural diversity as an issue to be solved once arriving into Italian territories. Moreover, the after experiment showed how the reading had provided some ground and served as a tool for students to go beyond the mere information provided in the text, to critically draw connection with other topics. A considerable section of the session was dedicated to the different links that were made between the colonized and the immigrants. According to the students, in terms of discrimination and criminalization, both groups underwent a process of “othering” based on their race/ethnicity. However, a discrepancy is to be found in this discourse. Students perceived themselves as more aware and open minded, especially in comparison to their parent’s generation. To back this, after the reading they discussed how the demining propaganda during colonial times was parallelly still existing when talking about immigration. Yet, the same classmates, before the intervention, were claiming how “criminality increased after their arrival” and how they still keep acting like criminals “even when they don't want to be discriminated against”. A denial of these dimensions shows that even if the students were exposed to more in-depth information, some discourses are still deeply ingrained, resulting in difficulty to change in a shorter framework.

6.5 A shift in the wording: language analysis

The analysis of the language use represents a clear indicator that sheds light on how the content quality of the social discourse within classes changed after new information was provided. From the discussion before the reading, the language used by students employed

words such as conquest, settlement, expansionism, especially when referring to and describing colonialism. Whereas verbs such as developing, obtaining and expanding were employed when describing colonization of third parties. After the intervention a clear change can be observed in the language used. The use of stronger words such as invasion, war, massacres, genocide used to frame the acts of colonialization. This shift in terminology shows how students picked up the gravity of the situation from the text and redefined their way of describing and understanding colonialism and the related topics. Moreover, after the intervention it can be observed how there is a shift in the subjects used in the sentences. Before when referring to the country's role in the colonial conquest, students tended to use the subjects of Italians in their answers, rather after the intervention the subject became "we". A change from general and impersonal use of Italians to the more personal and inclusive use of "we" shows how there was a form of appropriation and recognition of the actions.

6.6 A glimpse into the history textbook

The history manual adopted by the five classes is titled "Le Carte della Storia. Spazi e Tempi del Mondo. Dal Novecento ad Oggi" by Caracciolo and Roccucci (2022) and it represents the textbook of reference for the study of history of the interviewed classes. As we have seen, the subject of history, differently from other scholastic subjects, is still heavily relying on the support of the textbook as a means of teaching. Therefore, a brief assessment, yet necessary, must be made for the understanding of the content of what students have been learning. What is most relevant to this research, is framing of the issues of colonialism and the Italian role in it. Firstly, the book containing more than 400 pages has a total of two sub paragraphs dedicated to Italian colonialism, where the topics are covered in sections that are no longer than 300 words, and one chapter dedicated to decolonialism, where the Italian case is not even mentioned (see Appendix C). The first two paragraphs touch upon Colonialism during the Giolitti era (see Appendix A) and the one during the Mussolini era (see Appendix B). The mention of Ethiopia and Libya is present, although none of wars or genocides is mentioned and the presentation is limited to historical succession of events, without any further in-depth information regarding socio, cultural and economic implications for colonies. There are no further readings or extra material suggested regarding the topic. The end-of-the-chapter quizzes only assesses colonialism in England, France and The Netherlands. The economic side of the conquest is nonetheless covered. Moreover, the colonial conquest is

often referred to as “Colonial Adventure”. Secondly, the chapter of decolonisation covers different countries such as England, France, Spain and their colonies, therefore with a focus on colonized countries; however, there is a lack of content on African decolonization from the Italian perspective.

7.0 Discussion and findings

What could be observed when comparing findings before and after the knowledge intervention is a considerable change in the quality of the debate. This change was observable on a different level: on a linguistic, beliefs/attitudes level and discourse level. From a linguistic perspective, the social dialogue that took place within the class drastically shifted. From a more impersonal use of language, that in a way was reinforcing a distance between “Italians”-the students- and the “Other”- whether colonized groups or immigrants– it drifted towards a more inclusive and empathic use of lexicon. The frequent use of “we” and “us” to include these groups that before were referred as “them”, showcased an understanding of students that was less exclusionary. With the introduction of new material, the separation between the Italians and the Other had become more fluid. On a practical basis, this has demonstrated creating a more humane and empathic relation with the topics of discussions, going from being a faraway detached reality, to a concrete perception and connection with these people as “more than just mere words on a piece of paper”.

The main pattern observable surfacing after the experiment is the power role information withholds, and the way it is presented, within a larger discourse. The change in the social discourse perceivable in the aftermath of the experiment is in the framing of the discussion, for many instances of the focus groups. Many were the new consideration in regards following points: i) the experience of colonialism that moved away from the economic motives towards a more exploitative framing, ii) a novel image that sees Italians not just as magnanimous colonizers but rather as perpetrators of exploitation and colonial crimes, iii) the shift in the way immigrants were perceived by students, from a criminal problem that need to be tackled to but rather as an enriching source for multiculturalism. All of this is exemplary of the level of increased understanding for the intricacy and consequences that the treated topic triggered within students. Their heightened attitude to be more critical towards social themes and historical events, was a result of the knowledge intervention. However, the

persistent denial of the existence of racism within their generation, even if there was proof of racism and xenophobia within the same dialogues, builds a case in understanding how difficult it is to change the overall discourse in such a small instance of time. Here, the social representation of the Italian colonial past has aided in the construction of collective memory of the interviewed groups, who represented vehicles for its reproduction. This has provided the background to understand their unique way of operating and analyzing other modern issues such as immigration, multiculturalism, immigration etc.

On a deeper level, it can be observed how some images and discourses that feed into the narrative of "Italiani Brava Gente " are still very present in the subconscious of the young minds. Here, a parallelism can be drawn: the intrinsically magnanimous nature of Italian in the colonial venture as conceptualized by the older generation's discourse, did absolve Italians from being colonialist and racist, as highlighted by the interviewees. Nonetheless, the same ideological image can also be found in the answers of the same interviewees, who acknowledge racist tendencies only in the Older generations of Italians, stating the lack of discrimination and xenophobia within their younger generation – (Giovani) Italiani Brava Gente. It is clear how this ideological framing has never lost its importance, re-claiming its role into Italian culture in modern times, not only for the issues of colonialism but also from a wider perspective. With the changing migratory flows and a greater sense of nationalism of the last few years this image had shielded the Italian conscience from contemplating the possibility of racism and bigotry. rather recognising its existence but never in their country or their own generation.

These are important findings also regarding the modality through which students have processed information. On one hand, a clear instance of cognitive dissonance has surfaced in the dialogues. Firstly, the belief that racism does exist in their generation, regardless of the clear instances of racism put forward by the same colleagues. Here the dissonance has been faced by denial and refusing the possibility of a different reality. Additionally, the reading provided served as a disturbance factor that triggered a process of dissonance between the prior package of knowledge and beliefs of the interviewees and the new information presented to them. Their prior knowledge of Italian colonialism and the attached myths and beliefs has been challenged by the text provided during the experiment, causing a significant change in the framing of their dialogues. On the other hand, the notion of confirmation bias has aided in explaining that after the experiment, some students still

argued in favour of their position. An example is the maintained understanding that Italians had contributed “significantly into the economic development of their colonies” and that “Arabs and Africans were portrayed as criminals for a reason”. Although the reading proved to be contradicting these statements and conceptions, some students selected only the information that reinforced their prior bias on those topics; therefore, not accepting any new information deviating from their pre-existing understanding. Many of the current dialogues, drawing from a colonialist view, still resonate in the answers of the students. The underlying moral superiority was found to be looking down upon a category of immigrant- Africans and Arabs- that resembled the colonial way of thinking.

8.0 Conclusion

We have commenced this research by establishing the nature of the problem for this research, which is the conceptualization of the past, to then move into the understanding that Italians have of their colonial past. This understanding encompassed a vision of an benign and marginal Italian presence in their colonies. The latter has framed the reproduction of a certain historical discourse around the topic of colonialism, while deeply shaping the public dialogues and the construction of a self-identity, juxtaposed with the image of the “Other”. Such understanding creates links with the present issues through societal beliefs and attitudes towards the reality we live in – a continuum between multiculturalism and nationalism. Nowadays the increasing migratory flows have served as a vehicle for these beliefs to surface, where we see how this image/framing and understanding of the past is translated in how people operate towards immigrants and different cultures. One of the main instruments through which these collective memories are reproduced is the educational system, more specifically via the information presented in the history textbooks in schools. The research had therefore moved towards assessing the role of history education and textbook knowledge in the school setting. The information bearer of the official version of historical narratives are the textbooks, which contain the information that partially contributes to the collective understanding and conceptualizations of a nation's past and present (Foster 2011, 7).

From the conducted interviews and analysis, it can be concluded that information available in the world influences and changes people's views and ideas, in a way that cannot

be underestimated. The existing social structure and pertaining actors that shape our world, contribute to creating discourses and dialogues that are then repeated and perpetuated across the social fabric. Considering the example of history education, school curriculum and textbook, we see a direct outlet of such discourses. The ongoing development of anti-culturalism, serving to reinforce a sense of nationalism, as opposed to multiculturalism, is therefore a constructed phenomenon that is influenced by social discourse (Dong, Day, and Collaço 2008, 28). Concepts and narratives can be employed negatively to construct, establish and teach negative social discourse, but clearly such processes can be reversed into a positive one. Such politically charged dialogues are therefore constructed in a way where they can serve a certain purpose. Providing the Italian context, this paper has also touched upon how political debates are devices used, especially by right-wing representatives to feed a precise understanding of historical events and narratives. The latter is enacted through an instrumentalist use of education and knowledge, resulting in an undeniable impact on people's views and conceptualization of some issues.

Exemplary is the current framework used in the political arena frames in regard to the issue of immigration. The creation of the “Other” as an external enemy “coming to invade and threaten the preservation of the nation” finds its commonalities in both immigration and colonial rhetoric. Zooming into the case of Italian Colonialism and the understanding that young minds possess, it was possible to observe how certain conceptualizations of the past together with some collective myths are still getting transmitted through time. They are responsible for shaping the understanding and beliefs that students have of other topics intertwined with Colonialism. The myth of *Italiani Brava Gente* is an example of how the Italian role within colonialism is perceived and its connection with the topic of immigration, discrimination, criminalization and racism in the country. Here, the old and yet persisting rhetoric of the “Italiani Brava Gente ” myth is reinforced by emphasizing the element of innocence. The “innocent” Italians that are experiencing this invasion of the “Other” unjustly. Where before the “other” was the colonized group that was threatening the preservation of a pure race and Italian culture, nowadays this experiment showed how it is applied also onto a new “danger”: the immigrants. The rhetoric reinforces the colonial concept of “Otherness” with its criminalization creating a status of “being under threat”. It frames immigration as the problem. The new information provided to the interviewees had actually shifted the framing from a “problem” view of the topic towards an inclusive stance.

It shows the instrumental side of knowledge and information that can be applied through history textbooks in the case of educating younger generations.

As the experiment has shown, providing new information that is more in depth and that diverges from the mainstream information and discourse taught, can help change the parameters of the conversation. This paper draws on the powerful political usage of language and discourse, in changing students and at large societal attitudes and understanding towards different cultures. The social dialogues depend on what the agents are exposed to: in the setting of education a considerable role is attributed to the information that is contained in history textbooks. With these conclusions the consequent puzzles arise: how to combat this? The case of the knowledge intervention has shown that by enhancing critical reflection and tackling the human aspect of the scenarios, the attitudes and beliefs can change. This was immediately visible with the students' change in the answers provided, consequent to the reading of the given informative text. To conclude, this research in the context of the interviewed classes of Liceo S. Ettore Majorana, can assert several points. Firstly, it has assessed the intricate relation between education of history, reproduction of mainstream discourses and knowledge. Secondly it has assessed the current understanding, dialogues and myths regarding the topic of Italian Colonialism, more specifically in its reproduction through school textbooks. Thirdly, it has evaluated how the historical narrative of Italian colonialism has been portrayed in the public discourse. Lastly, attempting to provide an answer to the main research question, this research will conclude that information can influence change, rather a shift, in the quality of the social dialogues and conceptualization that students hold of Italian colonial past, and of related topics, at large. Its result in a change in parameters of the dominant discourses of conversation.

Considering the many limitations that had to be set and ramifications of this research, further research can spur from these results. For instance, further inquiries could be made to explore in future settings the longevity of these changes in social dialogues within classes, to understand if, once the information triggers the change, if it continues and under what conditions. Therefore, to understand how durable changes in the discourse can be.

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Appendix list:

Appendix A: Questionnaire for focus groups

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Appendix D: Questionnaire guiding the discussion of the focus groups.

Introduction (warm up questions)

- a) Come vi tenete informati riguardo alle notizie giornaliere?
Ask how they keep themselves informed about daily events/news
- b) Che piattaforme usate per tenervi informati?
Ask what platform they use to do so

PART A

Understanding Prior Knowledge

1. Cosa sapete riguardo al passato coloniale dell'Italia? Lo avete appreso in classe oppure attraverso altre fonti/ discusso in altri contesti? (Ex in famiglia, nei media)
What do you know about Italy's colonial past? Have you learned about it in school or through other sources/ discussed it somewhere else (family, media etc)?
2. Imperialismo e colonizzazione: fatemene un riassunto a parole vostre spiengandomelo brevemente.
Imperialism and colonialization: summarize it in your own words.
3. Riguardo l'Italia? Quale è stato il suo ruolo nel colonialismo, se lo paragoniamo a gli altri paesi?
What about Italy? What was its role in the colonialization period compared to the rest?
4. Nella società italiana di oggi, quali sono le conseguenze/eredità, negative e positive, del colonialismo Italiano?
What are the lasting legacies in today's society, both positive and negative, of Italy's colonial rule?
5. Come definiresti la tua comprensione/percezione generale riguardo ai flussi migratori che arrivano in Italia?
How would you describe your general perception or understanding of the current inflows of immigrants into Italy?
6. Quali elementi caratterizzano (distinguono) un' Italiano vs un immigrato (sociale, fisico)? Descrivetemelo.
What characteristics define and distinguish an Italian vs Immigrant?

PART B

After Knowledge intervention

1. Qual è stato il vostro principale punto di riflessione?
What is your main takeaway?
2. Avete imparato qualcosa di nuovo? Se si, spiegateci cosa? Se no spiegateci come mai?
Did you learn anything new? If yes explain what? If not explain how come?
3. Vi trovate in accordo/disaccordo nel modo in cui gli italiani vengono descritti nella lettura? Con cosa nello specifico siete in accord/disaccordo?

Do you agree/disagree with how Italians have been depicted in the text? With what specifically do you agree/disagree?

4. La lettura tende ad evidenziare questo odio o senso di superiorità basato sulla razza. È un elemento che è possibile ancora vedere/riscontrare quando si parla di immigrati dall'Africa? Sì/no, perché?

The reading highlights this hate/ sense of superiority based on race. Do we still see it when it comes to immigration from Africa? Yes/no, why?

5. Questa lettura (vi ha fatto cambiare idea o riflettere) ha messo in discussione qualche idea/ credo/ preconconcetto sull'argomento, che avevate prima di leggerla?

Has the reading challenged any ideas that you had prior to this?

6. Nel testo si parla di propaganda che fomenta questo odio per la diversità verso chi è diverso/proveniente dalle colonie. Oggigiorno che parallelismi possiamo fare tra colonizzati e immigrati, in generale? Quali sono delle caratteristiche comuni?

In the text it talks about the propaganda that fuels the hate for diversity for the colonized. Nowadays what parallelism can we draw between colonized and immigrant? What are some common features?

7. Credi che ci siano insegnamenti importanti che possiamo imparare dalla storia coloniale dell'Italia che ritieni possano essere applicati per affrontare le sfide contemporanee/ problemi legati all'immigrazione e all'integrazione culturale?

Are there any lessons or insights from Italy's colonial history that you believe could be applied to address contemporary challenges related to immigration and cultural integration?