INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION AND COMPETENCES AT SCHOOL. RESULTS OF AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN ITALY

Educación y competencias interculturales en la escuela: resultados de un estudio exploratorio en Italia

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Abstract[1]:

The present time of globalization, interdependence and multicultural societies has brought about both opportunities and crisis that concern all fields involved with social welfare, especially education (Portera, 2020, 2006). Within the school environment, there is a growing need for intercultural education and competences at the cognitive, emotional and relational levels, which will endow teachers and students with the abilities to operate in linguistically and culturally complex contexts (UNESCO, 2015; Portera, 2013; Deardorff, 2009). However, the concepts of 'Intercultural Education' and 'Intercultural Competences' are often misunderstood and require more precise definition. The authors review the scientific literature on the aforementioned concepts and then report the results of a study carried out by the Centre for Intercultural Study at the University of Verona (Italy) which examines how teachers who work in different types of schools define and apply the concept of 'intercultural competences' in their praxis. The study uses a

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qualitative research methodology that includes a process of 'triangulation'. Specifically, a series of semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participant observations were conducted in order to explore teachers' intercultural competences, especially through the analysis of critical incidents. After discussing the results, the authors outline impplications for teacher education and school praxis in intercultural perspective.

Key Words: diversity; inclusion; intercultural education; intercultural competences

Resumen:

La época actual de la globalización, la interdependencia y las sociedades multiculturales ha traído consigo oportunidades y crisis que afectan a todos los ámbitos relacionados con el bienestar social, especialmente la educación (Portera, 2020, 2006). En el entorno escolar, por lo tanto, existe una creciente necesidad de educación y competencias interculturales a nivel cognitivo, emocional y relacional, que doten a profesores y estudiantes de la capacidad de operar en contextos lingüística y culturalmente complejos (UNESCO, 2015; Portera, 2013; Deardorff, 2009). Sin embargo, los conceptos de 'educación intercultural' y 'competencias interculturales' a menudo se malinterpretan y requieren una definición más precisa. Los autores, a partir de un trabajo de revisión de la literatura científica sobre los conceptos antes mencionados, presentan los resultados de un estudio realizado por el Centro de Estudios Interculturales de la Universidad de Verona (Italia) se centró en cómo los profesores que trabajan en diferentes tipos de escuelas definen y aplican el concepto de 'competencias interculturales' en la práctica. El estudio se basa en una metodología de investigación cualitativa que implica un proceso de 'triangulación'. En concreto, se realizaron una serie de entrevistas semiestructuradas, grupos focales y observaciones de los participantes con el fin de explorar las competencias interculturales de los docentes, especialmente a través del análisis de incidentes críticos. Después de discutir los resultados, los autores esbozan impulsos para la formación docente y la praxis escolar en una perspectiva intercultural.

Palabras clave: competencias interculturales; diversidad; educación intercultural; inclusión

1. Introduction

The world in which we are living in has radically changed. It has become increasingly smaller, more complex and interdependent. In the present time of late capitalism and post modernity, *Globalisation* has caused "the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (Held, 1991, p. 9). Transformation of time and space have had radical effects on interpersonal relations. Throughout the world, societies have become more multiethnic and multicultural (Bauman & Portera, 2021). Once impossible interactions and exchanges have become usual and routine (Urry, 2005; Beck, 1994).

On the other hand, democratic nations have had to face some risky cultural developments, such as the *neoliberalism*, that "sees the market as the most effective way of determining production and satisfying peoples'needs" (Stromquist, 2002, p. 25). Today, "capital can travel fast and travel light and its lightness and motility have turned into the paramount source of uncertainty for all the rest. This has become the present-day basis of domination and the principal factor of social divisions" (Bauman, 1999, p. 68). Citizens have come to care less and less about democratic principles and the commitment to one another in terms of community

and the common good. Instead of promoting social cohesion, sense of community and solidarity, neoliberal thought leads to unfair competition and exclusion (Nussbaum, 2010; Stiglitz, 2003).

At both political and social levels (also in academic research), the management of cultural diversity and the new transcultural and neocolonial developments has become the subject of considerable debate (Grant, 2017; Torres, 2017; Habermas, 1992; Held, 1991). Countries which experience high immigration levels (e.g. the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and many other countries in Europe and elsewhere) are experiencing rising ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural diversity (United Nations, 2015), and are concern with the issue of facilitating the development of socially harmonious and cohesive societies whose members can communicate and interact positively.

Education has been internationally recognized as a preeminent force for understanding the consequences of such changes and for giving effective and efficient answers (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2014; Council of Europe [CoE], 1999; Oxfarm, 1977; etc.). The present epoch of globalization, interdependence and multicultural societies has brought about both opportunities and risks that involve social welfare, politics and economies and represent critical concerns for all sectors of education (Portera, 2020, 2006). The changing cultural and religious demographics in many areas requires innovative conceptual theories regarding the optimal educational approaches for meeting the challenges of inclusive management of the different diversities. In schools, especially for teachers, it is urgently necessary to develop a critical understanding of many important issues, such as the influences of neoliberal reforms for school management, aims and decision-making. Phenomena of segregation, exclusion, discrimination and racism need to be understood and combatted in classroom. It is urgently necessary for teachers to develop competences (knowledge, attitudes and skills) related to the new scenarios, challenges and opportunities. Today's education can and should play a central role in addressing the abovementioned challenges and the many other unsolved global questions which require global answers (e.g., pandemics, pollution, climate change, war, nuclear power).

As mentioned previously, there is a worldwide consensus regarding the essential role for education. However, debates persist on optimal policies, theories, practices, methods and contents. Various approaches to education have been developed in different times, countries and disciplines (Grant & Portera, 2011). After recognizing the devastating, negative or useless effects of many previous strategies for facing ethnic and cultural diversity (like elimination, segregation, assimilation, melting pot), and the failure of monocultural theories, *intercultural education* has been identified, especially in Europe, as the most appropriate approach for addressing appropriately and constructively ethnic, linguistic, religious and other cultural diversities (Barrett, 2013; Cantle, 2013; Portera, 2011; CoE, 2008; Gundara, 2000).

The main thesis of this article is that within schools there is a growing need for intercultural education and intercultural competences at the cognitive, emotional and relational levels, which will endow teachers, students and principals with the abilities to operate in linguistically and culturally complex contexts (UNESCO, 2014; Portera, 2013; Deardorff, 2009). However, the concepts of 'Intercultural Education' and 'Intercultural Competences' are often misunderstood and require more precise definition. Below, after a short terminological introduction, we will report the results of a study carried out by the Centre for Intercultural Study at the University of Verona (Italy) focused on how teachers define and apply the concept of 'intercultural competences' in praxis. In addition to discussing these results, the authors will outline implications for teacher education and school praxis from an intercultural perspective.

2. Intercultural Education at School

In Europe, since the 1980s, the intercultural approach is considered as the most appropriate for facing the challenges of globalization, interdependence and coexistence of multiple uses, customs, languages, behavioural modes and religions). In Europe and in many other countries, in recent years scholars have been increasingly publishing important statements in support of *intercultural education* (IE) (Dervin, 2021; Barrett, 2013; Cantle, 2013; Portera, 2011; Bouchard, 2011; CoE, 2008; Wood & Landry, 2008; Gundara, 2000).

The intercultural approach builds on the positive elements and addresses the limitations of multicultural and transcultural models. It is placed between universalism (transcultural model) and relativism (multicultural model). The *transcultural* (global or cosmopolite) approach is rooted in the theory of cultural universalism (Lukes, 2003). Voltaire, de Codorcet and other philosophers of the French Enlightenment, promoted the idea that the fundamental purposes and needs of human beings are identical at all times and places. The main aims of cross- or transcultural education are found in an acknowledgment of and respect for cultural commonalities. For sure there are many advantages related with this approach (e.g. educating toward the ideal of equality for all human beings; common values, human rights, human needs). On the other hand, there are also several limitations to this vision of a world that in reality is complex and heterogeneous. In educational praxis, the transcultural approach does not (fully) take into consideration the many cultural differences. An additional limitation is that one's own cultural values, norms and behaviours are taken as absolute. In the European origins of this model and in its North American adaptations, there is the risk that Western countries (due to their economic, linguistic and political power) try to impose their own way of living and to to dominate world culture in a monopolistic fashion. Further, the global or transcultural approach overemphasizes stability and permanence, without adequate consideration of the current movements and processes of change within cultural systems. The open question is: who should decide whose values are to be considered universal?

The multicultural approach refers to the Latin and it means 'many'. Consequently, *multicultural* and pluricultural education refer to a sort of 'peaceful coexistence of cultures', based on the principle of cultural relativism (Lukes, 2003). The foundamental idea is that all cultural traditions are equally 'good' and that the choice of one or the other is based solely on preferences. The multicultural approach emphasizes cultural differences and describes the contemporary situation: the presence of diverse cultures between and within national borders. It also considers the cultures as unique and immutable. Following this theory, the focal educational aim of multicultural education is acknowledging and respecting cultural diversities. In addition to the many advantages, there are also significant limitations of this model. Above all, is the static and rigid concept of culture, which implies that all cultures are to be understood and to be respected and should not be changed. It implies educational strategies that aim at *peaceful coexistence*, like residents in a condominium. Consequently, especially in Europe[2], multicultural educational intervention has been often limited to folksy or exotic presentations, which have inevitably and increasingly constrained immigrants to their 'native culture' and to patterns of behaviour that are outdated even in their country of origin. Furthermore, teachers, students and practitioners are encouraged to adopt the viewpoint of *Epochè* (the suspension of political and moral judgment) and *Organicism* (where each culture is perceived as a single, indivisible organization limited in national States). Asresult, there is absence of evaluation or judging. However, both teaching and education cannot both avoid evaluation and the promotion of provoke changes (education is related to change and not just respect). Eventually, the assumptions that cultures cannot be compared can lead to the acceptance of many maladaptive behaviours present in some cultures, like violence against children or women, genital mutilation, etc.

In Europe, the intercultural approach started with the awareness of the strenghts and limitations of the transcultural and multicultural concepts. It considers both and adds the possibilities of *encounter*, dialogue, confrontation and *interaction*: activity of everyone, authentic contact, active relationships between different people (Portera, 2020, 2017, 2011). While multiculturalism evokes descriptive phenomena, referring to a peaceful coexistence of people from different cultures (side by side) and transcultural refers to universal rights and values, the addition of the prefix *inter* refers to interaction which presents the opportunity of real encounter, exchange, conflict management, and the eventual modification of ideas, values and behaviour. Intercultural education (IE) like the multiculturalism seeks to combat cultural barriers, discrimination, and intolerance, and to promote education for understanding and respect. It also includes many ideas of the transcultural approach: it seeks to develop common laws and structural political, economic and social mechanisms for reducing inequalities, discrimination, poverty, and marginalisation. In addition, IE places a central role on dialogue, exchange and

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[2] In the USA, where multicultural education has been developed, many scholars like Banks (1991), Sleeter and Grant (1987) and Nieto (2016), have underlined not only the opportunity to recognize and respect differences, but also to interacte.

interaction through the use of intercultural competences, like empathy, flexibility, and curiosity.

As noted in previous publications (Portera, 2020, 2017, 2006), IE can be considered as a new Copernican revolution because concepts such as 'identity' and 'culture' are no longer understood as static but as *dynamic* processes in constant development and evolution. Furthermore, otherness, emigration, life in a complex and multicultural society are no longer viewed as risks of distress or disease. Instead as *opportunities for personal and collective enrichment*. The encounters with the foreign and with the ethnically and culturally different subjects, represent the opportunities for comparison and reflection regards ideas, values, rules, and behaviour. In addition, the key concepts of identity and belonging are no longer considered and experienced exclusively or antithetically *either-or* (e.g. Are you Italian or Spanish? I am half Italian half Spanish), but multiple and integrated (I am Italian, Spanish, German, European) (see also Portera, 2008, 1995).

Given the multiple changes, risks and opportunities, adopting the principles and aims of IE in schools makes it possible to revisit education by combining the best of the traditional with the needs of the present while also considering the challenges of the future. The proposal is to definey societies as 'multicultural' (in the sense of the presence of subjects with different uses, customs, religions, way of thinking), laws as transcultural (same lows and roles should be valid for all countries of the planet). Strategy of educational intervention might assume an intercultural characters. Whenever possible, education should go beyond knowledge and respect of diversities. Good education should always promote authentic interactions with the aim of changing what is considered to be maladaptive or wrong (e.g. violence, oppression, prejudice).

3. Teachers' Intercultural Competence: An Exploratory Study

To meet the needs of an increasingly complex and multicultural world, along with a robust literacy on IE, a revision of teachers' competences would appear crucial. The reason for this is that, although there are a range of factors involved together in giving shape to the processes of inclusion and social cohesion, a key role is actually fulfilled by scholastic-educational contexts. The revision of the teaching profession, in response to the changed characteristics and needs of current societies, requires in this case the acquisition of intercultural competences [IC]; this is an aspect that on a number of occasions has also been highlighted in EU documents. For instance, in 2008, the European Commission [EC] adopted the Green Paper *Migration and mobility: challenges and opportunities*, in which it was stated that IC and the capacity to enter into a respectful dialogue with people coming from a different background are competences that need to be acquired by teachers; likewise, in the 2013 document titled *Supporting teacher competence development for better learning outcomes*, the EC identified how teachers need to maintain and actively extend their competences throughout their careers by engaging in an ongoing

professional development process. Nevertheless, even if during the 1980s, the CoE had already emphasized the need for intercultural training for teachers from all levels of schools, one can still notice — more than thirty years on — "the urgent need for a concerted effort to develop the necessary attitudes, skills and knowledge that contribute to intercultural competence in the everyday practice of teaching and learning" (Huber & Reynolds, 2014, p. 7). IC is in fact not only a key dimension of the school curriculum, but also of teacher education. One of the most controversial aspects concerns its definition, since research on IC spans over several academic disciplines and applied fields. For this reason, as stated by Arasaratnam (2014), nuances and labels are prolific, causing a measure of confusion. This problem is exacerbated by a paucity of cross-referencing between disciplines. Therefore the importance of having a framework through which to understand IC has been widely acknowledged.

When we talk about IC, we are generally referring to "the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world" (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, p. 7). Appropriateness relates to the perception of a relational exchange that is adequate and in line with the expectations of all participants. Effectiveness may be deemed achieved when the interlocutors succeed with their goals in a strategic, creative and, above all, united manner. When taken with this meaning, the construct of IC indicates the possession (albeit always dynamic and in progress) of procedures of thought, action and interaction for individuals who want to be included in contemporary societies in an active and conscious manner. This is a competence that turns out to be strictly tied to education towards democratic citizenship and human rights (Torres, 2017; Gaudelli, 2016; Tarozzi, 2015; Portera et al., 2010).

If the adoption of a democratic and IE approach is in the realm of the political choices of a country, the responsibility of translating this choice into a congruent scholastic system needs to engage all the stakeholders that take part in the system. In particular, a decisive role is played by teachers. In order to be able to promote IC among their students, teachers themselves need to possess that competence. But what do teachers mean by 'intercultural competence'? What practices do they consider to represent IC? What motivations and what objectives induce them to exercise IC? In order to answer to these important questions, it was deemed necessary to carry out an exploratory research study with the aim of detecting and describing teachers' spontaneous conceptions of IC by describing their practices with a view to improving them.

3.1. Methodology and Research Tools

As outlined in previous publications (Milani, 2017, 2015), a choice was made to employ symbolic interactionism as an epistemic approach to be applied to the research, since it underlines the intentionality, the consciousness of interactive

behavior and, above all, how the latter is related to the context in which it is generated (Carter & Fuller, 2016; Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1967). Competence is always displayed within a particular situation by means of pertinent forms of conduct with respect to the specific context in which they occur. At the same time, this approach is totally in tune with the methodological premises of participant observation (one of the techniques used to gather data) which is based on the needs to grasp the meanings attributed by people to their own actions and to see the reality using their own lenses of interpretation (Wolcott, 2001; Spradley, 1980). Moreover, focusing the analyses on verbal and non-verbal communication, on the definition of situations, and on the mechanisms of interpretation leads to a minute reconstruction of social interactions which lays the foundations for shifting attention towards micro events rather than to macro social processes. The qualitative methodology that was used entailed a kind of triangulation involving two focus groups (one conducted at the start of the research and one at the end) (Corrao, 2000), semi-structured interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Kallio et al., 2016) and an extended period of participant observation within three classes (one kindergarten class and two primary school classes). There was an attempt to understand and analyse the IC of the teachers principally through an analysis of 'critical incidents' (Allen, 2018) and/or successful episodes with the related elicitation of the strategies adopted to deal with the impasse situations. More specifically, the choice of the initial focus group was determined by the need to gather preliminary motivations, emotional responses and interpretations related to the topic under investigation, whereas the aim of the final focus group was to propose a reworking and final validation of the path undertaken i.e. an interpretation/greater insight into the data obtained through other techniques, as well as suggestions for action strategies in relation to problems encountered.

Conversely, in the construction of the interviews to be administered, a decision was taken to use a semi-structured format, an epistemological choice that made it possible to narrow the issues for exploration and, at the same time, investigate the research topics in a flexible manner. There were, in particular, six closely studied dimensions: biography; globalization, work strategies; concrete situations in which use was made of IC; difficulties perceived within one 's professional responsibilities; conflicts; IC.

Participant observation was implemented to evaluate the 'reflection in action' (Schön, 1987) and to ascertain whether there was a gap between what experienced teachers can explain spontaneously about their practice and what they actually do subsequently. These tools were accompanied by the parallel drafting of the research diary (Semi, 2010) in which ethnographic notes were collected and divided into: descriptive, methodological, emotional and theoretical.

3.2. Participants

Giving the exploratory and qualitative nature of the research, the survey was conducted on a non-representative group of Italian teachers (15) from Verona (Italy) who had varying characteristics in relation to the Institutes they came from, the type

and level of school, their role and years of service; the only element that was common to them was the fact of being 'privileged operators', i.e. people who possessed expert knowledge in the field of research on account of previous experience in an intercultural field (e.g. participation in other research projects, roles and duties in their schools and/or communities related to the promotion and development of interculturalism).

It should be noted the total absence of men – and, consequently, the female one-sidedness of the points of view collected – as well as the difficulty in finding teachers willing to participate in the survey. In fact, the search for teachers to be involved was challenging, and the number of those who initially agreed to participate in the study gradually dwindled.

Overall, and more specifically, 3 kindergarten schoolteachers took part, 6 from primary schools, 1 from a nursery school, 4 from lower secondary schools and lastly 1 teacher working at the Provincial Education Office of Verona. The following table (Table 1) shows the type of Institute they belong to, their role(s) and years of service.

Table 1
Teachers' type of Institute they belong to, role(s) and years of service. Source: data set.

No.	Type of School	Role	Years of Service
1/15	Kindergarden	Teacher	37
2/15	Kindergarden	Teacher	20
3/15	Primary School	History, geography, science, and English teacher. Member of the 'Intercultural Commission' within the school	11
4/15	Primary School	Teaching Assistant and appointed as responsible for foreign students	10
5/15	Nursery School	Teacher	8
6/15	Kindergarden	Teacher	23
7/15	Primary School	Teaching Assistant	15
8/15	Primary School	Religion teacher and appointed as responsible for foreign students	30
9/15	Lower Secondary School	Teaching Assistant	8

10/15	Lower Secondary School	Teaching Assistant	18
11/15	Lower Secondary School	Teaching Assistant	15
12/15	Primary School	Math teacher. Member of the 'Intercultural Commission' within the school	22
13/15	Lower Secondary School	Literature teacher	14
14/15	Provincial Education Office of Verona	Teacher	7
15/15	Primary School	Literature teacher	10

The study was approved by the University of Verona's Ethics Committee and each participant was asked to fill out an informed consent document for participation in the survey, after adequate presentation of the study (purpose, methodology, commitment required) and emphasizing the benefits that any research generates for the community in terms of knowledge of processes, critical issues and possibilities for intervention. In addition, in accordance with the Italian Legislative Decree No. 196 of June 30, 2003, which represents the code for the personal data protection, the total anonymity of such information, used solely for the analysis of the material, was guaranteed. No physical risk was involved in participating in the study, and teachers were guaranteed the ability to exit the survey at any time, as well as to skip some responses.

3.3. Data Analysis

The analysis of the data required multiple readings, the identification of recurring themes that gradually became categories for analysis (i.e. theme-based clusters within which to organize, associate, make sense of the gathered information), the extrapolation of the significant excerpts and the overall analysis of the forms of expression and speech. The concepts were not always expressed explicitly by the teachers, but emerged from the comments and thoughts during the interpretation of the data (a sort of 'labeling' relating to the analysis of the material, attributed by referring to the outlined theoretical framework). The focus groups and interviews were transcribed in full in electronic format. Specifically, once the transcription phase was concluded, the data coding and their reorganization into thematic areas followed. Each significant text unit was labeled by affinity through the formulation of a title that captured the core of the story. The macro-themes of analysis thus emerged through a bottom-up process (Drisko & Maschi, 2016).

The data set was encoded so as to be able to place every statement with its relevant technique based on a numeric code assigned to each text and to each

participants (interview – IW; focus groups – FG; research diary – RD; interviewer - I). The member checking was carried out during the last focus group, in which the privileged operators had the opportunity to co-validate the data set. In this way teachers have not only enriched the analysis with additional elements, but have also increased the degree of validity of the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.4. Results

The overall analysis of the data gathered through the different stages of research led to the identification of certain recurring themes, which proceeded to become central categories in the structuring of the professional profile of teachers. For greater clarity in expressing the IC that emerged, the division into 'knowledge', 'attitudes' and 'skills' was maintained according to a tripartite model which is very often found in literature (Portera, 2020, 2013; Milani, 2017, 2015; Pellerey, 2010; Deardorff, 2009; Byram, 1997), and displayed in this order: the cognitive dimension, emotional dimension and that of the competence action.

In relation to the macro-area of 'knowledge', the teachers emphasized certain elements that, in their opinion, may allow the smooth running of multicultural relationships in school:

1. Having cultural and socio-anthropological knowledge (ways, customs, habits, traditions). Lack of understanding of the rules governing school routines is in fact considered as a hindering factor: "Knowing when they are in Ramadan is important; in the sense that one can calibrate work a little. In the afternoon, of course, they can't cope physically [...] so if I have to give tests, I try to schedule them during the first lessons of the day" (IW, 13/15).

2. Having language skills and non-verbal language skills: language skills do not just mean mastering a language as a digital code, but also possessing its affective dimension. Especially in infant schools, emotional involvement is also very evident from the proxemics that can be observed in the classroom; relationships are marked by intense affectivity, the attitude of teachers is particularly welcoming and protective and there is considerable attention to the children's needs: "[...] she seemed particularly sad and dejected, and so the teacher took her to one side to give her a hug and a cuddle" (RD, 5/3).

3. Knowing social skills: it is essential for teachers to know and to put into practice all social skills that facilitate the establishment of positive, constructive and respectful relations. It is necessary, however, to devote time to teaching these things, since the ability to interact, collaborate and feel part of a group are not innate, but need to be trained: "[...] We mustn't think that these skills will magically appear in our pupils; we need to educate them to use them" (IW, 3/15).

4. Having self-awareness: according to the teachers, in order to deal with sharing the stage with diversity requires a solid grounding in one's own culture: "[...] I am increasingly called upon to acquire greater awareness of who I am, what my beliefs are and my habits and customs" (IW, 12/15).

As regards 'attitudes', the teachers showed certain personal, psychological and/or professional (innate or acquired) characteristics that they consider important for the development of IC:

1. Openness, displayed in its various semantic nuances: flexibility, decentralization, willingness, curiosity. The attitude to openness is to be regarded as the litmus test that measures social cohesion (Tronca, 2020) and peaceful coexistence with respect for differences. Being open-minded people, in fact, leads to positive changes in one's habits, in the daily organized and/or system routines to find quality responses to various needs: "We hold parties in the afternoon because this means that mums, dads can and siblings, come if they are around" (IW, 7/15). Also: "When a person who has particular differences is included in the group, it is common practice for me to change program" (FG, 2/2) and "We are starting a Twinning Program with Sierra Leone... and you can perfectly see how much the kids are curious; they ask lots of questions about Sierra Leone and they want to know more of it. Their families too. And that creates a bridge in my opinion. You have to be open; that is one of the most important competences" (IW, 4/15).

2. Patience/perseverance: in the sense of persevering to achieve an objective despite the difficulties that may occur: "First, you need to arm yourself with patience, because it takes a lot of patience. I don't even mention the Eastern world, especially the Chinese students...look, they drive you crazy. They are very closed, but to protect themselves, of course. And then you have to have a lot of patience" (IW, 8/15).

3. Sensitivity and empathy: sensitivity and affective, relational involvement are conceived as supports for empathy. In particular, the latter is conceived as a cognitive action that allows mutual understanding through a process of identification that enables one to assume the look of the Other and to see the world through the lenses of his/her feelings (Milani, 2018; Bellingreri, 2013; Panksepp & Biven, 2012): "You need to be sensitive, it's the only way you can implement empathy, the only way to put yourself in someone else's shoes and try to understand what goes on inside his/her head [...]" (FG, 1/2).

4. Congruence: according to the teachers, in order to adopt univocal and transparent forms of behavior, one needs to question oneself about and reprocess one's own and the other person's symbolic-cultural universe, having no fear of denying horizons of meaning that are not shared or in which one is not fully mirrored: "I often find myself wondering about my roots. Sometimes, as a result of the ongoing sharing of views with kids and parents, I realize what I should throw away from the baggage I carry around with me. Other times, I find myself appreciating even more elements of my own culture" (FG, 2/2).

On the other hand, the dimensions included in the 'skills' are attributable to the capacity to apply the knowledge learned through intellectual and/or practical skills for the management of a particular problem or situation:

1. Making the most of other cultures, seen as an opportunity for personal and professional enrichment and stimulus, as well as an opportunity for growth: "We realized that, by organizing specific meetings for parents of non-Italian speaking children, they feel more valued" (IW, 15/15).

2. Knowing how to create a community and to facilitate continuity between different levels of schooling and the local educational agencies: the awareness that the educational system is a complex reality highlights the need to build educating communities (Tramma, 2009; Wenger, 2000; Sergiovanni, 1994) where everyone gets involved playing their own part and assuming their own responsibilities: "An important aspect that we should promote is the community aspect. Therefore, we should also succeed in cultivating a culture of community, a culture of welcoming on a social level, not only in school" (IW, 14/15). Also: "There was a moment of regression of this child, but it was discussed with the mother through the educator and the social worker. It was suggested that the family seek out a good psychologist to help him to cope with loss. There was a tight cooperation among teachers, family and services" (IW, 7/15)

3. Knowing how to manage most effectively the temporal, financial and spatial resources at disposal, calibrating the educational action and establishing priorities: "Despite the restrictions (lack of time and an inadequate classroom for a craft which involved large-sized sheets and twenty children to manage and very few photocopies available) we managed to do a great job. We used everything that we could find (watercolours, crayons, but also stones, leaves, etc." (RD, 8/2).

4. Knowing how to communicate: since communication is seen as one of the essential tools to facilitate relations (Rings & Rasinger, 2020; Castiglioni, 2005), the teachers feel it is important to be more open towards listening and dialogue, as well as observation and self-observation, to avoid the gap between the person and their culture of origin becoming a source of mistaken assessment and misunderstandings: "The teacher does not seem to comprehend the fact that a Chinese pupil does not get brilliant results in mathematics. She also talks to her colleagues about it during break" (RD, 3/2); and: "When you converse and listen carefully to a person, you can understand why he/she has a certain behavior, attitude or belief. Through communication you build a bridge that leads to the other person...and perhaps you may even discover that the elements that divide you from the other person are not that many" (FG, 1/2)

5. Building welcoming environments: promoting a positive social-and-relational climate is an objective that must be set so as to facilitate reception and ensure inclusion. In practical terms, for the teachers involved in research, this means believing in positive relationships, enhancing social interaction and fostering a sense of trust and group belonging: "She was totally withdrawn, she did not want to say a word of Italian. [...] So, we worked in a small group and organized the cooking workshop. By the time we reached Year 8, she had cooked a range of dishes and opened up considerably with the group" (IW, 11/15).

6. Knowing how to do action-research, by documenting it, and how to foster change (school reforms): implementing action-research projects by providing timing and procedures for proper documentation. The idea of doing research combines with the opportunity of managing and/or contributing to quality changes that go beyond the walls of one's own school to extend on a macro level; it means being aware that you can — and must — act also on more global decisions and thus influence political choices.

Alongside the strengths of IC, the data set analysis also revealed a few obstacles and critical factors pointed out by the teachers and/or observed by the researcher:

1. Difficulties relating to relationship dynamics, due to the fact that occasionally there are examples of prevarication, competitiveness and an uncooperative atmosphere. These tensions affect relationships between colleagues, but also between schools and families and between the families themselves.

2. An often-inadequate school-organisational setting in terms of being able to make the most of the differences in teaching-method and curricular choices, and of the management of time, resources and space.

3. A greater focus on cognitive curricula at the expense of socio-emotional and relational ones: narrowness and imbalance in curriculum design risk overshadowing the development of social-emotional competences, which has positive effects not only on the management of emotions and relationships, but also on cognitive performance, learning motivation, mental and physical health, especially in the long term, maintaining these benefits even in adult life.

4. Poor reflectiveness and/or an inability to read contexts effectively on the part of teachers when facing problematic situations (for example as regards pupils that are foreign and with developmental disabilities) and when using forms of communication — even if most of the time unconsciously — that can lead to exclusion (stigmatization, stereotypes and prejudices).

5. Poor investment in training that could support and facilitate teachers' ability to enter into constructive relations with the Other.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The presence in the school of students from other countries and with different cultural backgrounds created unusually complex scenarios, but also a wide range of opportunities and innovative perspectives which on one hand might act as a stimulus, and, on the other, made the work of teachers and principals more challenging and complex (see also Barrett, 2018; Ferri, 2018; Nava, 2017). The presence of trained, motivated teachers, principals and all the other stakeholders working in the school environment, sensitive to the specific characteristics of all the

students in their care, is therefore an essential factor for building an educational environment capable of kindling trust among families and the wider community.

The analysis of data revealed that the effectiveness of the educational process is based on the weave between knowledge, attitudes and skills in a systemic vision that must take into account several factors, intervention contexts, and stakeholders. In particular, the teachers emphasized the need to work continually on the Self in order to gain self-awareness through a re-processing of beliefs, values, convictions, stereotypes and prejudices linked to their own reference culture. Even the communicative-relational dimension plays a central role. The construction of spaces for recognition, meeting together and exchanging views as a 'training ground' for mutual improvement of communication channels is, in fact, one way to bring out and enhance all differences. This presupposes a shared ability for planning among colleagues, the use of active methodologies that integrate the cognitive and meta-cognitive dimension with the socio-emotional-relational dimension and the involvement of families and the local area with a view to acting as an educating community (Triani, 2018; Wenger, 2000). The frames of reference, thus, occupy a key position in fostering and strengthening the chosen educational strategies. In Italy and many other countries, the reduction in time at school, in classes with two or more teachers and in funds for development projects, as well as inadequate spaces and scarce resources is negatively affecting educational actions. Consequently, being able to manage the tools for running educational activities more effectively, being willing to change and to experiment with action-research projects that provide serious documentation becomes essential for the development of IC. These elements, however, need to be constructed and facilitated: planning requires unhurried times for sharing ideas and views, competence requires a constant commitment to training that revolves around new actors, unaccustomed ways of acting and decisive sources of usable resources.

Concluding, in a time of globalisation, global interdependence and neoliberalism, *education,* especially in *intercultural* terms, *has a prevalent role to play*. IE and IC can make a substantial contribution, especially for teachers, by catalyzing a critical understanding of factors and mechanisms such as the negative influences of neoliberal reforms for school management, aims and politics, and other changes related to destructive phenomena in the classroom, such as segregation, exclusion, discrimination or racism. Although schools remain central, education is not limited to schooling. Education should also include families (cooperation between schools and families is essential for facing 'educational poverty' and establishing educational alliance; Save the Children, 2014), and civil society (e.g. mass media, working places, public spaces, cultural and political structures). Furthermore, in schools IE and IC can help students, teachers and principals focus on the necessity of recognizing, respecting and managing all kind of diversities not just 'cultural' but also power structures, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, etc.

Applying IE and IC in schools means considering diversity and change (both in culture and identity), rather than as a problem, as necessities (life is founded on

differences) rather than as problems. If differences are understood properly, they are great opportunities for promoting personal and social enrichment through interaction, encounter, contact, dialog, confrontation, and conflict management.

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