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Working in the classroom with migrant and refugee students: the practices and needs of Italian primary and middle school teachers

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ABSTRACT
The current study analysed teachers’ methodologies, practices and needs to promote the integration of newly arrived migrant/refugee pupils in educational contexts. Twenty-nine Italian primary and middle school teachers answered a qualitative survey analysed with ATLAS.ti software. In analysis, seven categories emerged: teaching values and beliefs; students’ cognitive, emotional, and linguistic skills; inclusive class activities and resources; intercultural communication; social interactions in classroom; networking with the local community; and teachers’ needs. Teaching strategies and methods reported included inclusive approaches for supporting the integration of migrant/refugee students and promoting the well-being of the whole class. Creativity and flexibility emerged as two of the main features of teachers’ work. Further needs reported included training, didactic counselling, resources for supporting teaching, economic resources and school organisation. Evidence was found for the complexity of teaching in an intercultural context suggesting a multidimensional approach for analysing educational issues.

KEYWORDS
Intercultural education; migrant and refugee students; teachers’ needs; primary school teachers; middle school teachers

Introduction
Immigration is one of the main human rights emergencies in Europe at the moment. Wars, conflicts, and famines in several areas of Africa and the Middle East (including Syria, Libya, Nigeria and Sudan) have forced many people to leave their families, homes and countries to reach safety. According to UNHCR (2016a, 2016b), between January and December 2016 over 181,500 people arrived in Italy, 173,500 in Greece, and 7,500 to Spain by sea. These numbers include children who travelled with their families and others who were unaccompanied. Many different reasons contribute to decisions to leave one’s home country and to move to a foreign nation, such as economic difficulties (unemployment, poverty) and low safety due to military conflicts or persecution. Two terms are used to define people who leave their homes and relocate to another country: refugee and migrant. To clarify the difference between these two conditions, UNHCR (2015) defines both terms: refugees are people who leave their countries to escape wars,
conflicts, and other risks to personal safety, or because of fear of social, cultural, or religious persecution. Persons who have been recognised as refugees are protected by international law. By contrast, people who move for other reasons (related to improving their economic conditions, to reaching family, to pursue their education or career) are defined as migrants. These definitions are quite formal and fail to recognise that, while differing in terms of bureaucratic consequences, the refugee/migrant nexus is a continuum rather than a dichotomy.

The experience of newly arrived migrant/refugee children and adolescents

The experience of immigration represents a significant psychological and emotional event with strong impacts on children and adults. Although the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘migrant’ highlight two different circumstances, children and adolescents who leave their homeland for new countries face similar difficulties in the first phases of their lives in the new nation. Adolescents, affected by extreme circumstances, do not have the same ability as adults to cope with stressful situations. Upon arrival in a new country, young people not only bring with them the marks of their immigration journey (which can be an appalling experience), but they have also to learn about, and adapt to a new social and cultural environment. Pratt-Johnson (2015) identified several stressors that affect the daily lives of young migrants: separation from family or a new family arrangement, which can bring difficulties for parent-relative-child relationships; social and judicial pressure on migrants; and prejudices and discrimination among children in school. Another stressful aspect is the disappointment that may arise for migrant people when they comparing their previous expectations of their new lives (often unrealistically high) with reality in the country of arrival (Rogers-Sirin, Rice, and Sirin 2014).

Research about the stress experienced by migrant children has shown contrasting results. It seems that children feel more distress than their parents in the first year after migration (Levitt, Lane, and Levitt 2005). This condition may result from the lack of control that young people have on their migratory experience. However, there is also research which shows that, over time, children are more resilient and adaptable than adults and thus the migration experience might have less of a negative impact. It seems that young people can quickly overcome the consequences of extreme experiences. Resilience in children was defined as the ability to recover quickly after negative events, while in adults, resilience is more connected with emotional competence, namely the ability to manage and control personal emotional states (Prince-Embury 2012). Considering extremely adverse events, children are less inclined to develop long-term negative effects than adults (Sigal and Weinfield 2001). This perspective seems related to the life-stage during which people experience negative events. Children’s cognitive and psychological development are still in progress and they are not able to fully understand the hazards and risks they are running; conversely, parents and older relatives can be overwhelmed by adverse events and their implications.

Educational experiences play a role in helping young people to adapt to new social and cultural contexts. According to Berry and Vedder (2015), educators can support or prevent the positive integration of migrant children and adolescents depending on the educational goals that adults set. Realistic objectives, support from significant adult
figures and social interactions with other children help to protect young people who are trying to build their future in a new country. Conversely, limited relationships with peers, educational objectives that are not student-centred and an absence of adult guidance can lead to the failure of adaptation and result in an increased risk of low-economic outcomes, unemployment and involvement in criminal actions. Children from all cultures have to address and surpass specific developmental tasks (Motti-Stefanidi et al. 2012) to ensure successful adaptations to new environments.

**The role of schools and teachers in promoting migrant and refugee children’s integration**

Education is a human right. To ensure an individual’s right to education it is not only necessary to make school education compulsory, but also to respect students’ personal needs and cultural characteristics (Gropas and Triandafyllidou 2011). In Italy, several approaches have been developed to promote education for all students. At first, to promote cross-cultural, common attitudes among students in line with the model of ‘universal good citizenship’ (Banks 2012), a multicultural approach was proposed. Underlying multicultural education is the concept of ‘cultural relativism’ which regards each cultural orientation equivalent to others (Portera 2010). Cultural relativism focuses on differences and similarities between cultures and aims to accept and respect diversities. However, cultural relativism has received criticism, most notably its lack of recognition of role of cultural background to individual experience. In addition, it fails to go beyond the simple recognition of the equal role of each cultural approach and does not promote exchanges and shared experiences between people from different ethnic groups (Portera 2010). From these premises, a new approach has been developed – the intercultural approach. This is a process characterised by constructive exchanges between people from different cultural groups. Its basis can be found in the recognition and acceptance of cultural differences to enhance mutual understanding and collaboration. Intercultural education and dialogue have the potential be effective solutions to intercultural challenges in a globalised society. One of the first authors who had introduced the theme of intercultural education in the European debate was Porcher (1981). Considering the changing context characterised by increasing migratory flows toward European countries, Porcher (1981) contributed to work on the most effective way to structure learning experiences to support the social and educational integration of children from migrant families. He recognised the importance of promoting intercultural approaches to education, enhancing interaction, mutual exchange, and cooperation between students from different cultures. The concept of intercultural education has since been modified and enhanced (Allemann-Ghionda 2009). This revision corrected the first definition’s lack of fit with the current global socio-economic situation in which interpersonal exchanges between people from different cultures are not enough for promoting a real integration of minorities in society. New issues have been introduced to the framework of intercultural education including the role of multilingualism in a plural society; the need to promote the coexistence of different religious creeds in school and society; the integration of migrant children and adolescents in school, and fostering successful learning experiences for these
students (Allemann-Ghionda 2009). Schools have to become the context for promoting the integration of migrant/refugee children and families. The European school is a privileged space in which migrant and indigenous cultures can meet and interact, paving the way for integration. Schools may become a means to acquaint students with different cultural backgrounds and to start building an intercultural society in which differences are accepted and respected (Berry 2005).

**Pedagogical aims and strategies for working with migrant and refugee pupils in the classroom**

Across Europe, teachers are involved in the process of developing migrant/refugee children’s integration: as educators, they need to be aware of this responsibility and broaden their cultural perspectives to promote and support an educational climate of ‘social justice’ (Jokikokko and Uitto 2017). Teachers not only have to facilitate migrant and refugee students in the new educational context but also to work with the whole class, including all the students, to promote and facilitate intercultural exchange and mutual respect.

Kiel, Syring, and Weiss (2017) proposed a model of intercultural school development that integrated different levels: the personal, the didactic/curricular, the social and structural/organisational which also covers points such as management, teaching, parental cooperation and staff competencies. With a view to the creation of an effective intercultural school, this model of intercultural school development stresses the importance of community involvement (families, external agency, etc.), changing teachers’ attitudes, collaboration and teamwork among teachers, additional resources, teacher training, and overcoming language barriers. In addition, educators in school can facilitate the achievement of motivation by offering a meaningful learning setting which can be connected with pupils’ daily lives (Hedegaard 2006). All the different students’ life experiences have to be taken into account in class work. Teachers have to develop a culture-sensitive approach, including different perspectives in didactic activities and tasks sustaining an inclusive approach in the classroom. Teachers should seek to support pupils’ inclusion from the very first days of their academic career in the new educational context. An inclusive approach involves both the teachers and the class (Grimes 2014) because the role of the teacher is to adopt a student-centred approach and to encourage inclusive behaviours in the classroom.

**Teachers’ needs and requirements for working with migrant/refugee students in Italian school**

Working towards coexistence and integration should not be a matter of teachers’ goodwill and intuitions but should be based on specific skills and competences. According to a national report from the Italian Ministry of University and Education (Conti et al. 2016), Italian teachers perceive the increasing numbers of migrant and refugee students in classrooms as a positive resource for Italian schools. But teachers also reported a lack of support from institutions including the Italian Ministry of University and Education: this was also reflected in inadequate provision for professional training addressing the challenges of teaching in multi-ethnic classrooms.
To sustain continual professional development, training experiences need to be framed by theoretical and methodological approaches that can support teachers in multi-ethnic classrooms.

Teachers’ intercultural skills need to be promoted during initial teacher education periods: the training process of future educators should be contextualised by multidimensional perspectives, including strategies and methods for promoting equity across all the disciplines. Specific training could positively impact on teachers’ acceptance of the cultural differences among migrants. Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, and Garcia (2009) conducted a study in which primary school teachers were involved in workshops and research projects during which they reflected on the use of different cultural frameworks (individualistic vs. collectivistic) and read and understood examples of families’ cultural differences. As some cultural beliefs were made more specific, teachers became more respectful of cultural differences. This awareness was reflected in the search for new strategies and actions to link the different cultures of the families and the school.

The complexity of the educational context with students of different cultures and needs requires specific support in terms of professional training activities for teachers. Jokikokko and Uitto (2017) highlight teachers’ need for continuous ongoing practice and life-long learning process for managing multiethnic classes. In addition, the importance of promoting intercultural competences in trainee teachers’ education and in-service teachers’ professional development activities has to be considered.

In the European context, many national and international projects have been developed to improve teachers’ intercultural education training. Several instruments and strategies have been offered to teachers and educators for working with children from different cultural backgrounds. One of these is the Educamigrant project, an international project that aimed to create cooperation between several European countries with the aim of improving the educational inclusion of migrant children.

The educamigrant project

‘Educamigrant – ensuring equability in education for migrant and refugee pupils’ is an ERASMUS+ KA2 Strategic Partnership international project led by Turkey that involves universities and school partners from Spain and Italy. The project aimed to promote effective actions and strategies to educate migrant/refugee children in school. The main objectives of the projects were as follows:

- To raise the academic success of migrant/refugee pupils.
- To improve the pedagogical/methodological skills of teachers as regards the education of migrant and refugee children.
- To inform parents about intercultural relations at schools and the requirements of the system.
- To attract the attention of policy makers and stakeholders on the problems faced in the education of newly arrived migrants and refugees.
- To improve the capacity of universities and teacher training centres to support teachers in meeting the needs of newly arrived migrants/refugees and to strengthen intercultural communication in the classroom.
To improve the capacity of regional authorities and schools to cater for the needs of newly arrived migrants/refugees and to strengthen intercultural communication in the classroom.

Several activities were included in the project including an analysis of primary and first-level secondary (middle) school educators’ strategies for teaching in classrooms (presented below), developing modules for training the trainers, designing professional development activities about migrants/refugees for teachers (Biasutti, Concina and Frate 2019), and developing educational activities for the multicultural classroom. The impacts of multicultural classroom activities on the students’ learning processes were also recognised.

**Aims of the study**

The objective of the current study was to examine the practices and methodologies of Italian teachers regarding school activities involving migrant and refugee children, with particular reference to newly arrived migrant pupils. In Italian classroom there are typically many students from migrant families who came to Italy to find work and better economic conditions. More recently, as a result of civil wars affecting several countries (e.g., Syria), the number of refugee children has increased. Migrant and refugee children experience different travel conditions and emotional impacts but, in the process of inclusion in a new country, they share similar difficulties including their economic conditions and issues relating to social, cultural and linguistic integration. In addition, pedagogical strategies for supporting migrant students in the classroom are considered as well as teachers’ needs and requirements for educational and institutional support. More specifically, the analysis was guided by the following three research questions:

1. What are the pedagogical approaches and strategies proposed by Italian teachers concerning the education of migrants?
2. What are the practices and methodologies used by Italian teachers for developing intercultural communication in the classroom?
3. What are Italian teachers’ needs and requirements for developing their practice with regards to the education and integration of newly arrived migrants and refugees?

Before describing the study, an important linguistic distinction should be made. In what follows the term ‘multicultural’ will be used to describing educational contexts characterised by the presence of people from different cultures (as stated in the UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education 2006). The adjective ‘intercultural’ will be used to define pedagogical approaches, methods, and strategies used specifically to promote interactions, mutual exchange, communication, and conscious involvement in the integration process among people from different cultural backgrounds (Portera 2010). While the word ‘multicultural’ focuses on the description of a given situation, the term ‘intercultural’ refers to processes and actions directed at the promotion of a welcoming and respectful society for all the cultures included in it.
Method

Participants

The participants were recruited among primary and secondary teachers. Using snowball sampling, teachers with expertise in working with migrants were contacted via e-mails. Teachers were asked to collaborate by filling in a survey and spreading the research interview among their colleagues. Twenty-nine primary and middle school Italian teachers responded and agreed to participate in the survey. Most of the participants were women and only one was a man: this percentage is consistent with data on the Italian population of primary and secondary first-level teachers (data for the years 2014–2016 from the Italian National Institute of Statistics, ISTAT\(^1\)). The average age was 50 years and 16 teachers worked mainly as generalist primary teachers, while 11 were specialist teachers in first-level secondary (middle) schools, (2 participants did not indicate the school level). They worked in several regions in the North of Italy.

The questionnaire

An open-ended questionnaire was used to collect information about the teachers’ educational practices and their strategies for interacting with newly arrived migrant and refugee students. The questionnaire, developed by a pool of five experts involved in the project, considered the relevant topics of intercultural education related to teachers’ strategies. Based on these topics, a set of questions were designed and discussed with all the project staff. In addition, to check the construct validity of the tool, the questionnaire was offered to other colleagues expert in the field of intercultural education. The aim was to collect their comments on the conceptualisation of the questions, confirming their theoretical foundations, and to eliminate ambiguous statements. At the questionnaire began with questions seeking demographic information (age, gender, level of school in which the respondent worked and, for middle school teachers, main subject taught). After this, eleven open-ended questions were employed to collect data about didactic activities offered to migrant and refugee students to support their inclusion and integration; to assist their emotional, linguistic and cognitive development; and to understand further the teachers’ own educational needs. The full list of questions is reported in Appendix.

Procedure

Participants were contacted through an e-mail describing the project and the main aims of the survey. In addition, they were informed about the anonymity of their responses. The questionnaire was offered in both synchronous (as a Skype interview) and asynchronous ways (as an email questionnaire). Skype interviews were transcribed and sent back to the participants to check for accuracy. The current study was carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society with written informed consent from all participants.
Data coding process

Participants completed the questionnaire with extended written answers (about five-six typed lines each). Only the final question was ever left blank (Do you have any suggestions to work more effectively with migrant and refugee students?). Participants’ responses were analysed using inductive methods that have been effectively used for qualitative analysis in previous educational studies (Biasutti 2015; Biasutti et al. 2018; Kiel, Syring, and Weiss 2017). Content analysis developed codes and categories. The categories were derived from the kinds of questions posed rather than from naturally occurring data which yielded themes. ATLAS.ti 7 software was used to support the qualitative analysis. The coding process included two main steps. In the first step, the primary documents were read, divided into units of analysis and coded, and a coding scheme was defined. In the second step, connections were determined, and the list of codes was systematised and structured into categories. During the first phase, researchers familiarised themselves with the written material, reading it several times. This activity revealed 210 units of analysis. In the second stage, the units of analysis were classified into 40 general codes. In addition, there was a phenomenological reduction phase in which categories were identified from the codes; seven categories emerged. Having gone through the entire process independently, the two researchers reached 80% agreement. They discussed the mismatches and achieved 100% agreement. The codes and categories were used to interpret the phenomenon, defining an overall theory for explaining it.

Results and discussion

The current study revealed several aspects of Italian teachers’ work in multi-ethnic classrooms. Seven categories emerged from the qualitative analysis, highlighting the complex situation of school integration for migrant and refugee children in Italy. The categories allow us to answer the three initial research questions, counting the educational methodologies, strategies and activities for including migrant and refugee children in classroom work, and teachers’ needs and requirements for working towards intercultural inclusion.

Research question 1: What are the pedagogical approaches and strategies proposed by Italian teachers in their educational activities with migrant and refugee children?

With reference to the first research question the following three categories offer an overview of the pedagogical concepts and strategies adopted by teachers: (a) teaching values and beliefs; (b) students’ cognitive, emotional and linguistic skills; (c) inclusive class activities and resources.

(a) Teaching values and beliefs: the first category describes the theoretical and methodological principles that teachers have adopted in their classroom activities with migrant and refugee children. It includes the assessment of students’ prior competencies and learning challenges, the methodologies adopted, the methodologies and the strategies recommended. Teachers believed that a student-centred approach and activities based on cooperative learning can help integration and the learning process for the whole class. Teaching staff acknowledged the value of cooperative learning for promoting interpersonal...
relationships between migrant and refugee and the other students and supporting effective and meaningful learning. The data suggested that common goals should be promoted to develop a sense of inclusion which can engage everyone. Defining a shared task could be a didactic strategy for promoting a sense of inclusion. Teachers employed an inclusive approach for meeting each student’s educational needs, as one teacher said: ‘In order to learn the language for dealing with school subjects, students need an inclusive methodology in the classroom.’ According to the participants’ responses, integration is an active process that involves not only migrant and refugee students but also their classmates and the teacher (Berry and Vedder 2015). One participant stated that ‘the challenge is to be able to enhance (students’) individual differences, since they would become a stimulus for proposing a personalised teaching method, and not a stumbling block.’ Teachers’ perceptions were consistent with the following notion proposed by Berry (2005): the classroom should be considered an intercultural context in which different cultures are presented and accepted by all the students. According to the teachers, integration involves not only migrant and refugee students but also all the pupils in classroom. Teachers have to promote inclusive attitudes in the class and students have to learn to accept and negotiate cultural differences in a climate of mutual respect (Grimes 2014). Furthermore, teachers expressed some methodological recommendations for supporting their didactic work, including integrating play into teaching to encourage curiosity. Students’ learning challenges can be addressed in everyday teaching to capture the interest of students and to choose relevant didactic content as one participant stated: ‘the school’s challenge in recent years is related to teachers’ ability to focus on didactics.’ To make learning meaningful, it could be useful to link didactic content with students’ personal experiences (Hedegaard 2006). Meaningful learning implies a flexible and learner-centred approach to lessons, such an approach could place students’ needs at the centre of the educational activity, respecting their personal needs, culture and characteristics (Gropas and Triandafyllidou 2011).

(b) Students’ cognitive, emotional and linguistic skills: this second category describes what teachers do, and what they need to do, to promote and support students’ cognitive, emotional and linguistic achievements. The promotion of critical thinking, emotional skills and linguistic literacy emerged from the data along with the need for linguistic support/resources, students’ linguistic needs and linguistic challenges. These dimensions are interrelated because critical thinking is necessary for developing emotional awareness, and personal emotional states may be expressed and shared through verbal and non-verbal communication. A multidimensional approach is essential for considering all the different aspects of migrant and refugee students’ school experiences in the development of a personal attitude to cultural exchange (Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, and Garcia 2009). The needs of migrant and refugee students are related to emotional, social, linguistic and academic dimensions, and educators should consider all these in order to promote children’s well-being (Portera 2010). Schools are the primary environment in which all children can develop
critical thinking (Motti-Stefanidi et al. 2012). As one participant reported, ‘[the teacher’s role is] to open the students’ minds to other points of view.’ In addition, it was believed that teachers should promote the emotional skills of the whole classroom ‘for developing empathy and a sense of solidarity’ among children. Some teachers explained the strategies they used to facilitate the development of emotional skills such as a ‘game where children feel like migrants and discuss it in class.’ Other techniques described included the use of role play, drawing and life-storytelling through witnessing other refugee and migrant experiences. Art and music activities were also suggested to support the development of emotional skills, such as emotion recognition and expression. In addition, linguistic issues were recognised as one of the main challenges for migrant and refugee students. Promoting linguistic literacy and linguistic skills are crucial for enabling learning (Allemann-Ghionda 2009). Some teachers emphasised the usefulness of linguistic support and materials such as the presence of a linguistic mediator and the use of name labels on objects in the classroom. Teachers emphasised ‘the use of concrete words’, ‘the use of games such as memory’ and ‘didactic games based on physical responses.’ One participant suggested that ‘every school should have multilingual materials for supporting communication.’ Teaching staff requested more linguistic materials for supporting the integration and linguistic learning of the children including: multi-language textbooks, foreign languages dictionaries, visual dictionaries, multi-linguistic software and other multimedia materials and Internet resources. These tools were considered crucial for creating meaningful learning contexts (Hedegaard 2006) which can integrate the daily personal experience of children with the contents and skills that need to be promoted and developed in class.

(c) Inclusive class activities and resources: teachers also referred to concerns about the actions and tools that the participants used during classroom work. Some teachers described the activities they implemented (or that they felt should be implemented) to foster intercultural communication, integration and learning. The participants listed the following activities: activities on emotions and emotional literacy such as ‘a lab on emotions by choosing different types of music that will have to be accompanied by different movements’; activities for linguistic development such as repeating the name of objects and ‘using visual dictionaries in different languages’; activities for facilitating disciplinary learning such as ‘personalised linguistic support’ or ‘curricular activities carried out in small groups and according to specific learning levels’; historical and artistic resources including pictures of past historical immigration phenomena; multimedia and technological resources such as observations of natural phenomena or educational robotics. In addition, other practical and workshop activities were mentioned in which everyone could express their originality including ‘intercultural animation workshops’ or ‘theatrical representations of human rights’. Teachers believed that learning was most successful when they adopted learning-by-doing methods and practical activities linked to children’s daily experiences (Hedegaard 2006). The activities proposed involved all the students (not only migrants and refugees), in enabling
the whole class to engage fully with processes of educational inclusion (Grimes 2014).

Although teachers recognised the positive effect of practical approaches to promoting students’ learning and social exchanges, teachers were not fully aware of the theoretical principles behind these didactic activities, particularly ‘learning by doing’ methods.

Research question 2: What are the practices and methodologies used by Italian teachers for developing intercultural communication in the classroom?

The second research question focused on the methods and activities that teachers offered for fostering the inclusion of all the students in class. Three categories were connected with this topic: intercultural communication, social interactions in classroom, and networking with the local community.

(a) To promote respect, peaceful coexistence and collaboration in class, participants recognised the importance of intercultural communication and aspects of communication including welcoming, intercultural meeting and sharing, intercultural needs, intercultural challenges and intercultural recommendations. Teachers reported the need for intercultural exchanges and communication: ‘At the beginning it is always important to know the culture and habits…’. Teachers also recommended ‘having some time to know them [migrant people] and to allow them to know us and get acquainted with the new context’. Teachers also reported some activities that they performed in the classroom to welcome a migrant child: ‘The teacher prepares the whole classroom for the new pupil’s arrival with small presents, drawings etc.’ and some activities to encourage the acquaintance such as ‘name games’ or ‘the game: if you come in my country I’ll give you …’. They also promoted knowledge about other cultures with ‘activities that shed light on the beauty of the native land (of all migrant children)’. In addition, teachers reported that, ‘the challenge is to enhance the differences’ as learning resources among students. As suggested by previous research in which teachers chose to enhance differences rather than masking them (Berry 2005), the teachers in our research believed that the right approach to integration was not to ignore the cultural differences that emerged among students in the classroom but to get acquainted and take advantage of them through personal and social development tools. Participants showed great creativity in planning and offering students tasks to facilitate social exchange and interpersonal relationships.

(b) Participants emphasised the role of social interactions that were concerned with promoting relationships and social contacts between migrant and refugee children, the other students, families and teachers. Several aspects of communication were mentioned: peer interactions in class, students’ psychological well-being, students’ relational needs, students’ relational challenges, the teacher-student relationships, the teacher’s roles, interaction with families and relational recommendations. According to the participants, the relational dimensions of intercultural education should be integrated in the teacher’s educational activities: the role of the teacher is not only to enable students to acquire contents and skills but also to create and support good interpersonal environments within the classroom. In agreement with Grimes (2014), who suggested that creating a friendly setting with good relationships
is the first step for involving all students in an inclusive educational environment, participant teachers talked about the importance of adopting cooperative learning methods for the integration of migrant children. Specific strategies for defining the groups were suggested such as ‘forming new groups for developing new relationships and involving all children in games and drawings.’ In addition, peer-tutoring involving an Italian and a migrant student was encouraged to strengthen interpersonal relationships and facilitating linguistic literacy. Teaching staff emphasised that it is important to encourage good teacher-student relationships. As one participant stated, ‘It’s necessary to create a good relationship with the [migrant] student’. Teachers consolidated good relationships by applying techniques such as an ‘active listening’, a ‘constant dialogue’ and ‘suspending any kind of prejudice’. Participants provided relational suggestions: ‘[teachers should] work a lot on the relationship with students trying to understand their needs’; ‘with migrant children we must work on the relationship in the classroom and peers fostering a positive collaboration’. For promoting positive collaboration and enhancing active participation and involvement in school life, teachers suggested designing specific activities such as ‘activities with all classes in the intercultural day’. They indicated that the teachers’ role was to promote good social interactions in class through games that allow teachers to understand the relationships between pupils and encourage further interactions. One participant reported the example of the game ‘handfriend’: ‘they work through physical games, tales and graphic activities such as making handfriends where pupils draw the shape of their hand and write on the fingers the names of pupils who feel they are friends’.

Participants suggested that teachers, also have a duty to discourage discriminatory and unfair behaviours among students. As one teacher reported, ‘I often have to mediate in situations of bullying or misunderstandings between classmates’. Teachers should also promote the psychological well-being of students working in their classroom by offering activities to strengthen students’ self-confidence and self-esteem. In agreement with previous literature (Kiel, Syring, and Weiss 2017; Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, and Garcia 2009), teachers underlined the importance of creating good relationships with migrant and refugee children’s parents by involving them in the life of the school life. The parents’ participation in the school was believed to be crucial in supporting the teachers’ efforts to integrate pupils in class and defeating some of the learning difficulties and conflict in relationships with pupils and the teachers. Teachers suggested several activities, such as ‘organising a welcoming day with families’, ‘inviting the parents to school to teach the games of their countries’, ‘asking to the parents to create a book of recipes with traditional dishes’, and contacting the families facing relational challenges.

(c) Teachers also suggested developing networking within the local community referring to the external connections with agencies and associations that can help the adaptation, integration and well-being of migrant and refugee children. Teachers considered it important to engage in networking with the entire community: ‘I suggest that there should be synergy between the school, families, the local environment, local associations (sport associations and others) and the entire educational community’. The participants suggested more involvement of external agencies for organising class
supporting activities, or cultural mediators’ support and literacy of language courses in the afternoon. In line with Kiel, Syring, and Weiss (2017), teachers recognised as relevant the role of the school in the community.

Teachers’ efforts to sustain migrant and refugee students’ integration was characterised by sensitivity and attention to pupils’ educational needs. However, the activities they proposed lacked an underlying structure a reference to more general theoretical frameworks. We believe that it is important to raise teachers’ awareness and to stimulate knowledge of the most effective teaching techniques for working in multicultural classes. In addition, a reflective approach could be promoted (Schön 1983) inducing self-reflection about the didactic activities implemented in the class to promote a metacognitive orientation to classroom activities. In our opinion, the best practices emerging from participants’ responses could be integrated in a more comprehensive model that could support teaching staff and institutions working with migrant and refugee students.

Research question 3: What are Italian teachers’ needs and requirements for developing their practice with regards to the education and integration of newly arrived migrants and refugees?

With regard to the last research question, teachers highlighted several issues while considering their activities within the multiethnic classroom. Even if teachers have a repertoire of best practices and methodologies, they underlined some needs regarding the education of migrant and refugee children and the following issues emerged: teachers’ training, didactic counselling, supporting activities and projects, resources for supporting teaching, economical resources and school organisations. To offer an effective educational context to migrant and refugee children, teachers claimed the need for supporting activities and high-quality projects. They called for professional development activities: ‘The success of the projects depends on how the projects themselves are implemented,’ and ‘We need more human resources motivated and targetted for this purpose’. Teachers claimed to lack the skills needed to support migrant and refugee students’ linguistic literacies and intercultural competencies: ‘To face (our) “ignorance” is not so easy: we do not have the competences for teaching a language starting from another language of which we do not only know the basics, but also the alphabet.’ These findings are consistent with previous research by Kiel, Syring, and Weiss (2017), who emphasised the need to explore intercultural knowledge and introduce regular intercultural training. In agreement with findings from Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, and Garcia (2009) study, in which awareness emerged as the key element in encouraging the adoption of a more intercultural perspective among primary teachers, intercultural training can also have a relevant impact on teachers’ beliefs about adopting an intercultural approach in teaching. Considering teachers’ needs, one of the most relevant aspects emerging from our research was the request for specific training to improve teachers’ skills and competences in working with migrant and refugee students. Considering the increase in the immigration phenomenon, trainee and in-service teachers need to be effectively educated on cultural diversity, inclusive teaching and intercultural knowledge and competences (Jokikokko and Uitto 2017; Kiel, Syring, and
Furthermore, teachers requested more economic resources to cover their needs and to improve school organisation. Some limitations can be identified for the current study. First, the group of participants was located in the North of Italy which is only a small part of the country. The questionnaire was administered in the North part of Italy because of local support for the project. Second, the qualitative methods used in study did not allow the results to be generalised. However, the findings could be a useful tool for reflection and to compare methodologies and practices in other contexts and countries. Further research projects could involve more teachers from other Italian regions and also from other countries to develop a transnational comparison.

**Conclusion and further developments**

The current study investigated the educational methodologies and strategies used by primary and middle school teachers in promoting migrant and refugee students’ educational integration. The findings highlighted the complexity of the situation of school integration for migrant and refugee children in Italy. Teachers reported several didactic strategies and methods and called for increased educational support for classroom work to promote the inclusion and integration of migrant and refugee students. The results provided evidence of the complexity of teaching in an intercultural context and suggested a multidimensional approach for analysing educational issues. The categories that emerged could be used as criteria for developing a multidimensional approach to intercultural issues in education, considering many different aspects (Kiel, Syring, and Weiss 2017).

The results provided a rich and comprehensive overview of how teachers understand their work with migrant students. The current findings have educational implications since teachers highlighted the need to adopt a flexible approach while working in multicultural classes. Creativity and flexibility were the two main features that characterised teaching with students from different cultural backgrounds. Teachers reported being constantly engaged in finding innovative and effective ways to support school inclusion and to facilitate social interactions within the class. A gap between institutional indications and the educational work in the real context of the class was outlined: teachers sometimes had the feeling of being isolated in their daily work and the strategies they adopted were often the result of experiments in real time. The main educational implication is the need to link the theoretical dimension of intercultural education with the good practices that teachers try, develop, propose, and revise in class every day.

The present study is a first qualitative step and could be used for developing larger-scale quantitative research projects involving a larger number of participants, including a quantitative tool using a Likert scale for a detailed evaluation of the aspects mentioned by the teachers. The findings could also provide input for designing training activities to enhance the skills that teachers need to work in multicultural school contexts. A reflective approach to teaching seems the best model to implement in an intercultural classroom.
Note

http://professioni.istat.it/sistemainformativoprofessioni/cp2011/scheda.php?id=2.6.3.3.1
http://professioni.istat.it/sistemainformativoprofessioni/cp2011/scheda.php?id=2.6.3.3.2.

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References


Appendix

Questions for the survey proposed to the participants.

(1) What kind of classroom activities could be proposed to support the inclusion and adaptation of migrant and refugee students to the new school context?

(2) What kind of classroom activities could be proposed to support the integration of the different cultures of the students?

(3) What kind of classroom activities could be proposed to reflect on human right aspects of the migrant and refugee?

(4) What kind of classroom activities could be proposed to reflect on emotional issues of the migrant and refugee?

(5) What kind of activities could be proposed to support migrant and refugee students while learning Italian?

(6) What kind of activities/methodologies (e.g., in maths and science education) could be used to include migrant and refugee students in your daily activities?

(7) What kind of support would you like to receive while working with migrant and refugee students?

(8) What kind of challenges do you face when working with migrant and refugee students?

(9) What kind of actions do you propose to meet the basic needs of migrant and refugee children?

(10) What kind of supporting activities do you provide to migrant and refugee students with trauma/stress?

(11) Do you have any suggestions to work more effectively with migrant and refugee students?