

## “Becoming” a cooperative learner-teacher

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**Título:** “Llegar a ser “ un aprendiz-maestro cooperativo.

**Resumen:** Este artículo presenta una visión general de las bases teóricas acerca de los retos que supone para los profesores de Educación Secundaria la implementación del aprendizaje cooperativo, en campos como las técnicas alternativas de evaluación del aprendizaje, la oposición de los estudiantes a las técnicas de colaboración, la planificación y gestión del aula, la formación del profesorado, la promoción y la evaluación. La investigación se basa en los datos recopilados en las regiones italianas de Véneto y Emilia Romagna a través de grupos de discusión con profesores de enseñanza secundaria. El proyecto educativo se centra en el uso de los incidentes críticos como la formación y las herramientas educativas, prestando especial atención a los enfoques de aprendizaje cooperativo en las situaciones de transición y en el aprendizaje intercultural. Se examinan diferentes opciones metodológicas y se analizan formas de aplicar el método de incidentes críticos para abordar la detección y el desarrollo de la competencia intercultural en entornos educativos de aprendizaje cooperativo.

**Palabras clave:** Aprendizaje cooperativo; incidentes críticos; diversidad cultural; Grupo de Investigación; formación del profesorado

**Abstract:** This paper presents an overview of the theoretical background concerning the challenges for secondary school teachers implementing cooperative learning in areas such as alternative student assessment technique, student's resistance to collaborative techniques, planning and class management, teacher training, advancement, and evaluation. The research is based upon data gathered in the Italian Veneto and Emilia Romagna regions through focus groups with secondary school teachers. The educational project focuses on the use of critical incidents as training and educational tools with particular attention for cooperative learning approaches to transition situations and intercultural learning. It reviews different methodological options and explores ways to apply the critical incidents method in addressing the screening and development of intercultural competence within cooperative learning educational settings.

**Key words:** cooperative learning; critical incidents; cultural diversity; group investigation; teacher training

### Introduction: teachers' views on cooperative learning potential and challenges

Within educational settings, cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Slavin, 1996) provides structured opportunities for collaboration, dialogue and negotiation based on activities in small heterogeneously mixed working groups of learners who are at the same time learning social skills and working toward a common task. Meta-analysis such as those conducted by Slavin (1996), and by Kyndt et al. (2013) highlight a positive effect of cooperative learning on achievement and attitudes concerning learning in formal education settings. Recent reviews include 65 research studies from 1995 onwards on cooperative learning in primary, secondary or tertiary education conducted in real-life classrooms. In both the academic as well as in the social realm the teacher's role in cooperative learning turns into becoming a facilitator who steers the learning process. Far from being a mainstream teaching practice, cooperative learning is still regarded by teachers as an innovative approach with a significant learning potential as well as with significant challenges for teachers in areas such as alternative student assessment technique, student's resistance to collaborative techniques, planning and class management, teacher training, advancement, and evaluation. Consistently with the collaborative dimension promoted by cooperative learning, such challenges as well as ways to develop teacher' skills in planning, facilitating and assessing cooperative learning are best addressed within professional learning communities.

### Towards a professional cooperative learning community

At the core of a community lies the sharing of the community's members' perspectives as well as the search for a shared perspective. According to Dooner, Mandzuk and Clifton (2008) the notion of community should also consider individual needs (Little, 2002). It is the ongoing interplay between such notion and its demand for a shared perspective in relation to a community's focus on professional growth that can help teachers to develop knowledge that enables them to acquire a better understanding of the specificities of school's everyday practice (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Such knowledge development implies the ability to maintain an inquiry and reflection process about the factors that enable professional learning communities to develop, to sustain themselves, and how teachers learn to work collaboratively. However, so far limited educational research reviewed the specific difficulties that teachers face in establishing and sustaining learning communities. An understanding of such difficulties would offer both an advantage in facilitating teachers' mutual support work, as well as a better comprehension by the teachers of the tensions that are inherent in group work (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002), including the task that they themselves assign to their own students.

Crucial to this inquiry and reflective perspective are the metaphors that teachers use to conceptualise learning. Our own experience with Italian teachers is in line with the review offered by Hodkinson, Biesta, and James (2008) who focus on three main metaphors. The first metaphor is rooted in a cognitive perspective and it translates learning into “acquisition”. Such metaphor is identified by authors such as Sfard (1998) and Mason (2007) reasserts, cognitive. An alternative view is offered by situated learning scholars who draw

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upon the metaphor of "participation". In addition, from a socio-cultural perspective Hodkinson et al. (2008) suggest "becoming" as a metaphor that offers a potential to conceptualise learning in a more holistic way, acknowledging that people (and therefore teachers) are always socially positioned. Among the three metaphors the latter metaphor seems closer to the type of teachers learning community that will be addressed later in this paper, offering a promising framework to consider the development of social dynamics from a learning perspective.

According to authors such as Blatchford, Kutnick, Baines and Galton (2003), in most schools' everyday practice it is noticeable that the majority of pupils and teachers have very limited preparation and often no training for group work (Blatchford, Kutnick, Clark, MacIntyre, & Baines, 2001). Their observation remind us of what Doyle had already stated in 1986: educational research is providing limited attention and information about the problems that teachers are experiencing when managing cooperative group learning. This is especially relevant in relation to classroom management as a whole (Blatchford, et. al., 2001) and in relation to the ability to differentiate and to identify arguments typologies among students. This is particularly relevant in order for cooperative learning to be instrumental in favouring the role of peers in triggering and supporting mutual cognitive development. Authors such as Howe and McWilliam (2001) make a clear distinction between arguments and explanations to the group, involving an attempt at explanation or justification, in comparison with unsubstantiated disagreement. Howe and McWilliam (2001) view the latter as a developmental prerequisite to argumentation. There is a clear advantage for teachers in scaffolding their students developments in acquiring a deeper understanding concerning the role of argumentation and cognitive conflict arising out of accommodating to another's point of view.

While previous scholarly work such as Johnson & Johnson, (2003) has regarded teacher's role in cooperative learning group work as either conceptual—i.e. stemming from cooperative learning principles—or following a set of scripted rules and activities, based on our experience with Italian teachers this does not seem a dichotomy to us but rather two poles of teachers attitude in addressing cooperative learning planning and classroom management in terms of facilitating collaborative student interactions, and of monitoring and assessing students contributions.

Previous research suggests that limited teacher involvement in groups can serve to increase pupil autonomy and task involvement as students gain both academically and socially when they are provided with room to interact with others to accomplish shared tasks (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Slavin, 1996). Gillies (2012) summarise some of the key research findings in this area: through interaction students learn to interrogate issues, share ideas, clarify differences, and construct new understanding. This activity is instrumental in providing students with opportunities to learn to use language to explain new experiences and realities which, in

turn, help them to construct new ways of thinking and feeling (Barnes, 1969; Mercer, 1996). In addition, working cooperatively together, students increase their participation in group discussions, demonstrate a more sophisticated level of discourse, engage in fewer interruptions when others speak, and provide more intellectually valuable contributions (Gillies, 2006). Teacher training plays a key role as cooperative learning is not usually implemented as a practice to facilitate student interaction and learning (Baines, Blatchford, & Kutnick, 2008).

In a study of junior high school students' performance on a science-based learning activity, Gillies (2008) found that students performed better when their teachers had been trained in how to establish cooperative learning activities in their curricula. Moreover, a positive role was played by the fact that students had been provided with opportunities to participate in these activities on a regular basis. These findings show that it is crucial for teachers to understand how to embed cooperative learning into the classroom curricula to foster open communication and engagement between teachers and students, promote cooperative investigation, problem-solving and reasoning, and provide students with an environment where they feel supported and emotionally secure (Johnson & Johnson, 2003; Roseth, Johnson, & Johnson, 2009).

Studies such as the one implemented by Gillies (2008) suggest to further explore the relevance of cooperative learning teachers training. What are the skills needed to implement cooperative learning in the classroom in effective ways? They include at least three group of skills: in the first place they concern skills that enable teachers to offer their students well structured cooperative learning activities (Gillies 2007); moreover, they concern skills to ensure that cooperative learning tasks are defined and offered in both complex and challenging ways (Cohen, 1994); finally, they concern the ability to teach students the social skills that are instrumental in order to manage conflict and to monitor and to review the group's progress (Johnson & Johnson, 2003). Such ability implies as well attention and understanding for group composition, task construction, and student preparation in order to group students in teams that take into account both individuals' profile and the type of activity to be undertaken (Baines et al., 2008; Galton, Hargreaves, Comber, Wall, & Pell, 1999).

Scholars such as Webb et al. (2009) highlight the relevance of teachers in-service training and professional development in order to support the implementation of cooperative learning in their classrooms, recognizing and sharing the difficulties that concern students responses to the cooperative learning approach and the way teachers feel challenged by such responses.

## Promoting intercultural understanding through cooperative learning

In linking cooperative learning to relevant and complex issues it seems particularly relevant to the present European Union multicultural context—and specifically to the present Italian context in relation to recent immigration trends—to acknowledge that co-operative learning provides significant opportunities for collaboration, dialogue and negotiation; these are core elements of any learning process focusing on narrative exchanges motivated by attitudes of respect and mutual understanding (Acquario et al., 2008). Through co-operation in small groups where members work together towards a shared aim, participants from different backgrounds and with different competences improve their learning about themselves and they tend to be more receptive to issues of diversity.

In particular, co-operative learning seems to be an appropriate pedagogical approach for promoting intercultural learning, as previously explored in Europe in the 1990s by the Co-operative Learning in Intercultural Education Project (CLIP) (Batelaan, 1998). In addition, various studies have pointed to a relationship between the implementation of co-operative learning and the reduction of prejudice (Sharan, 1998; Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

Such pedagogical perspective is of significant importance in addressing issues of cultural diversity within the European Union. The EU Countries regulatory frameworks and policies concerning citizenship, labour market, education, social provision (MIPEX, 2011) have been integrating at the institutional level a sense of diversity. Today, diversity policies are promoted by governmental agencies, corporations, universities, unions, non-governmental organisations and media, among others. The pluralism of contemporary societies hasn't been paralleled with adequate legal and policy instruments. The adoption of a diversity perspective does not imply yet a consistent understanding and approach across the various sectorial policies (Lentin & Titley, 2011). Obviously, this gap is even more threatening in relation to cultural diversity policies in countries such as Italy, where citizenship is still based mainly on *ius sanguinis* and where the recognition and accommodation of diversity lacks the pro-active approach that could be witnessed in the past decades in other Western democracies. This is one of the reasons why director Fred Kuwornu and his team are urging Italian society to challenge and to transform Italian citizenship and “residence permit” regulation. These are the figures that their documentary as well as the national civil rights campaign “*L' Italia sono anch'io*”<sup>1</sup> contribute to raise awareness about:

- In Italy there are 932.675 “foreign” children and youth under 18 years of age, 572.720 of them are born in Italy;

- 673.592 of them are enrolled in primary and secondary education schools;
- Every 100 “foreign” children that are born in Italy, 42 are not granted Italian citizenship when they are 18 years old.

In order to understand these figures and challenges it seems useful to introduce at this stage some comparative data concerning Italy within the context of other European and North American countries' intercultural policies. According to the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX, 2001), on average 31 European and North American countries have policies “just halfway favourable for integration. Scoring around 50%, overall policies create as many obstacles as opportunities for immigrants to become equal members of society”. According to the MIPEX, on average, migrant workers, reunited families and long-term residents enjoy basic security, rights and protection from discrimination. But the three relevant obstacles remain for settled foreigners to become citizens or politically active and for all children, whatever their background, to learn and achieve together in school.

Italy is witnessing poor policies in terms of granting citizenship rights to migrants and their children in combination with a weak approach to the education in relation to “migrant” pupils (MIPEX, 2011). MIPEX notes that “this is an area of weakness for Italy, (...) Its education system has as many strengths as weaknesses. Migrant needs are targeted but generally as a ‘problem group’, while all students are not taught how to live together. As in most countries, migrants under age 18, whatever their status, access education and general support for disadvantaged pupils (however successful these measures are). Schools can use some targeted funding and teacher training on migrants’ needs. Newcomers risk being placed at the wrong level, with few measures to catch up. Besides civil society projects, the Italian education system is not actively supporting new opportunities and intercultural education”.

In Italy, the ministerial circular of March 2006 contains the guidelines for the welcome and integration of foreign children. It provides indications on the use of linguistic and cultural mediators in schools with foreign pupils. In practice, these mediators welcome and tutor newly-arrived pupils and help them integrate at school. They also have interpretation and translation duties, and serve as mediators in parent-teacher meetings, especially in specific problem cases.

The recent Integration of the European Second Generation recent (TIES<sup>1</sup>) surveys provide a comparison of the access of “second generation” immigrants to higher education in Central and Northern European countries. TIES surveys highlight significant differences: for example five times as many second generation Turks are to be found in higher education in France and Sweden compared to the German speaking countries. TIES explains these differences as consequences of a continuum that goes from more or less stratified or closed school systems—in Germany, Austria and Swit-

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.litaliasonoanchio.it/>

zerland—to more open, comprehensive systems in France and Sweden and it suggests that each country is actively constructing its type of “immigrant” community according to the chances and opportunities it provides.

These data offer important elements to reflect upon in Southern European countries although a “more open” school system such as the Italian one might still offer examples of poor “second generation” access to higher education as the choices concerning the education career are dependent on a more complex pattern of socio-economic and cultural factors. Within Italy, different regions are experiencing a variety of formal education responses to diversity in school. Based on 2012 data, in Italy “foreign” students are 8.4% of the overall school population, although in the two Regions where this study has taken place they are close to 12% of the overall school population. The increase recorded since the year 2000 (when they were 2%) and the rates of low school performance of “foreign” students (Fincati, 2009) represent significant challenges to school policies. These concern the school methodological and organizational side, as well as the normative and symbolic context. Teachers have found themselves in the role of “mediators” of an actual “shared school” (Giovannini & Palmas, 2002) between *de jure* Italian students and new *de facto* Italians: students without Italian citizenship, although in close relationship with their school mates, and, in principle, with equal rights.

The analysis on the changes in the identity of foreign students have started to be included in literature, as personification of “cultures at stake” (Melucci, 2000), multiform, changeable and nuanced. The condition of students of foreign origin who are studying in vocational secondary school is particularly interesting as it represent the condition of the majority of these students and as such school choice is usually leading to not accessing higher education and to adjust to low salary professions, indicating a tendency by these students, their schools and their families to limit their capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004).

### **Cooperative learning through Group Investigation and Critical Incidents**

The results presented here are part of a broader research project focusing on intercultural competence development through cooperative learning methodologies and specifically with the Group Investigation approach involving both secondary school teachers and students. One of the aims is to identify educational and teaching conditions that help students to develop interest and open mindedness towards diversity, especially cultural diversity. Group Investigation (GI) is a co-operative learning strategy that involves organising the class in groups of four or five students researching a topic co-operatively together. The GI approach includes six steps (Sharan, 1998). In short, the six steps include: the class identifies sub-topics and organises research groups; groups plan their research work; groups implement their research

work; groups plan their presentations; groups present their research work; teachers and students assess presentations.

The study involved 24 secondary school teachers from Modena, and 18 secondary school teachers from Verona (Italy) who taught a variety of subjects. They volunteered to participate as action researchers as part of the overall research project. During the school year 2011-12 and 2012-13 these teachers were involved in 32 classes from 17 different schools. The study adopted an action-research approach involving three phases: (a) planning, (b) action, and (c) reflection on the impact of the action.

During the Planning phase, at the beginning of the project, the teachers who participated were invited to find a common definition of intercultural sensitivity and they agreed upon the required key core abilities. Their short definition of intercultural sensitivity was “Intercultural sensitivity enables you to interact both effectively and in a way that is acceptable to others when you are working in a group whose members have different ethnic and/or cultural backgrounds”. We explored this definition in relation to recent theoretical modelling in this field. Among the various models provided by different authors we identified the dynamic model suggested by Deardorff (2009) as the one most closely related to this definition. While we found Deardorff’s model useful in providing the teachers with a common intercultural sensitivity reference framework, Bennett’s Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1993) proved a useful tool to map and read changes in students’ attitudes. Based on these models, teachers discussed and identified key descriptors in relation to the development of intercultural sensitivity and turned them into a grid to observe students’ attitudes and behaviours in the classroom and to share relevant information during the focus group interviews. On the basis of this work, a self-observation grid was developed to enable students to reflect upon their own attitudes concerning diversity.

The core part of the school project was the action phase. During the action phase of the project, teachers implemented GI units with their students and jointly agreed on the minimum number of these to be scheduled during the school year. Through monthly training sessions, teachers learned the basic principles and approaches of co-operative learning and in particular the GI model. Once familiar with them, they started to plan GI projects together, to be used with their students. Four GI units based on the teachers’ respective subject areas (Italian, English as a Foreign Language and Agricultural Sciences) were developed that involved student investigations based upon the following questions: How can we open a shop at our school that is run by students? (Vocational School); How can we start and implement a fertilisation plan? (Vocational School); How can we make Manzoni’s book *Promessi Sposi* accessible to 15 year old pupils, including pupils of foreign origin? (Technical Institute); How can we open a shop at our school that is run by students? (Vocational School); How is English seventeenth century lit-

erature affected by the scientific revolution? (Foreign Languages Licée).

In the last phase, the Reflective phase, the difficulties faced by teachers in implementing the GI units were discussed during the monthly training sessions, along with the impact that the approach was having. Additionally, at the end of the first school year, two teacher focus groups and eight student focus groups of self-selected volunteers (one representative from each participating class) were held in order to gain a better understanding of teachers' and students' intercultural sensitivity and to elicit attitudes towards the use of the co-operative learning approach.

Specific attention was given to identifying the features that support the acknowledgement of cultural differences and the construction of intercultural meaning. As this review is part of a broader research project focusing on intercultural competence development through cooperative learning methodologies, the last part of this paper will also discuss how to identify, to draft and to use critical incidents in relation to secondary school cooperative learning activities and teacher training. Such an approach is reviewed in terms of the pedagogical potential of this methodology in promoting reflective educational practice that have a potential to address issues of diversity and home-school transitions and to provide common core educational tools to classroom didactics, teacher education and parent support.

### Teachers Voice, the results of the Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted with teachers at the beginning, half-way through the school year and at the end of the school year. They concentrated on the strengths and weaknesses encountered by the teachers in implementing GI activities with their respective students.

All teachers participated in the project in a voluntary way and they all agree that working with cooperative learning presents more positive than negative sides. In their words, cooperative learning "creates a special classroom climate because students are enjoying these activities more than the usual ones" and as a result students tend to participate in a more active way in classroom activities. Teachers observe that this climate seems to encourage more active listening and to facilitate constructive interaction among students. This does not happen right away. Teachers find it important to be able to implement several cooperative learning activities over time and to offer students both structured and "informal" cooperative learning activities (Johnson & Johnson, 2003). Their assessment of the cooperative learning activities implemented by their students is that it takes a few sessions for the students to get acquainted with the cooperative learning approach and with working together. Structuring the activities and making such structure visible to the students helps the students to get involved because they are able to identify their roles and responsibilities and to focus on a shared and explicit task. As one teacher says:

"By structuring the roles and activities students understand what they are supposed to do [...]. This helps effective collaboration within the group as each of them is aware that her/his own contribution is relevant to help the group to move on. Each of them feels responsible for their own task and towards a shared goal".

According to teachers goal sharing helps both academic achievement and social interaction, in line with previous studies (Johnson & Johnson, 2003; Slavin, 1996).

Teachers also identify a number of critical issues. Consistently with their previous attention for the time dimension, they consider such dimension problematic in two ways. In the first place it demands time on the side of the teachers in order to plan and to deliver well structured cooperative learning classroom activities. In addition, it demands teachers to be effective in their time management and in their monitoring of the group dynamics during the implementation of the cooperative learning activities. They find it particularly challenging when time management concerns "highly diverse" classes. As one teacher explains:

"When we try to be rigorous with time management and in making students respect deadlines we motivate them to work hard to respect deadlines but at the same time we run the risk to exclude the weaker students ... it is difficult to strike a balance".

A second critical issue deserving attention in teacher training is group composition and role assignments within small working groups. Focus groups show that teachers see the relevance of group composition in order to offer collaboration opportunities among students. Teachers tend to agree with a dominant idea within the cooperative learning approach, namely that heterogeneous groups enable improved collaboration on the basis of the participants complementary and different capacities and therefore of potential outcomes in terms of mutual support and peer learning, also affecting students' opening up to cultural diversity.

When confronted with four possible ways to tackle group composition (Johnson & Johnson, 2003), i.e. based on a random procedure—students number off in a fixed pattern producing groups that have a random composition; self-selected groups—teacher allows students to make their own groups; teachers form groups depending on the activity, skill or subject; teachers form heterogeneous groups based on a mixed ability criteria—creating groups that consist of students of all levels. Reflecting upon the activities implemented in the classroom, teachers agree that the way that they prefer to form groups is to favour random composition in order to trigger new social bonds. They also agree with Kagan (1985) that the random approach sends the students a message that the teacher does not have a "hidden agenda" and this encourages students to take responsibility for the cooperative learning group task. However, this approach to group com-

position can prove to be challenging as well and several teachers opted for forming heterogeneous groups based on a mixed ability criteria in order to ensure that all groups could count on adequate resources in working towards the common goals. In turn, this approach raises the issue of how to support and to enhance positive interdependence among group members through roles assignment. Focus group activities help teachers to exchange ideas and to raise awareness about how to assign complementary roles that actually enhance positive interdependence. For this to happen teachers feel that there is a need for students to acknowledge the actual roles complementarity.

"It is important to strike the right balance between a clear role definition and avoiding that students perceive their role in a rigid way, in order for the students to feel involved through the all process".

Finally, teachers focus groups have been an opportunity for sharing the common difficulty to combine cooperative learning management and student monitoring and observation. This awareness emerged during the first project year and became very evident during the second project year: they progressively acquire an understanding that it is not enough to agree about written grids and/or checklists. They increasingly focused on the relevance of interpersonal dynamics and of the importance to find tailor made tools to observe and record them (through notes, logs etc. As they state it:

"While at the beginning we were paying attention mostly to contents, our focus has shifted towards group members social interactions and learning dynamics".

In terms of group dynamics and open attitudes several teachers observe that while cooperative learning activities contributed to improve the classroom climate, a longer learning process would be needed to achieve a proper meta-cognitive reflection upon diversity issues.

"The risk with heterogeneous groups is that students who are less performing within the group might tend to isolate themselves and freeze their collaboration"

Teachers note that when this is happening it might increase prejudices when associated with cultural diversity features. Most important, teachers began to appreciate the importance of acknowledging conflict as an important dimension in classroom dynamics and to value the use of critical incidents as a potential bridge between teacher training and cooperative learning core educational resources addressing misunderstanding and conflict situations.

## The use of critical incidents as intercultural learning tools

The use of critical incidents within cooperative learning activities was probably the most important shared results of the two-year education process described in this paper and involving teachers and students in Modena and Verona secondary schools. Before discussing the use of critical incidents in educational settings it seems worth presenting in the following paragraphs a short overview of the theoretical background and research approaches concerning the use of critical incidents as training and educational tools with particular attention for transition situations and intercultural learning. This includes a review of criticism addressed to approaches based on critical incident analysis and discusses methodological improvements. It reviews different methodological options and explores ways to apply the critical incidents method in addressing the screening and development of intercultural competence within educational settings. According to Flanagan (1954)

"By an incident is meant any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act. To be critical, an incident must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects".

Critical incidents were introduced into intercultural training at the beginning of the 1960s (de Frankrijker, 1998). Shorter than case studies, from an intercultural perspective, critical incidents can be framed as "brief descriptions of situations in which there is a misunderstanding, problem or conflict arising from cultural differences between interacting parties or where there is a problem of cross-cultural adaptation" (Wight, 1995). Although there are different approaches to critical incidents in training, their use typically implies providing short information in order to "set the stage", a snapshot of (the main facts concerning) the incident, and some comments about feelings and reactions by the involved parties. This short information should lead to question(s) encouraging participant(s) to provide their views on these facts and possibly to explain the portions that do not overlap across what is being taken for granted by the different parties, i.e. the cultural differences at stake.

Within cross-cultural critical incidents literature, cultural differences are understood mainly as implicit cultural standard and expectations. The critical incident approach does not make such cultural standard and expectations explicit. It rather encourages participants to identify them and to reflect upon them through the activity of finding viewpoints at work within the critical incident and generating potential operational scenarios in response to the incident (Wight, 1995). The key element is a relational misunderstanding that goes

beyond failing to understand each other at the linguistic level. Actually, according to anthropologists such as La Cecla, to misunderstand each other is a *conditio sine qua non* in meeting each other. Reflecting upon misunderstanding conditions is in itself an invitation to consider “cultures” not as autonomous entities with reified waterproof borders. It is an invitation to explore cross-cultural encounters from an intersubjectivity, perspective that take relationships as the unit of analysis (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). Within such perspective borders are not necessarily a core focus and they are best treated as permeable entities (Hermans, 2001). According to most studies on intercultural competences Deardorff (2009), in order to develop intercultural competence it is crucial to learn to view the world, including “own” world including other viewpoints. Reductionist views of intercultural competence focus mainly on issues of effective communication and management, especially of immigration issues and multicultural working environment. Beyond this narrow focus, the inclusion of other viewpoints implies a process of transformation of the ways we look at ourselves, the way we live and perceive the world. This means that intercultural competence is concerned with the ability to look for and being open to being questioned by values and beliefs other than those one is accustomed to (Belenky, Clinchy, Golberg, & Tarule, 1986). At the same time, it concerns the ability to deal with the “unavoidable encounters and the misunderstandings that are sparked by such encounters” (La Cecla, 1997, p. 5). This refers to the ability to learn how to “think about oneself” while at the same time one is observing the “other” and “oneself” (Fitzgerald, 2000), or, in other words, to observe the tensions across the relationships. This should contribute to develop an ability to analyse and find answers to what Spradley and McCurdy (1972) define as “cultural scenes”, and Turner (1974) labels everyday life “social dramas”. Such an answer should be an exercise in meaning making and such meaning should be meaningful for all involved actors (McAllister, Whiteford, Hill, Thomas, & Fitzgerald, 2006). In order to explore such “possible worlds” (Sclavi, 2003) it seems necessary to implement a self-reflecting attitude involving active listening and an ability to decentralise oneself as one listen to the “other’s gaze” (Augé, 2008). This implies to make room and being ready to experience alterity within relationships as well as to conceive individuality as an evolutionary process.

This makes it relevant to work with critical incidents within multicultural contexts such as formal education contexts. Within these contexts cultural diversity is associated to a threat and a danger by a significant part of the youth population (Acquario et al. 2008). Working with critical incidents can be instrumental in facilitating the development of self-reflection (Fitzgerald, Mullaveey-O’Byrne, Clemson, & Williamson, 1996; Fitzgerald, 2001) and to address and to deconstruct cultural stereotypes. The communication misunderstanding at the core of the critical incident offers an opportunity to reflect in a critical way on the tensions that make the relationship difficult and therefore both on the

“other” as well as on one’s “own” culture. It is this potential “dis-oriented” position that offers an opportunity for a change of perspective (Glicszinski, 2007).

Based on the feed-back provided by the teachers participating in this study, we discussed with them how to identify, to draft and to use critical incidents in relation to secondary school students attitudes towards cultural diversity. The ability of individuals to deal with cultural diversity has been described and operationalised by authors such as Bennett (1993). Bennett’s Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) has been tested with German students by Hesse and Göbel (2007). Elaborated between 1986 and 1993, DMIS is not a model of attitude change or of skill acquisition. Rather, it is a model of the development of worldview. It is structured into six stages: the first three stages are labeled “ethno-centric” and the later three stages are labeled “ethno-relative”. In line with the dominant perception of the term, in Bennett’s definition, ethno-centric means that one’s own culture is experienced as central to reality in some way. In Denial (stage 1), one’s own culture is experienced as the only real one, and consideration of other cultures is avoided by maintaining psychological and/or physical isolation from differences. In Defense (stage 2), one’s own culture (or an adopted culture) is experienced as the only good one, and cultural difference is denigrated. In Minimization (stage 3), elements of one’s own cultural worldview are experienced as universal, so that despite acceptable surface differences with other cultures, deep down those cultures are seen as essentially similar to one’s own.

The second three DMIS stages, i.e. the ethno-relative stage, indicate that one’s own culture is experienced in the context of other cultures. In Acceptance (stage 4), other cultures are experienced as equally complex but different constructions of reality. In Adaptation (stage 5), one attains the ability to shift perspective in and out of another cultural worldview; thus, one’s experience potentially includes the different cultural experience of someone from another culture. In Integration (stage 6), one’s experience of self is expanded to include the movement in and out of different cultural worldviews. This stage would be difficult to detect through a critical incident exercise.

In summary the ethno-centric stages can be viewed as ways of avoiding cultural difference (by denying its existence, by raising defenses against it, or by minimizing its importance) while the ethno-relative stages are ways of seeking cultural difference (by accepting its importance, by adapting one’s perspective to take it into account, or by integrating the whole concept into a definition of one’s identity).

From an educational perspective it seems appropriate to refer to the DMIS (or similar models) more as potential intercultural strategies than as a rigid progression from one development stage to another in a linear way. Yet, the DMIS can be instrumental in referring people’s (and in our study students’) attitudes towards cultural diversity to specific worldviews. The following study aimed at understanding to what extent the combination of an intercultural competence

model such as the DMIS as reference framework and the use of qualitative tools such as critical incidents (as well as answers to questionnaires) can be instrumental in identifying students' viewpoints and competence in relation to cultural diversity. To this purpose three critical incidents focusing on cultural diversity were selected.

During the school years 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 all students from six Verona (Italy) secondary school classes were involved in responding to critical incidents. The students were confronted with the critical incidents at the beginning (November 2010, October 2011) of the school years and at the end (June 2012) of the 2012 school year in order to gather data at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the research project. 127 students participated in the first critical incident session, 102 in the second one, and 86 in the final session.

Each Critical Incident session was implemented in the following way. Students were distributed hand-outs including a short (half-a-page) description of a critical incident. They were asked to read it individually and then to answer to three open questions (on the same page, at the bottom of the critical incident description): What happened? What do the persons feel? What would you do?

After having answered the three questions, the students would find (by turning the page) five possible answers to each of the three questions. The answers reflected five different viewpoints, each of them being formulated in order to be as close as possible to the DMIS stages (except the last one, "integration", Bennett, 1993). The answers/stages were presented in a random order on the page. For each of the answers they were asked to tick (on a seven items Likert-type scale) the degree of probability of that specific answer as a plausible answer to the question (from "It seems highly likely to me" to "It seems highly unlikely to me"). This approach is not new. It was first implemented by Hesse and Göebel (2007).

## Results and Conclusion

The data provided by the students who were more consistent in their answers show that most students tend to assume a minimization position, especially in the second and in the third sessions, the two sessions that present more internal consistency. In contrast, the answers that were provided by the students during the first session reflect more ethno-relative positions –when compared to the positions indicated in the second and in the third sessions. These results are consistent with previous studies with similar age groups conducted by Mitch Hammer (2011). They offered teachers

an opportunity to deal in classroom with issues of active listening, misunderstanding and conflicts in a more complex way and to address them in explicit ways in designing and monitoring cooperative learning assignments. This ability to identify a relevant social and conceptual dimension that needs further educational consideration and to introduce it both in teacher training and in classroom activities seems quite consistent with the socio-cultural perspective that Hodkinson, Biesta, and James (2008) attach to the "becoming" metaphor as a way to conceptualise learning in way that acknowledges students and teachers as socially positioned. Therefore, the "becoming" metaphor seems to respond to Hargreaves (2001, p. 19) concern that:

'Too often y conflict in schools is seen as a problem, not an opportunity, where purposes are threatened, competence is questioned and undertones of status and power strain the fragile bonds that hold teachers together.'

The ability to provide "citizenship" to the conflict dimension within schools in Italian regions such as Emilia Romagna (where Modena is located) and Veneto (where Verona is located) seems particularly relevant as such regions are placed at the core of a widely contradictory socio-institutional scenario. While national surveys such as the one co-ordinated by National Economic and Labour Council (CNEL) attribute to the Veneto area a high (potential) for immigrant integration, its Provinces have often witnessed episodes of conflict which received a significant and often biased media coverage. There appears to be a contradiction between the processes which ensured to immigrants the provision of different levels of responses to their needs (with the peculiar contribution of a few religious bodies headed by Caritas and charities on various levels) and the symbolic background that have frequently been attributed to this area (based on concepts related to the troublesome nature of the presence of immigrants in the area and to narrow-scale, security-based and anti-welfare ideologies). What type of relationship can be identified between teachers attitudes and the degree of social integration? So far the existing literature about the multicultural dimension of Italian school presented teachers as independent variables. Teachers feed-back about cooperative learning practices that explicitly tackle cultural diversity in the classroom show that both teachers and students attitudes deserve further research in the formal education settings in order to adapt educational methodologies to the present socio-cultural challenges. Nurturing professional learning communities appears to be essential in offering teachers ways to develop, to offer mutual support, and to learn to work collaboratively.

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