

An educational workshop on sport as a tool for cultural enhancement in Italian lower secondary schools

Giovanna Scala*, Fabiola Palmiero, Maria Giovanna Tafuri, Davide Di Palma, Generoso Romano

University of Naples “Parthenope”, Italy.

* Correspondence: Giovanna Scala; scala.nina001@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This experimental study aimed to examine the effectiveness of a cricket-based sports workshop designed to promote the educational and cultural inclusion of students of Sri Lankan origin in an Italian lower secondary school. The study involved 60 students (aged 12–13 years) enrolled in two second-year classes of a public lower secondary school in Emilia-Romagna, equally divided into an experimental group (n = 30) and a control group (n = 30). Each group included 15 students of Sri Lankan origin and 15 Italian or other students, ensuring balanced cultural composition. The experimental group participated in a six-week intercultural sports workshop based on cricket (12 sessions, 18 hours total), while the control group followed the regular physical education curriculum without specific intercultural content. A mixed-methods approach (quantitative and qualitative) was adopted, combining standardised questionnaires assessing school belonging, ethnic identity and peer relationships with semi-structured interviews and systematic observations. The results indicate significant improvements in the experimental group ($p < 0.05$) in terms of sense of belonging to the school, perception of cultural identity, and quality of peer relationships, whereas no significant changes were observed in the control group ($p > 0.05$). Overall, the findings suggest that integrating culturally meaningful sports activities into school-based educational programmes can be an effective strategy for fostering social cohesion, intercultural dialogue and inclusive school climates, benefiting both students from migrant backgrounds and the wider school community.

KEYWORDS

School; Cricket; Cultural Inclusion; Educational Workshop; Sport

1. INTRODUCTION

Intercultural education is now an educational necessity and a real epistemological and political challenge for the Italian school system. It must respond to the growing cultural diversity of its students with new, informed tools. According to ISTAT data (2023), there are over 800,000 non-Italian students in Italian schools, forming a permanent part of the school population. The Sri Lankan community is among the most represented migrant communities and stands out for its significant presence, especially in some regions of central and northern Italy, where stable multicultural coexistence has developed. In this complex scenario, school inclusion can no longer be interpreted exclusively as formal access to education, but must be understood as full, active and valued participation in school life in all its dimensions: educational, relational, emotional and cultural. This perspective is supported by international scientific literature, according to which authentic inclusion is only achieved when students, regardless of their origin, feel respected, listened to and recognised in their own identity (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Nussbaum, 2012). Many scholars (e.g. Banks, 2015; Gay, 2018) emphasise that school practices must be culturally responsible, i.e. capable of integrating and valuing the experiences, languages, and knowledge of pupils from cultural minorities. The culture of origin of pupils should never be perceived as an obstacle to learning, but rather as a valuable resource for creating richer, more equitable and inclusive learning environments.

In this context, sport is a particularly important area for developing inclusive practices, as it provides an informal, cooperative, non-verbal and participatory environment. According to Bailey et al. (2013), physical and sporting activities can promote social skills such as cooperation, respect, conflict management and empathy. This contributes to strengthening the sense of belonging and building positive peer relationships. Donnelly and Coakley (2021) also emphasise that sport can play a role in establishing rituals and forming identities, which can be beneficial for young migrants who are renegotiating their identity and building a symbolic bridge between their culture of origin and their host culture.

The choice of cricket as a didactic and symbolic tool for educational purposes fits into this theoretical context. Considered the national sport in Sri Lanka, cricket is more than just a physical activity; it is also a cultural symbol with emotional, historical and collective significance. As Perera (2010) and Seneviratne (2018) have observed, cricket is a common language transcending class and ethnicity in Sri Lanka, celebrated nationally as a symbol of unity and pride. Introducing it into Italian schools is therefore a powerful pedagogical gesture capable of overturning the usual patterns of symbolic marginalisation. Rather than asking students of foreign origin to adapt solely to the Italian

context, this approach offers them a space for recognition and an opportunity to take centre stage by sharing their culture with the school community. In line with these premises, this study has two main objectives: 1. To explore the impact of a cricket-based sports workshop on the educational inclusion of students of Sri Lankan origin, observing any changes in their sense of belonging, cultural identity and perceived well-being; 2. To verify the effectiveness of the intervention in promoting intercultural relations among peers by investigating the presence of collaboration, mutual respect and cohesion dynamics within the class group.

2. METHODS

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This experimental study employed a mixed qualitative-quantitative design, which is considered the most appropriate approach for investigating complex educational phenomena involving subjective and experiential elements alongside measurable variables (Creswell, 2014).

This study involved 60 students enrolled in two second-year classes at a lower secondary school in Emilia-Romagna. The participants were divided into two groups of an equal size with balanced cultural backgrounds. The inclusion criteria for access to the study were as follows: 1. regular attendance in the second year of middle school; 2. no previous repetitions of the same class; 3. belonging to families of Sri Lankan or Italian origin (or from other cultural contexts with similar socio-cultural characteristics); 4. Participants could not have had any previous experience of structured cricket training, either in or outside school.

Participants were divided into two groups of equal size with balanced cultural backgrounds: Experimental group (n = 30): 15 students of Sri Lankan origin and 15 Italian or other students, and control group (n = 30): 15 students of Sri Lankan origin and 15 Italian or other ethnic origin students.

2.2. Measuring Tools

We used scientifically validated tools with proven psychometric reliability to collect quantitative and qualitative data. This methodology was chosen to ensure a rigorous, integrated approach capable of capturing the objective and subjective aspects of participants' experiences of school and intercultural learning.

2.2.1. Quantitative tools

School Belonging Scale (Goodenow, 1993)

This scale measures students' subjective perception of their sense of belonging to the school community. It specifically assesses dimensions such as acceptance, inclusion, respect, relational security and connection to the school environment. It is a widely used educational tool for assessing school well-being and the degree of student integration, particularly in multicultural or at-risk contexts (Goodenow, 1993).

Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure – Revised (MEIM-R) (Roberts et al., 1999)

This psychometric tool was developed to investigate the extent to which individuals explore and commit to their ethnic identity. The two main dimensions (exploration and commitment) are fundamental to understanding how students construct their cultural identity in multicultural contexts. The scale has been validated in multiple ethnic contexts and is considered reliable with adolescents too (Roberts, R. E. et al., 1999).

Peer Relationship Questionnaire (Rigby & Slee, 1993)

This tool measures the quality of peer relationships, focusing on empathy, collaboration, support, conflict management and perceptions of exclusion or inclusion. It is widely used to assess the relational climate in schools and in educational programmes aimed at promoting relational well-being (Rigby & Slee, 1993).

2.2.2. Qualitative Tools

Semi-structured Interviews

These were conducted with twelve students (six from the experimental group and six from the control group), two teachers and a cultural mediator.

Structured observations

These were carried out during the 12 cricket workshops and followed a coded grid (adapted from Bortolotti & Sorzio, 2014). This grid focused on aspects such as active participation, collaboration, respect for shared rules, leadership roles, conflict management strategies and openness towards peers from different cultural backgrounds. This tool enabled us to systematically identify emerging inclusive behaviours and triangulate the results with those obtained from the interviews and tests (Bortolotti & Sorzio, 2014). Observing in school: Carocci).

Qualitative data, derived from interviews and observations, was managed and coded using NVivo 14 software. This software facilitated the structuring of the text database, the systematic application of codes, and the production of cross-queries, all of which supported thematic analysis.

2.3. Teaching Activities

The educational intervention was divided into two distinct paths for the experimental and control groups, with the aim of rigorously assessing the impact of the cricket workshop on intercultural inclusion and peer relations.

The educational intervention for the experimental group took the form of an intercultural sports workshop based on cricket, designed to promote inclusion, enhance cultural identities and improve peer relationships. Consisting of 12 90-minute sessions totalling 18 hours, the workshop took place after school over a period of six weeks. It followed an integrated approach (Canevaro, 2006), combining cognitive, motor, emotional-relational and reflective components. It was inspired by the principles of intercultural education (Portera, 2013; Gobbo, 2015) and inclusive pedagogy (D'Alonzo, 2020).

Phase 1 – Cultural and identity approach

During the first two meetings, the first phase was carried out. This phase was dedicated to creating a welcoming atmosphere and recognising the cultural diversity present in the class. Students explored cricket as not only a sport, but also a cultural, social and symbolic phenomenon. This involved watching documentaries such as *The Story of Sri Lankan Cricket* to introduce the cultural value of sport, creating individual cultural maps depicting their connection to their culture of origin (e.g. flags, sports, food and holidays), and sharing autobiographical stories about significant sporting experiences in their lives. Through these activities, the pupils reflected on their cultural roots and personal experiences related to sport and their community.

A central element of this phase was the involvement of students of Sri Lankan origin, who acted as 'cultural ambassadors', sharing stories about their families and communities' experiences with cricket, explaining the basic rules of the game and demonstrating how to hold the bat and throw the ball. This approach has fostered mutual recognition and cultural agency by valuing the skills and narratives of students from migrant backgrounds (Banks, 2006; Nieto, 2010). Activities concluded with circle time and collective brainstorming sessions, stimulating reflection on key words such as respect, cooperation, rules, and identity. These strategies were effective in deconstructing stereotypes and initiating authentic intercultural dialogue (Gorski, 2009; Abu El-Haj, 2015).

Phase 2 – Physical activity and cooperation

The central phase of the workshop, from weeks three to ten, had a strong experiential and cooperative focus. Students took part in progressive motor activities designed to teach them the technical fundamentals of cricket, such as using bats and balls, batting, throwing and fielding drills. The pair and small group exercises were structured to promote collaboration and continuous role-swapping, thereby stimulating empathy and active listening.

Teams were composed of a mix of genders, motor skills and cultural backgrounds according to the principle of positive interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), which is essential for developing interpersonal skills and authentic forms of cooperation (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006). The federal instructor and teachers acted as facilitators, providing constructive feedback on both technical skills and group dynamics, and promoting relational coaching.

At this stage, sporting activity took on a strong educational value, in line with the perspective of sport as a tool for social inclusion and the development of life skills (UNESCO, 2015; Duda, 2013; Bailey et al., 2009). Activities:

- Technical stations exercises:
 - Station 1: Throwing the ball in a straight line (with a target).
 - Station 2: safe batting with a focus on correct wrist movement.
 - Station 3: 'Catch' exercises in pairs.
- A cooperative game called 'Cricket Relay': a relay race in which each player must complete a technical action (e.g. running, throwing or batting) and pass the baton, working as a team.
- Intercultural mini-matches involved mixed teams of Italian and Sri Lankan students. Roles rotated every 10 minutes (e.g. from batter to defender) to promote interdependence.

Phase 3 – Reflection, narration and metacognition

The final phase, which was developed during the last two meetings, mainly focused on revisiting the experience through narrative and reflective tools. During the concluding circle sessions, the students had the opportunity to share their emotions, what they had learnt and the difficulties they had encountered, in an atmosphere of empathetic listening facilitated by a teacher and a cultural mediator.

A significant portion of the time was dedicated to creating a collective logbook, a participatory document comprising drawings, meaningful phrases, keywords and written reflections. Each student also wrote a short letter to themselves, reflecting on how they related to others and their

personal growth journey. Such metacognitive activities are essential for consolidating learning, developing emotional awareness, and encouraging critical reflection (Costa & Kallick, 2000; Mezirow, 2003).

The final plenary presentation, which was open to other teachers and school management, offered an opportunity to share and was also a symbolic recognition of the programme's value.

Consistent with an inclusive and intercultural pedagogy, these activities made the workshop a transformative experience, impacting not only the physical aspect, but also the relational and symbolic aspects. The centrality of sport as a universal language, combined with storytelling and guided reflection, enabled differences to be recognised as an educational resource.

2.3.1. Control Group Activities

The control group followed the normal physical education activities provided for in the curriculum, without participating in the cricket workshop or activities specifically aimed at intercultural inclusion. Over the same six-week period, the students carried out the following activities:

- General physical activities (two hours per week, totalling 12 hours): Lessons included warm-up exercises, team games such as five-a-side football and volleyball, and ball toss activities, as well as coordination courses and activities aimed at developing basic motor and conditioning skills. Teams were organised randomly, with no particular attention paid to the intercultural composition of the groups.
- Absence of cultural mediation or guided reflection. Unlike the experimental group, there were no structured moments of metacognitive reflection or activities aimed at promoting intercultural dialogue. Teachers maintained a traditional teaching approach focused on developing motor skills without making any specific references to issues of identity or citizenship.

The control group was used as a reference point to evaluate the specific impact of the cricket workshop on variables such as sense of belonging to the school, ethnic identity, and quality of peer relationships through comparative analysis.

The control group followed an educational programme focused exclusively on physical activities included in the regular curriculum. This programme did not include intercultural content, cultural mediation or structured reflection sessions. This programme was developed over the same timeframe as the experimental group programme (six weeks), comprising 12 hours in total, divided

into two weekly sessions of 60 minutes each. This approach was based on the traditional perspective of physical education, focusing on developing motor, conditioning and coordination skills as required by the National Curriculum Guidelines (MIUR, 2012).

Phase 1 – Preparatory activities and general warm-up

During the first two sessions, the focus was on general motor activation and consolidating basic physical abilities such as strength, endurance, speed and flexibility. The exercises included:

- Aerobic warm-up (slow running, skipping and various gaits);
- stretching and joint mobility exercises;
- Simple motor games (e.g. tag and capture the flag) were played for recreational and coordination purposes.

Inspired by the principles of physical education as a means of achieving psychological and physical well-being, as well as harmonious body development (Cratty, 1989; Gabbard, 2004), these activities emphasised progressive exercises adapted to the class's average level. The approach was primarily functionalist, focusing on enhancing individual physical efficiency in accordance with a performance-based perspective of the discipline (Bailey et al., 2009).

Phase 2 – Team sports and technical skill development

From the third to the tenth meeting, the focus was on traditional school sports. Activities included:

- Five-a-side football: individual technical exercises (dribbling, passing and shooting) and team matches organised as an internal tournament;
- Volleyball: learning the basics (serving, bumping and passing), pair exercises and simplified games (e.g. 'bounce ball').
- Motor coordination courses: a series of stations with obstacles, hoops, skittles and cones to improve balance, rhythm, dexterity and reaction speed.
- Mini relay races: carried out in a competitive format to promote agility and speed.

All activities were inspired by motor learning theories (Schmidt & Wrisberg, 2008) and involved practical exercises aimed at improving technical skills and consolidating basic motor patterns. The teams were organised randomly or on a voluntary basis, reflecting a traditional pedagogical model (Curtner-Smith, 1999), with no explicit intention to promote inclusion or intercultural cooperation.

Phase 3 – Motor assessment and final activity

During the last two meetings, the focus was on summatively assessing the motor skills acquired. Physical education teachers administered standardised practical tests to assess the following:

- the ability to perform complex motor sequences (e.g. timed courses);
- accuracy in sports fundamentals;
- behaviour during play, such as respect for the rules and fair play.

These assessments were conducted according to classic observational criteria consistent with traditional assessment models in school PE (Ardizzone, 2008) and did not involve the use of metacognitive or reflective tools. The final lesson concluded with a brief team game and an informal discussion about the progress of the activities. However, there was no real narrative reflection or experiential self-assessment (Costa & Kallick, 2000).

Unlike the experimental group, the control group did not benefit from any cultural mediation or educational strategies aimed at promoting cultural diversity or intercultural dialogue. The teaching content remained neutral and standardised, with a predominant focus on the technical and performance aspects of physical education.

The decision to maintain a traditional approach was instrumental in establishing a neutral benchmark for evaluating the specific impact of the cricket workshop on improving interpersonal relationships, sense of belonging and inclusion of students with a migrant background (Banks, 2006; D'Alonzo, 2020).

2.4. Statistical Analysis

Quantitative data analysis was carried out using paired sample t-tests (for pre-post comparisons within groups) and analysis of variance (ANOVA) (for comparisons between the experimental and control groups). Statistical processing was carried out using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Quantitative Results

Table 1 presents the pre-test and post-test School Belonging Scale scores for the experimental and control groups.

Table 1. Changes in school belonging scale scores from pre-test to post-test by group

Study Group	Pre-test (Mean \pm SD)	Post-test (Mean \pm SD)	Δ	<i>p</i> (within- group)	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Experimental Group	3.20 \pm 0.50	3.80 \pm 0.40	+0.60	< .001	1.08
Control Group	3.18 \pm 0.50	3.20 \pm 0.50	+0.02	.67	0.08

The experimental group showed a statistically significant improvement in school belonging, with mean scores increasing from 3.20 (SD = 0.50) at pre-test to 3.80 (SD = 0.40) at post-test ($\Delta = +0.60$; $t(29) = 5.91$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.08$), indicating a large effect. In contrast, the control group showed no significant change (pre = 3.18 \pm 0.50; post = 3.20 \pm 0.50; $t(29) = 0.43$, $p = .67$), suggesting stable levels of belonging in the absence of the targeted workshop.

The two-way ANOVA confirmed a significant Time \times Condition interaction for school belonging ($F(1,58) = 23.41$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .29$), indicating that changes over time differed significantly between groups.

Table 2 presents the pre-test and post-test scores for the commitment dimension of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure–Revised (MEIM-R), while table 3 shows the pre-test and post-test scores for the exploration dimension of the MEIM-R.

Table 2. Changes in MEIM-R commitment scores from pre-test to post-test by group

Group	Pre-test (Mean \pm SD)	Post-test (Mean \pm SD)	Δ	Δ %	<i>p</i> (within- group)	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Experimental Group	2.90 \pm 0.60	3.50 \pm 0.50	+0.60	+21%	< .001	1.12
Control Group	2.92 \pm 0.60	2.95 \pm 0.60	+0.03	+1%	.62	0.05

Table 3. Changes in MEIM-R exploration scores from pre-test to post-test by group

Group	Pre-test (Mean \pm SD)	Post-test (Mean \pm SD)	Δ	Δ %	<i>p</i> (within- group)	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Experimental Group	2.95 \pm 0.60	3.45 \pm 0.60	+0.50	+17%	< .01	0.88
Control Group	2.96 \pm 0.60	2.98 \pm 0.60	+0.02	+1%	.71	0.03

For the experimental group, both ethnic identity dimensions improved significantly. The commitment subscale increased from 2.90 (SD = 0.60) to 3.50 (SD = 0.50) ($\Delta = +0.60$, approximately +21%; $t(29) = 6.14$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.12$, large effect). The exploration subscale rose from 2.95 (SD = 0.60) to 3.45 (SD = 0.60) ($\Delta = +0.50$, approximately +17%; $t(29) = 4.82$, $p < .01$, d

= 0.88, large-to-moderate effect). The control group showed no significant pre–post differences for either dimension ($p > .10$).

Table 4 summarizes the results of the two-way ANOVA examining the interaction between time (pre-test vs. post-test) and condition (experimental vs. control group) across the study outcomes.

Table 4. Summary of two-way ANOVA results for the Time \times Condition interaction effects

Dependent Variable	F(1, 58)	p-value	η^2p
School Belonging	23.41	< .001	.29
Ethnic Identity – Commitment	25.80	< .001	.31
Ethnic Identity – Exploration	18.52	< .001	.25
Peer Relationship (total)	21.70	< .001	.27

Two-way ANOVA results further supported the effectiveness of the intervention, revealing significant Time \times Condition interactions for both commitment ($F(1,58) = 25.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .31$) and exploration ($F(1,58) = 18.52$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .25$), reflecting medium-to-large effects.

The ANOVA analysis confirmed the significant effect of the Time \times Condition interaction on all variables:

- School Belonging: $F(1, 58) = 23.41$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2p = 0.29$
- Ethnic Identity - Commitment: $F(1, 58) = 25.80$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2p = 0.31$
- Ethnic Identity - Exploration: $F(1, 58) = 18.52$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2p = 0.25$
- Peer Relationship (total): $F(1, 58) = 21.70$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2p = 0.27$

The partial chi-square values (η^2p) confirm that the effects of the intervention are medium to high, according to the parameters suggested by Cohen (1988). This implies that a significant portion of the variance observed in the post-test scores is attributable to the specific educational intervention.

A further exploratory analysis examined the differences in effectiveness of the workshop for students of Sri Lankan origin compared to Italian or other students.

In the experimental group Sri Lankan students demonstrated greater improvements in MEIM-R ($\Delta = +0.70$) than non-Sri Lankan students ($\Delta = +0.40$), thus corroborating the hypothesis that culturally significant sports activities facilitate the recognition of identity and the development of a sense of agency. Italian students demonstrated significant improvements in peer relationships ($\Delta = +0.40$), indicating an increased willingness to engage in intercultural cooperation and empathy towards their peers. This suggests that the intervention supported the empowerment of migrant students and promoted active intercultural citizenship among their Italian peers.

Correlation analysis (Pearson) of post-test scores in the experimental group revealed positive associations between the variables:

- School belonging and peer support ($r = 0.64$, $p < 0.001$).
- Ethnic identity (commitment) and school belonging: $r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$.
- Peer support and commitment: $r = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$.

These results corroborate the arguments put forward in previous studies (Goodenow, 1993; Rigby & Slee, 1993) that strengthening one's cultural identity can positively impact one's perception of acceptance and support within a school setting, creating a virtuous cycle of belonging and relational well-being.

3.2. Qualitative Results

With the support of NVivo 14, the thematic analysis allowed the 12 transcribed interviews and observation notes to be systematically organised, revealing four macro-themes related to sense of belonging, redefinition of peer relationships and personal and academic empowerment.

Rediscovery of cultural identity

The Sri Lankan students saw the workshop as a unique opportunity to tell their stories and gain recognition. Cricket served as a device for autobiographical expression, bringing their biographical experiences, which are often marginalised in school narratives, back to the centre. As one student said, “Finally, I was able to share something about myself that I know well. It was as if I were the teacher for a day”. This dynamic aligns with the concept of 'narrative identity' (Bruner, 1990), whereby the capacity to recount one's personal narrative in public settings fosters the development of a socially recognised identity.

Increased visibility and legitimacy

The workshop served as a symbolic act of recognition (Honneth, 1995), restoring visibility and value to a sporting culture that is usually overlooked. Many students perceived the introduction of cricket in an Italian school context as a form of institutional legitimisation: “We usually play football or volleyball. This time, however, it was our sport, and the others had to learn it from scratch too”. This recognition helped break down the dynamics of marginalisation, establishing a new symbolic balance within the group.

Redefining peer relationships

As predicted by cooperative learning models (Johnson & Johnson, 1999), observations documented a progressive transformation in interpersonal relationships, characterised by greater positive interdependence. Students began to value one another, develop symmetrical relationships, and hone their empathic skills. The emergence of authentic collaborative dynamics contributed to the democratisation of peer relationships and facilitated class cohesion.

Personal and academic empowerment

Many students viewed the workshop as an opportunity to develop transferable skills and enhance their sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Taking on an active role allowed the Sri Lankan students to strengthen their self-confidence, which had a positive impact in other school contexts as well. As one teacher observed: “Some of the children have gained a confidence they had never shown before. They are more involved, even in maths and Italian”. The cultural mediator added, ‘The strongest effect has been on the way they see themselves. Now they feel part of the group, and that changes everything’.

The qualitative corpus also revealed recurring reflections on the importance of the school as a place for intercultural dialogue. The possibility of ‘hybridising’ body language, play and culture has generated a form of relational learning that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries. In this sense, the experience can be seen as an example of ‘situated pedagogy’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991), in which the context itself becomes an agent of change.

Overall, the qualitative results reinforce the quantitative evidence, adding complexity, depth and meaning to the impact of the intervention. The cricket workshop provided an opportunity to develop new identities, form relationships and establish a sense of shared belonging.

4. DISCUSSION

The results of the study confirm the initial hypothesis that sport, when designed with attention to symbolic and identity dimensions, can become a powerful pedagogical tool for promoting school inclusion in multicultural contexts. A similar example of using sport as an educational tool in inclusive contexts is provided by the project described by Morsanuto et al. (2023), in which adapted and outdoor motor activities showed positive effects in children with autism spectrum disorder, improving cognitive, social, and relational skills in line with the goals of the 2030 Agenda. Likewise, Tafuri et al. (2025) demonstrated how Baskin—a sport designed for the inclusion of students with

and without disabilities—contributed to the development of inclusive dynamics in a secondary school setting, promoting empathy, cooperation, and a sense of community among participants. The cricket workshop experience in particular demonstrated how integrating culturally significant physical activities through cooperative and reflective approaches can produce significant transformations in minority individuals and the entire educational ecosystem.

One of the first elements to emerge is the importance of symbolic recognition as a pedagogical tool. The choice of cricket, Sri Lanka's national sport, enabled Sri Lankan students to embrace their cultural identity, challenging the assimilationist logic that typically renders minority groups invisible or marginalises them (Taylor, 1992; Honneth, 1995). This recognition triggered empowerment dynamics, transforming students from passive recipients of integration into active subjects who are bearers of knowledge and significant memories. Adopting 'cultural ambassador' roles has fostered positive identity investment and contributed to redefining hierarchical relationships within the class (Cummins, 2000), enabling authentic negotiation of educational power. Secondly, the workshop activated the positive interdependence mechanisms envisaged by cooperative learning models (Johnson & Johnson, 1999), creating contexts that encouraged intercultural collaboration. The sports activities were structured to encourage role rotation, group heterogeneity, and the mutual exchange of technical and cultural knowledge. These configurations enabled the creation of horizontal relationships, where differences were transformed into group resources, according to a mutual learning paradigm (Portera, 2021). This outcome aligns with literature emphasising sport as a setting for 'situated education' (Lave & Wenger, 1991), where relational competencies evolve from the context rather than being imparted in a directive manner.

Another notable outcome was the transformative effect of the workshop on not only minority individuals, but also the entire educational community. Italian students and students from other backgrounds demonstrated significant increases in empathy, cultural curiosity, and willingness to cooperate. These results corroborate the theories of Gay (2018); Banks (2015), which posit that culturally responsible educational practices benefit the entire school community by promoting cognitive and relational pluralism, not just migrant students.

The experience acted as a context for widespread intercultural learning, contributing to the development of an 'implicit curriculum' founded on respect, reciprocity, and the acknowledgement of differences (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). The reflective element of the workshop was crucial in consolidating learning processes and developing critical and reflective thinking. Using narrative tools such as the collective logbook and autobiographical letters facilitated the emergence of metacognitive

dimensions related to identity, relationships with others, and self-perception within the school environment. According to Schön (1983) and Mezirow (2003), such reflective practices activate transformative learning that can change not only individual perceptions, but also the group's shared understanding. The circle time moments also allowed for a collective reworking of the experience, strengthening community bonds and shaping a shared narrative of inclusion.

From a methodological point of view, the mixed-comparative approach made it possible to systematically capture the effects of the intervention, through both the measurement of psychological and relational variables (quantitative) and the interpretative analysis of observed narratives and behaviours (qualitative). This approach has solidified the results by offering triangulated data that strengthens the study's internal validity (Creswell, 2014). Using validated tools such as the School Belonging Scale and the Peer Relationship Questionnaire ensured reliable measurement of school well-being and relationship quality. Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews and participant observations captured the emotional, symbolic, and contextual nuances of the experience.

5. LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

However, the structural limitations of the intervention must also be considered. Its success was facilitated by favourable, albeit difficult to generalise, conditions: the presence of a motivated and trained teacher; a stable cultural mediator; the support of the school management; and the availability of a federal instructor. In school contexts lacking these resources, the model may be difficult to replicate. Furthermore, the short duration of the workshop (six weeks) does not permit a reliable assessment of its long-term effects. Future longitudinal studies are therefore necessary to analyse the retention of learning and the sustainability of relational transformations over time.

In practical terms, the workshop can be transferred to different school settings provided it is adapted to the cultural specifics of the groups involved. The intercultural approach applied to cricket can be replicated in other sports or expressive activities, such as music, theatre and dance, provided the principle of cultural centrality for minority students is maintained. A recent study by Fogliata et al. (2025) highlights how the implementation of instructional strategies aimed at improving motor performance in female youth athletes can also foster inclusion and engagement, confirming the educational potential of structured sports interventions across diverse school populations. It is essential that the teaching design incorporates spaces for pupils to exercise agency, opportunities for guided reflection and strategies for co-constructing relational rules. Furthermore, valuing physicality

as an inclusive language is an effective approach in contexts where language barriers can hinder verbal communication.

From a theoretical point of view, the cricket workshop experience contributes to the pedagogical debate on intercultural education by proposing a non-assimilationist and dialogical vision of inclusion. Rather than considering difference as a 'problem' to be overcome, the programme has emphasised how diversity can enrich educational contexts and promote pluralistic and participatory school citizenship. In this sense, the workshop embodies a model of intercultural citizenship education in line with documents from UNESCO (2021) and the Council of Europe (2016), which promote the idea of teaching as the joint creation of values, meanings, and relationships.

The experience suggests some strategic directions for innovation in the school system:

- Training teachers on intercultural issues, educational mediation and inclusion through sport.
- Systematically integrating intercultural extracurricular activities into the Three-Year Educational Plan (PTOF) and promoting them as part of the implicit curriculum.
- Collaborating with migrant communities and local sports or cultural associations to encourage co-design of activities.
- Participatory evaluation of the courses, involving students, families, mediators and operators, to monitor impact and guide future practices.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The cricket workshop proved to be a powerful educational mediation tool in a multicultural context, capable of producing significant cognitive, emotional, and relational effects. The quantitative and qualitative results converge in suggesting that a culturally connoted sporting activity can act as a lever for inclusion, promoting both the empowerment of students with a migrant background and the school's ability to restructure its representations of otherness.

In pedagogical terms, this experience provides valuable insights for reformulating the curriculum with an intercultural focus. This approach goes beyond merely integrating marginal content, taking the principle of cultural pluralism as central (Banks, 2015). In this case, cricket has served as a symbol of recognition and fostered relationships, but this model could be replicated using other sports, as well as artistic and narrative practices, which draw on students' cultures of origin.

However, these projects must be supported by inclusive school policies and structural investments, such as teacher training, the presence of mediators, spaces for co-design and networks

between schools and associations. Only in this way will it be possible to move from isolated experiences to systemic strategies for inclusion.

Ultimately, the workshop functioned as an educational micro-utopia: a safe space in which to experiment with new ways of coming together, acknowledging each other, collaborating, and learning in a spirit of reciprocity. It is in such spaces that schools can begin to realise their inclusive and democratic mission, however small they may be.

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