

CLUES TO THE WIND'S DIRECTION: SAILING ON TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT CULTURAL DIVERSITY. RESULTS FROM SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS IN THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

This article analyses the results of semi-structured interviews conducted with 45 Italian in-service primary school teachers. Starting from a problem frame that highlights how important and necessary it is to work with teachers, this qualitative study focuses on determining what the teachers' beliefs on cultural diversity were and how their beliefs about diversity influences their planning and their practices. The data shows a gap between the theoretical achievements and policy documents of intercultural education confronted with teachers' beliefs and practices.

Keywords

teachers' beliefs, cultural diversity, intercultural education

Introduction

Culturally diverse schools have become a reality in Europe (OECD, 2010, 2015). This circumstance, though not at all new, looks particularly complex due to its divergent and continuously mutating nature. Furthermore, it demands that formal education enhance sensitivity and competence on cultural diversity in order to promote inclusion, well-being, widespread school effectiveness, and achievement (Alleman-Ghionda, 2009). Teachers play a crucial role in increasing schools' understanding of both requests and occasions related to diverse contexts. In fact, globalization, migration, and mobility affect educational systems and schools. These effects can be considered as both challenges and opportunities to the extent that they can "lead teachers to re-consider their everyday practices and strategies to meet the learning needs of ... pupils" (European Commission & PPMI, 2017, p. 12). According to the European Council, it is fundamental to empower teachers in order to permit "children and young people to acquire social, civic and intercultural competences, by promoting democratic values and fundamental rights, social inclusion and non-discrimination, as well as active citizenship" (European Commission, 2016, p. 3).

Considering the cultural aspect a variable acting in social, political, and educational issues (Abdallah-Preteceille, 2013), intercultural education is compelling, especially when it is understood not as a means to assimilate culturally different people. In this paper, we understand intercultural education as a practice that enables everyone to understand and respect differences in a dynamic process that expects reciprocity (Fiorucci & Catarci, 2015). In this light, cultural diversity, identity, and culture are vibrant aspects in a continuous transformation, not fixed and static phenomena, and occasions for dialogue and mutual development (Portera & Grant, 2017). According to the OECD (2010, 2015), there is a lack of research on how teachers relate to diversity and their needs in terms of training in this field.

Moreover, the European Parliamentary Research Service (2016) and the OECD (2015) have highlighted that teachers perceive themselves as underprepared to teach culturally diverse pupils. Research has revealed that initial teacher education, competences, experiences, and also prejudices and preconceptions are crucial for teachers' work (European Commission & PPMI, 2017). Studies on teachers' beliefs about cultural diversity show important gaps in the domain of knowledge (Gay, 2015), and, according to Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson (2015), teachers' beliefs highly influence their agency.

Starting from a problem frame that highlights how important and necessary it is to work with teachers, this qualitative study aims to determine what teachers' beliefs on diversity were and how their beliefs about diversity influenced their planning and their practices.

Contextualization: Crucial concepts

Some references may be relevant for determining the grounds upon which such research is based. According to Freire (2002), concreteness and a close, vital relationship with reality are needed; through listening to and fostering knowledge, education must be the interpreter of reality so that the authentic values inherent in the person can be saved and promoted. Moreover, Lorenzo Milani (1996) stood for academic success for all pupils, regardless of their starting conditions; they are actors who need to become aware of and commit to fostering an active and responsible role. Therefore, the aim is to empower everyone's participation and civic rights: in this way, education corresponds to democracy in action. These points are still relevant in contemporary times when not only diversity is a matter of social differences but the cultural aspect plays a prominent role in everyday life. In theory, the consideration of cultural diversity as linked to ethnic, folklore, or, worse, neocolonial issues is superficial and completely outdated (Aime, 2004; Lorcherie, 2004). As argued by Boros (2014), from a theoretical point of view the concept of culture has been overcome; for instance, Hannerz (2001) discussed cultures as a plural concept, an integrated set of ideas of thought that are transmitted from generation to generation. For that, culture should be seen as a dynamic topic: "As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations" (UNESCO, 2001, p. 13).

Contextualization: Understandings of intercultural education in Italy

Italian scholars currently define intercultural education as a pedagogical project inherent to the multicultural environment (Agostinetto, 2016). In this paper, interculturality and multiculturalism are not at all synonyms and, for that reason, cannot be thought as interchangeable concepts or words. While society or a situation can be considered multicultural, i.e., when different backgrounds and cultures live together, education defined as intercultural is oriented to four main purposes: human rights (Macinai, 2015), social justice (Tarozzi, 2015), decentralization (Fiorucci & Catarci, 2015), and dialogue and mediation (De Luigi, 2015).

Intercultural education should be directed towards decentralization in order to go beyond ethnocentric orientations, the mere acceptance or tolerant adaptation of differences (Bennett, 1993; Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Fiorucci & Catarci, 2015), to move towards an ethnorelative vision. More specifically,

it should aim at an internalization of the laterality of cultural visions. This can be achieved by focusing on dialogue and mediation, both intentional acts that make it possible to explain and highlight the links between apparently distant people, through incessant negotiations of meanings (Tarozzi, 2005).

In addition to academic studies, during the past 10 years, Italian educational institutions have edited many documents and made recommendations regarding intercultural issues, such as *The Italian way for the intercultural school and integration of foreign students* (MIP, 2007) and *Guidelines for the reception and integration of foreign students* (MIP, 2006; MIUR, 2014). The first document highlights that the Italian school system understands that intercultural education is a strategy not only for migrants but also to involve diversity, such as social, economic, environmental, and capability differences. As Fiorucci and Catarci (2015) stated, this is a very advanced and still relevant document. In its first part, the document outlines the essential principles of universalism, the centrality of the person in relation to others, interculturality, and the common school. Contrary to what occurs in other European countries, and in continuity with previous choices made by Italian policies for the reception of various forms of diversity,¹ *The Italian way* (MIP, 2007) includes non-Italian pupils and newly arrived children within traditional classrooms, avoiding the construction of separate learning classrooms. This is the tangible application of the principle of universalism; moreover, the acknowledgement of a positive value for peer socialization and daily confrontation with diversity is at the basis of these claims.

In the second part, the policy document recognizes 10 actions that affect everyone at school, from the staff to the students. According to Fiorucci and Catarci (2015), these proposals can be allocated into three main areas:

Action for integration – 1. practices of reception and insertion into the school; 2. Italian as a second language; 3. enhancement of multilingualism; 4. relations with foreign families and orientation.

Action for intercultural interaction – 5. relations at school and in out of school time; 6. interventions on discrimination and prejudice; 7. intercultural perspective in knowledge and skills.

Actors and resources – 8. autonomy and networks among educational institutions, civil society and territory; 9. the role of school directors; 10. the role of teachers and non-teaching staff. (pp. 122–123)

¹ A reference can be made here, for example, to pupils with disabilities: Law 118/1971 (1971) started the inclusion process, and in fact all children are educated in common classes. Moreover, Law 517/1977 (1977) abrogated special schools.

The *National pre-primary and primary school curricula* (MIUR, 2012) confirmed, once again, that the Italian school system has chosen intercultural education as a national strategy.

In light of this, it is necessary also to emphasize that in Italy, Presidential Decree no. 275 of 8 March 1999 (MIP, 1999) introduced the autonomy of schools, meaning that the Ministry of Education establishes the general national guidelines and the basic pre-primary and primary curricula but each school is independent in its administration and organization. Thanks to this autonomy, schools are allowed to define their own academic plans. Thus, commitments and actions about intercultural education depend on the choices made and the sensitivity to these issues by each school's staff. This implies a mosaic made up of many distinct levels of involvement and is often tied to the presence of non-Italian pupils.

According to Allemann-Ghionda (2003, p. 44), "discussions about school policies only exceptionally become adequate school practices. School systems resist changes". In Italy, diversity and plurality have become the model, in theory. However, does this represent the reality? Are these documents really detectable in teachers' activities? What parts of the contents of these documents actually affect Italian schools and how? How many of these provisions are translated into teachers' reflections and awareness about their fundamental role in the growth of tomorrow's citizens? What occurs in this translation?

These are some of the questions that led to this study.

Methodology and methods

This study's aim was to examine in detail the relationship among theory, beliefs, and teaching activities on diversity considering the recursive correlation between theory and practice in education as fundamental (Agostinetto & Bugno, in press). In particular, a qualitative approach was adopted in order to provide "an in-depth, intricate and detailed understanding of meanings, actions, non-observable as well as observable phenomena, attitudes, intentions and behaviours" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018, p. 288); such an approach moreover "gives voices to participants and it probes issues that lie beneath the surface of presenting behaviours and actions" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018, p. 288). Particular attention was given to the investigation of the "observable and unobservable aspects". In fact, the literature reports both the implicit and explicit nature of beliefs (Osisioma & Moscovici, 2008; Rimm-Kaufman, Storm, Sawyer, Pianta, & LaParo, 2006). Research shows that both quantitative and qualitative approaches have been used in order to investigate teachers' beliefs (Fives & Buhel, 2012; Fives & Gregoire Gill,

2015), and in this study the qualitative approach was preferred; indeed, participant teachers' beliefs have been examined thanks to a triangulation of interviews, document analysis, and participant observation. At the end, focus groups were also used in order to both further study teachers' beliefs and pilot a formative process starting from reflections on emerged beliefs. In this first exploratory phase, the goal was to study teachers' statements to track their direct explicit beliefs through semi-structured interviews dealing with the following research questions: What are teachers'² beliefs about cultural diversity? Do teachers' beliefs about cultural diversity influence their practices? Teachers' direct explicit beliefs about cultural diversity and their consistency were investigated in-depth through semi-structured interviews as the first step to identify the most relevant topics to be used as the base for a training process for these same participants. The conversations were held between March and September 2016, while the analysis started in June 2016 and ended at the beginning of 2017.

Participants

According to Gay (2015, p. 344), "almost all research studies and conceptual or theoretical essays involve prospective teachers"; her literature review showed a research gap that the present study has tried to fill. In fact, the semi-structured interviews were conducted with 45 in-service³ primary teachers (pupil age: 6–11 years old) in order to examine their direct explicit beliefs. All participants were volunteers, all but one female, and they were aged between 28 and 62; this was a convenience sample. Thirty-one of them worked at 9 different schools in Padova and 14 in a village nearby.

The decision to involve in-service teachers led to a number of difficulties. Due to their normal work commitments, it was hard to involve teachers in this research. Nonetheless, the number of respondents exceeded expectations, denoting increasing interest and engagement.

Of course, the ethical dimension was complied with: anonymity and personal information were protected using ID numbers instead of names and referent schools were named differently. Moreover, participants signed an informed consent form in which they agreed that their statements would be used for research aims.

² Here, "teachers' beliefs" refers back to the teachers participating in the research.

³ "In-service" means that the teachers were actively working in schools; they were not students or trainees.

Instrument and procedure

In order to prepare the interviews, pilot interviews were implemented involving subjects/teachers with characteristics similar to the participants in the research. Thanks to the pilot round, the design of the interview was improved, determining its flaws and refining the questions.

A list of 15 questions guided the conversations with the teachers; the questions were intentionally general and abstract so as to allow the widest choice of expression about the addressed topics. Each interview opened with some simple questions, while explicit references to opinions were required during the second part. To enable informants to feel free to express their points of view as they preferred, they were asked about their experiences in culturally diverse classrooms from the past to the present. In particular, participants shared their thoughts about the evolution of their practices and if they used particular teaching attention to take benefits from the cultural differences present in their classroom and allow all pupils to appreciate them. Teachers were asked to share their difficulties in dealing with diversity as well as their insights on the difficulties of the pupils and their families. Moreover, respondents were asked about their views on intercultural objectives and good practices in the school environment. In many cases, the passage from abstract thoughts to practices was hard and it was often necessary to ask them to provide specific examples. For this reason, the tape-recorded and later transcribed interviews went for up to 1 hour and 20 minutes.

Analysis

The semi-structured interviews furnished rich and comparable qualitative data, which was analyzed using ATLAS.ti. Both a top-down and a bottom-up approach were used; the entire corpus of interview transcripts was segmented into significant quotations and then coded by assigning bottom-up content-based labels. The codes were grouped together by sense into larger themes, defined top-down thanks to the list of interview questions.

Considering the research questions, there were two levels of exploration: On the one hand, the first analysis outcome was an organized, analytical, and descriptive inventory of the teachers' beliefs about cultural diversity which emerged from the texts. On the other hand, referring to the second research question, the consistency between what teachers affirmed in theory and what they declared that they did was taken into account. For that reason, each code was specified in two different ways: when the statement could be understood as abstract, an *A* was placed beside the label; when the quotations contained tangible examples or references to concrete experiences, a *P* was

added next to the code. Therefore, we used ATLAS.ti for both qualitative and quantitative analysis. Effective intercultural actions and the problems faced by the teachers in heterogeneous classrooms are detailed below.

Results

Inventory of the teachers' beliefs about cultural diversity

Fifteen descriptive categories were identified to summarize the topics expressed by the respondents on what they considered the most relevant about cultural diversity. Specifically, Figure 1 lists each category by name in descending frequency of the codes.

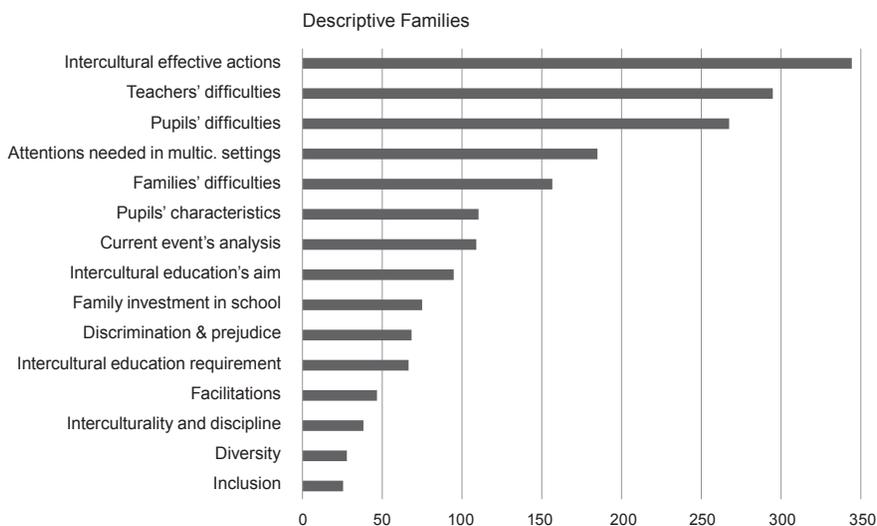


Figure 1. Descriptive families

Figure 1 shows how the frequencies were distributed for the different sense categories. The abscissa reports the number of times the codes related to the respective descriptive families were applied in the texts. These numbers provide a measure of the wealth of assertions collected from a quantitative point of view. It is easy to interpret the graph in order to figure out what subjects were mentioned by teachers the most. Teachers particularly spoke about intercultural effective actions, the difficulties they considered as characterizing the paths of non-Italian children, and those they met themselves in carrying out their work. Moreover, the codes also referred at a very high frequency to the strategies teachers utilized.

Intercultural effective actions

The first descriptive family contains teachers' statements on activities that they deemed effective in promoting intercultural actions at school; in particular, an interview question asked what the best intercultural strategies to apply in the classroom are. This category included multiple codes and is related with the aims of intercultural education. According to the respondents, workshops and practical activities are able to accomplish the intercultural purpose. Teachers often found involving non-Italian parents in intercultural projects useful. In these cases, teachers invited them to explain something about their own cultures and customs, such as typical food or traditional dresses. For instance:

We decided to meet together and share lunch. So, every foreign mother brought food, all the ingredients, and the process to make the recipe. We ate and we shared this time talking about their places of origin. It was a good time. (Int. 10-48-E)

Other similar examples concerned typical clothes, the way parents were used to attending school in their home countries, and the games they played when they were children.

This type of initiative is not to be criticized a priori, since it has the great advantage of involving parents in school activities. The issue is that in all of the teachers' statements about this topic, this activity was the final point of the teachers' intercultural projects, whereas such actions should be a beginning. Inviting parents to school and sharing a convivial moment with them is certainly positive, but from an intercultural point of view providing something more is necessary. Otherwise, the risk is to fix predetermined, static cultural characteristics, in other words: prejudices.

Informants also believed that storytelling, a way to fill the language gap, is a powerful method to involve pupils. In this type of situation, they preferred culturally relevant texts, such as local and traditional folklore.

With that child, we built, for example, Dragon An, which comes from their traditions. Then, his mum brought Chinese food to school. There was this beautiful and warm reception, and we brought a lot of classical Chinese objects into the classroom. (Int. 36-x-G)

The informant recognized that this activity did not give the desired results, because the child with the Chinese background did not know the story. For this reason, the attempt to involve him was unsuccessful and his classmates were a little disappointed. Moreover, analyzing this activity in light of academic suggestions, it can be argued that it would tend to highlight cultural differences rather than finding common points: the risk is that of fostering prejudices and exclusion.

These examples of the teachers' understanding of cultures reflect an understanding of elements as immutably defined and determined and not dynamic dimensions. The result of this combination of fixed entities in a rigid and crystallized way entails an error of assumption (Agostinetti, 2014) that leads teachers to construct inadequate practices. Indeed, the same informants detected significant levels of ineffectiveness, especially for their aim to involve non-Italian pupils. From a pedagogical point of view, these projects often focused only on cultural differences with the risk of trivializing cultural diversity rather than honoring it. Moreover, it has to be considered that most of the pupils were second-generation and may not necessarily have experienced the traditional dress and folklore of their parents' cultures. It is more likely that these students were more used to eating the same food as their peers: kebabs, noodles, and muffins are definitely as popular as pizza and spaghetti.

Pupils, families, and teachers' common difficulty: The language

The participants' most mentioned topic (during the interviews) was language. It was related to all of the types of difficulties we asked about, especially that for pupils. It was reported to be the biggest difficulty for parents as well, and it also had a great deal of importance in the descriptive family for teachers. In all of these three cases, language had the highest frequencies recorded. Referring to newly arrived children, the teachers agreed that this is the first and biggest obstacle foreign students face. As highlighted in the following two extracts, their beliefs about that issue can be opposite:

Non-Italian pupils need to take a good language course before starting school. If that's not possible, they should be immediately enrolled in a language course because without that there can't be any integration. (Int. 09-45-G)

[If there are foreign students in the classroom], not only will Italian children learn Italian well, but they'll learn it together with their non-Italian classmates, discovering things they'd never find out if Italian were just a vehicle of communication between ... peers that all know the same words. (Int. 05-43-A)

Unquestionably, the linguistic gap is one of the main issues for pupils with a different cultural background. Whether children are newly arrived in the country or are second generation and speak other languages at home, language plays a crucial role, especially considering its importance for academic achievement and active participation in society. Nevertheless, while this must be considered a special educational need on which to focus activities, it figures also as opportunity for natives to deepen their reflection on their mother tongue together with coming into contact with different ways of communication.

Even with regard to families, especially if they have just arrived in Italy, teachers see the language as:

... a very huge difficulty, especially in order to understand what the school does or what a child must do at home. (Int. 01-62-A)

In general, it is possible to affirm that language difficulties were a nagging problem for the informants. Most of the time, they struggle to overcome communication problems with children and parents. Few of them understand this situation as an opportunity to propose activities on plurilingualism, even though the policy documents encourage them to do so for the purpose of intercultural education (MIUR, 2012). Plurilinguistic classrooms can be useful experiences for appreciating different languages and fostering awareness about pupils' linguistic repertoires.

Intercultural education requirement

The answers to the interview question “*What would be necessary, in your opinion, to achieve intercultural education at school?*” led to the mention of emergencies and overwhelming needs, such as for resources in economic and material terms and support from external experts. One interesting element is teachers' perceptions of their need for training. The following quotations highlight these training needs in different ways. For example, some teachers asked for experts to explain the characteristics of different cultures:

We could also do some courses where we could better get know these other cultures, Arabic culture, for example. I don't know ... just to get to know a little about their history, their characteristics, their habits ... We could then understand better when a child behaves some way. (Int. 38-31-G)

Others referred to a more specific need:

Systematic training, training that takes place over years involving teachers in working groups, those who already collaborate and work together. This is training that gives tools especially for openness, knowledge, but also gives a way to manage problems, a methodology rather than anything else. Knowing it, however, also means seeing it work, trying it, experimenting, having someone who helps you. That's why I believe this, especially for teacher training. We need systematic training conducted with appropriate criteria. (Int. 1-62-A)

Another research gap can be found in the analysis of how teachers are prepared through their in-service professional development (European Commission & PPMI, 2017). This in particular is necessary because of different paradigms and country policies. What emerges from the interviews with 45 teachers is that they felt the need to be trained in order to welcome non-Italian students and provide the right support and provisions to all their pupils.

Between saying and doing

The data shows a significant gap between the objectives declared by teachers, corresponding in most cases to the theoretical achievements of intercultural education, and their practices.

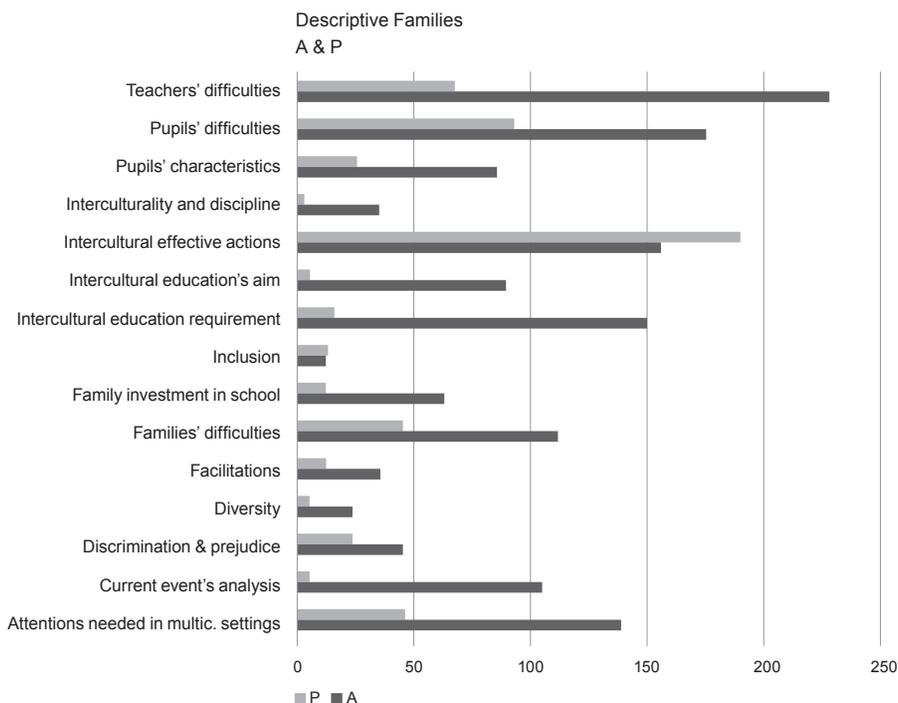


Figure 2. Descriptive families: Theoretical achievements & practices

This aspect relates to the transition from theory to practice, which has always been considered one of the most difficult and crucial points in all educational actions. For example, teachers agreed that it is important to take advantage of cultural differences and promote them, but in practice, as seen above, most of them trivialized differences through folklore activities on habits, flags, and typical food and dress. Figure 2 shows that there is an important distance between what teachers believe and what they do or experience. During the interviews, practical examples were often asked for, but most of the time the statements seemed to be conceptions without effective anchors in practice. The following passage can be a significant example:

Teacher: *Maybe some of their ways of doing things or interpreting our things and considering our activities or holidays may be ... yes, it may seem strange to us, but for them, considering their culture, mentality, and way of behaving, it may be normal.*

Interviewer: *Have you got an example?*

Teacher: *Actually, I've never experienced it. (Int. 16-28-H)*

This can be considered a clear example of what is meant by an explicit belief that is not reflected in practice or experience.

Even if this type of statement is groundless, it influences teachers' plans and the activities they propose. In that sense, it is important to allow teachers to be conscious about their beliefs in order to reconceptualize beliefs they have not reflected on, aiming for more effective and significant practice. Thus, with greater awareness they can improve their practices and their ways of handling diversity and teaching in diverse classrooms.

Conclusions

From the analysis of the interview data, we can answer the research questions by affirming that the teachers' beliefs about cultural diversity were plural and influenced their practices. In more detail, the teachers' beliefs were often characterized by a lack of consistency and coherence. Referring to current theoretical definitions and policy documents, sometimes the teacher's beliefs were even contradictory. Several biases can be identified in the teachers' statements. For one, disproportionate idealization of intercultural education can lead to moralizing discourse, often steeped in rhetoric. Moreover, reducing cultures to fixed objects led to reiterating good practices without reflecting on whether these are really suitable for the specific context in which the teachers are working.

“Teachers are expected to have the competences to relate to parents and engage them in their children's learning process, provide the peer learning experiences that can promote inter-group respect and understanding, and to apply learner-centred teaching strategies” (European Commission & PPMI, 2017, p. 15). These are hard tasks to implement and imply that teachers should be aware of their beliefs and take a critical view about their intentions and practices. In the interviews, many oversimplified representations establishing and exalting supposed characteristics and typical traits can be found. In fact, school projects often involved dances and flags, and parents in traditional clothes or cooking typical dishes were mentioned as effective practices.

Considering the teachers' logic that they have not reflected upon, improving their awareness implies attributing pedagogical and educational value to them. In other words, it is necessary for teachers to reflect on their own beliefs for them to improve their practices. This means promoting teachers' professional development and empowerment. In fact, "to address the challenges faced by all pupils in schools, education systems across Europe must equip teachers with relevant competences throughout the teacher education continuum" (European Commission & PPMI, 2017, p. 24). For that reason, the analysis of the interviews is useful to both give a clear lesson to policymakers and define guidelines for the next step in research. For the former, it is important to figure out that there is a gap to fill between guidelines and practice and that this requires attention. Secondly, the aim could be to develop a program that makes reflection on theory, beliefs, and practices through participant observation and focus groups significant and formative. At the end of this exploratory study, a hypothesis emerged: an in-service teachers' training process can be effective if it is focused on detecting their beliefs and the consequent biases that characterize their practices. Moreover, such a training program will be useful if it leads participants to reflect on the actions they take in their everyday work at school. Future research will enable understanding of a particular complex and ongoing social situation. It will ensure participants' awareness and empowerment in a collaborative, reflective, and dialogic action-research process of change.

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