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ITALIAN ADAPTATION OF THE IDENTITY PROJECT:
QUALITATIVE FINDINGS CONCERNING INTERVENTION EFFICACY

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INTRODUCTION

It is true that toddlerhood represents the period when children start developing self-perceptions, but adolescence characterizes the critical developmental transitions and consolidations of these perceptions into a coherent view of themselves. Adolescents typically begin to explore their space and position in the social world, trying to integrate various aspects of themselves into a consistent whole. This is the process of identity development (Schwartz & Petrova, 2018; Xing et al., 2015).

An important component of adolescents' identity development is their social identity as they orient themselves more towards peer interactions (Liu & Goto, 2007). This includes forming a sense of self-concept that originates from affiliation and membership in social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Culture plays a critical role in this process as it operates on the individual and social levels. Cultural practices and values, attitudes towards the cultural group, acculturation orientations, and ethnic identity are the main focuses and constructs of cultural identity (Schwartz et al., 2008).

Furthermore, a stable identity development has proven to foster higher resilience, well-being, and a sense of competence (Flum & Kaplan, 2006). However, this process has become more challenging with the spread of globalization, individualization, and immigration. This reality can also be seen in Italy, where foreign residents, as of January 1, 2021, are 5,039,637 and represent 8.5% of the resident population, with the largest community being from Romania, followed by Albania, Morocco, and China (ISMU Foundation, 2022). For this reason, children are growing up exposed to different cultures, worldviews, and environments. This exposure starts from a young age and is found in different contexts, but it becomes particularly salient with the spread of multicultural classrooms. In Italy, 10.3% of the school population is of migratory origin (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2021); however, the disadvantages and unequal

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opportunities associated with immigrant status in Italy have many influences that can also be evident in the school environment. In the last two years of secondary school, the education rate of students with non-Italian citizenship decreases compared to that of Italian students. Moreover, in 2019/2020, the rate of Italian students with delay in their educational path was 8.9% compared to that of 29.9% of students with non-Italian citizenship. The maximum gap is found in the second year of secondary school, where the percentages become respectively 18.8% and 56.2% (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2021).

School is thus an essential context for adolescents' identity development. For a stable developmental process, the school climate must encourage cooperation and exploration of cultures while stimulating individual reflection on the flexibility of culture and its influences (Morris et al., 2015).

Given that few interventions tackle these issues in a school context, the *Identity Project* was developed in the U.S. and has proven that adolescents' exploration of their ethnic and cultural identity promotes better psychosocial well-being among minority and majority youth. In awareness of the current diversity in Italian classrooms and the initial success of the project, it was decided to adapt the *Identity Project* to the Italian context and then implement it in schools in Padua, Italy.

This thesis aims to introduce the main components and objectives of the *Identity Project* and present the qualitative feedback collected concerning its efficacy in the Italian adaptation. Chapter 1 will focus on the theoretical framework behind the *Identity Project* intervention, its characteristics, and Italian adaptation. Focus groups held after its implementation and the qualitative feedback gathered from them will be presented comprehensively in Chapter 2. In the third and final chapter, general comments and issues regarding the *Identity Project*, the Italian adaptation, and the qualitative findings from the focus groups are described.

CHAPTER 1

THE *IDENTITY PROJECT*

1.1 Theoretical background

In its many forms, identity development is a key lifetime developmental task that is uniquely prominent during the period of adolescence (Erikson, 1968). During that period, adolescents gain the cognitive maturity and social exposure necessary for a more complex exploration of the aims and values that make up their perception in relation to the self and to others (Erikson, 1968). Because of the multidimensionality of identity, an individual can be defined by several identities. These identities are mainly categorized into personal and social identities, where the former refers to "those aspects of the self that describe personal characteristics or abilities", while the latter regards the "aspects of the self that are relative to other people or other groups of people" (Umaña-Taylor, 2020, p. 7).

Individuals' social identities, in particular, are influenced by the concepts of race, ethnicity, and gender (Umaña-Taylor, 2011). An individual's ethnic-racial identity (ERI) reflects an example of social identity, with important consequences for adolescents' normative development and adaptation. Phinney (1989, p. 36) defined ERI as an individual's "sense of self as a member of an ethnic group and the attitudes and behaviors associated with that sense." This multidimensional, psychological construct develops from the ethnic-racial self-identifications that have previously developed in childhood. Different aspects of the social environment, such as cultural traditions reflecting ethnic heritage, strongly contribute to individuals' ERI. Another significant contributor is their ethnic-racial group's position in this environment, including the social and historical factors that shape it, such as marginalization or prejudice because of minority status (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018).

In the United States, among minority adolescents, studies have shown that stronger ERI is linked to a number of benefits in adjustment, such as fewer depressive symptoms, greater self-esteem, life satisfaction, academic achievement, and even better physical health (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). In addition, further research has shown that both minority and majority ethnic groups can benefit from greater exploration of their ERI in terms of psychosocial adjustment (Sladek et al., 2020; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018). Psychosocial adjustment refers to people's "capacity to adapt to the environment" in terms of integration and goal achievement, for instance (Piqueras et al., 2019). Studies from Italy and Germany have also shown ERI exploration to be associated with prosocial behavior and intercultural competence among adolescents from both minority and majority groups (Moscardino et al., 2019; Schwarzenthal et al., 2017).

Given the constant rise in diversity and globalization, it is normal that the significance of ERI in youth's daily life is becoming more potent. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic added to its relevance because it highlighted ethnic and racial gaps in opportunities and an increase in harassment and attacks (Dyer, 2020; Grierson, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Another reason for its elevated salience is the multiple events of ethnic-racial discrimination and injustices that have taken place around the world in recent years. These events include policy-making such as the French Senate voting to ban hijabs for minors (March 2021), violent acts like the murder of George Floyd that triggered a series of protests in the United States and many countries around the world (May 2020), and the conflicts between Palestine and Israel that have been going on for years but have re-escalated recently, gaining more attention from the international community (May 2021, April 2022).

All these events and crises accentuate the need to make spaces and opportunities for adolescents to learn more about their own and others' diverse

backgrounds and ERIs, including complex topics like prejudice and discrimination (Juang et al., 2020). Doing so through critical conversations can foster belonging and clarity of youth's own ERI (Mathews et al., 2020) and empathy for that of others (Camacho et al., 2018; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018). With the importance of ERI development and creating such opportunities in mind, an intervention named the *Identity Project* was designed by Umaña-Taylor and collaborators (2017) in the U.S. with the objective of promoting adolescents' well-being by focusing on their ERI development (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018). As a universal mental health promotion program, the *Identity Project* does not refer to at-risk groups of the population: the intervention was designed with the aim of benefiting adolescents belonging to both ethnic-cultural minority and majority groups (Umaña -Taylor & Douglass, 2017).

Erikson's psychosocial theory of development was a significant contributor to the theoretical framework behind the *Identity Project* (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018). His theory consists of eight stages, each representing a crisis the individual faces. "Identity vs. Identity Diffusion" is the fifth stage that, according to Erikson, is confronted during the adolescence period. To solve the "Identity Confusion" crisis, adolescents must undertake a process of exploration. This involves reflecting on their own cultures, actively interacting with their peers, and participating in activities that concern their cultural belonging (Syed, 2013). After exploration, resolution can be achieved when adolescents gain some stability regarding their cultural affiliation. With a clearer and more secure identity, they can then move on to the next development stage.

The theoretical model of the *Identity Project* was also influenced by Marcia's (1980) theory concerning identity development statuses: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. Two factors, crisis and commitment, play a role in the accomplishment of these statuses. Identity achievement is completed when the adolescent confronts a crisis through exploration and then

reaches resolution with commitment to an identity (Marcia, 1980). These processes of reflection and observation led Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2018) to target ERI exploration and resolution in their intervention.

1.2 General characteristics

The *Identity Project* is a school-based intervention that targets young adolescents in the ninth grade. Since individuals' identity is partly formed by their social surroundings and interactions, the settings in which they spend most of their time in a given period are critical for their identity development (Markus et al., 2000). The school represents an example of such a social setting since it occupies a notable portion of adolescents' days. Moreover, this particular grade level was chosen as it reflects adolescents' natural development timeline for complex cognitive and social skills.

The intervention's main aim is to increase ERI exploration and resolution and thus achieve better psychosocial adjustment through greater identity cohesion. This can be accomplished by increasing students' awareness and understanding of their own and others' ethnic-racial heritage, differences within and between groups, and the different historical instances of ethnic-racial discrimination experienced by multiple groups. The intervention also engages the students in a more personal manner to achieve its goal by encouraging reflection on their meaning of "family," their identification with an ethnic group, and their paths towards ERI formation. It also provides students with practical tools to explore the different traditions and symbols that form their ethnic heritage and opportunities to discuss them.

These goals are all achieved in the span of eight weekly sessions of 55 minutes each, during which students are guided through a planned theoretical curriculum as well as practical individual and group activities. Students are also assigned some homework tasks related to the lessons to help them explore their

ethnic backgrounds with family or community members beyond the school context (Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2017). There are additional meetings for conducting the pre-test and pro-test questionnaires and the focus groups to gather feedback. The contents of each of the eight sessions are briefly described below (see Table 1).

Table 1 – 8-week curriculum of the Identity Project intervention

Session	Description
1- Unpacking identity	Establish expectations and rules for classroom behavior Introduce different features of identity: • Fluidity: different components change across time and situations • Multidimensionality: personal identity, social identity including ERI Explore students' different identity "backpacks"
2- Group differences: Within and Between	Address stereotypes: • Definition as presumptions based on group homogeneity • Chance for students to recognize and discern themselves from stereotypes Introduce the idea of more variability within than between "groups" and that in both, differences exist on a continuum instead of in categories

3- Stories of our past	Raise students' awareness of how various groups have been marginalized in U.S. history by: • Sharing real experiences of discrimination of people from diverse groups • Using the accounts to create a sense of community among students Review the topics previously discussed
4- My family history	Increase students' exploration and awareness of their cultural heritage Increase students' knowledge of the complexity of family structure and the variable influence of family members on people Display how the diversity of students' family histories creates commonality among them
5- Symbols, traditions, and rites of passage	Introduce symbols, traditions, and rites of passage: • Definition • Relation to cultural heritage • Role as specific indicators for different cultures Promote students' exploration of their culture's symbols, traditions, rites of passage
6- Photo processing and storyboards	Promote processing of photos by creating: • Group discussions • Personal storyboards Recognize commonalities and differences between the students' storyboards Raise students' awareness and clarity of the meaning the symbols have for them

7- Ethnic racial identity as a journey	Normalize the contrast between the varying relevance some students attribute to familial cultural experiences Increase students' understanding that: • Cultural identity is informative but constitutes only one part of their identity • The meaning of their cultural identity and ERI can vary in terms of formation process and across time and people
8- Grand finale	Review key themes previously covered Share and celebrate the cultural exploration and journeys the students achieved in the past weeks Allow students to share aspects of their ethnic heritage and inform guests of what they learned during the project

An efficacy trial conducted by Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2018) supported the success of the *Identity Project* intervention in a North American sample. Specifically, adolescents who engaged in ERI exploration had a better understanding and resolution of their ethnic-racial and overall sense of self, leading to better socio-emotional adjustment and well-being. However, when the *Identity project* was adapted and applied in Germany, results supported an increase in ERI exploration but not in resolution (Juang et al., 2020). For a better evaluation of the efficacy of the *Identity Project* cross-culturally, further adaptations and trials need to be conducted in different countries and cultures.

1.3 Italian adaptation

The Italian team of the *Identity Project* is coordinated by professor Moscardino (DPSS, University of Padova) in collaboration with a multicultural

team of students at different university study levels and representing, in addition to Italian, also German, Polish, and Lebanese cultures. Additionally, during the adaptation process, the team cooperated with cultural mediators from diverse backgrounds such as Albania, Nigeria, Gambia, Moldova, and Palestine. The adaptation of the *Identity Project* to the Italian context followed, similar to the German one that was previously done, international guidelines for the cultural adaptation of psychological interventions (Barrera & Castro, 2006). In particular, to make the implementation of the intervention in the specific context as effective as possible, the 5 phases of (1) information gathering, (2) preliminary adaptation design, (3) preliminary adaptation test, (4) adaptation refinement, and (5) cultural adaptation trial were followed, which are described below.

1. <u>Information gathering</u>

Italy, the U.S., and Germany all have different cultures, so adaptation, even linguistically, was necessary given that culture is a central theme in the *Identity Project*. The differences between cultures were considered by analysing the literature, comparing with the other teams, and investigating the Italian migratory situation. Additionally, 16 individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with first- and second-generation immigrants who were asked about the traditions, symbols, and values of their heritage cultures.

To encourage an adaptation as effective as possible, focus groups were also conducted with the participation of 5 cultural mediators with a migratory background representative of some of the foreign nationalities most present on the Italian territory. During the meetings, the 8 sessions of the project were discussed with a focus on the activities and topics covered.

All the information gathered was then analysed and used in the design of the preliminary adaptation.

2. Preliminary adaptation design

In the second phase of adaptation, the project manual, the self-report questionnaires used for the pre-test and post-test, and the contents of the activities (videos, textual contents, slides, etc.) were revised and translated into Italian with certain modifications. All adaptations were made without interfering with the coherence of the central themes and aims of the intervention, as suggested by McKLeroy and colleagues (2006).

One of the first fundamental decisions made was replacing the terms "race" and "ethnicity" with "culture," a term more appropriate to the post-war multi-cultural scenario that increasingly characterizes Italy and Europe today. Several adjustments were also made to the contents to reflect better the Italian context, such as examples and visual materials, by relying on the information gathered in the interviews, Italian news, and social media. For example, in the session "Stories of our past," instances of discrimination in the U.S. were replaced with stories of marginalization that occurred in Italy.

3. Preliminary adaptation test

In spring 2021, a pilot study was conducted to test the preliminary Italian adaptation of the *Identity Project* intervention and evaluate its feasibility and acceptability. Participants were students attending tenth grade in a technical institute in Padua, Italy, where 37% of the students had an immigrant background coming from 21 different countries. The entire pilot study was conducted online through the *Google Meet* platform due to the global Covid-19 pandemic. Adolescents ($N = 186$) were recruited from 9 classes and then divided into the intervention condition (five classes), which proceeded with the *Identity Project* curriculum, and the control condition (four classes), who only participated in the pre-test and the post-test by completing self-report questionnaires. All sessions were conducted by a trained doctoral student in psychology, who was assisted by

the psychology interns and master's students under the coordination of Professor Moscardino (DPSS, University of Padova). For data analysis, only the participants with signed parental consent (n = 138) were considered. Data collection took place between the beginning of March 2021 and the end of May 2021. Self-report measures tackled distinct areas of the students´ life, such as their social-demographic information, cultural identity, mental health, friends and family, and classroom climate.

Briefly, a statistically significant increase in the clarity of the students´ cultural identity and their openness towards members of other cultures was detected in the data analysis for students who participated in the *Identity Project* curriculum versus the control group. A small increase was also observed in the positive intercultural class climate among students in the intervention group.

4. <u>Adaptation refinement</u>

To further refine the Italian adaptation of the *Identity Project*, qualitative feedback from the team and participants was collected in June 2021 to evaluate the feasibility and cultural relevance for the Italian socio-cultural context. This was carried out by conducting two focus groups: one with the students and one with the teachers. Students appreciated the opportunities to explore their own and their peers' cultural backgrounds and their processes of defining identity, especially with respect to the influence of their biological and non-biological families. However, they criticized the length of the questionnaires. When it comes to the teachers, they noticed a rise in the solidarity and sensitivity among classmates who participated in the project. The feedback allowed the team to take some aspects into consideration for modification. For instance, some teachers suggested to further investigate the linguistic aspects, since language is an essential component of students' multiculturalism and identity. Moreover, it was noticed that Italian adolescents are less familiar with some important themes of the intervention, like discrimination and prejudice. Hence, the team decided to

include a brief review of previous key concepts at the beginning of every meeting to consolidate them. A more detailed discussion of focus groups carried out in the actual main study and their feedback will be provided in Chapter 2.

5. <u>Cultural adaptation trial</u>

Considering the data gathered, the study was revised and then conducted between October 2021 and March 2022 on a large sample of students. The main intervention was implemented in six different schools in Padua, a northern city in Italy. 45 classes from the second year of the six high schools were considered, of which 23 were randomly assigned to the intervention and 22 to the waitlist control group. The project included 956 participants who were assessed using questionnaires at three times: 1 week before the intervention, 1 week after the intervention, and 5 weeks after the intervention. Students received the *Identity Project* intervention from 14 highly trained moderators, consisting of intern psychology students and a Ph.D. student, who worked in pairs in every class. Students who had recently moved to Italy and were experiencing language difficulties were assisted by language mediators during the meetings. For instance, I supported some Arab students by mediating between Arabic and Italian so they could follow the meetings and participate in the activities. Focus groups were held after the intervention, at the end of each semester.

CHAPTER 2

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS CONCERNING
EFFICACY

2.1 Description of focus groups

To explore how the intervention was received and evaluated by the students, focus groups with students and teachers were carried out. A focus group is a method of data collection used for qualitative analysis (Dilshad & Latif, 2013). It is usually comprised of a small number of participants, between 6 and 9 individuals, and is led by a trained moderator with the aim of exploring attitudes, ideas, and feelings about a specific topic (Wilkinson, 1998). The moderator poses open questions that have been previously prepared and proceeds to record the participants' reflections. Focus groups can aid researchers in planning, evaluating, and improving their projects and programs. In the case of the *Identity Project*, the Italian adaptation adopted a similar method to the German one in the method and content of the focus groups. The focus groups were conducted with students and teachers separately and in two different periods, after the intervention and waitlist control groups had finished the follow-up assessments (January-February and April-May 2022). This thesis will focus on the feedback collected from the groups who participated in the intervention in the first semester of the school year 2021-2022.

There was one meeting conducted with the teachers from each of the six schools in Padua that participated in the *Identity Project*. The groups were held in the online modality in February 2022 for approximately one hour each and were facilitated by the project coordinator. A total of 24 teachers and staff were asked to elaborate on 5 questions, and different moderators from the project recorded their responses.

Eleven focus group meetings were held with students representing classes from the six schools by the end of January 2022. In total, 50 students participated in the focus groups, with each meeting including between 2 to 9 students. Six focus groups were held online, four were conducted in the classroom during school hours, and one was carried out in dual mode. Moreover, each meeting was attended by one moderator and one recorder from the project interns.

In the following section, I will first discuss in detail the feedback from the teachers, and then I will elaborate on the students' answers.

2.2 Feedback from teachers

During the focus groups, the teachers were posed 5 questions and then asked for their final comments. The first question was regarding their general comments and impressions of the workshop. The teachers had a lot of diverse answers concerning this. Most of them shared the opinion that since this project strayed from the traditional class, students were more interested and involved. They felt like it was a fair-targeted approach as no students were excluded even when class sometimes got noisy or with the challenges of distance learning. They found themselves learning with the students and appreciated how the topics were dealt with professionally, mixing theory and reflections and laying the foundations for future activities. They considered the trainers to be very suited for the tasks since they were well-prepared, young but with a lot of maturity. They would have appreciated a more personal elaboration of the contents, though. According to the teachers and what the students informed them, the practical activities were greatly appreciated, so they would have liked to engage in more group work.

However, others reported that the feedback they received from students was not highly positive. They believed the intervention should have targeted younger students because it was too simplistic or covered topics they were already familiar

with by being in a multicultural class. Some teachers also felt like they were not involved and thus had no material to evaluate, which they regarded as problematic given the short period available for them to complete their jobs. Another major concern that most of the teachers noticed was that students faced some issues with the questionnaires' lengths and contents; they found them either too long or too invasive.

After taking note of the teachers' general reflections of the intervention, we decided to delve deeper into their feedback to better pinpoint their views regarding the weaker or stronger points of the project. Their input is valuable as they were able to observe the students' behavior during the meetings, which gives an additional perspective to the students' own feedback that we will discuss later in the chapter.

The next question asked to the teachers was explicitly about their perception of the students' participation. Some teachers noted that students mainly seemed intrigued and cooperative. They noticed that students enjoyed the chance to express and talk about themselves and their origins. Not only did they seem eager to explore their own background, but they seemed to particularly enjoy the meetings with the cultural mediators and the real-life experiences they shared with the class. The teachers thought the approach taken by the *Identity Project* was well-suited as it was practical and did not involve any evaluation of the students' performance. One teacher noted, "*They have never been so collaborative as when the trainers came in… It is precisely the approach that is different. Just do something practical and concrete that touches them in their life, and everything changes completely*." However, despite the lack of academic testing, some students were still hesitant to participate in fear of peer judgment and criticism, according to the teachers. In addition to the redundant criticism of the length of questionnaires mentioned throughout different aspects of the

feedback, some teachers thought the introductory part of the project was too lengthy and that the students were less interested at the end of the curriculum.

The teachers were next asked if they made any references or activities in the regular curricular hours of the class that were related to the themes of the *Identity Project*. One teacher remarked that, according to her, "*There was no connection whatsoever*." Additionally, some teachers found it challenging to involve the students in such discussions. However, others managed to link some topics with Law, History, Civic Education, Italian and English classes. For example, few teachers also connected some ideas covered in the intervention to chapters they taught about self-development, classes involving group work, or certain book readings.

The fourth question we asked teachers in the focus groups was, "Is there anything you would add, remove or modify in relation to the topics covered in the intervention? If so, what and why?" Some teachers believed that certain discussed concepts were too simplified for certain multicultural classes and expected the topics to be taken to a more complex level. They thought the curriculum was more suited for middle school students. One teacher also pointed out that she would have preferred the inclusion of more psychological content in the project. More than one teacher advocated for more engaging activities, more group work, and fewer theoretical explanations. An example would be using popular television shows to discuss some of the topics in a way that will catch the students' interest. They also thought that one teacher following the project would be more beneficial for continuity and organization. Another modification they suggested would be elongating the sessions to have more time and flexibility in alternating between the theoretical and practical parts of the meeting, thus allowing a deeper exploration and reflection on certain topics. Few suggested tackling other concepts in the intervention as well, such as emotions and gender identity. Lastly, some teachers pointed out the existing variability between the

classes, suggesting that a primary comparative evaluation between them is necessary to adapt the activities according to their levels for a more engaging and impactful intervention.

The last question regarded the problems that teachers encountered during the *Identity Project* intervention. Some found the activity to be too demanding as it took many of their hours of lectures without allowing them to do evaluations regarding the topics. One teacher remarked that "*students perceived the meetings as 'play time' and treated them as such.*" There were also some practical issues, such as teachers not remaining in the class or lack of availability of technology needed to showcase some project materials. Some teachers reiterated the problem of continuity and adaptability, emphasizing the need for more dialogue between teachers and trainers prior to the meetings. For this reason, it should be noted that most of the teachers we interviewed had followed a relatively limited number of sessions (i.e., between 1 and 3).

2.3 Feedback from students

The feedback received from the students was very diverse, with some common points and some disagreements.

The first question presented to the students was about their favourite meetings or activities from the project. The most frequent response from students in all classes was the meeting with the cultural mediator. They listed many different reasons for that choice. Many agreed that it was an immersive and involving experience. They felt that the mediator was interested in what they had to say. For some, it was a profession they had not heard of before, and they were very impressed by how the mediators were providing help and support to others in challenging situations. They also appreciated how the mediators shared some personal events and experiences with the classes, even if they were quite intense. One student pointed out that it gave him a different perspective on cultural

encounters, such as greetings, and another perceived the session as a direct way to meet other cultures. Many students also stated their appreciation for the session where they discussed family and made their own family trees. They perceived it as a way to express themselves and share their origins. Others had not even thought much of their roots before the meetings and appreciated the opportunity to do so. According to one of the students, "*Knowing that our culture is influenced by those close to us seems obvious, but I had never noticed it.*" Another well-liked meeting was concerned with cultural symbols. Students enjoyed learning about their classmates' cultures and stories, such as proverbs expressed in native languages or pictures of their favourite aspects of their cultures. It reminded them of the feeling of belonging to a culture, and they regarded it as a way of representing themselves. They also found the meetings that addressed stereotypes to be necessary, particularly the activity of 'I am x culture, but I am not x stereotype.' One girl remarked that because of that activity, "*for the first time, others were able to understand how I feel when they say these stereotypical comments about my culture and religion.*" The video they watched of individuals from diverse backgrounds sharing their experiences also resonated with the students.

Regarding the sessions and activities that students liked least, their responses were varied and sometimes contradictory. Some students found the family meetings quite invasive and the cultural symbols activities unnecessary. They also thought some concepts were repetitive. One student highlighted that "*the problem was that everyone had the same culture and habits, so the same things always came up.*" This reduced interest since they stopped discovering new things about each other. A common point was that they perceived some meetings to be not as involving as they would have liked, mainly due to the length of some introductory parts.

In relation to the previous comments, the students were then asked what they would add, remove, or modify in the sessions. They had many suggestions, a major one being reducing the length of the questionnaires. They also encouraged more incorporation of group, practical, and dynamic work into the activities and advised additional sessions similar to the one with the cultural mediator, since they preferred encountering real people over learning through videos and slides. Some suggested reducing the initial speeches and switching the symbols and family activities to the beginning of the intervention to have more time for interactive personal activities towards the end. Some students pointed out that the intervention should be done in a more diverse environment, given that some classrooms were less multicultural than others. When it comes to the sessions that addressed the topics of stereotypes and discrimination, a few students thought it would be more helpful to provide some operational solutions to deal with these issues. Lastly, some pointed out that they would have preferred the sessions regarding the cultural symbols to be deepened and taken beyond the stereotypical picture.

The next question concerned if the students perceived any changes in how they think or feel towards their cultures of origin. Some students reported feeling no change either because they already felt "alien to their culture of origin" or because they believe that belonging to a particular place does not mean they should follow its culture. Many reported preferring to learn about others' cultures, so while they experienced no change themselves, they enjoyed discovering new things about their classmates. However, others reported that the *Identity Project* triggered their curiosity to learn more about their origins, especially if they previously felt detached from them. Moreover, one of the students even reflected again about wearing the veil as a representation of her faith. Others realized how attached they are to their cultures of origin while being far away. For one student, it helped her identify a new aspect of herself: "*Before the project, I classified myself as Chinese. After the project and because of the questionnaires, I noticed*

that I have an Italianized part, so now I define myself as Italian- Chinese rather than Chinese." The intervention also made some students reflect on the topics of stereotypes.

The fifth question regarded perceived changes in the students' feelings towards other cultures. While few students pointed out that they had already known the topics discussed because of their families or had always found people from different cultures more interesting, many students reported considerable changes in their approach and knowledge of cultures. They learned new information about the cultures of their classmates and were exposed to different symbols and traditions. They listened to some personal experiences and learned the values and customs that characterize the cultures of their classmates. One student highlighted that because of the project he "*got to know what is considered respectful or disrespectful in other cultures.*" This helped them see each other from new perspectives, which increased their tolerance and empathy toward others. The *Identity Project* also made them realize that people enjoy sharing different aspects of their cultures with others but are usually not given the opportunity. It even introduced them to the profession of "cultural mediator," which many were not aware of before the intervention. Some students managed to see various aspects of their identities in the cultures of others. All the activities triggered their curiosity and intrigue in the history and origins of cultures different from their own.

Lastly, the students were asked if they would have liked the intervention if it was done by teachers instead. The majority replied that they would not for a number of reasons. Some students commented that they would find it strange to confide in the teachers and share any personal details. They worry that they would not have the same freedom to express themselves since the teachers usually evaluate them, and that is a substantial barrier. Moreover, if the teacher had bias because of previous misconduct, low marks, or some conflicts in the class, this

would negatively impact how the intervention is carried out. In general, the students highlighted that they respond better to people they do not know since they find it easier to talk to strangers. They also prefer the university interns since they find that young people understand them more which facilitates communication and self-expression. The students also pointed out that not only are the teachers incapable of being neutral, but they also would need to be intensively trained since they are not equipped to deal with such topics. One student strongly opposed, commenting to the moderators "*Imagine if you girls came to teach us Math or Physics. Some teachers struggle to explain their own subject*." Furthermore, given their personal experiences, they noticed that their teachers tend to be impatient since they are always rushing to finish the curriculum. They worry that the teachers will disregard some important interactive parts of the *Identity Project* curriculum or modify the material to fit their own teaching style. They would find the whole program to be less involving. However, there were a few students who believed it would be a favorable modification since teachers know how to explain concepts and manage a classroom environment. While it could be embarrassing at the start of the intervention, they thought that feeling would fade away as everyone got better acquainted, which would increase the connection in the class.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

3.1 The Identity Project

Identity formation is a key component of the developmental process in adolescence. In particular, developing a clear cultural identity is an integral part of that process, especially in today's multicultural reality. Globalization and immigration are changing society as a whole. These changes are also reaching the school context, where students are continuously sharing the space with people from different cultures and backgrounds. This dynamic exposure can have different influences, either cultivating a space of mutual understanding and clarity or creating more confusion and discrimination.

The *Identity Project* aims to enhance adolescents' clarity of their cultural identity by attempting to increase reflection and exploration of its different aspects. It creates opportunities for discussing culture and its impact on everyday life while maintaining an atmosphere of respect as adolescents share commonalities and differences between their cultures. It addresses complex topics such as stereotypes, discrimination, and family history while also celebrating the diversity of cultural practices and traditions.

Following the evidence supporting the efficacy of the *Identity Project* in the U.S., the intervention was then carefully adapted to the Italian context. Data analysis from the pilot study supports some of the intervention's general aims. This confirms the salience of ERI exploration and the critical role cultural identity plays in adolescents' psychosocial adjustment. The promising results of the pilot study led to the implementation of the Italian adaptation of the *Identity Project* in different schools in Italy.

3.2 Focus groups

Qualitative research tools can play an influential role in research as they can be used in the exploratory stages of the study and also guide or improve quantitative data collection methods after its implementation (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). Focus groups are a valuable example of such tools, since they allow the researchers insight into the participants' views and attitudes. They also help put in perspective the reasons and meanings behind certain behaviors the participants exhibited or responses they provided.

In the case of the *Identity Project*, focus groups played a fundamental role pre-and post-intervention. First, focus groups that were held with cultural mediators contributed to the improvement of the adaptation of the intervention's activities to the Italian context. Then, once the intervention was adapted and implemented, focus groups revealed the students' own perceptions of their experiences as well as their teachers' observations of these experiences and their own impressions.

The teachers mostly perceived the intervention as a positive experience that can even impact their own lessons. However, they strongly recommended more dialogue to be carried out before its implementation with the researchers to better coordinate suitability in terms of schedules, age, and adaptivity to different classroom needs. They also strongly recommended more continuity concerning the teachers following the intervention, which would also help resolve the recurrent concern of evaluation.

The students' feedback was even more enlightening as it highlighted some dichotomous perspectives and skepticism about fundamental features of the original project's structure. In general, it was clear that students favored interactive activities where they felt involved and learned about others simultaneously. Another important realization was made from their feedback. On

the one hand, students in multicultural classrooms had already acknowledged and dealt with many of the topics discussed, which made the intervention unstimulating to them. On the other hand, students in classes that lacked diversity did not have a lot to share, so they found some activities repetitive. This, along with the different levels of maturity in different classes, can be an important piece of information to consider when improving the intervention's structure and adaptation to different needs. Lastly, the majority of the students strongly emphasized their opposition to the intervention being conducted by their teachers instead of university interns or any external trainers. This directly challenges the original project's main method and goal for delivering the intervention. The *Identity Project*'s aim, after its success is ensured, is to be integrated into the regular school program by getting administered by the teachers. Having university interns or trainers implement the project long-term would not be feasible as it is unsustainable in terms of time and resources. Thus, the focus groups highlighted a critical issue that the researchers will need to consider and address.

As a final note, this thesis provides a coherent overview of the contribution of qualitative findings from focus groups to research, particularly, to the Italian adaptation of the *Identity Project* intervention. In Chapter 1, the discussion of the theoretical basis of the project, its characteristics, and its Italian adaptation can be reflective of the salience of cultural identity development and valuable for practitioners and researchers working in the fields of multiculturalism, ERI, and identity development in adolescence in general. Furthermore, the qualitative feedback from the teacher and student participants that was presented thoroughly in Chapter 2 demonstrates the *Identity Project*'s efficacy, impact, and limitations in the Italian context while accentuating the value of focus group implementation.

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