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**Efficacy of the Identity Project intervention in Italian
multiethnic classrooms**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
CHAPTER 1: THE IDENTITY PROJECT	5
1.1 Theoretical background	5
1.2 General characteristics.....	7
1.3. Adaptation to the Italian context	9
CHAPTER 2: THE STUDY	14
2.1 Research questions	14
2.2 Participants	16
2.3 Procedure and measures	17
2.4 Results	19
2.4.1 <i>Research question 1: Cultural identity exploration</i>	19
2.4.2 <i>Research question 2: Cultural identity resolution</i>	20
2.4.3 <i>Research question 3: Focus group results</i>	20
CHAPTER 3: DISCUSSION.....	23
3.1 General comment.....	23
3.2 Limitations and future directions.....	24
REFERENCES	28
APPENDIX.....	32

INTRODUCTION

In 2022, the Italian Ministry of Education published some guidelines for the integration of students coming from migratory contexts. These “Intercultural Orientations” (Orientamenti Interculturali) stress the need to face the consequences of recent historical happenings, including the COVID-19 pandemic, sociopolitical events like the so-called “refugee crisis”, and the war in Ukraine to support the fulfilment of the needs of all students in the Italian school system, especially those who have been penalized the most in recent years, which mostly comprises students with migrant backgrounds.

Missed opportunities for socialisation and learning have contributed to setting back the students with less support or access to resources, who often are first- or second-generation students that still do not see their socio-educational needs being fully met. Rethinking learning is necessary to foster an environment where students can thrive in a context of cultural pluralism and diversity, where language learning is not the sole focus (MIUR, 2022). This represents a complex challenge, but it should also be seen as an opportunity: giving value to cultural pluralism in its entirety, especially during such an important developmental stage like adolescence, enables students to learn to suspend judgement and practice social inclusion and active citizenship from school desks.

Juang and colleagues (2020) highlight the importance of creating spaces for adolescents to learn more about their own and others’ cultural heritages and backgrounds, delving into more complex topics such as prejudice and discrimination. The psychological construct of cultural identity is central in adolescence: exploring the meaning of one’s cultural heritage to reach a mature understanding of one’s ethnic-racial

identity has positive implications for overall wellbeing and psychosocial adjustment in the long term. The *Identity Project*, a school-based intervention initially developed in the United States, aims to promote the processes of cultural identity exploration and resolution and promoting positive intercultural relationships among students. The study has been successfully replicated in other European countries, one of them being Italy.

The objective of this thesis is to analyse the efficacy of the Italian adaptation of the *Identity Project* intervention in several high school classes in Padua, Italy. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the theoretical framework of the *Identity Project* and the general characteristics of the intervention, highlighting the process of cultural adaptation followed in the Italian context. Chapter 2 describes the study methodology and seeks to analyse the efficacy of the *Identity Project* intervention in multicultural high school classes in Padua, Italy. Chapter 3 introduces a critical discussion on the results of the study and acknowledges the main limitations to take into consideration for future research.

CHAPTER 1: THE *IDENTITY PROJECT*

1.1 Theoretical background

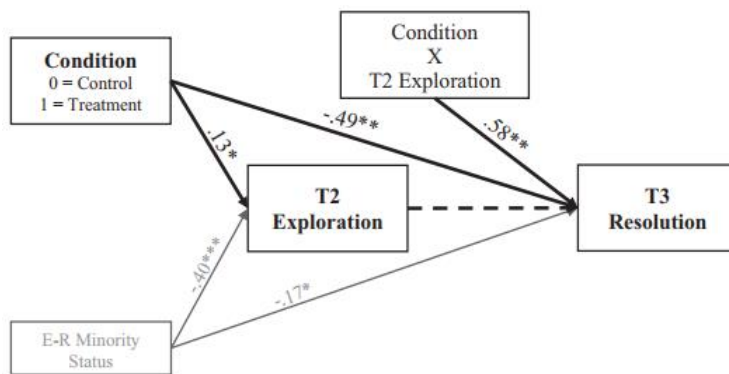
Individual development unfolds throughout the course of people's entire lifespan (Erikson, 1959). However, adolescence is a crucial period to set the foundations of one's identity. Erikson's psychosocial development theory identifies ego-identity acquisition as a core concept, to be attained after overcoming the so-called stage of "identity vs. identity confusion" (Erikson, 1968). Taking inspiration from Erikson's theory, Marcia (1966) delineated two behavioral variables which determine the necessary competences for identity formation: exploration of potential identity representations and effort invested in the choice. Combining these two dimensions allows the definition of four different identity statuses: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement (Marcia, 1993).

In adolescence, the individual reaches the necessary cognitive maturity to explore the personal and societal values that constitute their self-perception and the impression of themselves expressed by others, and begins categorising the multiple dimensions of identity related to themselves. The adolescent gains awareness of both "those aspects of the self that describe personal characteristics or abilities" - namely their personal identities - and "aspects of the self that are relative to other people or other groups of people", constituting their social identities (Umaña-Taylor, 2020, p.7). The latter result from one's concept of gender, race, and ethnicity (Umaña-Taylor, 2011) and are crucial for normative development and adaptation.

Ethnic racial identity (ERI) is a multidimensional psychological concept which stems from previously developed self-identifications in childhood. It can be defined as someone's "sense of self as a member of an ethnic group and the attitudes and behaviors associated with that sense" (Phinney, 1989, p. 36). An individual's ERI is strongly influenced by the social environment - cultural traditions, rituals, and symbols - as well as an ethnic-racial group's position in the environment itself: history, social status, marginalisation and being the target of prejudice because of one's minority status (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018). ERI development is the result of a phase of exploration - active research on one's own current and future cultural identity (Umaña-Taylor, 2018; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018; Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2016) - and a phase of resolution where personal meaning is found for one's own identity, and a sense of stability is achieved (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018).

Considering the importance of ERI development and its salience in adolescence, the *Identity Project* intervention was developed by Umaña-Taylor and Douglass (2017) in the United States to promote adolescents' wellbeing through a universal mental health promotion program that could target both minority and majority youth, with the theme of cultural identity in mind (Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2017). Higher levels of identity exploration and resolution in adolescence lead to a higher sense of global identity cohesion and are correlated with a series of psychosocial wellbeing indicators: more academic involvement, self-esteem, openness towards other cultural groups, less depressive symptoms (Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2017).

Figure 1. *Hypothesised process model testing the effect of the Identity Project intervention on ethnic–racial identity (ERI) exploration at T2 and resolution at T3 (Umaña-Taylor, 2017)*



1.2 General characteristics

The *Identity Project* is a school-based intervention targeting 9th graders to be carried out in a total of 8 weekly 55-minute-long sessions led by trained facilitators. Markus and colleagues (2000) note how individuals' identity is partially determined by their social surroundings and interactions. Consequently, the social settings where people spend most of their time influences one's identity development. In adolescence, school is a quintessential part of one's daily life, and coherently with stage theories of development (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980), it is the age at which the two processes of identity exploration and resolution take place. The natural development timeline for more complex cognitive, social, and emotional skills is functional to support the aforementioned processes (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2017).

The intervention aims to increase adolescents' ERI exploration and resolution to increase identity cohesion and attain psychosocial adjustment, improving overall wellbeing. These results can be accomplished by providing adolescents with a space where they can increase their understanding of their ethnic-racial heritage and that of their peers, and where they can discuss in- and outgroup differences or histories of ethnic-racial discrimination. Adolescents are also encouraged to reflect on their own meaning of "family" as something that also includes the non-biological figures they care for, on their identification with a cultural group or many, and on the changing nature of identity throughout the lifespan.

Trained facilitators provide students with practical tools and homework to explore their heritage traditions, rituals, and symbols in their home community and in class, so they can share them with the rest of their peers (Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2017). A detailed description of the contents of each of the eight sessions is shown in Table A in the Appendix.

Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2018) conducted an efficacy trial in a North American sample which supported the success of the *Identity Project* intervention. Specifically, youth who participated in the program engaged in more ERI exploration at posttest and had a better understanding and resolution of their ethnic-racial identity and overall sense of self at follow-up compared to their peers in the control group, resulting in better socio-emotional adjustment and well-being one year later. In the German adaptation, however, an increase in ERI exploration did not result in higher levels of ERI

resolution (Juang et al., 2020). The cross-cultural efficacy of the intervention is still being investigated through adaptations and trials in other countries.

1.3. Adaptation to the Italian context

As the main measured construct of ERI is deeply connected to the dimensions of race, ethnicity, and cultural climate (Juang et al., 2021), carrying out the intervention in a different country than the original US pilot study necessarily requires some adaptations.

The Italian adaptation was carried out under the supervision of Professor Moscardino (DPSS, University of Padova) and Chiara Ceccon, Ph.D., together with a team of psychology interns and cultural mediators. As similarly done for the German adaptation of the Identity Project, the Italian adaptation followed international guidelines for the cultural adaptation of psychological interventions (Barrera & Castro, 2006). To ensure the efficacy of the intervention in the context of Italy, five specific phases were followed:

1. Information gathering

The process of information gathering started with an analysis of the existing literature and a thorough comparison with the other countries' teams. Cultural differences were considered, and Italian migration history and its state of the art were investigated. Attention was also given to linguistic differences in the expression of the central constructs measured in the project (Juang et al., 2022). Sixteen individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with first- and second-generation immigrants, diving deeper

into themes such as traditions, symbols and values of their heritage culture, episodes of discrimination and stereotyping, and their heritage culture's migratory past.

In addition, 5 cultural mediators with migration backgrounds true to the foreign nationalities most numerous in Italy participated in focus groups meant to discuss the 8 sessions of the *Identity Project*. Particular attention was given to the activities and topics planned for each session. All the information gathered in this phase was analysed and employed in the preliminary adaptation design.

2. Preliminary adaptation design

This phase of the adaptation process involved the revision and translation of the intervention manual, the contents of the activities (slides, videos, textual content, etc.) and the self-report questionnaires used for the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up. As suggested by McLeroy and colleagues (2006), special attention was paid to maintaining the core themes and aims of the intervention, while also fitting the constructs to the culture at hand. The translations into Italian involved certain modifications that would fit better into the sociocultural context of Italy. Coherently with Juang et al. (2020), one central modification in terminology involved the replacement of the terms "race" and "ethnicity" with "culture" to reflect the postwar multicultural context characterizing today's society in Italy and, more in general, in Europe.

Other adjustments to visual materials and concrete examples were made to enable youth living in Italian territories to better relate to the contents of the intervention. For instance, the episodes of discrimination and marginalization used in the "Stories from our past" activity session were taken from Italian newspapers and social media, instead of

using examples from the United States. The adaptation work was approved by the U.S. and the German teams through close collaborations, and cultural mediators were involved in the process to ensure an effective and contextually relevant result. A comprehensive summary of the modifications to the curriculum sessions can be found in Table A (Appendix).

3. Preliminary adaptation test

To evaluate the feasibility, acceptability, and cultural adequacy of the Italian adaptation of the *Identity Project* intervention, a pilot study with a pre-posttest design was conducted in spring 2021 after obtaining approval from the Ethics Committee of the School of Psychology of the University of Padova (protocol n.3871). The sample consisted of 138 tenth-grade students (average age 15 years) attending a technical high school in Padua, Italy. Thirty-seven percent of them had migration backgrounds, coming from 21 different countries. Due to complications brought about by the global COVID-19 pandemic, the entire intervention was conducted online through the Google Meet platform. Classrooms were assigned to the intervention group receiving the *Identity Project* sessions ($n = 5$), and the control group ($n = 4$) only filling out the self-report questionnaires.

Data collection took place between the beginning of March 2021 and the end of May 2021. The self-report questionnaires tackled, amongst other things, the students' socio-demographic information, intelligence and intercultural competence, cultural identity cohesion, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, prosociality, perceived

discrimination, academic involvement, interpersonal relationships with friends and family, and classroom climate.

A statistically significant increase was detected in the intervention group in regard to the participants' cultural identity resolution and to their openness towards members of different cultures. A small increase was also observed in the positive intercultural class climate among students in the intervention group. On the other hand, no differences were detected between the intervention and control groups with regards to cultural identity exploration.

4. Adaptation refinement

An evaluation of the feasibility and cultural relevance for the Italian socio-cultural context was carried out using qualitative feedback from the facilitators' team and the study participants. This was carried out in June 2021 by conducting two focus groups, respectively with the students and the teachers involved in the intervention. Students particularly valued the opportunity to explore their own cultural backgrounds and to discover more about their peers and the processes of defining cultural identity through the influence of people around them. By contrast, the length of the questionnaires was thoroughly criticised.

Teachers reported an increase in peer solidarity and sensitivity in the intervention group and provided constructive feedback for future developments of the intervention. They suggested giving more importance to mother tongue due to its central role in students' identity. Additionally, their inputs about the students' lack of familiarity with

the central themes of the intervention resulted in the addition of a review of the key concepts in each session, to help the students consolidate their knowledge.

5. Cultural adaptation trial

After a revision based on the feedback received, the study was conducted on a larger sample between October 2021 and March 2022. This time, six different schools in Padua were involved, with a total of 45 tenth-grade classes (23 randomly assigned to the intervention group, 22 to the waitlist control group). The participants ($N= 956$) were assessed 1 week before the intervention, 1 week after the intervention, and 5 weeks after the intervention. The sessions were facilitated by a team of 13 trained psychology interns and a Ph.D. student, as well as language mediators for students experiencing language difficulties. Focus groups were held at the end of each semester.

The results of a Bayesian model comparison (Ceccon et al., 2023) revealed a main effect of condition on the dimension of cultural identity exploration at T1, where students in the intervention group had higher scores compared to the control group, irrespective of school or classroom. Nevertheless, the previous hypothesis of an interaction effect of cultural identity exploration at T1 on cultural identity resolution at T2 was not supported: an increase in resolution at T2 was not directly linked to increases in exploration at T1.

CHAPTER 2: THE STUDY

2.1 Research questions

This study is part of a larger study investigating the efficacy of the *Identity Project* intervention in Italian high school classrooms. The study is coordinated by Professor Moscardino and PhD student Chiara Ceccon from the Department of Developmental Psychology and Socialization of the University of Padova, in collaboration with Professor Umaña-Taylor from Harvard University (USA) and Professor Schnachner from Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg (Germany).

The main objective of the project is to promote cultural identity development in highschoolers with and without a migration background, and to foster positive intercultural relations among classmates. The evidence-based intervention seeks to investigate potential changes in the dimensions of cultural identity exploration and resolution, self-esteem, global identity cohesion and classroom climate. To measure these changes, a randomized controlled trial with three assessment points (pretest, posttest, and follow-up) was conducted. This thesis is based on the implementation of the intervention in school year 2022-2023, involving 3 technical institutes with a total of 29 classrooms.

In the current work, two main questions were addressed:

- 1) *Is there a difference between adolescents in the intervention vs. control group in cultural identity exploration at posttest (T1) after controlling for baseline levels of this variable (T0)?*

Previous research has demonstrated the efficacy of the *Identity Project* intervention in favoring ERI exploration in both the US and Germany (Juang et al., 2020; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2017). In the Italian main study, an increase in cultural identity exploration at T1 was confirmed, but no cascading effects on cultural identity resolution at T2 were detected (Ceccon et al., 2023).

Hence, we expected students in the intervention (vs. control) group scoring higher in cultural identity exploration at post-test (T1).

2) *Among students in the intervention (vs. control) group, are higher levels of exploration at posttest (T1) associated with higher levels of resolution at follow-up (T2)?*

This research question is consistent with the cascading hypothesis formulated by Umaña-Taylor and Douglass (2017), where increases in ERI at posttest were followed by increases in resolution at follow-up. Based on the original findings in the US study, we also expected for the intervention group to experience an increase in ethnic-racial identity exploration at posttest, which in turn would produce increases in resolution at follow-up.

3) *How do students from the intervention group describe changes (if any) with respect to what they think or how they feel about their cultural identity?*

Students were asked to participate in focus group discussions after having received the intervention. In this instance, on top of sharing their thoughts about the activities and topics covered in the sessions, students were asked about their perception of their own cultural heritage. Based on previous editions of the *Identity Project* intervention,

we anticipated that students would report some change in their self-perception and their ideas about their culture(s) of origin.

2.2 Participants

The program was carried out in 3 upper secondary schools in the city of Padua, in northeastern Italy. The city of Padua and the Veneto region have a foreign population of around 500000 people (ISTAT, 2023). Participants were all from public technical or vocational schools, where the percentage of people with migration background is higher compared to private schools or gymnasiums. Twenty-nine classrooms were involved, comprising a total of 720 students; of these, 38% had a migration background. Classrooms were randomly assigned to the intervention group ($n = 15$) and to the waitlist control group ($n = 14$) using a computerized algorithm.

The criteria for inclusion were: a) attending 9th grade throughout the data collection period, b) having sufficient knowledge of Italian language, and c) not having certified intellectual disabilities or neurodevelopmental disorders. Although 15 students did not fully meet the inclusion criteria, they were still invited to participate in the sessions and were supported by a teacher or a facilitator, but they did not complete the questionnaires. As regards non-Italian speakers, questionnaires and materials from the sessions were provided in their preferred language.

Of all the eligible participants for the study, 691 provided parental consent (participation rate = 96%), but in our analysis we considered only the students who attended all three assessment sessions (pretest =T0, pos t-test= T1, follow-up= T2),

including a final sample of 580 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 14.9$, 53% girls, 38% with a migration background).

Immigrant-origin students came from 23 different countries, the most representative being Moldova, Romania, and Morocco. The majority (78%) were second-generation (i.e., born in Italy from at least one parent born abroad), and the remaining were first-generation (i.e., born abroad from at least one parent born abroad).

2.3 Procedure and measures

The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Psychology at the University of Padova (protocol n. 3871), and informal contact was established with technical and vocational institutes that historically register more culturally heterogeneous classes, which implied greater saliency of the project and therefore potentially more student engagement (Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2017).

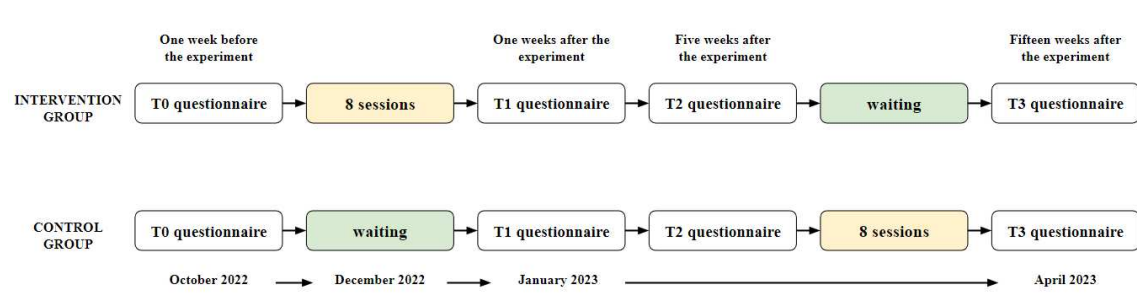
All participating classes were given informative pamphlets providing information about the study's objectives, data collection and protection procedures, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequences. The pamphlets were available in several languages to ensure comprehension for non-Italian speaking parents and students, and had to be signed by both parents. An online meeting was organised with the students' families to describe the intervention and all the relevant procedures, and to answer any questions.

After informed consent forms were collected from students, classes were randomly assigned to either the intervention or the control group. Although both groups received

the 8-week intervention, the control group was put on a “waiting list” and received it during the second semester.

Data collection was carried at four different time points (see Figure 2): one week before the intervention (pretest, T0), one week after the intervention (posttest, T1), five weeks after the intervention (follow-up, T2), and fifteen weeks after the intervention (follow-up, T3). Focus groups were conducted separately with students and teachers on a voluntary basis after the last assessment took place.

Figure 2. *Timeline for implementation of the Identity Project*



The main topics of the sessions were the definition of identity (especially cultural identities), stereotypes and discrimination, intercultural mediation (with a professional in the field), symbols, rituals, and traditions from everyone’s cultural backgrounds. The facilitators made sure to review the previously discussed topics at the beginning of each session, and breached the subjects using multimedia tools, group discussions, practical activities, storytelling, and sharing of cultural experiences. A final moment for personal reflection was always included.

My own contribution to the project consisted of the administration of the T0 and T1 surveys along with the implementation of the intervention in 4 classes together with

another facilitator, for a total of 40 sessions. The questionnaires were administered via the QualtricsXM platform, using a QR code for online completion, under supervision of the facilitators. The option to complete the questionnaire on paper was requested by 20.5% of the participants. Each student was provided with a unique identifying code to ensure anonymity and to enable data deletion in case of dropouts.

To assess cultural identity exploration and resolution, we used the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). The measure includes 17 items (7 for exploration, 4 for resolution, and 6 for affirmation) rated on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (does not describe me at all) to 4 (describes me very well). Scores for each subscale are calculated by averaging the scores attributed to items pertaining to the three subscales. In this study, Cronbach's Alphas were .78 and .85 for the exploration and resolution subscales, respectively.

To address our third research question, we conducted focus groups with the students. These lasted approximately one hour and students representing each class participated on a voluntary basis. In the discussion, the facilitators who had carried out the intervention moderated the discussion by asking them open-ended questions about their most and least favourite activities in the project, their desire to add, remove or change any of the activities and, lastly, if they perceived any changes in their perception of their own cultural identity and their feelings about others' cultural backgrounds. In this dissertation, a focus has been put on the following question from the students' focus groups:

“Did something change in the way you think or feel about your culture of origin?”

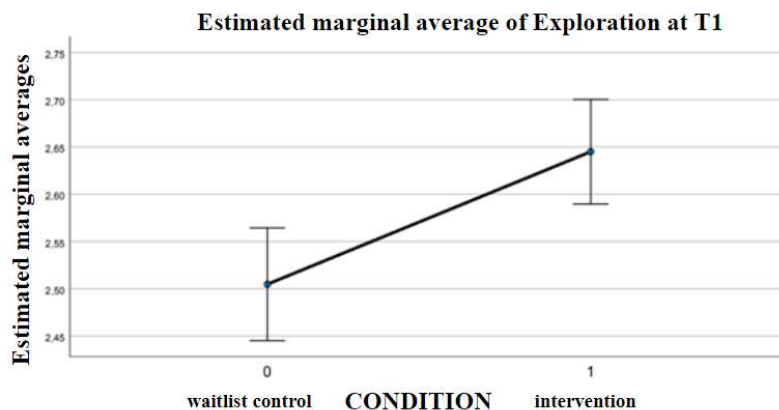
Their answers have been analysed qualitatively based on the number and type of responses of the students in the intervention group.

2.4 Results

2.4.1 Research question 1: Changes in cultural identity exploration

To assess potential differences between adolescents in the intervention vs. control group in cultural identity exploration at post-test (T1), we conducted a univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). In this model, condition (intervention vs. control) was the independent variable, exploration at posttest (T1) was the dependent variable, and exploration at pretest (T0) was the control variable. The analysis revealed a significant effect of condition, $F(1,587) = 11.46, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .02$, with adolescents participating in the intervention reporting higher levels of cultural identity exploration than their peers in the waitlist control group (see Figure 3).

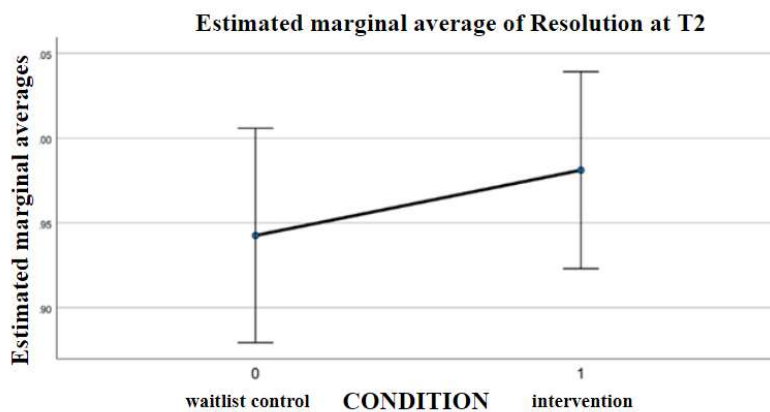
Figure 3. *Cultural identity exploration at posttest by condition*



2.4.2 Research question 2: Changes in cultural identity resolution

To evaluate whether an increase in cultural identity exploration at posttest was linked to an increase in resolution at follow-up, we conducted an ANCOVA including condition (intervention vs. control) as the independent variable, resolution at follow-up (T3) as the dependent variable, and exploration at posttest (T2) as the control variable. As can be seen in Figure x, no significant effect of condition on cultural identity resolution was found ($F = 1,570, p = .381, \eta^2_p = .001$).

Figure 4. Cultural identity resolution at T2 as a function of exploration at T1 by condition



2.4.3 Research question 3: Perceived changes in cultural identity

Overall, students' feedback provided during the focus group discussions revealed an appreciation for the *Identity Project*: they believed it was useful at a personal level and in relation to other classmates, as well as in how they perceived their heritage culture. Some students reported not giving much relevance to their culture before the start of the intervention, but they admitted to have started thinking about their cultural identity for the first time during the project, making them acquire more awareness of the prominence

of the themes discussed in the sessions in their everyday life. This was highlighted mainly by students belonging to the majority culture, although some students with migration backgrounds reported similar experiences.

In spite of this, most of the students participating in the focus group did not perceive deep changes in their thoughts or feelings about their own cultural identity. They reported already feeling knowledgeable about their culture before the start of the project, although participating in the project helped them consolidate their feelings. Others reported that they appreciated learning about other cultures even if they did not experience any change themselves: *“I understood how others felt like and that sometimes they might feel not represented enough, or misrepresented”*.

Some of them admitted that they had taken their heritage culture for granted and did not give it as much thought before, but they cherished the opportunity for discovery triggered by the program. The *Identity Project* was helpful to stimulate adolescents to reflect on their heritage culture(s) through searching, observing, and considering the construct of identity during the sessions (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). For some of them, the curriculum was helpful in making them more proud and less ashamed of their culture: *“I previously didn’t share much about my culture in front of others, [...] but then I saw that my classmates loved their cultures and I thought: “Why should I be ashamed of mine?”*”. She was wearing henna during the focus group, something she had refused to show at school before.

CHAPTER 3: DISCUSSION

3.1 General comment

This study aimed to analyze the efficacy of the *Identity Project* intervention in the Italian school context. Specifically, we tested the cascading model developed by Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2018), who propose that the intervention contributes to an increase in exploration at posttest which, in turn, is related to an increase in resolution at follow-up. In doing so, we recruited students attending 29 classrooms within three upper secondary schools in Padua that were randomly assigned to an intervention and a waitlist control group.

The first research question addressed possible differences in cultural identity exploration at posttest between the intervention and waitlist control group. The results confirmed previous implementations of the *Identity Project* intervention (Ceccon et al., 2023; Juang et al., 2020; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018), showing that adolescents participating in the program reported higher levels of this variable than their peers in the control group. Hence, our findings support the cultural appropriateness and relevance of the activities proposed during the sessions for the Italian context.

With regard to the second research question, no significant effect of exploration at posttest on resolution at follow-up was found, therefore failing to support the cascading model proposed by Umaña-Taylor et al. (2018). Ceccon and colleagues in 2023 also highlighted these outcomes: an increase in ERI exploration at T1 was registered but “increases in resolution at follow-up were not linked to increases in exploration in the

intervention (vs. control) group” (Ceccon et al., 2023, p.10). This could be attributed to the fact that the hypothesized cascading effects are observable in the longer term (Juang et al., 2020), but also because of the “delay syndrome” on identity formation found in Italian youth (Livi Bacci, 2008). Ceccon and colleagues (2023) highlight how the fact that postponing adult responsibilities and commitment is a socially accepted and widespread practice in Italy might enhance identity instability during the period of adolescence: moratorium is prolonged and individuals “consider and reconsider multiple identity alternatives instead of solidifying a sense of identity” (p.14). Moreover, immigration in Italy has a relatively recent history compared to the U.S. and tends to put in place immigration policies that focus on assimilation rather than integration: consequently, practicing cultural socialisation is not something people in Italy are used to (Ceccon et al., 2023).

As regards the feedback provided by students during the focus group discussions, the program was appreciated by most of the participants because it provided grounds to discuss everyone’s experience and it encouraged their curiosity towards their classmates and towards their heritage cultures. Nonetheless, some of them also failed to perceive a strong change in their thoughts or feelings concerning their culture of origin, as they already felt a strong attachment to it or felt knowledgeable about it before the start of the intervention.

3.2 Limitations and future directions

When interpreting the results of this study, some limitations need to be taken into consideration.

The first limitation concerns the scope of the effects obtained through the analysis of covariance of our statistical model: although significant, they are limited. When it comes to psychological research and replication studies involving a large sample, however, it is unusual to note large effect sizes (Ceccon et al., 2023), and the results of our analysis are still consistent with previous implementations of the *Identity Project* (Juang et al., 2020; Umaña-Taylor, Douglass, et al., 2018). Beyond quantitative data, the qualitative feedback provided by the students during focus groups discussions highlighted how the Project was an important starting point for them to reflect on the themes of identity and heritage. Although the perceived changes in their perception of self and of their ethnic-racial heritage were not striking right after the end of the project, one must remember that the time available for the intervention was limited to a total of eight 55-minute-long sessions. Despite the limited effects, they might provide ground for long term psychological changes.

A second limitation concerns the limited proportion of students with a migration background in the high school classes used in our Italian sample: despite the wide range of cultures of origins (with 50 nationalities being represented), only 30% of students had a migration background, as opposed to other countries where the project was carried out (Ceccon et al., 2023). In the U.S. implementation, in fact, approximately 50% of the students were part of an ethnic minority (Umaña-Taylor, Douglass, et al., 2018). In the

future, attention to the efficacy of the *Identity Project* in adolescents from specific cultural backgrounds or generational statuses could be given.

Third, the waitlist control method utilised to ensure that also students in the control group would receive the intervention does not allow to control for peers in the intervention group revealing information about the project beforehand, potentially reducing the difference between the two conditions. Teachers might have also influenced the groups by expanding on the topics of the Project outside of the facilitated sessions to encourage reflection upon the themes of cultural identity and discrimination.

Last, the region of Veneto has higher economic wealth, population density and immigrant population rates (ISTAT, 2023) compared to other geographical areas with a different immigration pattern in and outside the country, making it hard to generalise both the results of the study and the universality of the intervention (Ceccon et al., 2023).

Italian schools are becoming more and more culturally heterogeneous (MIUR, 2022), making it necessary to find an educational approach that gives importance to cultural diversity and puts different heritage backgrounds in open communication with each other, thus promoting intercultural understanding amongst students and teachers. The students directly experiencing this educational shift are coincidentally also dealing with their own developmental needs: building a solid identity to improve psychosocial wellbeing and adaptation.

The *Identity Project* provides tools to sustain the exploration of one's own cultural heritage, with positive results for individual students and for classroom climate, creating

a better environment for overall youth development. It is a valuable contribution to existing literature on school-based psychosocial interventions targeting adolescents.

An interesting future development could involve a multidisciplinary collaboration with teachers to continue to integrate the themes of the *Identity Project* throughout the entire academic journey of the students, effectively using them to enrich reasoning and methods outside of the intervention hours, all while improving classroom climate.

The intervention is purposely highly interactive and favours the exchange of ideas, experiences, and opinions in a safe and welcoming environment for all students. One of its aims is to provide students with a space where they can freely express themselves and confront themselves with their peers and with trained adults who can offer some insight into the themes of identity, cultural symbols, diversity, discrimination, and stereotyping. When youth is provided with the right tools to explore their identity and their place in a multicultural world, they will not perceive the “other” as a threat, but rather as a resource to enrich society and their life experience.

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APPENDIX

Table A. *Italian adaptation of the Identity Project*

SESSION	IP in the United States	IP in Italy
<p>1 - “Unpacking identity” - <i>“Lo zaino dell’identità”</i></p>	<p>- Introduction on the unfolding of the Identity Project - Students decide on some ground rules to follow during the sessions to ensure a climate of respect and dialogue - Explanation of the concepts: identity, personal and social identity, ethnicity and race, ethnic-racial identity, identity ad a multidimensional concept changing throughout time - Identity backpack: activity where students think about the components of their identity. Then, they share their work in groups and identify common elements - Reflection: each student will receive a personal sheet of paper to write down their thoughts and what struck them during each session</p>	<p>- Introduction on the unfolding of the Identity Project - Ground rules: are established with the students to ensure a safe, respectful, and engaging climate - Identity backpack: the “backpack” is used as a metaphor to represent identity as something we always carry with us, with contents that can change throughout time - Activity “I am”: participants write 5 characteristics that are tied to their identity on a piece of paper, and they choose one characteristic to share with their peers - Explanation of concepts: identity, personal and social identity, cultural identity - Reflection: each student will receive a personal sheet of paper to write down their thoughts and what struck them during each session</p>
<p>2 - “Group differences: within and between” - <i>“Nel gruppo, tra gruppi”</i></p>	<p>- Stereotypes: definition and explanation of the phenomenon using relatable examples for the students - Watching a video: show that differences inside a group are often more prevalent than differences between groups - Introducing the idea that differences exist, but they are continuous, not categorial - Activity “I am ... and I am not ...”: on a piece of paper, students write down the culture they identify with, and on the other side they write a stereotype associated with their cultural group that they do not personally identify with - Reflections</p>	<p>- Review of the topics of the past session - Stereotypes: definition and explanation of the phenomenon using relatable examples for the students - Watching a video: show that differences inside a group are often more prevalent than differences between groups - “Sorting” activity: students answer to 6 questions highlighting how there are similarities and differences among the students - Introducing the idea that differences exist, but they are continuous, not categorial - Homework: thinking about some stereotypes associated with one’s cultural group - Reflections</p>
<p>3 - “Stories of our past” -</p>	<p>- Journaling: students think of an episode where they have not been treated based on a stereotype</p>	<p>- Review of the topics of the past session - Activity “I am ... and I am not ...”: on a piece of paper, students</p>

<p><i>“Storie dal nostro passato”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discrimination: introducing the concept of discrimination and confronting it with stereotyping - Stories from our past: reading of 8 episodes of discrimination of people with different cultural backgrounds, all happened in the US. Students need to make hypotheses on the cultural origins of the protagonists of the stories, which is revealed later on. The use of 8 different stories aims to create a sense of community among students - Review of the topics of the previous sessions - Reflections 	<p>write down the culture they identify with, and on the other side they write a stereotype associated with their cultural group that they do not personally identify with</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discrimination: definition, types of discrimination, confronting it with stereotyping Stories from our past: reading of 5 episodes of discrimination of people with different cultural backgrounds, regarding Italian history. Students need to make hypotheses on the cultural origins of the protagonists of the stories, which is revealed later. The use of 8 different stories aims to create a sense of community among students - Reflections
<p>4 - “Symbols, Traditions and Rites of Passage” - <i>“Simboli, tradizioni e riti di passaggio”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introducing “family mapping” to be realised in the following session - Defining symbols, traditions, rites of passage and rituals - Increasing exploration and knowledge of the students’ cultural origins - Explaining the complexity and variety of family structures - Homework: completing the “family mapping package” asking one’s relatives, adults of reference, friends, siblings, or cousins about one’s cultural origins - Reflections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review of the topics of the previous sessions - Defining symbols, traditions, rites of passage and rituals - Linguistic-cultural mediation: intervention from an external professional - Activity “Language and identity”: research and sharing in small groups about proverbs and sayings from one’s culture of origin - Reflections
<p>5 - “My mapping family” - <i>“L’albero della famiglia”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Explaining that there are no “right” or “wrong” family structures - Realising one’s mapping family: students can create their own map in the shape of a circle or a pyramid, adding their family members and their respective cultural origins - Sharing in couples - Observation of peers’ family mappings - Class discussion - Homework: think about 10 symbols of one’s culture(s), photograph them or find pictures that represent them - Reflections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review of the topics of the previous sessions - Homework: think about 4 symbols of one’s culture(s), photograph them or find pictures that represent them - Explaining that many different types of families exist and each one influences someone’s definition of their own cultural identity - Activity “Family trees”: students create a list of people who have influenced them from a cultural viewpoint, then they draw a tree and add the names for the list to the tree, together with everyone’s cultural heritage - Sharing in small groups - Concept: each one of us has a unique background

<p>6 -“Photo processing and storyboards” - “Dalle foto alle parole”</p>	<p>- Presenting and sharing pictures: students present one of the pictures and explain why they find it important, then they discuss the similarities they found in groups - Storyboards: each participant creates a collage with the pictures they brought - Homework: interview a family member or a member of the community who is important to their cultural origin(s) - Reflections</p>	<p>- Reflections - Review of the topics of the previous sessions - Homework: interview a person from one’s own culture - Activity “Cultural symbols and where to find them”: students share the picture of the cultural symbols they chose in small groups - Reflections</p>
<p>7 - “Ethnic-racial identity as a journey” - “Il viaggio dell’identità culturale”</p>	<p>- Reflecting and discussing on the interviews conducted at home - Watching a video: 3 people discuss how their cultural identity changed throughout time. It is highlighted that there is no “right” or “wrong” journey - Reflecting on one’s own cultural identity journey - Homework: bringing something typical that represents one’s own cultural origin(s) - Reflections</p>	<p>- Explaining the following sessions - Reflection and discussion on the interviews conducted at home - Review of the characteristics of cultural identity - Watching a video: 8 people discuss how their cultural identity changed throughout time. It is highlighted that there is no “right” or “wrong” journey - Class discussion based on everyone’s thoughts after watching the video - Reflections</p>
<p>8 - “Grand Finale: Celebrations and closing” - “Gran finale”</p>	<p>- Brief review of the themes of the sessions - Sharing materials with visitors: “I am” cards, storyboards, and typical elements from one’s culture(s)</p>	<p>- Decorating the classroom using all the materials created during the sessions - Cruciboo: students divide in two team helping one another to guess the words in a crossword puzzle. The words are all related to the themes of the Project - “The last word”: students write on a post-it a comment on the <i>Identity Project</i></p>

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"Ci guadagno," disse la volpe, "il colore del grano."