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The Identity Project intervention as a way to promote adolescents' cultural identity development: long-term effects and moderation by family ethnic socialization

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"CAESAR: Pardon him, Theodotus: he is a barbarian, and thinks that the customs of his tribe and island are the laws of nature."

George Bernard Shaw, 1956, p.54

Introduction

Multiculturalism in Italy, as in the rest of Europe, has now become a given phenomenon of reality. From an emergency phase focused on initial reception, today the focus is increasingly moving towards the promotion of well-being in everyday life contexts for people with first and second generation migration backgrounds. School offers the best context in which to catalyze these processes of change and promotion of well-being, because it is a primary place of socialization, acculturation and intercultural contact (Schachner, 2019). On a national scale, students with non-Italian citizenship makeup 10.3% of the total student population reflecting the multicultural nature of Italy's educational system (MI, 2022a). These data highlight the changing needs of pupils from immigrant families, who are faced with the challenge of finding a personal synthesis and positive relationship between the heritage and majority culture (Erentaitė et al., 2018).

Adolescence is a crucial period in which individuals develop their sense of identity, including cultural identity, which plays an essential role in shaping their psychosocial well-being. To support the positive development of adolescents' cultural identity and related psychological constructs, school-based interventions such as the *Identity Project* (IP) have been implemented. This thesis aims to explore the efficacy of the IP intervention on adolescents' cultural identity, global cohesion of personal identity and self-esteem, and the potential moderating effect of familial ethnic socialization on

these associations. We also collected qualitative feedback from students on these topics during focus groups conducted after the intervention was implemented.

The IP curriculum is designed to provide adolescents with opportunities for considering how they feel about their culture and for reflecting on how others view their culture through the analysis of the mechanisms behind stereotypes, discrimination, and intergroup conflict. It aims to facilitate a deeper understanding of one's cultural background, values, and beliefs, fostering a positive sense of self and connection to their heritage culture(s). Through various activities and discussions, participants engage in a process of self- and other-discovery, challenging stereotypes, and building a more cohesive cultural identity.

The thesis is structured into 6 chapters. The first offers a historical reconstruction of the evolution of the migratory phenomenon in Italy, the phenomenology of generations of migrants and data concerning the Italian school. Chapter 2 presents a literature review concerning cultural identity content dimensions, namely centrality, private regard, and public regard, as well as that concerning personal identity, self-esteem and familial ethnic socialization. The third chapter describes previous implementations and evidence of efficacy of the IP in different countries, including Italy. Chapter 4 presents the methodology of the current study, including the research questions, participants, procedure and measures, as well as the analytic approach. Chapter 5 describes the results of the analyses in relation to our research questions, which will be discussed in light of the current literature on cultural identity development in chapter 6 together with the study limitations and applied implications.

CHAPTER 1

IMMIGRATION AND THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

1.1 Contemporary history of immigration in Italy

"*We asked for workers. We got people instead.*"

Beth Lyon, 2016

Worldwide, the phenomenon of migration poses both possibilities and difficulties for both migrants and residents of receiving cultures. Approximately 184 million individuals reside in countries other than their nation of origin, with roughly 20% of this group being classified as refugees (Albu, 2023), and with immigration in Asia and in Europe showing the highest increase (United Nations Population Division, 2022). Nowadays, many established democracies have witnessed a steady increase in the number of immigrants and a rise in populism, extreme right-wing parties, and related violence as well (Dennison & Geddes, 2019).

The demographics of multicultural contexts such as Europe are changing, such that everyday life is becoming more and more entangled with that of foreign residents every year. King (1993) brought up the problem of immigration population living in Italy, where, he claimed, the immigrant population faced a variety of challenges and injustices, such as resentment from the native population, exploitation at work, and poor living conditions of housing. As claimed by Ricucci (2021), the "*useful invading*" migrants have played a significant role in social transformation by introducing traditions and customs to the areas where they settle, frequently over the course of many

generations, into the social structure of the host nation until they reach the top step, which is to become citizens and ultimately “natives”. The author stresses how almost 50% of Europeans in 2016 (compared to 14% in 2010) said that immigration was the biggest issue. Additionally, polling results and media reports indicate that little changed throughout the course of the following years.

Italy's status as a destination for immigration was being explored already from the mid-1970s: From being a country of massive emigration until the sixties, it was becoming a country of mass immigration (King, 1993). According to Ricucci (2021), in the last thirty years, Italy has undergone a significant transformation in its migration patterns. It has shifted from being a nation primarily characterized by emigration to becoming a country that attracts substantial inflows of migrants from both outside and within the European Union. As in this latter case, according to Ambrosini (2015), around half of the foreign residents (around two million, equal to 49.3%) come from Eastern European countries: In particular, around a quarter come from the new EU countries (around one million), excluding Cyprus and Malta, of which 888.000 from Romania alone, while another quarter is represented by citizens of Eastern European countries not belonging to the EU.

As a result, the population of individuals with immigrant backgrounds has experienced rapid growth, constituting a significant and integral part of Italian society, estimated to be around 10% (Ricucci, 2021). *In nuce*, the Italian socio-cultural environment has changed significantly in recent years due to an increase in the frequency of immigration and the resulting increase in the proportion of immigrants in

the social fabric (Ferrari et al., 2014). As of August 27th, 2023, Italy, compared to Greece, Spain, Cypro, and Malta, is the arrival destination of 73% of all migrants coming through the sea (UNHCR, 2023). According to the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT, 2023), in terms of internal migration, there has been a slight rise in overall movements in 2022: The migratory movements returned at pre-pandemic levels. According to the Minister of Interior (MINT, 2023), during the period from January to August 2023, the influx of arrivals has increased by 103% compared to the same period in 2022: The arrivals since January are almost 41.000.

Between 1970 and 1980, while Italy's economy was booming, many foreign workers came to the country, mostly from North Africa and Southern Europe, as temporary guests to fill labor shortages. Since the second part of the 1990s, immigrant labor has been a structural element of the Italian labor market (Riva & Zanfrini, 2013). Italy has resorted to immigration to meet its labor demands in response to worries about the effects of an aging population and, more importantly, because several industries, such as manufacturing, cleaning, hotels, social and domestic services, health, and long-term care, are seeing a rising lack of low-skilled workers.

Nowadays, it might be said that immigrants do much more than they were expected to do in the past ("worker-peasants", King, 1993, p. 291). In addition, they have to submit to the "complementary paradigm". Based on this, immigrants should be complementary, never substituted by the locals, performing tasks that locals find uninteresting. As Riva and Zanfrini (2013) put it, "Whoever has a job may enter the country; more precisely, a job that we do not want to do" (p. 2).

In 1990, the Martelli Law was introduced as a formal measure primarily focused on refugees and displaced persons, aiming to expand and clarify their status as well as their right to political asylum. However, the second part of the law also addressed the urgent need to regulate the significant increase in migration flows during the 1980s (Ambrosini, 2015). This was done through state planning, aiming to manage the entry of non-EU foreigners based on the country's economic needs and employment opportunities. It is worth noting that the legislation consistently approached immigration from an economic standpoint. Furthermore, the Martelli Law introduced penalties, including imprisonment and fines, for combating illegal immigration. Although these penalties were relatively lenient at the time, when compared to the current ones, they marked a significant step forward. The penalties ranged from imprisonment for up to two years or fines of up to two million old Italian lire, which increased to imprisonment for up to six years and fines ranging from ten to fifty million lire in cases involving conspiracy or profit.

From the 1970s, when the phenomenon was steadily and slowly taking space in the analogical as well as the mediatic world, the image of immigration received more attention and consequently there were more opinions on it. According to Ambrosini (2015), migration phenomena were often seen in a negative light, and the echoes of this perception still persist in today's public discourse (for a sociological examination, see Zamora‐Kapoor et al., 2013). Immigration was predominantly portrayed as a social challenge burdening a nation already grappling with various difficulties. Italy regarded itself as a country plagued by persistent unemployment, lacking resources to share with

those arriving from abroad in search of a better life. Public funds were allocated to address emergency situations through the establishment of large reception centers, as well as to facilitate the repatriation of immigrants through "return projects" and vocational training initiatives. Consequently, seemingly reasonable arguments like "let's assist them in their home countries" gained significant traction, spanning from the early stages of the phenomenon up to the present day.

Many immigrants traveled across the Mediterranean in perilous and hazard-filled conditions from North Africa, mainly Tunisia and Libya. Multiple humanitarian crises and difficulties in controlling migratory flows resulted from this. In the Central Mediterranean migration route, from January until today, the number of deaths in the sea reached 1064 (Missing Migrants Project, 2023). According to ISTAT (2022a), 14.900 immigrants who entered Italy in 2021 were from Tunisia, Egypt and Bangladesh. The total number of migrants who entered Italy between January and November reached almost 60.000. The majority of migrant deaths and reports of migrants going missing globally occurred in the Mediterranean Sea. Compared to the Western and the Eastern route, the Central Mediterranean Route, which travels from Greece to Italy, is known for having the most deaths of all the Mediterranean routes (Black et al., 2016). Along this route, people can travel from North Africa to Malta and then on to Italy. Libya is the primary nation of departure, with Tunisia, Egypt, and East Algeria making up the smaller coastlines.

The false assumptions regarding the extent of the issue have led to broad support for laws that restrict immigration (Torelli, 2020). For instance, the Decree-Law on

Immigration and Security, entered into force in 2018, marked a significant setback in the structure of the Italian migrant protection system: It significantly undermines the legal safeguards and provisions intended for migrants in Italy, particularly those who are seeking asylum (Gentilucci, 2020; Nanni & Biggeri, 2021). Going back to this decree would mean moving towards increased unlawfulness, marginalization, and exclusion: Traits diverging from the intentions with the implementation of the security decree. In 2020, there were some modifications of the decree and the system has been brought back to the previous configuration (Openpolis, 2022). However, the decree kept the emergency approach to the migratory phenomenon, although it should be considered as a structural dimension of today's society.

Ambrosini (2015) claims that foreign immigration creates a "mirror effect" in relation to Italian society. According to this author, there is a unique revelatory role of immigration: The entry, employment integration, and establishment of foreign-born individuals on Italian soil have unveiled inherent characteristics, economic disparities, and social contradictions within the Italian nation. In recent years, Italy has experienced shifts in political dynamics, with the rise of anti-immigration sentiments and the emergence of populist movements. Italy's immigration problem has sparked questions about multiculturalism, human rights, integration, and identity. The nation is still attempting to reconcile the effective management of migration flows with the preservation of migrants' rights (Camilli, 2023) as it deals with the potential and problems of immigration. The “hospitality’s schizophrenia” (Gramaglia, 2008) seems to

be still the appropriate definition to describe how this complex historical-socio-cultural phenomenon is being handled in Italy.

1.2 Generations of migrants

Italy has been experiencing a notable rise in the number of immigrants, accompanied by a significant shift in the ethnic composition of various groups and the establishment of more permanent settlements (ISTAT, 2022). The great amnesty of autumn 2002 is one of the reasons for the phenomenon of family reunifications and births in Italy that has led to an increase in the immigrant population. Subsequent amnesties legalized other immigrants, while other migrants continued to enter irregularly, having no other opportunities (Ambrosini, 2015).

Furthermore, the free movement of workers from countries that have joined the European Union has transformed some of the immigrants into full-fledged European citizens. This transformation can be attributed to factors such as family reunification and the growing population of children born and raised in Italy to immigrant parents (Corchia, 2015). Essentially, over the past decade, the increase in migration flows and the stabilization processes have led to a transformation of labor-oriented immigration into a more permanent, settlement-oriented immigration in Italy.

In this context, exploring the phenomenon of the second generation is a crucial issue in defining the social integration of receiving societies. As noted by Corchia (2015), a "narrow" definition of the second generation only includes young people born in Italy to foreign parents, but in this historical phase of migratory development, it

would be short-sighted not to mention the children of family reunifications, who are the ones most compelled to navigate multiple cultural references. These references range from those of their country of origin reproduced within the family space to those of the host society, mediated by school, peer groups, media, and so forth.

Rumbaut (1997) differentiated between those who (a) arrive in the host country when they are aged between 0 and 5 years, (b) have lived and have been socialized by the family and in school in the home country, but finish the school education in the settlement country, and (c) arrive during their middle adolescence (13-17 years old). This differentiation describes a continuum of experiences and challenges in the lives of individuals born to foreign parents in the receiving country and of those who arrive later in life after being socialized in their country of origin. The crucial factor that influences their integration into the local socio-cultural and economic context is the age at which they arrive. For instance, their age of arrival might affect their ability to form connections with their Italian peers.

The immigrant generations differ in terms of age of arrival, distance from the settlement country, cultural background, geographic country of origin, knowledge and mastery of the new language. These differences impact psychological, sociological and academic factors differently. For instance, although there is evidence indicating that immigrants perform academically worse than natives (Dimitrova et al., 2016) and are underrepresented in academic settings (Borgonovi & Marconi, 2020), the "immigrant" group is not homogenous, and there is no linear relation. In particular, Azzolini and Barone (2013) explored differences in educational outcomes between immigrants and

natives in the Italian upper secondary education system (students aged 15-19 years). The findings revealed a significant educational gap between native students and children of immigrants, but this gap was most prominent among first-generation youths, decreased for the second generation, and disappeared for children of mixed couples.

These broad generational patterns mask a highly heterogeneous situation. Some national-origin groups that were initially disadvantaged (such as East Asians) catched up with native students in the second generation, while others (like North Africans) are still struggling. Therefore, according to Cingano (2014), the full integration into Italian society is achieved through diverse patterns rather than a linear progression. This depends on cultural background, first or second and beyond generational status, and these aspects are intertwined with social class: The educational success of immigrants' children stems not only from their own acculturation process, but also from the socioeconomic integration of their parents. Indeed, in the abovementioned study, nearly half of the gap among the first generation and over 70% among the second generation was explained by social class. However, this influence varies significantly across national-origin groups. The relative impact of social origins is stronger for the least disadvantaged groups, suggesting that the substantial challenges faced by the most severely disadvantaged groups may be attributed to linguistic and cultural factors (Cingano, 2014).

Immigrant communities are heterogeneous, and various national-origin groups experience different levels of integration and adaptation. Some groups demonstrate remarkable progress and catch up with native populations, while others continue to face

challenges and lag behind (Azzolini & Barone, 2013). When formulating policies and initiatives aimed at supporting immigrant generations, like the school-based intervention described in this thesis, this is fundamental, since it takes in consideration intersectional factors such as social class, ethnicity, and cultural background.

1.3 Intercultural schools

According to ISTAT (2022b), by the start of January 2020, Italy had a population of more than one million children who were second-generation in the narrow sense (born in Italy to foreign parents). Among this group, over 228.000 individuals, constituting 22.7%, had obtained Italian citizenship. The countries of origin of students with non-Italian citizenship are 200 (MI, 2022a, p.26). Among these, some communities are more represented than others. Almost half of the students come from European countries (44.95%): Roughly one-third of the total number of them comes from Romania and Albania, Moldavia adolescents follow these two. The remaining half is split almost equally between those with African origins (26.9%) and Asian origins (20.2%). The Moroccan student community, with around 109.000 pupils (12.6%), is the largest among African countries and ranks third in overall numbers in Italy. Following closely behind is Egypt, with nearly 31.000 students, making it the second largest African country in terms of student representation. In regard to the students with Asian origins, Chinese students are the most represented, followed by the Indian students.

The presence of students with non-Italian citizenship in Italian schools varies significantly across different regions. According to the Ministry of Education (MI,

2022a), in the school year 2020/2021, the majority of these students were concentrated in the northern regions, accounting for 65.3% of the total. The central regions follow with 22.2%, while the southern regions have a relatively lower percentage of 12.5%. This highlights the uneven distribution of immigrant students across the country. On a national scale, students with non-Italian citizenship makeup 10.3% of the total student population, reflecting the multicultural nature of Italy's educational system. After Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna, Veneto is the Italian region with the most students not having Italian citizenship. In particular, in Veneto the number of students without Italian citizenship is almost 95.000, 68% of these (i.e. 68.432) were born in Italy, making second generation students the majority of foreign students. In Padua, the number of students with immigrant background is 18.000, with adolescents with Romanian origins or coming from Romania being the most substantial number (MI, 2022a).

In the 2020/2021 school year, there has been a decline in the number of students with non-Italian citizenship attending schools in Italy, marking the first decrease since reliable statistical data was collected in 1983/1984 (MI, 2022a). The current count stands at 865.388 students, which is 11.000 fewer than the previous year, reflecting a decrease of 1.3%. Nevertheless, the number of students with non-Italian citizenship enrolled in upper secondary schools reached approximately 218.000, showing a significant 6.4% increase (+13.034 units) compared to the previous year (MI, 2022a). Overall, this data highlights that the upper secondary level of education is particularly dynamic in terms of attracting students with non-Italian citizenship and fostering diversity within the Italian educational system.

The selection of an educational path in the upper secondary level has a critical role in shaping individuals' educational and career trajectories, and migration background has its influence on this decision-making process. The place of birth is another factor that affects the decisions made by students who do not have Italian citizenship regarding high school choice (MI, 2022a). In contrast to students born overseas who select vocational institutes, students with non-Italian citizenship born in Italy are more inclined to pursue technical institutes and general high schools. Among them, there is a movement in preferences in favor of educational routes typically seen as more difficult and advanced. In addition, it is noteworthy that the secondary school choice, dropout rate, and delay are influenced by gender among Italian as well as foreign students, with girls performing better than their male peers.

In detail, at the end of lower secondary school in the 2019/2020 academic year, a substantial majority of students with non-Italian citizenship (82.4%) decided to continue their education in upper secondary school, while a smaller percentage (9.6%) opted for vocational training. When looking at the distribution of students with a migration background in different types of upper secondary schools, vocational institutes have the highest representation (12.5%), followed by technical institutes (9.3%), and finally, lyceums (4.7%). As regards the country of birth, a significant proportion of students born in Italy (39.6%) chose to enroll in technical institutes, while 35.7% opted for lyceums. The remaining 24.7% of students pursued their education in vocational institutes. However, students with non-Italian citizenship who were born in Italy showed

a greater tendency to attend technical institutes and lyceums compared to those born abroad.

The data also show a sudden termination of school attendance between the ages of 17 and 18 (MI, 2022a). It must be considered that in Italy the age of 16 years is crucial, since starting from this age, attending school is not mandatory. In fact, in the final two years of secondary school, pupils having citizenships other than Italian had a lower percentage of attendance, being, in the two-year period 2020/2021, 73.2% vs. 81.1% (MI, 2022a). Consequently, one-third of students with non-Italian citizenship do not experience a more broad and complete educational path that is necessary for joining the workforce. Boys are the target which suffers more from this drop-out: While the index for 17-year-olds falls from 94% to 66%, the decline in the schooling rate for females is far less, decreasing from 98% to 82%.

The gap between natives and second generation kids is not solely educational. Results from the PISA-INVALSI survey (cited in Caponera & Palmerio, 2019) emphasize that, along with educational disparity, students with migration backgrounds feel less connected to their school and face more instances of victimization compared to their native Italian counterparts. Therefore, interventions within the educational system should not be restricted to teaching Italian and academic matters alone. It is important to promote integration and psychological welfare by cultivating a positive classroom environment. In this context, a program such as the IP proves to be suitable for addressing these requirements, as also indicated in the 'Intercultural Guidelines' document recently issued by the Ministry of Education (MI, 2022b).

CHAPTER 2

CULTURAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN ADOLESCENCE

2.1 Personal identity

"In the social jungle of human existence,
there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity"

Erik Erikson, 1974

Identity development has long been seen as a fundamental component of personal growth and psychological health. Benish-Weisman and colleagues (2015) stress how during adolescence, both social and cognitive changes take place, with identity formation being one of the most significant. In his illuminating book "Identity: Youth and Crisis", Erikson (1974) emphasizes the value of identity formation throughout adolescence, the difficulties people encounter in creating a cohesive identity, and the influence of societal forces on this process ("the vortices generated by historical forces and by their own inner worlds", p. 304, Jacobsen, 2021). It continues to be a seminal work in the area of developmental psychology, offering insightful knowledge into the complexity of adolescence and identity. He proposes a psychohistorical perspective, pointing out how the problem of identity itself changes according to the historical moment within it.

Erikson considers the end of childhood to be a third identity crisis, and this crisis is to be considered a normative developmental milestone, a psycho-social task of adolescence. For the first time, youths have to depend solely on themselves, and this when they are going through physical, cognitive, and emotional changes as well as

changes related to their role in the community and society (Erikson, 1974). Remarkably, adolescence is a period characterized by major functional development of the social brain. Blakemore (2008) reviewed evidence about the social brain and concluded that some of its main areas undergo functional and structural changes. Indeed, during adolescence, individuals start to develop some of the important social skills necessary to be considered social beings, such as the ability to recognize conspecifics and comprehend the feelings, intentions, and beliefs of others, which continues to develop throughout adolescence.

The process of finding one's identity can be complex. This holds especially during the "ecological transition" from middle school to high school, in which the modification of the environmental situation leads to a modification of the role and expectations related to the adolescent's role in society (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Adolescents may revisit and redefine their identity multiple times as they mature and encounter new life challenges. When a person has not committed to or explored their identity, Marcia (1966) talks about role confusion or identity diffusion. Erikson (1974) spoke about *identity confusion*, meaning a loss of the barycenter, where the adolescent is not able to synthesize the various roles s/he has and is overwhelmed by handling them separately. This viewpoint is consistent with Campbell and her associates (2003, cited in Usborne & De La Sablonnière, 2014), who discovered that psychological well-being is more strongly correlated with self-concept clarity than with self-concept plurality.

On the other hand, according to Marcia (1966), *identity confusion* does not necessarily occur in the form of a crisis, as it could actually stem from a lack of

commitment: The individual seems not to be interested in exploring the occupational role, nor does s/he seem concerned about not finding it. When an occupation is found, it is not secure: The adolescent seems to follow contextual cues, rather than a solid vocation.

In developing relationships with their peers and with other leading figures out-side the familial context, teenagers can develop and explore a variety of facets of their identity, including gender, sexual orientation, ethnic or cultural heritage, and personal interests. Identity depends on the support that youths receive from significant social groups that promote a positive collective sense of identity: The classroom, nation, and culture. Nevertheless, the process of identity formation is a continuous effort of defining, re-defining oneself and others in comparisons and in multiple micro- and macro-contexts: family identity, ethnic identity, gender identity as well as academic or vocational identity.

The conclusion of the identity formation process is a cohesive sense of identity that is strong enough to be decisive for the rest of one's life, and a role accepted in the community; together, these achievements contribute to the adolescent's psychosocial social well-being (Erikson, 1974). In Erikson's opinion, when the person is able to synthesize childhood identifications, s/he can build a reciprocal relationship with their community and preserve a sense of continuity within him or herself (identity synthesis).

Personal identity is closely tied to an individual's emotional well-being. Adolescents who have a positive and coherent sense of identity tend to experience higher self-esteem, greater psychological well-being, a stronger sense of purpose and

higher performance results (Marcia, 1966; Stankov & Crawford, 1997). Conversely, identity confusion or a lack of clarity can lead to feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, and identity crises, or ultimately to psychopathology (Demir et al., 2009). There are numerous benefits behind shaping and forming an identity. Recent theorizing by Campbell and her colleagues (1996, cited in Usborne & De La Sablonnière, 2014) proposes a conceptualization of personal identity as consisting of two fundamental aspects. The first aspect is the *knowledge component*, which pertains to the understanding of one's own identity and is reflected in the answer to the question "who am I?". This encompasses the unique qualities and traits that define an individual. The second aspect is the *evaluative* or *esteem component*, which addresses the question of one's self-worth. It involves the overall evaluation an individual makes regarding their personal characteristics. According to Campbell (1990, cited in Usborne & De La Sablonnière, 2014), there is a positive correlation between knowledge and evaluative aspects of the self-concept. Thus, having a well-defined understanding of oneself, which is the goal of this developmental stage, is associated with feeling positively about one's own self.

It is crucial to remember that defining one's own identity is a highly personal and subjective process. Each person's experience is different, even if there are similar themes and difficulties related to teenage identity formation. During adolescence, encouraging circumstances, an open mind, and chances for self-expression and exploration can help young people build healthy personal identities.

2.2 Cultural identity

"That which bound me to Judaism [...] was not my faith, nor was it national pride; for I was always an unbeliever, raised without religion [...] there remained enough other things to make the attraction of Judaism and Jews irresistible—many dark emotional forces, all the more potent for being so hard to grasp in words, as well as the clear consciousness of an inner identity, the intimacy that comes from the same psychic structure"

Sigmund Freud, 1979

Once immigrants settle in a new society, their concept of self changes over time. According to Berry and colleagues (2022), when migrants first arrive, they have a strong feeling of their identity as citizens of their nation of origin. As soon as they enter the host context, their identification is enhanced to varied degrees. This happens since they may acquire the new language, comprehend the traditions, and obtain citizenship. The modifications in the multicultural dynamics change the sense of cultural group membership as a whole: They start to see themselves not just belonging to a specific identity or the other, but to a broader cultural identity group (ethnocultural group), for instance starting to use double ethnic labels (e.g., Afro-Americans).

In the late 1990s, mainstream developmental psychology started to recognize the acquisition of culture as a crucial component in development (Romero & Roberts, 1998): The necessity to investigate the impact of ethnocultural factors on youth development was brought up at the time, and investigated by many scholars since then. Its conceptualizations are based on theories that emphasize the connections between social identities, such as race, ethnicity and culture, and individuals' social behaviors, decision-making processes, and self-concept. Both Erikson's (1974) theory of

psychosocial development and Tajfel's (1979) social identity theory have served as the foundation for a large portion of developmental research that has investigated ethnic identification among teenagers.

The concept of cultural identity is intertwined with social identity theory. Tajfel and Turner (1984) posited that a person's self-image, which is generated from social categories, includes their social identity. Tajfel (1984) defines social identity (i.e., the assumption of identity in socially defined terms) as "that part of an individual's self-concept that arises from their awareness of being a member of one or more social groups, along with the emotional significance connected to this membership status" (p. 375). Hence, according to this theory, a person's self-concept is largely shaped by their social identities, and as a consequence in order to preserve their self-esteem, people turn to how their in-groups see them.

Since ethnic groupings may be viewed as social groups, cultural identity can be compared to social identity and so be one sort of group identification that has an impact on how ethnic group members perceive themselves (Romero & Roberts, 1998). As a result, those who uphold positive definitions of group membership will also demonstrate good self-esteem. However, if the social environment in which people live does not place importance on the ethnic group and people encounter bias or discrimination, they may display lower self-esteem than members of groups who do not have these experiences (Tajfel, 1981, cited in Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004).

Over the past few decades, research on ethnic and racial identity has expanded quickly, as an essential part of the normal growth of ethnic minority kids, showing that

the evolution of children's and adolescents' understanding of these two tends to follow parallel paths (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Ethnic minority kids experience two transitions: Psychological and sociological. As claimed by Berry and colleagues (2022), immigrant adolescents, like youth everywhere, must manage the change from infancy to maturity. Whilst it varies depending on culture, nearly all young people experience this. Additionally, like the initial migrants, second-generation adolescents must navigate the two cultural worlds of their peers, schools, and the larger society alongside their own families and cultural communities.

Before proceeding with the analysis of the construct, a terminological clarification is necessary. The scientific US literature commonly employs the meta-construct "ethnic-racial identity" (ERI), amalgamating racial, ethnic, and cultural components within this overarching framework, defining it as “a multidimensional, psychological construct that reflects the beliefs and attitudes that individuals have about their ethnic–racial group memberships, as well as the processes by which these beliefs and attitudes develop over time” (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014, p.3). An ethnic group's members are identified by their shared exposure to cultural components. Ethnic group membership is a key social context which impacts the formation of a self-identity (Umaña-Taylor, 2002). According to the author, ethnic identity relates to how people perceive and comprehend their ethnicity and, specifically, how strongly they identify with their ethnic group. Ethnic identity formation is a process that happens over time as people consider and come to conclusions about the significance of their ethnicity in their lives.

In this study, the term ERI is replaced by the unified term "cultural identity". “Culture” integrates tangible items, subjective experiences, ideas, and conventions in a more inclusive way than ethnicity. This choice aligns with the perspective highlighted by Juang and colleagues (2020) during the adaptation of the IP to the German context, and is motivated by the fact that in Europe, the terms "race" and "ethnicity" are heavily stigmatized due to the race-based atrocities committed during World War 2 (Möschel, 2011). In addition, in a subsequent paper, Juang and colleagues (2021) explained they used the phrase "heritage cultural identity" as they found it applicable to describe a concept that largely resembles ethnic-racial identity, but differs from it. Additionally, the phrase makes use of clear and significant words for German teenagers that they are familiar with, such as "culture" and "heritage". The first recognizes the importance of religious background in Germany by taking into consideration the intersection between religion and cultural or national identities, whereas the second,"heritage", helps to clarify the significance of lineage and family. Therefore, the use of the term "cultural identity" enables the inclusion of all aspects in which the *ethnos* is manifested as a "symbolic complex experienced by various peoples as constitutive of their identity and as a principle of social cohesion" (Tullio-Altan, 1995, p. 21).

Cultural identity is a complex concept that involves various aspects. According to Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2014), it includes the developmental stages wherein individuals explore and gain a clear understanding of their background(s) (processes), as well as the beliefs and emotions they hold regarding their affiliation with their ethnic-racial group (contents). The processes are considered to be exploration and

resolution, whereas contents refer to the diverse ways in which individuals interpret and give significance to their membership in an ethnic group. It also considers how these interpretations can influence individuals' social behaviors and beliefs. The content includes salience, centrality, private regard (or affirmation), and public regard. Overlooked in the scientific literature, the latter dimensions are the focus of this thesis.

Salience refers to the degree to which one's ethnicity is relevant to one's self-concept in a given situation. The particular situation the person finds themselves in and the extent this person's ethnicity is a relevant domain in his/her self-concept are important factors that come into play. As a result, ethnicity has a different impact on people in the same scenario than it does on different people in various settings. It is interesting to note that adolescence is the life stage where the salience of cultural identity reaches its highest levels (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

Centrality is defined as "the level of importance that individuals place on their ethnic-racial background within their overall self-concept" (Sellers et al., 1998 cited in Wantchekon et al., 2021a, p .443). It encompasses how much a person values his/her ethnicity or race as a component of their identity and - as it increases - leads to higher levels of affirmation and exploration (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). As ethnicity plays a significant role in the lives of adolescents, and thus it becomes more central to their identity, their motivation to explore their ethnic-racial identity increases, leading to a stronger sense of connection with their ethnic group. This stronger sense of connection may not always translate into greater adjustments, but it could generate polarized feelings, so that young individuals are more inclined to recount narratives involving

either instances of discrimination they have faced, or moments when they experienced a deep connection with their cultural heritage. The components of salience and centrality, together with the particular situational setting, may all play a role in the relationships between affirmation and adjustment (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

The two aspects of *regard*, namely public and private regard, represent emotional evaluations of one's ethnic group. In an integrated conceptualization, Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2014) suggest that public regard pertains to how individuals perceive the societal view of their group, whether positively or negatively. On the other hand, private regard involves individuals' personal emotional stance towards their group and their sense of belonging to it. Thus, they pertain to the emotions (positive or negative) a person experiences concerning their cultural group: These emotions can involve how others outside the group view it (public regard) or be of a personal and intimate nature (private regard). The literature reports that high levels of centrality and private regard correlate with a person's positive psychosocial adaptation (Wantchekon & Umaña-Taylor, 2021b).

As adolescents progress in their cognitive development, particularly in the realm of formal operations, which includes metacognition or the capacity to introspectively analyze one's thoughts and actions, their sense of public regard begins to take form. Public regard stems from social identity theory, which emphasizes how individuals incorporate outgroups into their self-concept, using them for both comparison and as a way to gauge how others perceive their own groups (Tajfel, 1984). Phenomena like the model minority myth, a stereotype that portrays a specific minority group - often Asian

Americans - as exceptionally successful, hardworking, and achieving without acknowledging their diverse experiences and challenges (Truong, & Walton, 2023), can be considered as a particularly noteworthy display of public regard directed towards Asian American youth. On the other hand, stereotype threats (e.g., with Latinx students, see Umaña-Taylor et al., 2012) and identity self-denial are to be considered to be negative (Umaña‐Taylor et al., 2014).

While during early adolescence teenagers are more influenced by peer pressure, in the middle and later stages of their development, adolescents typically gain greater independence in decision-making both from their parents and their peers. This increasing autonomy may encourage middle and older adolescents to delve deeper into exploring their ethnicity instead of merely conforming to implicit expectations set by parental or peer socialization influences (Umaña‐Taylor et al., 2014), and so developing a personal private regard upon their culture(s). According to the authors, as adolescents experience more interactions outside their families and navigate the challenges that come with adolescence, their ethnicity and race become more noticeable to them, that is, it acquires more salience. Adolescents who have a resolute identity, that is to say who had the chance to explore and commit to a specific cultural identity or identities, tend to place the highest importance (salience) on their ethnicity in various situations.

According to Umaña‐Taylor and colleagues (2014), a more pronounced increase in private regard is noticeable in those who have a high achieved status, therefore when they have explored and committed to their cultural identity(ies). Another circumstance where private regard increases is when students go through school transitions, such as

moving from elementary to junior high school and from junior high to high school: The IP in Italy has been implemented in the first year of high school.

Finally, it should be noted that cultural identity is a remarkably complex and multidimensional part of human existence. Our sense of self and how we interact with the world around us are shaped by our beliefs, values, traditions, languages, and behaviors. Although a strong sense of belonging and pride may be derived from cultural identity, it is also susceptible to change, impacted by several causes like globalization, migration, and societal changes, and discrimination. In order to promote mutual understanding, respect, and communication across various groups, it is crucial to accept the diversity and depth of cultural identities.

2.3 Self-esteem

In the literature, self-esteem is mainly defined as the "individual's overall positive evaluation of the self" (Cast & Burke, 2002, p.1042), with people with "low" to "high" self-esteem being on a continuum. In the worst situations, people with low self-esteem deliberately despise and feel unworthy of themselves. On the other hand, people with high self-esteem are confident in themselves and their intrinsic value (Jordan et al., 2020).

Self-esteem is considered a crucial sign of overall psychological health, especially in teenagers, and it is one of the most relevant components of peoples' self-concept. According to William James (1890, cited in Stets & Burke, 2014), self-esteem is a result that depends on how one's accomplishments compare to their aspirations. Thus,

self-esteem is poor if one's goals or pretensions are higher than their accomplishments. Even if one had numerous triumphs, poor self-esteem would still manifest if one had even higher objectives. Similar to this, when one's expectations are even lower, little victories might result in strong self-esteem. Identity theorists have claimed that James' theories closely resemble Cast and Burke's (2002) concept of *identity verification*, in which a person's "pretensions" are equivalent to their identity standard and their "successes" are equivalent to how they believe others perceive them in the situation. Identity verification occurs when their standard and perception match, and this makes people feel happy.

Self-esteem has been found to be associated with various beneficial outcomes, both psychological and societal. Parents from Western countries are interested in promoting high self-esteem in their offspring, given the (mostly) desirable outcomes of high self-esteem in children and adolescents, particularly in domains such as academic success, social acceptability, and physical well-being (Jordan et al., 2020). Self-esteem has been investigated either as an *outcome* of certain processes capable of producing or inhibiting it (e.g., parental style;, for a meta-analysis on the topic, see Pinquart & Gerke, 2019), or as a *self-motivating* factor, in the tendency for people to act in ways that sustain or boost good views of oneself; moreover, it acts as a self-protective barrier against negative events, working as a *buffer*.

Self-esteem is seen to be a persistent personality trait, similar to shyness and intelligence, showing only modest, steady changes over extended periods of time (Orth & Robins, 2014). However, adolescence is a period of complex and dynamic social and

cognitive changes. The transition from childhood to adulthood, self-discovery, accelerated growth, increased autonomy, interactions between biology and culture, socialization, along with rapid biological, psychological, social, and cognitive changes are all hallmarks of adolescence, which is regarded as a distinguished developmental phase (Szcześniak et al., 2022). Self-esteem is a critical factor during development, since it has been found that, when low, teenagers are more likely to have depressive symptoms (Masselink et al., 2018). Being able to handle the complexity and fragility of this period is critical for development, where the "feeling that one is 'good enough" (Rosenberg, 1965, p. 31) is not always experienced.

Adolescents live in contexts rich in social groups where they play different social roles: They are students, they are sons or daughters, sisters or brothers, and they might belong to a specific nationality different from the one of the majority group. Adolescents belonging to an ethnic minority share as many contexts as the majority group and even more. These social groups could be stigmatized, disadvantaged: In these adolescents, the link between self-esteem and social identification is particularly salient in a period of personal and social identity development. In Social Identity Theory, social identification (i.e., the subjective feeling of belonging to a certain group) is one of a person's most important aspects of identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1984). Being identified with a cultural group considerably enhances psychological health (Benish-Weisman et al., 2015). Indeed, when people describe themselves, they do so considering themselves - at least in part - as members of a specific social group so that personal identity

incorporates these groups' beneficial qualities, which improves positive self-evaluation and self-esteem.

During adolescence, as youth reflect on and become more conscious of their social affiliations and the external evaluations connected with them, social identification becomes particularly crucial in building self-esteem. Benish-Weisman and colleagues (2015) found that, if just one social identification is positively associated with self-esteem in youth, the more memberships we have in our social context (i.e., "multisocial identification"), the better. In fact, we experience more feelings of security - as this type of identification works as a buffer - and higher self-esteem levels. Adolescents who belong to an ethnic minority struggle with the development of their ethnic identity, which has a significant impact on their psychological well-being and is particularly evident during adolescence and the early stages of adulthood. In these periods, as youth reflect on and become more conscious of their social affiliations and the external evaluations connected with them, social identification becomes particularly crucial in building self-esteem.

2.4 Familial ethnic racial socialization

By the 1990s, interest in the process of racial and ethnic socialization among various ethnic minority groups had evolved exponentially (Umaña‐Taylor & Hill, 2020). According to Hughes and colleagues (2006), detailed portraits of African American families from the early 1980s revealed parents' worries that their kids would face racial barriers and unfavorable stereotypes. Together with these worries, narratives showed a corresponding emphasis on parents' attempts to foster high self-esteem, to instill racial

pride, and educate kids about bias. These parenting attempts are still relevant, since little seems to have changed.

The process of acquiring values and attitudes within the family and the degree to which adolescents embrace these values and attitudes are crucial aspects to investigate in order to understand how immigrant youth manage to live in two cultures. Indeed, within the family, adolescents learn the social behaviors, personal traits, beliefs, and adaptive patterns of conduct that are required by their heritage culture (Berry et al., 2022). However, once the family has moved, socialization loses the family as a primary source: Parents cannot rely on the new society to help with the cultural transmission of their own group's values. In addition, friends and education expose them to the ideals of their new society more and more. However, adolescents are probably more adaptable than their parents when it comes to immigrant families that must adjust to other cultures. According to Berry and colleagues (2022), intergenerational disparities emerge from the differing rates of acculturation experienced by parents and their offspring. For instance, teenagers' attitudes toward acculturation tend to encourage integration, but their parents' opinions could prefer separation, leading to dissonant acculturation.

An adolescent's family is the first social group with which they identify, giving them the chance to have a sense of belonging to a social group for the first time (Benish-Weisman et al., 2015). It is the primary source of socialization and transmission mechanism for values and worldviews, and the extent to which adolescents identify with their families has an impact on their development, thus the positive link to academic motivation and self-esteem. Christophe and colleagues (2022) consider

parental racial-ethnic socialization to be the set of "explicit and implicit beliefs and behaviors parents communicate to children to help them better understand the meaning and importance of their racial-ethnic group membership and the nature of racism and discrimination in their society" (p.177; for a more detailed conceptual frame, see Hughes et al., 2006). Umaña‐Taylor and colleagues (2009a) defined familial ethnic socialization (FES) as the "family members' contributions to the process of ethnic socialization" and ethnic socialization as a process thanks to which "children acquire behaviors, perceptions, values, and attitudes of an ethnic group and come to see themselves as members of the group" (p. 48).

FES might be overt or covert. Through the latter, parents may unknowingly be teaching their children about ethnicity: They do so by decorating their homes with items from their home country or engage in other common activities. On the other hand, the phenomenon of family members deliberately and explicitly seeking to teach teenagers about their ethnicity, for instance by purchasing books about the original nation and expecting teenagers to read them, is labeled as overt FES (Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2002).

The typologies of racial-ethinic socialization subsumed under the group of FES are considered to be four: (a) *Cultural socialization*, which consists of developing pride in one's ethnic/racial and cultural background through celebrating it, (b) *preparation for bias*, which is consistent in preparing teenagers for future experiences of discrimination and providing coping mechanisms, (c) *promotion of mistrust* of interethnic relationships, and (d) *egalitarianism*, which aims to highlight the equality of all groups (Wang, & Lin, 2023; for a more detailed explanation see Hughes et al., 2006).

Thus, the practices of FES can be grouped in two main conceptual frameworks. On one hand, cultural socialization is closely linked to the practices of preservation and transmission of culture. On the other hand, preparation for bias, promotion of mistrust, and egalitarianism refer to the strategies that parents teach their children to manage the devaluation of their own cultural group within society, experienced through discrimination and racism. On a theoretical level, these two types of socialization have different functions. In the first case, practices of preservation and transmission of culture aim to develop a strong cultural identity and a sense of pride in their cultural background which influence the sense of pride in one's culture (Okeke-Adeyanju et al., 2014). The effort, the means and the opportunities parents provide to their children in order to make them experience their heritage culture are called enculturation strategies. They encompass both practical aspects (e.g., sharing of traditional festivities, showing characteristic movies, books, music and food) and abstract ones (e.g., helping understand the role of culture in their lives, preparing them to face prejudice, explaining them that this beauty cannot be understood by the majority they will encounter, but rather downgraded), thereby providing them with a certain set of behaviors and transmitting values related to the membership (Ferrari et al., 2014).

FES has been found to be a reliable predictor of adolescents' adjustment (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2013). However, Hughes et al. (2006) suggested that the four strategies are independent and affect developmental outcomes differently. Overall, children of color who have strong ethnic-racial identities as a result of FES are more

likely to have better results in their mental health, relationships with others, and academic performance (Huguley et al., 2019).

It is important to consider that FES experiences can vary widely based on the cultural setting, individual family dynamics, and societal influences. Noteworthy, Derlan and colleagues (2018) investigated whether the cultural socialization behaviors of mothers are reinforced when mothers report a high level of ethnic-racial centrality, and found that this hypothesis was not supported. There may be occasions where families unwittingly propagate negative perceptions or struggle to handle complicated issues connected to culture and ethnicity (Berry et al., 2006). The influence of FES is complicated and multidimensional. Encouraging open and supportive discourse within families regarding these issues is vital for establishing good cultural identity development and encouraging inclusion and understanding in society.

CHAPTER 3

THE IDENTITY PROJECT

3.1 Theoretical background and characteristics

The Identity Project (IP) is an intervention program that aims to increase adolescents' well-being through a process focused on ethnic-racial identity development (Umaña-Taylor, 2018b). In Europe, the preference for the term "cultural identity" instead of "ethnic or racial identity" stems from several factors: Europe's rich cultural diversity, historical experiences with discrimination, varying legal frameworks, and sensitivity to issues of race and ethnicity contributed to this terminological choice. "Cultural identity" is often favored as a way to emphasize cultural diversity positively and reduce the potential for racial divisions (Juang et al., 2020).

The IP is a universal mental health promotion program, i.e. not referring to those segments of the population considered at risk: the intervention was designed to be of benefit both to adolescents belonging to cultural minorities and to those who are part of the majority group. This methodological choice is consistent with the theoretical reference to the developmental tasks that every adolescent must face. The project was designed to be delivered during school hours through 8 sessions (see Table 1), each lasting about 55 minutes, and conducted by a trained researcher or teacher.

Table 1. Overview of the IP objectives for each meeting

Meeting	**Objectives**
1. Identity backpack	a. Introduce the idea of identity as a multidimensional and fluid construct; b. Identify and categorize the different components of student identity, including personal and social components c. Underline how the various components of students' identity can change over time and in different situations.
2. Differences between and within groups	a. Introduce stereotypes as based on the presumed homogeneity of groups; enable students to differentiate themselves from stereotypes. b. Introduce the idea that there are more differences within groups than between groups. c. Introduce the idea that differences are continuous and not categorical.
3. Stories from our past	a. Raise awareness of how some groups have been marginalized throughout Italian history by sharing real-life incidents of discrimination b. Use episodes to create a sense of community. c. Resume the contents previously addressed
4. Symbols, traditions and rites of passage	a. Define symbols/traditions/rites of passage and how they relate to cultural background. b. Understand how symbols/traditions/rites of passage are indicators specific to each cultural group. c. Know the professional figure of the cultural mediator and how it relates to the concepts of symbols/traditions/rites of passage. d. Promote exploration of the symbols/traditions/rites of passage of one's cultural group. e. Stimulate the exploration of the mother tongue of one's culture (or one of one's cultures) as a shared cultural sign.

5. Family trees	a. Increase students' exploration and knowledge of their own cultural background. b. Increase students' understanding of complex and diverse family systems and how family members, friends, classmates, or sportmates can have different degrees of influence on people. c. Demonstrate the similarities that exist between them in terms of the diversity that exists in families and family histories.
6. From photos to words	a. Help students reflect on the photos they took as homework by discussing them with peers and creating a personal storyboard. b. Identify differences in the content of individual student storyboards and commonalities in the general themes represented by the student storyboards. c. Stimulate understanding and greater clarity in students regarding the meaning that different symbols have for them. d.
7. The journey of cultural identity	a. Stimulate students' awareness that some people's cultural experiences may be more relevant to them than others; normalize and validate these experiences. b. Increase students' understanding that our cultural background can inform who we are, but it represents only a part of our identity and has variable importance (depending on the people and the moment of life we are in). c. Understand that the meaning of cultural identity can change over time and space.
8. Grand Finale	a. Review of the topics covered. b. Celebrate and share the cultural heritages explored. c. Allow students to set up the classroom with the various materials created during the various meetings

Source: adapted from Umaña‐Taylor et al. (2018a)

The target group identified by the authors consists of ninth-grade students (about

15 years), which in the Italian context corresponds to the second grade of upper secondary school. The general objectives of the IP can be summarized as follows:

- Increase the salience and awareness of one's own and others' cultural background;
- Promote knowledge of the different experiences of discrimination among different cultural groups;
- Understand that there are as many differences within groups as there are between different groups;
- Know one's family cultural background;
- Resolve some ambiguities in the categorization of cultural groups, raising awareness of the different possible paths in the formation of cultural identity;
- Provide tools for exploring one's identity (for example symbols, rites, traditions);
- Provide a safe space for reflection and discussion.

3.2 Evidence of efficacy

3.2.1 United States of America

To test the efficacy of the intervention program, Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2018b) involved eight classes of a high school in the USA: Through a randomization procedure, 4 classrooms were assigned to the intervention condition – that is, the one that would benefit from the IP activities – and the other four to the control condition, which

included lessons focused on future educational and professional opportunities. The starting hypothesis predicted that students of classrooms assigned to the intervention group would report more exploration of cultural identity after participating in the IP (posttest), and that these increased levels of exploration would lead to an increase in resolution (follow-up).

Participants were 218 students aged 15 years (M_{age} = 15.02 years, *SD* = .68) with ethnic minority and majority backgrounds. Both the control group and the intervention group participated in eight meetings - one per week - scheduled during school hours and for a period of ten weeks. Furthermore, three self-report questionnaires were administered to all eight classes: the first, the pretest (T1), was completed one week before the start of the program; a second survey (T2) was administered 12 weeks after the pretest; finally, the last questionnaire (T3) was administered 18 weeks after the pretest.

The results of this first implementation of the IP showed that the intervention and control group significantly differed in the dimension of exploration at T2. Specifically, adolescents in the intervention group showed greater levels of exploration of cultural identity than those in the control group, and this effect was stronger in youth from ethnic minorities. Furthermore, students who participated in the IP showed higher levels of cultural identity resolution at T3 than their peers in the control group.

Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2018a) carried out a further follow-up one year after pretest, i.e. 56 weeks after the end of the intervention in the classrooms (T4), to verify if the increase in exploration and resolution of cultural identity due to

participation in the IP had promoted better long-term psychosocial adjustment. The indicators concerned the cohesion of global identity, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, school involvement, school performance, and orientation towards other groups. Results for the intervention group showed increased global identity cohesion, improved academic performance, higher levels of self-esteem, and fewer depressive symptoms. However, no significant effects were recorded in the dimensions of school involvement and orientation towards other groups. More recently, Sladek et al. (2021) found that in the intervention group, students who reported higher FES benefited more from participation in the IP than their peers with low levels of this important contextual variable, suggesting that it serves as a moderator of intervention efficacy.

Of interest, Wantchekon and colleagues (2021a) utilized the data of this randomized controlled trial of the IP in order to carry out moderation analyses. These latter showed that adolescents' baseline cultural identity centrality (measured one week before the intervention) significantly boosted the intervention's impact on their ERI exploration at the 12-week posttest.

Overall, the implementation of the IP in the US school context indicates that a program capable of offering adolescents the tools to explore various aspects of their own cultural background, as well as opportunities for intercultural exchange, can lead to the development of a clear and integrated vision of one's cultural identity which, in the long term, can translate into better psychosocial adjustment with respect to the aforementioned dimensions.

3.2.2 Germany

Some recent events that have occurred in the Western world, such as the shootings in Halle against a Jewish synagogue in October 2019 (ANSA, 2019), the Hanau attack against German ethnic minorities which took place in February 2020 (ANSA, 2020), and the murder of George Floyd by the US police (USA Today, 2020), have highlighted the need to explicitly address the racist sentiment present in contemporary German society. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated existing inequalities between cultural groups in terms of exposure to health risk and poor access to new educational means (OHCHR, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

These events have highlighted the need to create spaces where young people can be guided in critical and constructive discussions in which to address issues related to stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. For these reasons, Juang and collaborators (2020) implemented the Identity Project in a Berlin high school with the aim of promoting understanding of one's own and others' cultural background, fostering a sense of belonging and clarity regarding one's identity and improving the class climate with respect to cultural diversity.

The original project developed by Umaña-Taylor & Douglass (2017) was adapted to the German context, respecting the recommended practices for cultural adaptations of evidence-based interventions (Barrera & Castro, 2006). Specifically, the main changes were the following: (1) the intervention was adapted for students in seventh grade, since this represents a significant transition year in the German school system in which interventions are most effective (Sherman et al., 2013); and (2) the concept of

"ethnic-racial identity" was replaced with the term "cultural heritage identity". As already mentioned, following the Second World War, the word "race" tends to easily recall the racial ideologies and persecutions that occurred during the Holocaust; thus, its use related to people is deemed inappropriate today (Juang et al. 2021; Möschel, 2011; Neiman, 2019).

In the study by Juang et al (2020), the sample was composed of 195 seventh grade students (M_{age} = 12.35 years) of whom 83% had a migration background. Overall, the sample included 34 different cultural origins. The intervention was conducted in two distinct cohorts (2018-2019 and 2019-2020), for each of which 4 classes were randomly assigned to the following groups: Two classes to the intervention group and two to the control group. For the classes involved in the first cohort (n = 99), the intervention took place over 13 weeks during the 2018-2019 school year, while the classes in the second cohort (n = 96) completed the intervention in 8 weeks during the 2019-2020 school year.

Data from the 2018-2019 cohort were pooled across 4 measurements: 6 weeks pre-intervention (pretest, T1) and 1 week (T2), 6 weeks (T3) and 17.5 weeks (T4) post-intervention. The two classes belonging to the control group received the intervention 1 week after data collection at T3. For the 2019-2020 cohort, data were collected 5 weeks before the intervention (T1) and 1 week after the intervention (T2). Due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were closed in spring 2020; this prevented the administration of the questionnaires and the collection of data at T3 and T4, as well as the implementation of the intervention for the two classes belonging to

the control group. For these reasons, the analyses were conducted only at T1 and T2 for both cohorts. Furthermore, at the end of the intervention with the students of the 2018-2019 academic year, focus groups were held with teachers and students to ask about their impressions regarding the intervention and if they had any suggestions for improving the IP.

During each meeting there were always two trainers who led the intervention, an observer to ensure that the sessions dealt with all the main topics in a coherent manner by completing a fidelity-checklist, and at least one teacher from the respective class.

The results confirmed only some of the hypothesized effects: A greater increase in the exploration of one's cultural identity was observed in the intervention group compared to the control group for the 2018-2019 cohort, but not for the 2019-2020 cohort, while no changes in cultural identity resolution and global identity cohesion were observed at posttest. This could be due to the posttest measurements (T2) occurring shortly after the end of the intervention in the classrooms, for which it would have been necessary to carry out a follow-up one year after the end of the IP as in the study conducted by Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2018a). Furthermore, no changes were observed from pretest (T1) to posttest (T2) regarding better classroom climate towards cultural diversity; however, male and female students in the intervention group reported a significant increase, compared to the control group, in the dimensions of awareness of treatment disparity between groups and critical awareness (Juang et al., 2020).

The exploratory analyses concerning correlations among variables revealed that

only in the intervention group, exploration of cultural identity was linked to greater cohesion of global identity at T2. In addition, greater cultural identity resolution was linked to greater global identity cohesion and higher self-esteem, as well as fewer depressive symptoms, better school adjustment, and more positive attitudes toward people from other cultural groups. During the focus groups, students reported that having the opportunity to listen and learn something new from the experiences and cultures of their classmates was what they appreciated most about the project. Similarly, teachers were pleasantly surprised to discover new aspects related to the cultural backgrounds of their students.

3.3 Adaptation and implementation in the Italian context

The adaptation of the IP to the Italian context followed, as in the German case, 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 efficacious as possible, the 5 phases of (1) information gathering, (2) preliminary adaptation design, (3) preliminary adaptation trials, (4)) perfecting fit, and (5) testing cultural fit were followed.

During the information gathering phase, differences between the application contexts of the IP (US and Germany) were considered via a literature review and a continuous exchange with the German research team. Through the analysis of cultural diversity existing among the countries involved in the project, the Italian migration situation was also investigated. Furthermore, 16 semi-structured interviews were

conducted with first- and second generation young adults with a migration background. The questions focused on the symbols and traditions of the culture(s) they belonged to, as well as the characteristics perceived as unique to their own culture, episodes of discrimination, religion, language, migration background, stereotypes, patterns of thoughts and beliefs and values related to their cultural origins.

To evaluate the cultural appropriateness of the laboratory activities proposed in the original version of the IP, focus groups were also conducted with five cultural mediators of different ethnic backgrounds representing the major nationalities in Italy. During the meetings, the 8 sessions of the project were discussed one by one, focusing on the activities, on the topics covered, on the ways in which to deal with the latter and therefore on the adequacy and feasibility of the IP in general.

In the second phase of adaptation, the original project manual and the self-report measures were translated into Italian. Similarly, the contents of the activities (videos, textual elements, slides, etc.) were reviewed and modified. As suggested by McKLeroy and colleagues (2006), care was taken to maintain fidelity with the central themes and objectives while adapting the intervention to the specific Italian context. Among the changes made, the central one concerned terminology: consistent with Juang and collaborators (2020), the concepts of "race" and "ethnicity" were replaced by "culture. Furthermore, various adjustments were made to the contents to render them more relevant and understandable for students. For example, in the session "Stories from our past", stories of marginalization experienced by minorities in Italy or by Italians were

proposed, unlike the original intervention whose stories referred to events that occurred in the United States (for a complete description of the modifications, see Appendix).

Also in this phase, the adaptation work involved a continuous dialogue between the US and German research groups and the Italian team, as well as with the cultural mediators. This synergy took the form of weekly discussion meetings on the specific components of the IP, in which the mediators could suggest their point of view as experts of their heritage culture and thus favor an accurate adaptation. The changes were in line with what was previously done in Germany (Juang et al., 2020), and received the approval of the authors of the original project.

The main objective of the pilot study was to evaluate the feasibility, acceptability and cultural appropriateness of the intervention (see Ceccon et al., 2023a). The sample was composed of 138 adolescents (M_{age}= 15 years) with different cultural backgrounds (37% had a migration background and came from 21 different countries) of 9 classes within a secondary school (a technical institute) in the city of Padua.

In December 2020, following the approval from the Ethics Committee of the School of Psychology of the University of Padua (prot. n. 3871), we proceeded to contact and obtain authorization for the implementation of the IP by the same Institute. Given the complications related to the pandemic situation, classrooms were assigned to the intervention group (n = 5) and to the control group (n = 4) based on the requests and availability of the teaching staff. The IP was conducted during school hours for 8 weeks by a PhD student, assisted by a team of pre-graduate trainees and supervised by the scientific coordinator of the project (Prof. Moscardino). The meetings intended for the

intervention group, lasting about 55 minutes, were held once a week remotely through the Google Meet platform in line with the COVID-19 related restrictions that were in place during that period. The control group, on the other hand, attended regular lessons as scheduled by the school.

The data collection took place between March and May 2021. The tools employed included several self-report measures aimed at assessing socio-demographic data, cultural identity, intercultural intelligence and competence, identity cohesion, environmental sensitivity, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, prosociality, orientation to other groups, family ethnic socialization, perceived discrimination, academic involvement, and class climate versus cultural diversity. The battery of questionnaires was administered to both groups one week before (pretest, T0) and one week after (post-test, T1) the intervention.

In June 2021, once the pilot study was concluded, qualitative feedback from the research team and project participants was collected in order to evaluate its feasibility, acceptability, and cultural relevance in the Italian socio-cultural context. To this end, two focus groups were conducted (one with students, one with teachers). Students particularly appreciated the opportunity to explore their own cultural background and that of their classmates; they also emphasized the role of significant others in their self-definition in addition to ties with “biological” relatives. The critical aspects concerned mainly the length of the questionnaire. Teachers reported an increase in solidarity and sensitivity within the classrooms that had taken part in the intervention,

and suggested further investigation of the linguistic aspects related to identity in future implementations.

Among the main quantitative results of the pilot study, there was a statistically significant increase in cultural identity resolution and in the attitude of openness towards people belonging to different cultures among students who had participated in the laboratory. Conversely, no differences were found in the exploration of cultural identity and in the classroom climate with respect to cultural diversity before and after the sessions of the IP.

The main study, conducted between October 2021 and April 2022, was a randomized controlled trial at the classroom level (Ceccon et al., 2023b). Specifically, the authors used a waitlist control design for ethical reasons, with classrooms being randomly assigned to an intervention group (n =23) and a control group (n = 22). The variables of interest were measured 1 week prior to the intervention (T0, pretest), 9 weeks after baseline (T1, posttest), and 13 weeks after baseline (T2, follow-up). Adolescents in the waitlist control group received the intervention 2 weeks after the T2 follow-up data collection, which is 15 weeks after baseline.

Participants were recruited in public upper secondary schools in northeastern Italy, specifically in the Veneto region, a geographical area that hosts a large proportion of legally residing citizens of immigrant descent in the country (ISTAT, 2022). Public technical and vocational schools were approached, because youth from immigrant families tend to be overrepresented in these due to several contextual factors (e.g., preference for work-oriented schools to contribute to family income). This was done in

order to ensure that at least 20%–25% of the sample was composed of adolescents of immigrant descent. Following the original study, middle adolescence was the age focus as this particular age is considered to be most receptive and sensitive to identity-related issues (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018b).

The Ethics Committee of the School of Psychology at the University of Padova (protocol n. 3871) approved all procedures. As soon as informal contacts with schools were established, approval from relevant authorities (i.e., school principals, teachers) and written informed consent from parents were obtained. To achieve the planned sample size (i.e., $N = 600$), and based on national regulations indicating that classroom composition in upper secondary school entails between 20 and 30 students per classroom (MI, 2022), 1037 students from 45 classrooms in 6 different public upper secondary schools located in urban areas were asked to volunteer for the study. One teacher served as a contact person for each school, organizing the intervention schedule to fit with preexisting activities.

Participants were eligible if they (1) attended 10th grade during the period of data collection; (2) had sufficient knowledge of the Italian language; (3) had no certified intellectual disability or neurodevelopmental disorder. To avoid generating feelings of social exclusion, students who did not meet the second ($n = 6$) or third ($n = 6$) criterion were excluded from survey assessments, but they were invited to participate in the IP sessions and were further assisted by a facilitator/support teacher and, for non-Italian speakers, they were provided materials translated in their respective mother tongues. Of

the eligible participants, 68 did not return parental consent, resulting in a participation rate of 92%.

The findings of the study supported the initial hypothesis that adolescents in the intervention group, as compared to the control group, demonstrated increased levels of exploration from pre- to posttest. This indicates that the IP adapted to the Italian school context stimulated adolescents' reflections on their heritage culture(s) by encouraging a meaningful exploration, observation, and consideration of this significant aspect of their identity throughout the sessions. Despite coming from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, the culturally adapted IP proved to be a valuable tool in facilitating adolescents' engagement with their heritage culture(s). However, the study did not find any evidence to support the notion of a cascading effect, where cultural identity exploration at post-test leads to increased resolution at follow-up in the intervention group. Consequently, participants did not report a heightened sense of clarity regarding their own cultural identity one month after experiencing an increase in exploration processes as a result of their participation in the IP.

CHAPTER 4

THE STUDY

4.1 Aim of the study and research questions

The present thesis is part of a broader study coordinated by Prof. Moscardino and doctoral student Chiara Ceccon from the University of Padua (Italy) in collaboration with Prof. Umaña-Taylor from Harvard University (USA) and Prof. Maja Schachner from the Universität of Halle-Wittenberg, Germany. Specifically, the study is a randomized controlled trial aiming to assess the efficacy of an Italian version of the IP, a school-based intervention designed to promote adolescents' cultural identity development (see Ceccon et al., 2023a, 2023b).

The present study focused on the pre- and posttest as well as on the follow-up survey data that were collected as part of the second implementation of the IP (i.e., school year 2022-2023) in three upper secondary schools in Padua. Specifically, we aimed to evaluate the possible effect of the intervention on adolescents' cultural identity content (centrality, private regard, private regard), also by exploring the moderating effect of FES on these associations. In addition, we examined whether adolescents in the intervention group reported higher levels of self-esteem and global identity cohesion at follow-up compared to their peers in the waitlist control group, and analyzed participants' subjective experiences related to the program.

The following research questions were addressed:

1. *Do adolescents in the intervention (vs. control) group report higher levels of cultural identity in terms of centrality, private regard, and public regard at posttest (T1) than their peers in the control group, taking the initial level of these variables into account?*

Ethnic group membership is a key social context which impacts the formation of a self-identity (Umaña-Taylor, 2002). According to Umaña-Taylor (2018b), by actively engaging in cultural identity exploration, youth gain a sense of confidence and clarity of their identity, which empowers them to effectively navigate and address issues related to race and ethnicity. Cultural identity content is also highly relevant, as it refers to adolescents' attitudes and their convictions regarding their own cultural group and how this interacts with other groups, as well as the relevance their cultural background(s) has in their self-concept (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014)

Previous research has shown that the IP has proven efficacious in facilitating the process of cultural identity exploration in the USA, Germany, and Italy (Ceccon et al., 2023a, 2023b; Juang et al., 2020; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018b). Furthermore, an increase in resolution at follow-up as a function of exploration at posttest was observed in the US sample (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018a). However, studies on intervention effects on the content of cultural identity, that is centrality, private regard, and public regard, are still lacking.

The extant literature suggests that exploration and affirmation are strongly connected to centrality, defined as the extent to which individuals consider their ERI as a crucial part of their overall self-perception (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). In addition,

Wantchekon et al. (2021a) found that high levels of cultural identity centrality were linked to increases in both a sense of belonging and the act of exploring one's ethnic identity. Hence, centrality may influence teenagers' decision to delve into their ERI, ultimately influencing the extent to which students engage in the IP.

Given the lack of studies investigating changes in cultural identity dimensions of content (centrality, private regard and public regard) as a function of the IP, no *a priori* hypotheses are formulated in this regard. However, based on the findings reported by Wantchekon and colleagues (2021a), and considering the activities proposed during the IP which address issues like stereotypes, discrimination, cultural heritage and values, it is reasonable to expect that the three dimensions would be higher at posttest among students in the intervention (vs. control) group.

2. *Does family ethnic socialization work as a moderator of intervention efficacy in relation to the dimensions of cultural identity content?*

FES refers to the process by which parents or other family members transmit cultural beliefs, values, and practices related to ethnic identity to their children. It involves the messages and experiences children receive from their families about their ethnic background, heritage, and history. This socialization can be explicit, through direct conversations and teachings, or implicit, through daily interactions and behaviors within the family.

Prior research has shown that FES fosters individuals' strength of self-identification as a certain ethnicity group member (centrality) in adolescents (Bravo

et al., 2014; Neblett et al., 2009; Rivas-Drake, 2011). Specifically, maternal private regard influences several socialization processes which, in turn, lead to the development of positive private regard and heightened awareness of discrimination among youth (Kulish et al., 2019). Moreover, FES primarily offers protection, but an exclusive emphasis on discrimination (e.g., preparation for bias or promotion of mistrust) may lead to unfavorable outcomes among youths (more initiation of fighting, or increased perceptions of barriers to opportunities, see Rivas-Drake, 2011). As regards the IP, Sladek and colleagues (2021) found that adolescents who reported greater FES benefited more from the program than their peers with low levels of this variable.

Based on this evidence, we anticipate that high levels of self-reported FES will increase the expected effect of the IP on cultural identity content, especially in terms of centrality and private regard dimensions, among students in the intervention (vs. control) group.

3. *Do adolescents in the intervention (vs. control) group report higher levels of self-esteem and identity cohesion at follow-up (T1), after taking the initial level of these variables into account?*

Empirical evidence suggests that when young individuals actively engage in exploring and resolving their cultural identities, they experience better overall adjustment, especially those from minority backgrounds (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2023). This is manifested through higher levels of self-esteem, increased engagement and sense of belonging in school, improved academic achievement, and greater life satisfaction.

These findings are consistently supported by numerous studies and meta-analyses, underscoring the positive impact of cultural identity on youth well-being.

Previous implementations of the IP in the US have shown that participation in the program indirectly resulted in increased levels of global identity cohesion and self-esteem one year after the initial assessment. This increase was associated with heightened exploration and resolution during the posttest and first follow-up (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018a). Noteworthy, the implementation of the intervention in Germany did not yield changes in the cohesion dimensions of global identity and self-esteem, possibly due to the lack of a long-term follow-up over a more extended period (Juang et al., 2020).

Because this thesis considers the three assessment time points of the original study, but it does not include a follow-up assessment one year later, no hypothesis is formulated regarding changes in levels of self-esteem and cohesion of global identity in the intervention group compared to the control group.

4. *What are adolescents' subjective experiences of cultural identity development as a function of their participation in the IP?*

Previous editions of the IP conducted in Germany (Juang et al., 2020) and Italy employed focus groups to better understand how students experienced their participation in the program. Juang and colleagues (2020) found that students particularly enjoyed learning new things about their peers. There were varying opinions,

with some students feeling that certain questions delved too deeply into personal information, while others found discussing their own family and traditions enjoyable.

In the Italian study (Ceccon et al., 2023b), the qualitative feedback from students confirmed the cultural salience of the activities. Students consistently emphasized the usefulness of the IP in addressing issues related to their heritage culture(s) and those of their classmates, which were infrequently discussed in the school curriculum. With regard to changes in cultural identity, however, responses varied, with some students emphasizing…., and others failing to do so. Moreover, the IP was developed to increase the quality of the classroom climate (Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2017).

In light of this evidence, we expect that during focus groups, students will express more awareness concerning their private and public regard of their cultural origins after the implementation of the project. As regards salience, we anticipate students to experience a more central cultural identity. However, given the reluctance of some students to talk about personal issues, it is also reasonable to expect mixed feedback concerning the central variables of this thesis, with some adolescents being able to verbalize the role of FES, and others unwilling to do so.

4.2 Participants

Participants were recruited in three public upper secondary schools in northeastern Italy, specifically in the Veneto region, a geographical area that hosts a large proportion of legally residing citizens of immigrant descent in the country (ISTAT, 2022). Public technical and vocational schools were approached, since youth from immigrant families

are overrepresented in these contexts. This was done in order to ensure that at least 20%–25% of the sample was composed of adolescents of immigrant descent. Following the original study, middle adolescence was the age focus as this particular age is considered to be most receptive and sensitive to identity-related issues (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018b).

Specifically, the project was proposed to 29 classes (24 from grade 9, 5 from grade 10), attended by 720 pupils. Of these, 691 returned informed consent signed by their parents, with a 96% participation rate. Nine pupils were subsequently excluded from the surveys due to the presence of certifications; 6 were exempted for reasons of linguistic difficulties (insufficient proficiency in the Italian language), even if they still participated in the sessions to ensure the inclusion of all students. In these cases, the slides of the laboratory meetings were translated into the various languages (Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, French, English, Portuguese and Spanish).

Although the final participants were 676, this thesis takes into consideration only those students who fully attended the first three surveys (pretest, posttest and follow-up), for a total of 580 pupils. Of the 29 classes that joined the project, 15 (51.72%) were assigned to the control condition, and 14 (48.28%) to the intervention condition through a computer algorithm.

The participants' mean age was 14.19 years (*SD* = .75), and 52% of adolescents identified as girls; 38% had an immigrant *background* (i.e., at least one parent born abroad). Most immigrant-origin students (78%) were second-generation (i.e., born in Italy from at least one parent born abroad), while the rest of participants with a

migration background were first generation (i.e., born abroad with at least one parent born abroad). Among the 41 countries of origin, Romania (17%), Morocco (13%), Moldavia (10%), Cina (8%) and Albania (8%) were the most prevalent ones.

Regarding participant families' socioeconomic status (SES) as measured by the Family Affluence Scale (FAS; Boyce et al., 2006), the mean score was 6.44 (*SD* = 1.79, range = 1-9). In terms of parents' educational level, the majority had obtained a high school diploma (41% fathers and 44% mothers), 18% of fathers and 14% of mothers had obtained a middle school diploma, and 17% of fathers and 26% of mothers were university graduates.

4.3 Procedure

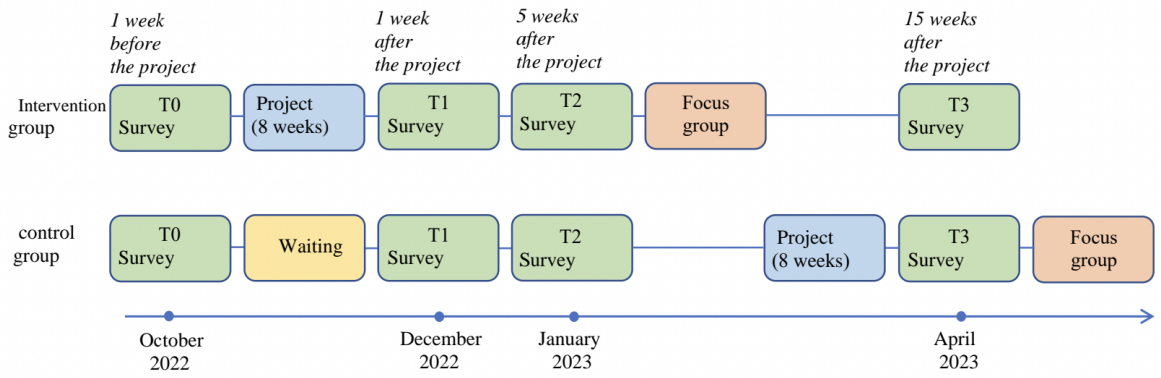
The Ethics Committee of the School of Psychology at the University of Padova approved all study procedures (protocol n. 4899). As soon as informal contacts with schools were established, approval from relevant authorities (i.e., school principals, teachers) and written informed consent from parents were obtained. One teacher served as a contact person for each school, organizing the intervention schedule to fit in with preexisting activities.

Prior to the start of the project, we provided all recruited participants with an information sheet that outlined the study purpose, data handling, and protection procedures, as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. The information sheets were available in various languages (Italian, English, Arabic, French, Portuguese, Chinese, and Spanish). Students were asked to

take the brochure home and to return it after approximately 1 week signed by their parents if they were interested in participating. We also thoroughly explained the study procedures as well as the pilot study results to adolescents' parents during an *ad-hoc* online meeting. Following the pre-consultation and recruitment phase, the classrooms were randomly assigned to the intervention or waitlist control group. Students were unaware of the group their class had been assigned to. For ethical reasons, all students received the intervention, but those who were assigned to the intervention group received it in the first semester, while their peers from classrooms in the control group were put on a waitlist and received the program in the second semester.

Data collection took place at four time points: One week before the intervention (T0), one week after the intervention (T1), approximately five weeks later (T2), and approximately 15 weeks later (T3). Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the implementation timeline of the IP.

Figure 1. *Timeline of the Identity Project in the school year 2022-2023*



In October 2022, the pretest (T0) was conducted. Pretest involved administering a battery of questionnaires to all the classes involved (intervention and control) to assess their initial levels of the various constructs. In addition to the variables relevant to the intervention, demographic information and individual psychological constructs were also collected. After one week, the intervention group classes began their laboratory sessions. These sessions were conducted by a team of facilitators (two per class), consisting of master's students and psychology interns who had received prior training and regular supervision.

One week after intervention ended (posttest, T1), students of both groups were assessed again with a questionnaire survey. On this occasion, adolescents from the intervention classes were asked to provide the names of volunteers who would participate in a focus group six weeks later, in which they could share their thoughts on the IP. The focus groups were also offered to teachers of the participating schools.

In January 2022, a follow-up assessment (T2) was conducted in all classes and starting from February 2022, the control group classes started the IP sessions. Following the conclusion of the intervention, the questionnaire survey was administered once again to all students (T3). Subsequently, focus groups were conducted with the students and teachers from each participating school who were involved in the project.

The Italian adaptation of the IP consisted of 8 sessions, each lasting one school hour (approximately 50 minutes), that were held once a week over a period of about two months. Throughout this timeframe, close collaborative communication was maintained among the facilitators, project coordinators, and the teaching staff of each school to

monitor progress. The topics covered during the sessions revolved around the concept of identity, specifically cultural identity, stereotypes, experiences of discrimination, intercultural communication (with the participation of a professional in the field of linguistic-cultural mediation), as well as symbols, traditions, and rituals from each cultural background represented in the class. Each session included a review of the previously discussed topics and the introduction of a new theme through practical activities, including the use of multimedia tools (such as word clouds, videos, internet image searches), small group discussions, reading stories, drawing relationship trees, assigned cultural interviews as homework, and writing personal reflections (see also Appendix).

Personally, I contributed to the project by administering the questionnaire survey at T2 and T3 and by facilitating, together with an intern, the IP sessions in the classrooms assigned to the control group as well as the cycle of focus groups in 5 classrooms, for a total of 40 sessions. In addition, I took part in the presentation of the study results to the students of 16 classes in two of the three schools.

The survey consisted of online questionnaires using QualtricsXM and providing students a QR code, with students having the possibility to complete it on paper upon individual request (20.5% of the total sample). They were completed in class in the presence of the facilitators. On average, each data collection session lasted approximately one hour. To ensure participant anonymity, a unique numeric code was assigned to each individual. The identifier consisted of the school's initials, the letter corresponding to the specific class, and a unique number based on the alphabetical order

of students within the class register. This identifier remained consistent across all questionnaires, except when there were class membership changes. If a student dropped out, the identifier was updated based on the new alphabetical order of the class.

All field staff received comprehensive training before collecting data to ensure data collection quality. Additionally, weekly online supervision meetings were held, led by the program coordinators and attended by the facilitators, to monitor the program's progress and address any issues that would arise during classroom activities.

4.4 Measures

This study employed both quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (focus groups) methods, as described below. Questionnaires that were not available in Italian were translated by the project coordinators using the translation-back-translation method.

4.4.1 Socio-demographics characteristics

Students were asked to provide some information about themselves (such as age, gender, date of birth, grade level, languages spoken, years spent in Italy, country of birth) and their family (number of family members, presence of siblings, country of birth, parents' educational level, and occupation).

To assess the family's socioeconomic status (SES), we used the FAS (Boyce et al., 2006), which consists of 4 items: "Does your family own a car?" (0, 1, more than 1); "Do you have a room of your own at home?" (no, yes); "How often do you go on vacation with your family in a year?" (never, 1 time, 2 times, more than 2 times); "How

many computers do you have at home?" (0, 1, 2, more than 2). The total score is calculated by summing the scores of each item: a score between 0 and 2 indicates a low SES, a score between 3 and 5 indicates a medium SES, and a score between 6 and 9 indicates a high SES.

Numerous studies in the literature have demonstrated the reliability and validity of the scale, even with samples of adolescents from different cultures (Hobza et al., 2017; Kehoe & O'Hare, 2010; Lin, 2011; Liu et al., 2012).

4.4.2 Cultural identity

In this study, cultural identity content was measured using the Multidimensional Model of Black Identity (MMBI; Sellers, 2013). The MMBI consists of 20 items grouped into 3 subscales: *Centrality* (8 items, e.g., "In general, my culture of origin is an important part of my self-image"); *Private regard* (6 items, e.g., "I feel that my cultural community has made valuable contributions to this society"); and *Public regard* (6 items, e.g., "My cultural group is not respected by the broader society"). The scores of items 3, 5, 8, and 12 are reversed. Participants are asked to respond to each item on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 corresponds to "Not at all," 4 corresponds to "Quite enough," and 7 corresponds to "Extremely." The final score is calculated by computing the average of the scores for each of the three subscales.

Previous research using the MIBI with ethnically diverse youth has found acceptable psychometric properties of the scale (see Sladek et al., 2021; Wantchekon et al., 2021b). In this study, the Cronbach's alphas for the centrality, private regard, and

public regard subscales were .62, .73 and .52 for immigrant-origin youth, and .47, .69 and .52 for non-immigrant adolescents. Despite these overall moderate levels of internal consistency, we decided to include the three variables in our analysis for exploratory purposes, although the results need to be interpreted with caution.

4.4.4 Cohesion of global identity

The present study utilized the *Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory Scale* (EPSI; Rosenthal et al., 1981), a tool designed to measure Erikson's six psychosocial stages and applicable from early adolescence onwards. The scale consists of 72 items divided into six subscales (Trust, Autonomy, Initiative, Industry, Identity, and Intimacy), with each subscale containing 12 items. Half of the items reflect resolution of the developmental stage's "crisis," while the other half describe the difficulty in resolving the crisis. For our research purposes, we administered the *Identity* subscale, which focuses on the cohesion of global identity and is further divided into two subscales: Synthesis (e.g., "I know what kind of person I am") and confusion (e.g., "I can't decide what I want to do in life"). Participants were asked to reflect on how they had felt in the past month and responded on a scale from 1 ("Not at all") to 5 ("Very much"). Items 1, 3, 7, 10, 11, and 12 were reverse-scored. To obtain the total score for each subscale, the mean score of the respective items was calculated.

The questionnaire has good psychometric properties concerning reliability and validity, even among adolescents from diverse cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, the EPSI exhibits good construct validity in relation to certain indicators of psychosocial

functioning, such as self-esteem, resilience, anxiety, and depression (Schwartz et al., 2009). In this study, Cronbach's alpha for the synthesis and confusion subscales were .78 and .73 for immigrant-origin adolescents, and .78 and .74 for non-immigrant youth.

4.4.5 Self-esteem

Levels of self-esteem were measured using the *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (RSES; Rosenberg, 1979; Italian version by Prezza et al., 1997). This scale consists of 10 items originally designed to measure self-esteem levels among high school students, but currently used with various groups, including adults (APA, 2006). It assesses global self-esteem by measuring both positive (e.g., "In general, I am satisfied with myself") and negative (e.g., "Sometimes I feel completely worthless") feelings that individuals have towards themselves.

Participants respond on a 4-point Likert scale, where 1 corresponds to "does not describe me at all" and 4 corresponds to "describes me very well". The scores of items 2, 5, 6, 8, and 9 are reverse-coded. The scoring system involves summing the scores assigned to all 10 items, resulting in a score ranging from 10 (low self-esteem) to 40 (high self-esteem).

Numerous studies have demonstrated the validity and reliability of the RSES, including among adolescents from diverse cultures (Amahazion, 2021; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .89 for immigrant-origin students, and .90 for non-immigrant youth.

4.4.5 Familial Ethnic Socialization

To measure the construct of FES, we used the *Familial Ethnic Socialization Measure* (FESM; Umaña-Taylor, 2001). The FESM is used to assess the degree to which participants perceive their families engaging in socialization practices regarding cultural identity. It was developed by Umaña-Taylor (2001) and later modified (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). The original version comprised 9 items, while the updated version includes 12 items, with 5 items evaluating explicit FES practices (e.g., "My family teaches me things about our culture") and 7 items evaluating latent FES practices (e.g., "My family participates in activities that are specific to our cultural group"). The explicit subscale assesses the degree to which the family intentionally implements FES practices with adolescents, while the latent subscale assesses the degree to which the family implements such practices unintentionally. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates "not at all" and 5 indicates "very much." The responses are coded so that higher scores indicate higher levels of FES. The final score is obtained by calculating the mean of the scores for the items belonging to each subscale.

A study conducted by Umaña-Taylor and associates (2004) reported that the instrument showed strong psychometric characteristics when used with a group of high school students representing different ethnic backgrounds in the United States. In this study, Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .93 for immigrant-origin adolescents, and .90 for non-immigrant students.

4.4.6 Focus group

A focus group is a data collection technique in which a group of minimum 4 to maximum 12 individuals engages in a discussion about a topic, generating qualitative data through their interaction (Kitzinger, 2006; Powell et al., 1996). This tool can be used in the preliminary, during, or concluding phases of a study to assess its direction, progress, or outcomes, respectively (Race et al., 1994). The session is facilitated by a moderator who provides explanations about the purpose of the group, encourages participation from each member by asking open-ended questions, and helps participants feel comfortable (Gibbs, 1997).

In this study, focus groups with adolescents from the waitlist control group were conducted approximately 6 weeks after the completion of the IP sessions. The focus group discussions were conducted with each participating school to obtain an overall assessment of the project's quality and impact. Specifically, at the end of the second semester, a total of 10 focus groups were conducted, with an average of 5 students per group.

Each focus group with students was facilitated by the same facilitators who had conducted the 8 IP sessions. While one facilitator moderated the discussion, the other took notes on participants' answers. We explored the overall perception of the IP among students by gathering qualitative feedback. Students were asked open-ended questions about their favorite and least favorite activities, any changes in their perceptions or feelings about their own cultural identity and attitudes towards others' cultural backgrounds, and suggestions for modifying activities. Each focus group discussion

lasted approximately one hour and was guided by the following questions posed to each participant: "Which session/activity did you like the most? Why?"; "Which session/activity did you like the least? Why?"; "Looking back to the sessions overall, is there anything you would add, remove, or modify? If yes, what and why?"; "Has anything changed regarding your thoughts or feelings toward your cultural background?"; "Has anything changed regarding your thoughts or feelings toward other cultures?"

4.5 Data analysis

To answer our research questions, the following analyses were carried out using the SPSS statistical package (version 28.0.1.0):

- To assess the presence of potential differences between adolescents in the intervention vs. control group in cultural identity centrality, private regard, and public regard at posttest (T1), three univariate analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were performed on the three subscale scores of the MMBI (dependent variables). In these models, the independent variable was condition (intervention vs control), and the control variables were the three subscales of the MMBI assessed at pretest (T0).
- To evaluate whether FES moderated the expected intervention effects on the dimensions of cultural identity content (centrality, private regard, public regard), we used the same model described above and added the FES total score as an independent variable to assess the interaction between condition and FES.

- To examine whether participation in the intervention led to any differences between students from the intervention vs. control group in global identity coherence and self-esteem at follow-up (T2), three univariate analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) were performed. In these models, the total scores of the two EPSI subscales (synthesis and confusion) and of the total RSES scale were used as dependent variables, condition (intervention vs control) was the independent variable, and baseline levels of each variable measured at pretest (T0) were the control variables.
- To examine students' subjective experiences of the IP, a qualitative analysis was conducted on participants' responses during focus groups to identify the most frequently reported themes.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS

5.1 Descriptive statistics

In this chapter, the results of data analyses are presented to address our research questions. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the study variables.

Table 2. Mean, standard deviation, and range of study variables by intervention and waitlist control group.

	Intervention group (n = 265)			Control group (n = 315)		
	M	*STD*	*Range*	*M*	*STD*	*Range*
Cultural identity						
Centrality, T0	4.03	.99	1.00-6.50	4.13	.86	1.43-6.13
Centrality, T1	4.22	.95	1.38-7.50	4.14	.81	2.13-6.13
Private regard, T0	4.82	.99	2-7	4.87	.99	1.17-7
Private regard, T1	4.82	.99	1.17-7	4.79	1.05	1.50-7
Public regard, T0	4.62	.81	2.17-7	4.42	.88	2-6.50
Public regard, T1	4.47	.84	2.50-8	4.48	.90	2.17-6.83
Global identity cohesion						
Synthesis, T0	3.40	.76	1.50-5	3.29	.71	1.67-5
Synthesis, T2	3.42	.81	1-5	3.34	.67	1.67-5
Confusion, T0	3.37	.77	1.17-5	3.34	.72	1.33-5
Confusion, T2	3.37	.77	1-5	3.33	.67	1.33-4.67
Self-esteem, T0	27.25	6.95	10-40	29.95	6.45	12-40
Self-esteem, T2	27.52	7.05	4-40	27.41	6.28	12-40
Family Ethnic Socialization, T0	3.1	.91	1-5	3,02	.8	1.25-5

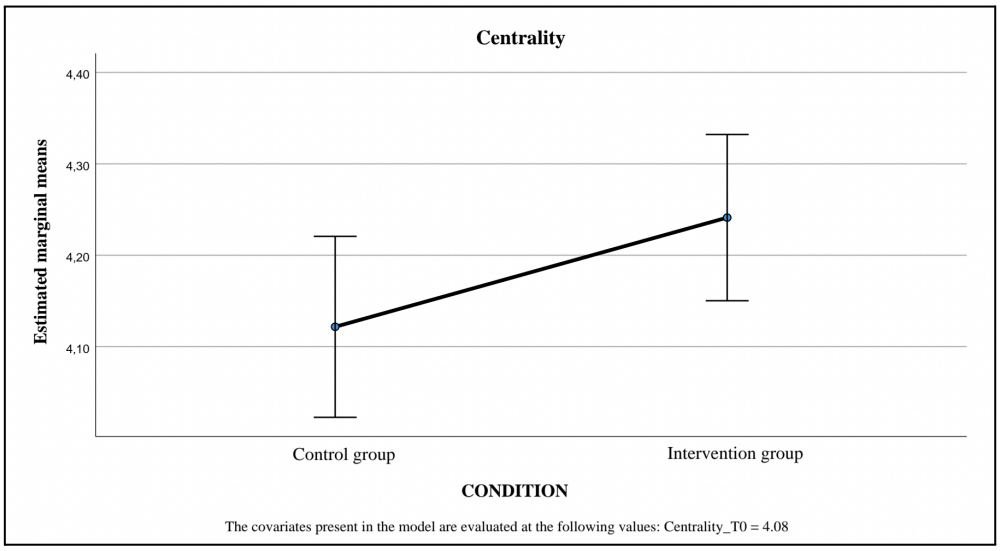
5.2 Comparison between intervention and control group

5.2.1 Cultural Identity

The first research question aimed to investigate whether there were any differences in the dimensions of centrality, private regard and public regard of adolescents' cultural identity based on their participation in the IP.

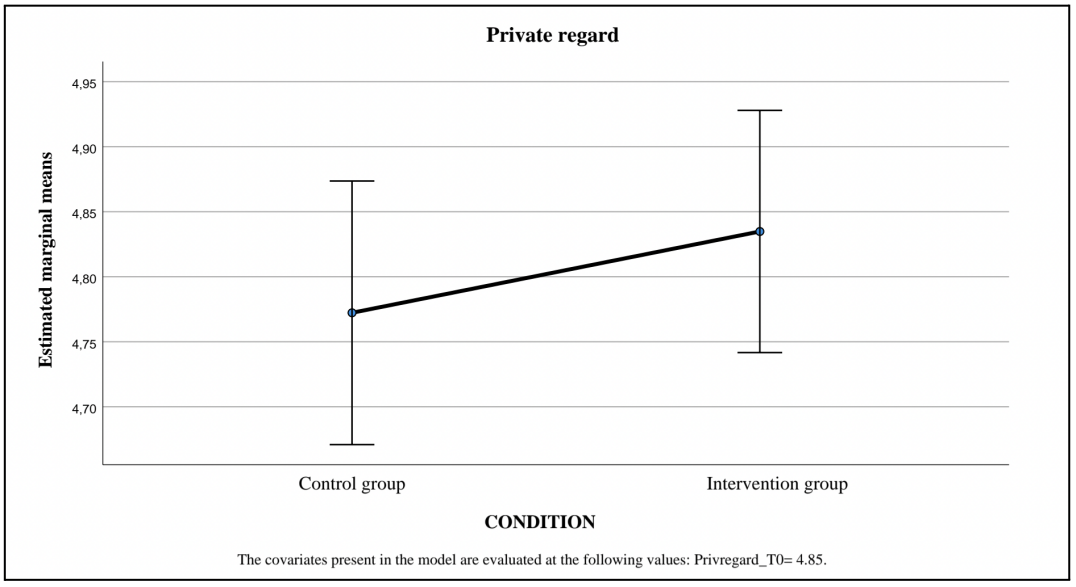
Regarding centrality, the univariate analysis of covariance revealed a marginally significant effect of condition with a very small effect size, $F(1,567) = 3.043$, $p = .082$, $\eta^2_p = .005$. As shown in Figure 2, at posttest (T1), adolescents in the intervention group had slightly higher scores in this variable than their peers in the control group. Error bars represent the 95% confidence interval.

Figure 2. Cultural identity centrality in the intervention and control group at posttest (T1)



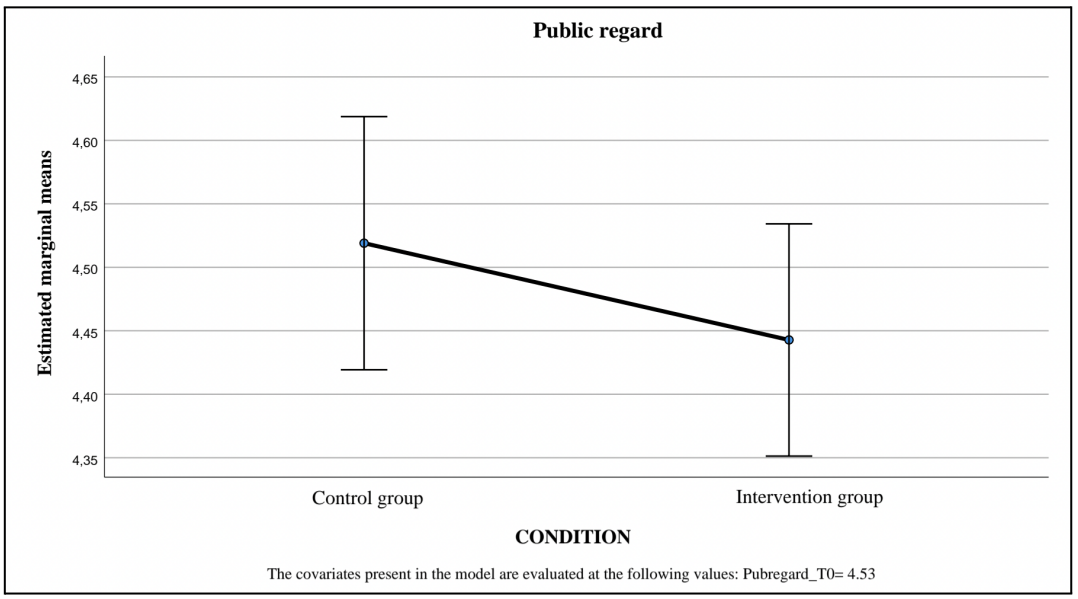
Concerning private regard, the ANCOVA revealed no significant effects of the condition, with $F(1,567) = .80$, $p = .373$, $\eta^2_p = .001$. Again, as shown in Figure 3, a slightly higher score in this dimension was found at posttest (T1) among adolescents in the intervention group compared to their peers in the control group, but the difference did not reach statistical significance.

Figure 3. Cultural identity private regard in the intervention and control group at posttest (T1)



In relation to public regard, there was no significant effect of condition, with $F(1,568) = 1.22$, $p = .27$, $\eta^2_p = .002$. Figure 4 shows that this dimension tends to slightly decrease after the intervention, but this effect was not statistically significant.

Figure 4. Cultural identity public regard in the intervention and control group at posttest (T1)



5.2.2 Family ethnic socialization

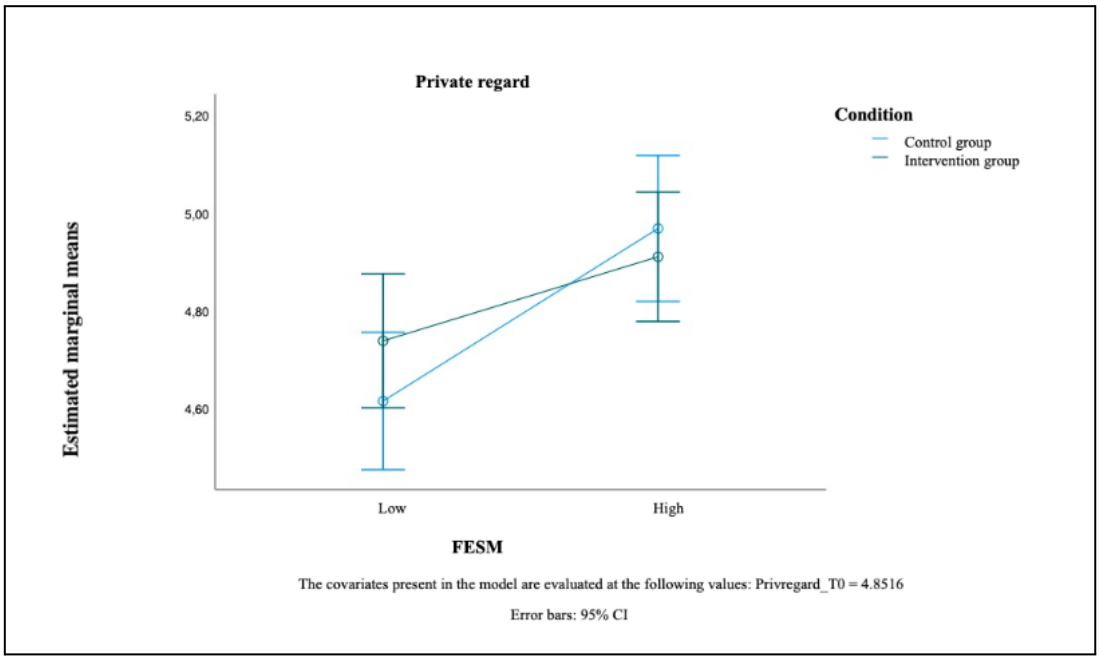
The second research question aimed to investigate whether FES moderated the expected intervention effects on cultural identity dimensions of content (centrality, private regard, public regard).

The ANCOVA did not show any significant interaction effects of condition x FES at pretest neither on the centrality subscale at posttest, $F(1,554) = .43$, $p = .514$, $\eta^2_p = .001$, nor on the public regard subscale, $F(1,556) = .27$, $p = .604$, $\eta^2_p = .0001$.

However, a significant effect of the interaction between condition and FES on the private regard subscale emerged, $F(1,570) = 1.83$, $p = .018$, $\eta^2_p = .01$, although the effect size was small. As can be seen in Figure 6, students who reported high scores on the FESM questionnaire had a high level of private regard at posttest irrespective of their participation in the IP, whereas those who scored lower on the FESM questionnaire showed higher levels of private regard following their participation in the program.

Hence, the IP was particularly efficacious for adolescents with low levels of FES, supporting the presence of a moderating effect.

Figure 5. Interaction of condition and FES on private regard at posttest (T1).



As can be observed, students who reported higher scores on the FESM questionnaire had a high level of private regard regardless of their participation in the laboratory, whereas those who had low scores on the FESM questionnaire showed an increase in private regard following their participation in the laboratory. In other words, it appeared that the intervention was only effective for those who started with low levels of FES.

5.2.3 Global identity cohesion and self-esteem

The third research question aimed to explore potential differences in levels of global identity cohesion (synthesis and confusion) and self-esteem between adolescents in the

intervention vs. control group five weeks after the completion of the laboratory sessions (follow-up, T2).

Regarding global identity cohesion, no significant effect of condition was found neither on the synthesis subscale, $F(1,561) = .101$, $p = .750$, $\eta^2_p = .001$, nor on the confusion subscale, $F(1,560) = .015$, $p = .90$, $\eta^2_p = .001$.

Similarly, no significant effect of condition on the self-esteem score emerged, with $F(1,560) = .355$, $p = .551$, $\eta^2_p = .001$.

5.3 Students' experiences of the *Identity Project*

"I still feel Moroccan. However, I really like pizza."
A.A.

To qualitatively assess the outcomes of the intervention, focus groups were conducted with the students six weeks after completion of the IP sessions (1 week after the follow-up assessment). During the focus group discussions, efforts were made to create a safe environment where students could freely share their reflections. They were encouraged to be as honest as possible in expressing any suggestions or modifications regarding the activities conducted in the classroom. In addition to asking which sessions were more or less interesting to them, efforts were made to investigate if and how students' thoughts and perceptions towards their own culture changed after the intervention.

Fifty-five percent of the students reported they did not feel any particular change after the intervention, whereas 35% reported a significant change and shared specific thoughts on it. For example, a female, second generation student with Marocchian

origins claimed: *"I feel I am more connected and feel more aware of belonging to my culture of origin"*. Among the participants who did not perceive a profound change, two male students whose parents were from the Veneto region and Sicily both agreed on saying: *"I was already very attached to my culture and therefore I don't feel a change*". Hence, for adolescents who already perceived their heritage culture as central in their self-image, the IP might be less relevant compared to those who have never thought about their culture. Among those who acknowledged that they had started to consider the cultural dimension as part of themselves, a female student without any immigrant background commented: "*I didn't even know I had one..it made me discover that I had a culture of origin, it was a word I never used and now I do. It was a topic I didn't pay attention to and now I do"*, underlying how the IP made her cultural origins salient in her self-concept.

Concerning private regard, a majority female adolescent offered an interesting perspective. Although she did not feel any change in the way she saw her culture, she commented: "(…) *but I have seen that if we are of the same culture, we live it differently"*. A male, majority student experienced a negative private regard toward his culture, but after the intervention he was able to embrace his cultural origins: "*Before I was offended by the word 'terrone', now it slips away from me because I've thought more and I'm able to go beyond. I like the customs of that place and I am proud of it.*" Similarly, another adolescent stated: *"Since my parents are from Apulia and therefore have some different habits compared to others who live here, I felt a little annoyed or at least I felt a little different. But now I don't care anymore."*

However, there were also three students who experienced a negative private regard before the IP and still did so after their participation. For instance, a female adolescent used a strong language when talking about her feeling Italian: "*I identify as Italian, but being Italian is a shame for me*". Yet, after listening to the reflections of her classmates, she also admitted that the intervention had "moved" something in her (*"ha smosso qualcosa"*). Another student stated that the intervention has helped those who felt ashamed of their culture to be proud of it and led to more sharing in the classroom: "*Maybe there are some people who didn't feel at ease before, but after the sessions I saw that they are more open and share their culture more even if they were ashamed before"*.

In terms of public regard, a Tunisian-origin student commented that, even though she had always felt different from others, the others also made her feel different. She claimed "*It's always been a little difficult with these two cultures. I have always felt a little different from others, even others have made me feel different at times.*" Thus, she described how public and private regard are inevitably intertwined and mutually influenced. Another student commented that "*Understanding stereotypes makes you realize that we all have this thing in common of making assumptions about other people's cultures without actually knowing*", showing how the reflection on the mechanisms behind stereotypes can serve as a protective factor against a negative public regard. However, some students shared how their perception of how others perceived them did not change at all: "*Having part of my family originally from the South, I feel a lot, especially among young people, a deep-rooted hatred towards people from the South and this thing always remains, it hasn't changed*".

Some students underlined how the project allowed them to reflect deeper on their cultural roots, allowing an acknowledgment of the different layers of cultural identity, where one culture may be more central compared to another, and different cultural identities have a different contextual salience. As one student put it: "*When I talk to my family at home, I'm closer to the Tunisian culture, while when I'm out, I feel closer to the Italian one*". This contextual dependence of cultural identity was a shared experience among several students.

Two students mentioned the role of the family in their cultural identity formation path. For instance, a female student with Italian origins reflected that "*I understood that the relationship that a person has with his culture also depends a lot on the family, on the teachings of his parents, on how he or she grew up and on the context".* In addition, the female student who expressed a negative opinion on her Italian cultural origin, explained that the intervention had helped her become closer to and know her family better; she expressed that the project prompted her*"to ask my relatives questions that I had never asked before"*. The Tunisian-origin student mentioned her difficult experience with living a daily life where two cultures are present (one in school and one at home): *"I've never been able to understand how I am, it's like I'm divided into two parts. I have to understand how to behave in every area, what I have to do…*".

In summary, the IP activities gave students the opportunity to reflect on their own identity and the cultural meanings attached to their own and other peers' identity. Although some youths reported not having perceived profound changes, most of the participants reported that they paid much more attention and were more curious about

the distinctive elements of their own and others' cultures. In general, students noticed that their relationship with their culture had changed: They felt more aware of the various cultural influences they were subject to and the people around them who partially determined their cultural identities. Being more confident and proud of their heritage culture(s), they also felt less vulnerable to discrimination. Specific questions about the quantity and quality of FES were not asked, and none of the students, if not during the sessions, raised this issue.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

"Absence of Evidence does not mean Evidence of Absence"
Carl Sagan, 1888

6.1 General comment

The current thesis describes the results obtained from a large-scale implementation of the Italian adaptation of the IP, a school-based intervention aimed at promoting cultural identity in adolescents attending multiethnic classrooms (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018a). Specifically, in this thesis we investigated possible intervention effects on the content of cultural identity at posttest, and explored whether students' self-reported FES moderated these associations. Moreover, we examined if students' global identity cohesion and self-esteem increased in the intervention group at follow-up, and evaluated to what extent the qualitative data gathered from focus groups were consistent with the quantitative data.

The first research question aimed to explore potential differences in cultural identity centrality, private regard, and public regard scores between the intervention group and the control group at posttest (T1). No study to date has examined intervention effects on cultural identity content, since the program *per se* is designed to stimulate adolescents' exploration and resolution processes. However, Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2014) found exploration and affirmation to be strongly connected to centrality. In addition, Wantchekon et al. (2021a) reported that students with higher identity centrality benefited more from the IP than their peers with low levels of centrality in terms of exploration. Given that the IP addresses topics like discrimination,

stereotypes, and intergroup conflict, and it facilitates a deeper understanding of one's cultural background, values, and beliefs, it was reasonable to expect that one or more of the three dimensions would increase after participation in the program.

The results did not confirm our hypothesis, since no significant effects were found on the three MIBI subscales, although a marginally significant association between condition and centrality in the expected direction emerged. In other words, students who participated in the intervention scored slightly higher on this characteristic at posttest compared to their peers in the control condition. However, given the low internal reliability of this subscale, this finding needs to be interpreted with caution. Overall, a possible explanation for this lack of effects is that, beyond the relatively low reliability of the questionnaire used to assess cultural identity content in this study, the main goal of the IP is to work on processes (i.e., exploration and resolution) rather than content, which has been found to be more stable and takes more time to be explored and explicitly taken into consideration (Neblett & Willis, 2020).

The second research question aimed to explore the possible moderating effect of perceived FES on the expected efficacy of the IP in relation to cultural identity content. In fact, it has been found FES fosters individuals' strength of centrality in adolescents (Bravo et al., 2014; Neblett et al., 2009; Rivas-Drake, 2011), and leads to a greater impact of the IP compared to those with lower levels of FES (Sladek et al., 2021).

However, we did not find any significant interaction effects in relation to centrality or public regard, indicating that adolescents' levels of FES do not influence intervention efficacy in relation to these dimensions. Yet, there was an interactive effect of condition

and FES on private regard, partially supporting our hypothesis. Specifically, adolescents with lower initial levels of FES benefited more from the IP than their peers with high FES in terms of private regard. In other words, adolescents with a family background characterized by a strong emphasis on the transmission of cultural values, traditions, and beliefs within the family showed high levels of private regard irrespective of the IP, whereas the intervention seemed to make a difference for those with low FES. It is possible that those who were already exposed in their households to an education regarding cultural identity related topics (e.g., cultural roots, racial-ethnic stereotypes) did not feel as much the impact of the IP as those whose parents did not mention these themes in the home environment.

The third research question aimed to analyze potential differences in global identity cohesion and self-esteem between the intervention vs. control group at the follow-up assessment (T2), considering the initial levels of these dimensions. The IP is a program specifically targeting cultural identity exploration and clarity (Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2018a); as a consequence, this project could provide psychological benefits for students facing challenges related to their cultural background (s) (Usborne & Taylor, 2010). However, we did not formulate a specific hypothesis in this regard. In fact, Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2018a) assessed the increase in levels of these constructs one year after implementation of the project, a long-term follow-up which is absent in this research and in the German one where no significant results where found possibility for this lack (Juang et al., 2020).

Indeed, our analyses did not show any significant effects of the intervention on global identity cohesion (synthesis and confusion), in line with the results of Juang and colleagues (2020), or on self-esteem.

One possible explanation is the limited time span of the follow-up, which took place approx 5 weeks after the intervention. A sequence of events from exploring cultural identity to reaching a resolution and eventually achieving a better psychosocial functioning, with a comprehensive global identity resolution and a higher self-esteem, might become more apparent within a more extended period of time, for instance, over the course of a year, as observed in the US study (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018a). As suggested by Juang et al. (2020), the effects on identity cohesion and self-esteem resulting from increased cultural identity exploration and resolution might arise only in the long term. Additionally, the primary focus of the program is to promote cultural identity development, which is expected to indirectly foster psychological well-being. The intervention may have had direct effects on other variables (depressive symptoms, outgroup orientation, etc.) not addressed in this study.

Concerning the fourth research question, our hypothesis was partially supported. The analysis of students' qualitative feedback gathered during focus groups suggested that the IP was efficacious in promoting greater self-awareness regarding one's own and others' cultural background. Our findings are in line with the results of Ceccon and colleagues (2023b), who stated that students with an immigrant background "became increasingly aware of how this dimension could be integrated into a multifaceted, multicultural identity" (p.1173). While culture may not have been a central issue in the

daily lives of some of these youths, many began to notice various cultural specificities they regularly encountered following the sessions. However, some students, mainly with immigrant background(s), did not perceive profound changes in their interactions with other cultures. Among those agreeing with this position, those with a majority culture background explained that they were already open to intercultural encounters with their peers before the project, and the lab sessions served mainly to reinforce the importance of these connections and to acquire more information. Students began to reflect and listen to classmates' stories, thus learning new things about them and creating a better classroom climate. Within this frame, students having lower levels of public regard might, in the future, develop a better sense of how others view their culture, thanks to the feedback of their classmates.

Nevertheless, for the majority of students, the activities provided an opportunity to engage in self-reflection about the significance of their cultural background(s). While the impact varied among our participants, a majority of them displayed increased interest and curiosity in exploring both their own culture and the cultures of others. This heightened awareness allowed them to recognize how cultural factors shaped their identity, leading to greater confidence and pride in their cultural heritage. As a result, they felt more resilient and less susceptible to discrimination. Overall, these findings support previous research highlighting the usefulness of the IP in promoting a positive cultural diversity climate and the quality of interethnic peer relationships (Ceccon et al., 2023a, 2023b; Juang et al., 2020). As expected, very few students mentioned the role of

their family in their relation with culture, and none of them, unsolicited, mentioned changes in self-esteem or personal identity cohesion.

6.2 Limitations

Despite its strengths, the current study has several limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the results.

A first limitation is linked to the exclusive use of self-report tools, which are subject to possible biases due to a number of factors (e.g., social desirability, memory recall, fatigue). For example, students were not used to completing questionnaires included in research activities and often stated that the questionnaire was too long, a factor which may have led them to answer some questions inattentively or inaccurately. Future studies might add teacher or parental reports of adolescents' cultural identity and other contextual factors to better understand the factors contributing to the efficacy of the IP.

A second limitation is related to the lack of differentiation based on nationality or generational status of adolescents with a migration background, which could have a relevance for the investigated constructs, especially as concerns public regard and FES. Therefore, further research is needed to examine the possible effect of these variables on the analyzed constructs. For example, a possibility would be to assess ethnic diversity in the classroom to ascertain whether this macro-level factor might be of moderate intervention efficacy.

A third limitation is that the study did not delve into specific inquiries about the quantity and quality of FES, which could have provided valuable insights into how family influences cultural identity formation in adolescence. Addressing this aspect in future research could further enhance our understanding of the role that the family plays in shaping cultural identity and its dimensions of content (salience, private regard, and public regard), moving beyond exploration and resolution processes.

A fourth limitation is the ethnicity of the IP trainers, who were all from the majority group. This factor has shown (Driessen, 2015) to be influential: Among other aspects, minority teachers tend to help students in having a stronger sense of self-recognition in the school environment, leading to a greater affinity for education, an aspect which could influence the efficacy of the project. The presence of minority teachers has several positive effects: They serve as role models and mediators, they are more able to identify cultural-specific problems and provide interventions for them, and they prepare both majority and minority students for living in a multicultural society (Driessen, 2015). Due to language barriers and the extremely low number of foreign students in Italian university, which ranks penultimate after Greece in numbers (Openpolis, 2023), the trainers were of Italian national background.

A fifth limitation concerns the experimental design, which does not include a follow-up 56 weeks after the conclusion of the intervention; including this survey in future research would make it possible to compare data from the Italian context with those originally collected in the United States (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018b), as well as to evaluate the association trends between the variables under examination in a

longitudinal perspective, with particular reference to the indicators of psychological well-being.

Last, our research took place in the northern Italian region of Veneto, which is known for its economic prosperity, dense population, and a significant influx of immigrants to Italy (ISTAT, 2022). Therefore, the generalizability of the results should be assessed in order to ensure its applicability in diverse regions with different socio-demographic features and immigration trends.

6.3 Conclusions and applied implications

The increasing diversity of cultural backgrounds within the Italian educational landscape is increasingly becoming a structural condition of the school itself. The IP responds to the demographic changes and changes in the stories of minors coming from migration contexts that Italy is facing. Indeed, according to MI (2022b), such changes require the educational system to provide visibility and responsiveness to cultural and learning needs by re-centering the issue of multicultural education.

To address the challenges posed by this diversity, it is necessary to adopt an approach that can facilitate communication among the various cultural universes, thus promoting exchanges and intercultural relationships among the different actors who inhabit the school environment on a daily basis. At the same time, those who are the primary recipients of the school's educational efforts also have to contend with the demands of personal development tasks. Among these tasks, the construction of a solid identity foundation is crucial, especially during adolescence. Cultural identity, in this

sense, represents one of the most critical aspects affecting the adaptation and psychosocial well-being of adolescents.

Overall, the results of this study lend support to the idea that the IP intervention is more effective in targeting the processes rather than contents of cultural identity. Although it has been found that content may play a role in shaping adolescents' tendency to engage in exploration (Wantchekon et al., 2021), our findings reflect the goal of the IP in its original configuration. Indeed, the program provides participants with tools and strategies to stimulate processes (i.e., exploration and resolution) rather than content, which has been found to be more stable and takes more time to be explored and explicitly taken into consideration.

The concept of FES has primarily been studied in the U.S., and there is limited research on this important aspect of family life in the European context. Our study makes a significant contribution in this regard: Even though the IP does not target this specific contextual variable, it allows for a deeper exploration of this construct in relation to other variables addressed by the intervention. In particular, the current study indicates that students' perception of FES moderates the association between experimental condition and cultural identity content, but only for private regard. In other words, our data suggest that the project was more efficacious in terms of private regard when students report lower (vs. higher) levels of FES; those students developed a stronger attachment to their culture. The lack of observed effects of the IP on cultural identity centrality might be partly explained - as has also emerged from the focus groups – by the fact that the IP has little impact among those students whose cultural identity is

already central in their sense of Self, or among those whose cultural identity is not yet salient in their self-concept, failing to make a difference. Public regard might require a more elaborate reflection: An in-depth analysis that may not be immediately feasible during the early stages of adolescence, where the development of the prefrontal cortex is not completely developed and the general topics addressed at school may not provide the conducive context for this to occur.

In the future, it may be useful to seek multidisciplinary collaboration with teachers in each class to ensure that the project is not perceived by both students and teachers as a one-time educational experience, but rather as an enrichment in terms of methods and reasoning to be continued over time. In addition, parental involvement should be considered. Although during adolescence other sources of socialization increasingly gain more importance, the family remains the main socialization agent (Benish-Weisman et al., 2015), and a collaborative communication between parents and the school system would provide a more holistic development of cultural identity.

In sum, as reported by our participants, the IP provides a unique opportunity to reflect on emotions and positions regarding one's own and other people's culture(s) in a safe space, acknowledging the efficacy of the project in having focused their attention to these topics. Specifically, the program provides adolescents with the opportunity to address themes that are relevant to them even outside of the school context, such as identity, stereotypes, diversity, discrimination, and cultural symbols, all within the regular school schedule. This is achieved through participatory methodologies that

move away from traditional frontal lectures to encourage debates, creative work, and group activities.

The interactive nature of the project aims to foster moments of sharing thoughts and considerations within a safe and welcoming space for everyone. The ultimate goal is to equip adolescents with tools for self-reflection and understanding of the world free from prejudice towards any form of diversity, so that it is not perceived as a threat or an emergency, but rather as a daily reality capable of enriching our identity.

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APPENDIX

Meeting	***Identity Project* in the U.S.A.**	***Identity Project* in Italy**
1 "*Unpacking Identity*" - "Lo zaino dell'identità culturale"	• **Introduction** to how the Identity Project will be conducted; •**Students will create the basic rules** to be followed during the meetings to ensure an atmosphere of respect and dialogue; • **Explanation of concepts:** identity, social and personal identity, ethnicity and race, ethnic-racial identity, identity as a multidimensional and evolving concept over time. • **Identity backpack:** an activity where students reflect on what constitutes their identity. Later, they share their thoughts in small groups and identify common elements that connect them. • **Reflections:** Each student will have a personal sheet to write reflections on what struck them during each meeting.	• **Introduction** to how the Identity Project will be conducted. • **Basic rules**: established together with the students to ensure a climate of respect, safety, and engagement during the meetings. • **Identity backpack**: the metaphor of a backpack is used to represent identity, something that one always carries with them, but its contents can change over time. • **"I am" activity**: participants write down five characteristics related to their identity on a sheet and choose one to share with their peers. • **Explanation of concepts**: personal identity, social identity, cultural identity. • **Reflections**: each student will have their own sheet to write reflections on what struck them during each meeting.
2 *"Group differences: Within and Between"* - "Nel gruppo, tra i gruppi"	• **Stereotypes**: definition and explanation of the phenomenon using examples relevant to the lives of the students. • **Video presentation**: shows how there are more differences within groups than between groups. • Introduction of the idea that **differences exist but are continuous, not categorical.** • **"I am... but I am not" activity**: students write down on a sheet the culture they identify with on one side and a stereotype associated with their cultural group that they do not identify with on the other side; • **Reflections**.	• **Review** of the previous meeting. • **Stereotypes**: definition and explanation of the phenomenon using examples relevant to the lives of the students. • **Video presentation**: shows how there are more differences within groups than between groups. • **"Sorting" activity**: students respond to six questions highlighting similarities and differences among themselves. • Introduction of the idea that **differences exist but are continuous, not categorical.** • **Homework assignment**: think about stereotypes associated with their cultural group. • **Reflections**.

3 *"Stories of Our Past"* - "Storie dal nostro passato"	• ***Journaling***: Students think about an episode where they were treated based on a stereotype. • **Discrimination**: introduction to the concept and comparison with stereotypes; • **Stories of Our Past**: Eight episodes of discrimination involving people from different cultural backgrounds in the U.S.A. are read. Students must hypothesize the cultural origin of the protagonists, which will be revealed later. • Use of the 8 stories to **create a sense of community** among the students. • **Reflections**.	• **"I am... but I am not" activity**: On sheets, students write down the culture they identify with on one side and a stereotype associated with their cultural group that they do not identify with on the other side. • **Discrimination**: definition, typologies, comparison with the stereotypes; • **Stories from Our Past**: Five episodes of discrimination involving people from different cultural backgrounds in Italian history are read. Students must hypothesize the cultural origin of the protagonists, which will be revealed later. • **Anti-discrimination strategies**: a made-up story is read by students in order to think about helpful strategies when facing discrimination episodes. • Use of the 5 stories to **create a sense of community** among the students. • **Reflections**.
4 *"Symbols, traditions and Rites of Passage"* - "Simboli, tradizioni e riti di passaggio"	• **Introduction to the "family mapping"** which is going to be done in the next meeting; • **Definition of symbols, traditions, rites of passage and rituals;** • **Increase student exploration and knowledge about their cultural origins**; • **Explanation of the complexity and variety of familial structures** • **Homework**: Complete the mapping package family member asking for information from family members, adults of reference, friends, siblings or cousins about one's cultural origins; • **Reflections**.	• **Review** of previous meetings; realized in the next meeting; • **Definition of symbols, traditions, rites of passage and rituals;** • **Linguistic-cultural mediation**: intervention of a external professional; • "**Language and identity**" activity: research and sharing in small groups idioms and proverbs from one's own culture of origin; • **Reflections**

5 *"My mapping family"* - "L'albero delle relazioni"	• **Explanation that there are no "right" or "wrong" family structures** • Carrying out the **family mapping**: the students can create their map in the shape of a circle or a pyramid, entering family members and their respective cultural origins; • **Sharing** in pairs; • Observation of the mappings of the companions; • **Discussion** in class • **Homework**: Think of 10 symbols of your own of the list with their cultural origins, photograph them or find photographs of them; • **Reflections**.	• **Review** of previous meetings; • Homework: think of 4 symbols of your culture(s), photograph them or find photographs of them; • **Explanation that there are many different types of families** and that each influences the definition of its own cultural identity; • **"Relationships Trees" activity**: students create a list of people who influenced them culturally then they draw a tree into which they enter the names of the list with the cultural origins; • **Sharing** in small groups; • Concept: each of us has a unique background; • **Reflections**.
6 *"Photo processing and Storyboards"* - "Dalle foto alle parole"	• **Presentation and sharing of photos**: students present one of the photos explaining why they consider it important, then they discuss in groups the similarities that emerge; • **Storyboards**: each participant creates a collage with the gathered photos; • **Homework**: Interview a family member or of the community important to their cultural origins; • **Reflections**.	• **Review** of previous meetings; • **Homework**: interview a person from your culture; • **"Cultural symbols and where to find them"** activity: students share photos of chosen cultural symbols in small groups; • **Reflections**.
7 *Ethnic-Racial Identity as a Journey* - *Il viaggio dell'identità culturale*	• **Reflection and discussion on the home interviews;** • **Video viewing**: 3 people tell how it has changed in time their cultural identity. It is specified that there is no "right" or "wrong" path; • Reflection on **one's own cultural identity journey**; • **Homework**: bring something typical that you represent one's cultural origins; • **Reflections.**	• **Explanation** of upcoming meetings; • **Reflection** and discussion on the home interviews; • **Review** of the characteristics of cultural identity; • **Video viewing**: 8 people tell how it has changed over time. It is specified that there is no "right" or "wrong" path; • **Class discussion** on the reflections resulting from the vision of the video; • **Reflections.**
8 *Grand finale: Celebrations and Closing*	• Brief **review** of the topics covered during the meetings;	• Preparation of the classroom with all the materials produced during the meetings;

- “Gran Finale”	• Sharing of materials with visitors: the “I am” cards, the storyboards and typical elements of one's own culture.	• **Cruciboo**: students form two teams that help each other each other to guess the words that will make up a crossword puzzle. The words to guess concern the topics addressed during the meetings; • "**The last word**": the students write on a post-it a comment on the Identity Project.

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