University of Padova

Department of Developmental Psychology and Socialisation

Master's degree in Developmental and Educational Psychology

Final dissertation

A pilot study of the Identity Project intervention at an international school in northern Italy

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Academic Year 2023/2024

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INTRODUCTION

"Education needs to address the world around our learners, but also the world within our learners." Sir Ken Robinson

Schools play a significant role in the lives of their students, with educators serving as influential figures in their academic and psychological outcomes in various ways. Recently, immigration issues have become more prominent in Italy due to the influx of immigrants from different regions of the world; however, evidence suggests that the full integration of immigrants into Italian society has not yet been achieved (Azzolini et al., 2019). Globalization and increasing diversity in classrooms have shifted the focus in educational settings toward recognizing the importance of promoting cultural identity development and fostering inclusive environments. In international schools, where students come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment is crucial.

The Identity Project (IP), developed by researchers at Harvard University, is a universal school-based intervention aimed at promoting positive cultural identity development among adolescents and enhancing their exploration of cultural identities. This innovative approach offers practical implications for integrating cultural identity development into educational curricula. Adolescent identity development is an important developmental competency that is positively associated with adjustment and negatively associated with maladjustment (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2024). Adolescence is a critical developmental stage marked by particular vulnerability, underscoring the importance of programs like the IP to support students' psychological and overall development.

This pilot study aims to examine, from an educators perspective, the feasibility, salience and appropriateness of the Italian adaptation of the IP in an international school setting in northern Italy. In addition, the study aims to assess the impact of the intervention on students' perception of the classroom cultural diversity climate as well as their academic engagement. This is the first time the IP is implemented in such a unique context; factors that make it an ideal setting are the flexibility and autonomy in its curriculum implementation. Additionally, the socioeconomic status of the student population in this context plays an important role in the rationale for its implementation, as these students often face significant academic and social pressures, creating a high-stress environment that could potentially hinder identity exploration.

The thesis consists of five chapters. The first chapter presents background information about the impact of globalization on the landscape of schools in Europe and Italy and reviews the literature on classroom climate and students' academic engagement.. The second chapter presents the theoretical background and evidence of efficacy of the IP and current research exploring the effects of the intervention on classroom cultural diversity climate. The third chapter is focused on the current study, outlining the design and research questions, adaptation to the current study context, participants, procedure, measures and analytic plan. Results are presented in chapter four and then critically discussed in the final chapter, together with the study's limitations and directions for future research

CHAPTER 1

MULTICULTURAL SCHOOLS

1.1 Characteristics

In the past decades, schools across Europe have become increasingly multicultural due to globalization, migration and demographic change (OECD, 2021). Globalization processes have led to mass migration to European countries, resulting in greater diversification of European societies. The phenomenon of immigration and multiculturalism is a significant global issue, with substantial implications for both migrants and host communities. According to the World Migration Report (2022) the number of international migrants worldwide reached 281 million, accounting for 3.6% of the global population in 2020. Overall, the estimated number of international migrants has increased over the past five decades. This demographic shift is driven by various factors, including economic opportunities, conflicts and environmental changes.

Reflecting this broader trend, Italy's educational landscape has been profoundly influenced by its growing multicultural population. With the increasing prevalence of multi-ethnic schools, intercultural teaching and learning have become significantly more important. According to ISTAT (2022), the number of students with non-Italian citizenship attending schools in Italy is approximately 865,000. These students come from a variety of countries, contributing to the rich cultural diversity within Italian schools.

Specifically, 44.9% of students come from Europe, 26.9% from Africa, 20.2% from Asia, and 7.9% from the Americas. The majority of these students come from four countries: Romania (154,256 or 17.8%), Albania (116,819 or 13.5%), Morocco (109,401 or 12.6%), and China (50,878 or 5.9%). Following these are Egypt, India, and Moldova, each accounting for 3% of the total international student population (Caritas, 2022).

In the Veneto region, students without Italian citizenship come from over 200 countries. By continent, most students (46.3%) come from Europe, followed by Africa (25.7%) and Asia (20.1%), with smaller percentages from the Americas and Oceania (7.9% and 0.03%, respectively) (Caritas, 2022). This diverse student body highlights the multicultural nature of Italy's educational system and underscores the need for inclusive educational practices.

The presence of non-Italian students varies significantly across Italy's regions. In the 2020/2021 school year, the majority of these students were concentrated in northern Italy (73%), followed by the central regions (18%), and the southern regions (8%) (Caritas, 2022). This distribution reflects the uneven spread of immigrant students across the country, with northern regions having a higher concentration of international students. Today, approximately 10% of students have migrant backgrounds, including first- and second-generation migrants, refugees, unaccompanied minors, EU and third country citizens; they all face very different problems and they have different needs in education (Farkas, 2022). Major risk areas for people with migrant backgrounds are issues such as

dropping out of school, low level of educational achievement, low employment rates, exposure to poverty and social exclusion. Moreover, despite their economic advantage, students from high SES families are not immune to risks such as emotional and psychological issues. They may experience such things as loneliness, anxiety, identity confusion and depression, partly due to the expectations placed on them. Adolescents in communities predominated by well-educated, upwardly mobile families show inordinately high levels of drug and alcohol use and more often than normative samples, they also show serious levels of various internalizing and externalizing symptoms (Luthar et al., 2013). Integration and inclusion are required in order to decrease these risks for all students and to construct societies which are more cohesive, resilient and prosperous. This process starts at schools, where education is seen as the foundation of successful participation in society; schools have the potential to be the major center of integration for children and for their families. To this end, schools and teachers must be equipped with the necessary resources and skills; they must be prepared to support students with migrant backgrounds throughout their education (Farkas, 2022).

The landscape of multi-ethnic schools in Italy is complex and evolving, reflecting the broader societal changes brought about by increased cultural diversity. The distribution of non-Italian students across the country and their varying levels of academic engagement highlight the need for targeted interventions and supportive educational policies. Intercultural education, as promoted by the IP, is crucial for fostering an inclusive and

supportive school environment. By addressing both academic and cultural needs, Italy's educational system can better integrate students from diverse backgrounds, promoting their academic success and overall well-being.

1.2 Classroom climate

School climate is based on patterns of people's experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices and organizational structures (Thapa et al., 2013). Overall, a positive overall school climate contributes to personal safety, the development of positive relationships between students and teachers, students' psychological well-being, and the management of psychological and behavioral problems (Thapa et al., 2013). Classroom climate denotes the global atmosphere of a classroom which is constructed via different types of interactions involving both student-student and teacher-student interactions (Gazelle, 2006). School and classroom climate matters.

Recognizing the importance of school and classroom climate, the research history on classroom cultural diversity can be traced back to Dr. Rudolf Moos's groundbreaking work in the 1970s. Moos, a psychologist, developed the Classroom Environment Scale (CES) to measure the classroom climate, emphasizing the importance of interpersonal relationships, personal growth, and system maintenance (Trickett & Moos,1974). The

Scale evaluates the effects of course content, teaching methods, teacher personality, class composition and characteristics of the overall classroom environment. This work laid the foundation for understanding how classroom environments impact student outcomes.

Building on this foundational work, Evans et al. (2009) further explored the concept of classroom climate, highlighting its multidimensional nature. Their research indicated that classroom climate significantly impacts students' academic performance, motivation, and engagement. They found that positive classroom climates, characterized by supportive teacher-student relationships and clear, consistent rules, can enhance students' learning experiences and outcomes (Evans et al., 2009). The study also suggested that the skills of individual teachers in managing classroom environments play a crucial role in creating a positive climate, thereby influencing overall educational success.

Measurement of the perceived social climate is a particularly promising way of investigating the psychosocial characteristics of diverse environments. Schachner et al. (2016) have explored the cultural diversity climate, defining it as an environment that promotes positive interactions among students from diverse backgrounds, which is essential for fostering intercultural competence and enhancing educational experiences. Studies have shown that a positive cultural diversity climate can lead to improved academic performance, increased self-esteem, and better social integration among students (Alansari & Rubie-Davies, 2020; Schachner et al., 2016).

The concept of a classroom cultural diversity climate, as defined by Schachner, emphasizes the importance of creating an environment that promotes positive interactions among students from various cultural backgrounds. This climate supports contact and cooperation, multiculturalism, and occasionally color-evasion, which focuses on shared humanity. By fostering such an environment, schools can enhance intercultural competence among students, helping them navigate and appreciate cultural differences effectively, thus improving their educational experience and social development (Schachner et al, 2019).

The multicultural school setting is composed of a diverse student population from all over the world. In such a unique setting, it is essential to understand how this diversity is dealt with and how intercultural relationships are fostered within the school environment. The role of a positive classroom cultural diversity climate as a predictor of various well-being indicators has been emphasized in recent research. A supportive and inclusive climate can lead to enhanced student engagement, higher self-esteem, better academic performance, and improved socio-emotional outcomes (Schachner et al., 2019). By creating a classroom environment that embraces diversity, teachers can help mitigate the negative effects of discrimination and cultural misunderstandings, thereby supporting the holistic development of all students (Alansari & Rubie-Davies, 2020). Creating such a climate involves implementing practices that promote intercultural understanding, cooperation, and respect among students. This approach not only helps in reducing prejudice and stereotyping but also prepares students to thrive in a multicultural society.

It is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural diversity climate in classrooms and how its various elements impact student outcomes as cultural diversity becomes the norm in educational settings. To address this need, the Classroom Cultural Diversity Climate Scale (CCDCS), was developed by drawing on theories and research from social psychology and multicultural education. In the context of classroom climate, a specific framework is used to describe the degree of cultural diversity present within it. According to Schachner et al. (2021), classroom cultural diversity climate can be described by two dimensions: equality and inclusion, which describe the degree of support and positive interactions experienced in the classroom (covering contact and cooperation, (un)equal treatment), and color-evasion), and cultural pluralism, which indicates how cultural diversity is presented as a resource and included in school curricula (including heritage and intercultural learning, critical consciousness, and polyculturalism).

Emphasizing the importance of a positive and inclusive classroom environment, Evans et al. (2009) reinforced the idea that such climates not only enhance academic success but also foster better social integration and well-being among students. This body of research underscores the need for educators to focus on creating supportive, well-structured classroom environments to promote optimal student development. The work of Civitillo et al. (2017) emphasizes that the way schools address and integrate cultural diversity is reflected through various practices, which collectively produce a specific narrative about diversity. This narrative impacts how students perceive and engage

with cultural differences, influencing their educational and social experiences. Effective approaches to cultural diversity involve concrete actions and representations that acknowledge and value cultural differences, promoting an inclusive and supportive school environment.

Studies by Schachner et al (2015) and Schwarzenthal et al (2019) highlighted how a classroom climate aimed at supporting interactions between students with different cultural backgrounds tended to favor a more positive orientation towards other groups and greater intercultural friendships. The approach of equality and inclusion does however have its limitations. Rosenthal and Levy (2010) discuss the concept of color-evasion, a perspective that emphasizes the irrelevance of cultural categories in interactions, arguing that highlighting cultural differences is what fosters prejudice and discrimination. They point out that prejudice derives from people's superficial emphasis on group categories and therefore prejudice can be decreased by de-emphasizing group memberships (Rosenthal & Levy, 2010). This approach can lead to neglecting the unique aspects of each cultural background, potentially reducing awareness of existing social inequalities and failing to address the underlying issues of discrimination effectively.

Cultural pluralism is the other dimension by which classroom cultural diversity can be described and whereby cultural differences are integrated as valuable curricular resources. Verkuyten and Thijs (2013) highlight the importance of cultural pluralism in educational settings. They argue that viewing cultural differences as a curricular resource

enriches the classroom environment. Lessons that explore the history and traditions of various cultural heritages help increase awareness of one's own origins among both minority and majority groups. This approach fosters a more inclusive and respectful learning environment, promoting intercultural understanding and reducing prejudice (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2013). This perspective places value on each cultural identity and as a result creates a climate conducive to appreciating diversity. Pérez-Jorge et al. (2023) highlight the necessity of incorporating intercultural education and educational inclusion into school culture to promote equity and social justice. They suggest that flexible processes and relationships open to diversity are essential for high-quality educational contexts.

Recent research supports the idea that valuing each cultural identity within the classroom can create a positive climate that enhances psychological adaptation and acceptance among students. Studies indicate that when cultural diversity is treated as a valuable resource, it contributes to better psychological outcomes for students with a an immigrant background. This approach leads to greater self-esteem, life satisfaction, and overall well-being (Pérez-Jorge et al., 2023; Rienties et al., 2013). When students from different backgrounds see their cultures represented and respected in the curriculum, it helps reduce prejudice and encourages mutual respect and understanding.

However, this perspective also poses risks, particularly the tendency to treat cultural differences as fixed and unchangeable, rather than as complex and dynamic and subject to

continuous transformation. It is precisely for the shortcomings of each of these perspectives individually that a combined approach should be adopted. Rosenthal and Levy (2010) discuss the importance of promoting knowledge of cultural differences while fostering a sense of belonging to the broader human community. They advocate for a mixed approach, combining elements of multiculturalism and polyculturalism to achieve these goals. Multiculturalism emphasizes the appreciation and understanding of distinct cultural identities, while polyculturalism focuses on the interconnectedness and shared aspects of cultures. This combined strategy helps in reducing prejudice and supporting psychological well-being among diverse student populations by highlighting both unique and common elements of different cultures.

1.3 Students' academic engagement

Academic engagement is a pivotal concept in educational psychology and pedagogy, describing the extent to which students actively participate in academically related activities. Defined by Alrashidi (2016) as a broadly positive and proactive engagement encompassing students' involvement, investment, commitment, and identification with school-related activities, it is an essential predictor of academic success and overall student well-being. The IP aims to enhance adolescents' well-being by fostering ethnic-racial identity development, which significantly influences academic engagement.

In their comprehensive review, Fredricks et al. (2004) described engagement as a malleable, developing, and multidimensional construct that consists of three broad dimensions: behavioural, cognitive, and emotional. The dimensions, according to the authors, are not isolated but are interrelated. Behavioral engagement involves students' effort, focus, and persistence in learning activities; emotional engagement pertains to students' enthusiasm, interest, and enjoyment in learning; and cognitive engagement refers to students' commitment to understanding and mastering challenging tasks and the deliberate use of appropriate learning strategies (Alrashidi et al., 2016; Skinner et al., 2008). These dimensions often coexist and are influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Cognitive engagement, in particular, tends to be more stable and forms a driving motivation for students (Perkmann et al., 2021). This comprehensive understanding underscores the significance of a supportive and stimulating school environment in fostering academic engagement.

Research on academic engagement has consistently highlighted its critical role in student outcomes. Fredricks (2004) identified engagement as a predictor of academic success, where positive engagement is associated with higher academic achievement, better school attendance, and greater likelihood of future academic engagement. Conversely, poor early experiences with school can lead to disengagement and negative behaviors such as substance abuse and social exclusion (Archambault et al., 2009). Understanding these

dynamics is essential for developing effective educational interventions that promote sustained engagement and success among students.

The relationship between academic engagement and academic success is well-documented. Engaged students are more likely to achieve higher academic performance, exhibit positive attitudes towards learning, and demonstrate resilience in the face of academic challenges (Martins et al., 2022). In multicultural schools in Italy, differences in academic engagement between foreign and local students reveal significant trends. Research shows that students with immigrant backgrounds are more susceptible to school dropout and enrollment delays (MIUR, 2022). Despite efforts to integrate these students, many still face challenges in accessing and participating in schooling, resulting in lower attendance rates compared to their native peers. For instance, the school attendance rate for students with immigrant backgrounds in Italy is 79% for the 3-5 age group, compared to 93.6% for native Italian children (MIUR, 2022).

Academic engagement is a multifaceted construct that plays a critical role in student success. The IP offers a valuable intervention by focusing on ethnic-racial identity development, which enhances students' sense of belonging and academic engagement. Supporting students from non-Italian backgrounds in multicultural schools in Italy requires targeted interventions that address their unique challenges and foster a supportive and inclusive school environment. By understanding and addressing the differences in academic engagement between foreign and local students, a more equitable and effective

educational experience for all students can be created, promoting long-term academic and psychosocial success.

1.4 Study context: a private international school in Northern Italy

A specific type of multicultural school is the reality of international schools. In Northern Italy, these schools have a rich history and play a crucial role in providing high-quality education to expatriate and local families. These schools are spread across major cities like Milan, Turin, and Verona, and they offer a diverse curriculum tailored to meet the needs of their international student body. They aim to foster global citizenship and cross-cultural understanding through their educational programs.

The private international school sector in northern Italy has seen significant growth, with an increasing number of schools catering to the expatriate community and local families seeking an international education for their children. Coinciding with the region's increasing globalization and economic growth, cities like Milan, with its significant expatriate community, have seen a rise in the demand for international education. According to the International Schools Database (2024), Milan alone has 23 international schools, with varying curricula and educational philosophies to suit diverse needs. The schools offer education from early childhood through secondary levels, ensuring continuity and stability for students.

International schools offer diverse educational programs. American international schools follow the U.S. curriculum, including Advanced Placement (AP) courses while British international schools adhere to the UK National Curriculum and provide IGCSE and A-level qualifications. International Baccalaureate (IB) schools emphasize critical thinking and creativity through rigorous IB programs. These schools place a strong emphasis on cultural integration. They organize field trips, workshops, and activities deeply rooted in Italian culture and history, helping students appreciate and immerse themselves in their new environment. Extracurricular activities ranging from arts to sports are integral, promoting holistic development and allowing students to explore their non-academic interests. Schools often provide dedicated counseling services to help students and families navigate the emotional and logistical challenges of relocating to a new country. Special needs services are also available to ensure that all students receive a tailored and inclusive education.

The specific context for this research took place at an international school in the city of Padova.[1] The school has approximately 700 students, representing 48 nationalities and provides a dynamic, multicultural environment that nurtures curiosity, critical thinking, and open-mindedness. The school's mission is rooted in offering a child-centered learning environment that is dynamic, differentiated, and rewarding. The school caters to students aged 18 months to 18 years, providing the resources necessary for them to reach their full

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[1] The English International School of Padova (EISP) is located in Padova, Italy and has been a leader in international education since 1987.

potential. Central to this mission is the emphasis on maintaining and enhancing students' self-esteem, ensuring they are encouraged to achieve their best. The goal is to develop lifelong learners by providing a robust foundation in knowledge and skills, preparing them for the demands of a global society (EISP, 2024).

The international school adopts an active, differentiated, and stimulating learning approach. It nurtures students' curiosity and critical thinking while fostering multiculturalism and mutual respect. The curriculum is designed to be challenging and enriching, promoting personal growth, cultural diversity and academic excellence (EISP, 2024). The High School curriculum, in particular, is structured to offer students opportunities that enable them to access university education worldwide. This four-year program is divided into biennial cycles. During the first cycle, students pursue the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), administered by the University of Cambridge International Examinations (CIE). The final two years are dedicated to the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP), overseen by the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO). The IBDP is an internationally recognized program that prepares students for universities in Italy and around the world. It transcends standard academic knowledge through a holistic approach that develops transferable personal skills and competencies. The program encourages continuous inquiry and independent learning, fostering open-minded individuals who appreciate cultural diversity and understand their responsibilities to the planet (EISP, 2024).

In the final two years of High School, students engage in the IBDP, which is accredited by the Italian government as equivalent to the Maturità, qualifying them for entry into universities globally. The program includes six subjects, one from each of the six groups including Language and Literature, Individuals and Society, Language Acquisition, Mathematics and Art as well as the Diploma Core consisting of:

- **Extended Essay**: This component allows students to research a topic of personal interest, honing their university-level research and writing skills.
- **Theory of Knowledge**: This course explores the nature of knowledge across disciplines, encouraging respect for diverse cultural perspectives.
- **Creativity, Activity, Service (CAS)**: This component involves participation in artistic, sports, cultural activities, and community service, providing experiential learning beyond the traditional classroom.

The curriculum supports an active learning approach, emphasizing the development of research skills, critical and creative thinking, analysis, and problem-solving. Students select subjects that best reflect and support their skills and ambitions, with official examinations set and marked by Cambridge International Examinations at the end of the two-year period. The school places a strong emphasis on experiential learning, offering school trips and events designed to extend the curriculum and support students' personal growth. These activities enable students to gain new skills, broaden their perspectives, and

enhance their understanding of the world. Students attend international conferences and visit artistic, cultural, and natural sites globally.

To support the well-being of its community, the school provides access to a school psychologist for students, parents, and staff. Additionally, an external psychologist offers consultancy and life coaching. The school prioritizes career orientation, helping students make informed choices about their future with the assistance of an internal university counsellor. This counsellor guides high school students through academic and professional opportunities both in Italy and abroad, assisting with admissions and liaising with universities and companies.

The school not only imparts academic knowledge but also fosters personal growth and global awareness among its student body. Through its comprehensive curriculum, supportive environment, and emphasis on lifelong learning, it equips its students with the skills and values necessary to thrive in a complex, interconnected world. The school's commitment to nurturing inquisitive, knowledgeable, and respectful individuals underscores its pivotal role in shaping future global citizens, making it an ideal context for implementing a school based intervention like the IP as discussed in the next chapters.

CHAPTER 2

A SCHOOL-BASED INTERVENTION: THE IDENTITY PROJECT

2.1 Theoretical basis and characteristics

The IP is a school-based program aimed at students in ninth grade. Recognizing the critical role of social environments and interactions in shaping an individual's identity, the school context is ideal as it is where adolescents spend a significant portion of their time, serving as an important social setting for this development (Markus et al., 2000). This grade level is specifically targeted because it aligns with the natural developmental stage when adolescents are enhancing their cognitive and social skills. Adolescents are particularly vulnerable at this stage and it is a crucial part of the developmental process. It involves major physical, cognitive, and psychological changes that may contribute to heightened emotional instability, difficulties in self-regulation, and lack of school motivation (Eccles et al., 2018). Youth increasingly engage in a process of exploring different aspects of identity and if successful they will achieve identity formation (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980). Cultural identity and the way we define ourselves in relation to our origins are crucial aspects of identity, particularly for adolescents from diverse cultural backgrounds. Broadly, cultural identity signifies an individual's affiliation with a particular ethnic group and nation (Phinney, 1990). Previous research indicates that a strong and positive cultural identity is linked to better psychological well-being, prosocial behavior, and intercultural competence among youth (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014).

The main objective of the intervention is to foster the exploration and resolution of ethnic-racial identity (ERI), leading to improved psychosocial adjustment through enhanced identity cohesion. The IP is designed to enhance the well-being of adolescents by focusing on the development of ERI (Umaña-Taylor, 2018). This is achieved by heightening students' awareness and comprehension of their own and others' ethnic-racial backgrounds, recognizing intra- and inter-group differences, and understanding historical instances of ethnic-racial discrimination faced by various groups. The intervention also personally engages students by encouraging them to reflect on their definitions of "family," their ethnic group identification, and their journeys towards forming their ERI. Additionally, it equips students with practical tools to delve into the traditions and symbols of their ethnic heritage and provides opportunities for discussion.

The general objectives of the IP can be summarized as follows:

- Increase the salience and awareness of one's own and others' cultural background.
- Know one's family cultural background.
- Provide tools for exploring one's identity (for example symbols, rites, traditions).
- Provide a safe space for reflection and discussion.
- 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.
- Resolve some ambiguities in the categorization of cultural groups, raising awareness of the different possible paths in the formation of cultural identity.

The intervention's objectives are accomplished by guiding students through a structured theoretical curriculum and engaging them in practical individual and group activities over eight weekly sessions, each lasting 55 minutes. Additionally, students receive homework assignments related to the lessons, encouraging them to explore their ethnic backgrounds with family or community members outside of school (Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2017). Extra meetings are scheduled for administering pre-test and post-test questionnaires and conducting focus groups to collect feedback. The contents and objectives of each of the eight sessions are briefly described below (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Curriculum of the Identity Project Intervention (8 weeks)

Meeting # Title	Theme	Explanation	Key Points & Objectives
1. Identity Backpack	**Cultural identity**	The part of who we are that is related to our culture(s).	● Define **identity** as all those different components that make us who we are. ● Distinguish between **personal identity (**aspects of self that describe personal characteristics or abilities) and **social identity** - aspects of self that are related to other people or other groups of people (one type of social identity is usually based on being part of a group, which ● includes other people). ● Introduce the concept of cultural identity: can change over time, individuals can have multiple cultural identities, and some can be more/less important than other identities.

2. Within Groups, Between Groups	**Stereotypes**	Assumptions we make about a person based on their membership in a group, not on their individual characteristics.	- Help students acknowledge that similarities exist between-groups, as well as differences within-groups. - Stereotypes start from the reality around us, but they are inaccurate "**cognitive shortcuts**" because they are based on incomplete information (or unrelated to the conclusions we draw) and lead to generalizations (i.e.to extend these conclusions to a whole group even if we take them from only one or a few examples). **Continuity**: characteristics and differences are not categorical but continuous. They have infinite shades of "intensity" and are unique to each person. **Subjective perspective:** feeling or notfeeling part of a group is subjective (i.e. what I feel may be different from what other people think of me), but the opinion of others can influence us).
3. Stories from our Past	**Discrimination**	Unfair and unfavourable treatment of one or more people based on their membership in a specific group.	**Implicit discrimination:** a type of discrimination that is more subtle and difficult to identify, e.g., when we assume that a person can only do unskilled jobs because he or she is of foreign origin. **Visible minorities:** groups that are discriminated against more often because the people in them are more easily identified as "different". - Raise awareness among students about detrimental effects of stereotypes and discrimination and build a sense of community, based on the fact that all cultural groups can face/have faced discrimination when they are a "minority".

4. Cultural Symbols	**Cultural Symbols**	Objects, shapes or images that we use to represent a significant and therefore important part or value of a culture.	**Social value**: a symbol has a certain meaning because people give it that meaning. - Identify different types of cultural symbols. Examples: **traditions** = practices handed down from generation to generation that have a cultural meaning or value; **rite of passage** = a ceremony or event we use to mark important transitions in life; **ritual** = an activity performed in a certain order to mark a special occasion. It is characterised by repeating the same words, in the same order, accompanied by some specific gestures. - Conceptualizing **language as a set of symbols**: it is a "convention" between people who decided to attribute a certain meaning to a sound, while other people, for the same meaning, chose other sounds. It is one of the cultural expressions linked to our identity.
5.Relation-ship Trees	**Social Family**	All those people who are important to us and have contributed or helped make us who we are, including people to whom we are not necessarily biologically related.	- There are many different types of families and many ways of creating a family. - Each student has a **unique (cultural) background** and this uniqueness is something we all have in common. - Cultural identity development is **influenced by meaningful relationships** that can change throughout time and life experiences.
6. From Pictures to Words	**Cultural Symbols: Similarities and Differences**	There are differences in cultural symbols across different cultures, but symbols can represent the same values and meanings in different cultures.	- Enhancing **personal experiences** and **interpersonal relationships/sense of belonging** to the group. - Stimulating **curiosity** toward and increasing **knowledge** of one's own and other cultural backgrounds.

7. Cultural Identity as a Journey	**Cultural Identity: Change Over Time**	Cultural identity (like all parts of identity) changes over time and situations.	- We begin to reflect on our cultural identity and what it means for us when we are no longer immersed in our own culture but encounter others: when we realise that what is "normal" for us may be "different" for someone else. - All our cultural identities develop through the same processes (by exploring and defining our relationship with our culture), but we all have our own personal and unique journey (i.e., there are no right or wrong ones).
8. Grand Finale	**Review of Themes**	Reflection	- Reviewing all main contents. - Celebrating the end of the program. - Creating a space for students to individually reflect upon and share with the group what they learned and the materials they created throughout the project.

2.2 Effects on Classroom Cultural Diversity Climate

Recent research by Schachner et al. (2024) sheds light on the profound effects of the IP intervention on the classroom cultural diversity climate. It aims to understand the dynamic interplay of the IP intervention with the classroom cultural diversity climate (specifically heritage culture and intercultural learning, critical consciousness and equal treatment) on cultural identity exploration and resolution. The findings emphasize the importance of a supportive and inclusive classroom environment in promoting cultural identity exploration and resolution among adolescents. This section explores the differential impact across

countries, the role of cultural identity exploration, and the significance of a positive classroom cultural diversity climate.

The effects of the intervention varied significantly between Italy and Germany. In Italy, the IP led to substantial improvements in cultural identity resolution, a result not as prominently observed in Germany. This disparity might be attributed to differences in the age and developmental stages of the students, as well as the pre-existing classroom cultural diversity climate in each country (Schachner et al., 2024). The findings suggest that the intervention's efficacy is influenced by contextual factors, highlighting the need for tailored approaches in different educational settings. The study found that the IP significantly increased cultural identity exploration among adolescents in both Italy and Germany. Particularly evident in the post-test results, students who participated in the intervention demonstrated greater engagement with their heritage cultural identities compared to those in the control group (Schachner et al., 2024). This increased engagement underscores the intervention's success in encouraging students to delve deeper into their cultural backgrounds and develop a stronger sense of identity.

A positive classroom cultural diversity climate, especially one that emphasizes critical consciousness, heritage culture, and intercultural learning, was found to positively affect cultural identity exploration. In Italy, classrooms with a stronger critical consciousness climate before the intervention saw increased heritage culture identity exploration at the post-test (Schachner et al., 2024). This suggests that environments

fostering discussions about social inequalities and systemic racism provide essential support for students to explore and affirm their cultural identities. It also highlights the significant role that a supportive classroom cultural diversity climate plays in fostering cultural identity exploration and resolution among adolescents. The differential impacts observed between Italy and Germany emphasize the importance of considering contextual factors when implementing such interventions.

The IP success in enhancing cultural identity engagement demonstrates its potential as a valuable tool in promoting inclusivity and cultural understanding in educational settings. These findings underscore the need for educators to create environments that support cultural diversity and encourage meaningful discussions about identity, contributing to the well-being and development of all students.

2.3 Evidence of efficacy

2.3.1 USA

To evaluate the efficacy of the IP, Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2018a) involved eight high school classes in the USA in their study. Through a randomization procedure, four classrooms were assigned to the intervention condition, participating in the IP activities, and the other four to the control condition, which included lessons focused on future educational and professional opportunities. The initial hypothesis predicted that students in

classrooms assigned to the intervention group would report more exploration of cultural identity after participating in the IP (post test) and these increased levels of exploration would lead to an increase in resolution (follow-up).

In total, 218 students aged 15 years (Mage = 15.02 years) with ethnic minority and majority backgrounds participated in the study. Both the control group and the intervention group participated in eight weekly meetings, scheduled during school hours and for a period of ten weeks. In addition, three surveys were administered to all eight classes: 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 the 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 (2018b) carried out a follow-up one year after the pretest (56 weeks after the end of the intervention) 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 pertained to 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 cohesion of global identity, 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.

Overall, the implementation of the IP in North American schools suggests that providing adolescents with tools to explore various aspects of their own cultural backgrounds, along with opportunities for intercultural exchange, can support the development of a clear and integrated sense of ERI. In the long term, this can result in improved psychosocial adjustment in the specified areas.

2.3.2 Germany

The persistence of racist sentiment in Germany has been brought into focus by events such as the shootings in Halle at a Jewish synagogue in October 2019 (ANSA, 2019) and the attack against German ethnic minorities which took place in February 2020 in Hanau (ANSA, 2020). Events such as these, underscore the urgent need for comprehensive measures to address these issues and the necessity to create spaces where young people can be guided in critical and constructive discussions which address issues related to stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. In order to confront these issues, Juang and collaborators (2020) introduced the IP in a Berlin high school. The project aimed to deepen students' comprehension of their own culture and the cultural backgrounds of others, with

the goal of fostering a sense of belonging, a clear identity and improving the classroom climate in terms of cultural diversity.

Originally developed by Umaña-Taylor & Douglass (2017) the project was adapted to the German context, respecting the recommended practices for cultural adaptations of evidence-based interventions (Barrera & Castro, 2006).The main changes were the following: (1) the intervention was adapted for students in seventh grade, as this represents a significant transition year in the German school system in which interventions are most effective (Sherman et al., 2013); (2) the concept of "ethnic-racial identity" was replaced with the term "cultural heritage identity". Following the Second World War, the term "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 four 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.

During each meeting, two trainers were always present to lead the intervention. An observer was also present to ensure that the sessions dealt with all the main topics in a coherent manner, and they were responsible for completing a fidelity checklist after each meeting. At least one teacher from the respective class was also present.

Data from the 2018-2019 cohort were collected at 4 different time points: 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.

The results validated only a few 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 after the end of the IP as in the study conducted by Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2018). Moreover, no changes were observed from pre-test (T1) to post-test (T2) regarding better classroom climate towards cultural diversity; however, students in the intervention group reported a significant increase, compared to the control group, in the dimensions of awareness of unequal treatment between groups and critical awareness compared to the control group (Juang et al., 2020).

The exploratory analyses regarding correlations between variables revealed that only in the intervention group, exploration of cultural identity was linked to greater cohesion of global identity. Furthermore, greater resolution of cultural identity was linked to greater cohesion of global identity and higher self-esteem, fewer depressive symptoms, better school adjustment, and more positive attitudes toward people belonging to other cultural groups. The focus groups revealed that what students appreciated the most from the project was having the opportunity to listen and learn something new from the experiences and the cultures of their classmates. Similarly, teachers were pleasantly surprised to learn new aspects about their students' cultural backgrounds.

2.3.3 Italy

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.

Due to the fact that culture is a central theme in the IP, appropriate adaptation, even on a linguistic level, was necessary considering that there are vast differences between the North American, German and Italian cultures. These differences were considered during the information gathering phase by analyzing the literature, comparison with the research team in Germany and investigating migration in Italy. In addition, 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with first- and second-generation immigrants who were asked about more nuanced details of their culture regarding traditions, symbols, values, language and beliefs of their heritage cultures. In order to assess the cultural appropriateness of intervention, activities proposed by the original version of the IP, focus groups were conducted with the participation of 5 cultural mediators with migration backgrounds representative of the predominant foreign nationalities in Italy. During these meetings, the 8 sessions of the project were presented and discussed, focusing mainly on the activities and topics covered and the overall feasibility of the program in general. This information was gathered and analyzed and subsequently used in the design of the preliminary adaptation.

During the second phase of adaptation, the original project manual, the self-report questionnaires used for the pre and post test, and the contents of the activities (videos, slides, etc.) were reviewed and translated into Italian with certain modifications. 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 Italian context.

Change in terminology was one of the first fundamental decisions made during this process. It was preferred to replace the terms "race" and "ethnicity" with that of "culture," a term more appropriate to the post-war multicultural composition of present day Italy and Europe in general. Several other changes were made to the content to better reflect the Italian context and make them more relatable for students. For example, in the meeting "Stories of our past," instances of discrimination in the U.S. were replaced with stories of marginalization that occurred in Italy. In addition, for the fifth meeting, the wording the "Family trees" was replaced with "Relationship trees", for the purpose of providing the possibility to students of including friends, teachers, neighbors and others among their notable relationships allowing for the inclusion of not only blood ties but those of another nature as well that may be considered just a significant to them. Together with the invaluable contribution of the cultural mediators as well as continuous dialogue with the American and German research teams, an effective adaptation process was able to be realized and approved. 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 (Ceccon et al., 2024). Participants were students attending tenth grade in a technical institute in Padua, Italy, where 37% of the students had an immigrant background coming from 21 different countries. The entire pilot study was conducted online through the Google Meet platform due to the global Covid-19 pandemic. Classrooms were assigned to the intervention condition (five classes) and to the control condition (four classes) based on the requests and availability of the teaching staff. The IP was conducted during school hours for 8 weeks by a PhD student in psychology, assisted by a team of psychology interns and master's students under the coordination and supervision of the principal investigator.[2] The meetings intended for the intervention group 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 and each meeting lasted 55 minutes. The control group attended regular lessons as scheduled by the school.

The data collection took place between March and May 2021 and only the participants with signed parental consent were considered. 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, orientation to other groups, family ethnic socialization,

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[2] Professor Moscardino, DPSS, University of Padova

perceived discrimination, academic involvement, and class climate versus cultural diversity. Questionnaires were administered to both groups one week before (pretest) and one week after (post-test) the intervention.

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 context. Two focus groups were conducted; one with students and one with teachers. Results indicated that 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.

This feedback provided an opportunity for the team to look at certain aspects of the intervention and consider modifications. For example, some teachers suggested investigating linguistic aspects, since language is an essential part of one's cultural identity. In addition, it was noted that Italian adolescents are less familiar with certain themes of the intervention, such as discrimination and prejudice. In order to consolidate these key concepts, the team decided to include a brief recap of previous concepts presented at the beginning of every meeting. With respect to the 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 intervention group versus those in the control group. 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.

As a result of the data gathered, the intervention was revised, and the main study was conducted between October 2021 and April 2022 (Ceccon et al., 2023). The main study was implemented in six different schools in Padua, a city in the northern part of Italy in the region of Veneto . This geographical area 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 types of schools due to several contextual factors (e.g., preference for work-oriented schools to contribute to family income). In order to ensure that at least 20%–25% of the sample was composed of adolescents of immigrant descent, the decision was made to carry out the research in this type of educational context. As a result of the original study, middle adolescence was the ideal age to focus on as this particular developmental period is considered to be most receptive and sensitive to identity-related issues (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018b).

The project included 956 participants in their second year of high school; 45 classes from six high schools were considered, of which 23 were randomly assigned to the intervention group and 22 to the waitlist control group. The participants were assessed

using questionnaires at three time points: 1 week before the intervention, 1 week after the intervention, and 5 weeks after the intervention. Students received the Identity Project intervention from 14 highly trained facilitators, consisting of intern psychology students and a Ph.D. student, who worked in pairs in every class. Students who had recently moved to Italy and were experiencing language difficulties were assisted by language mediators during the meetings.

A total of 956 participants took part in the study. 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 or third criterion were excluded from survey assessments, but they were invited to participate in the IP meetings and were further assisted by a facilitator/support teacher. For non-Italian speakers, they were provided materials translated in their respective mother tongues.

The initial hypothesis that adolescents in the intervention group, as compared to the control group, would demonstrate an increased level of exploration from pre- to posttest was supported. This demonstrates that the adaptation of the IP to the Italian school context stimulated adolescents' reflections on their heritage culture(s) by encouraging meaningful exploration, observation, and consideration of this significant aspect of their identity throughout the meetings. The culturally adapted IP proved to be a valuable tool in

facilitating adolescents' engagement with their heritage culture(s). There was no evidence to support the idea of a cascading effect, where cultural identity exploration at post-test leads to increased resolution at follow-up in the intervention group. Therefore, 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. While exploration processes might have been initiated by the IP, the sense of identity clarity may require sustained reflection and ongoing exploration to fully materialize. Essentially, the participants may have begun exploring their cultural identities but did not yet reach a point of clarity within the timeframe of the study. This suggests that identity development is a gradual process, and the effects of exploration on resolution may not be immediately apparent.

Given these encouraging results, the IP was further adapted to other educational contexts (e.g., unaccompanied immigrant minors living in residential care communities), including an international school, as described in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

THE CURRENT STUDY

3.1 Study Design and Research Questions

The present thesis is part of a broader study[3] which specifically aims to assess the efficacy and long-term effects of an Italian version of the IP, a school-based intervention designed to promote adolescents' cultural identity development (Ceccon et al., 2023).

The present study aimed to assess the feasibility, salience and appropriateness of the IP intervention in an international school setting in northern Italy from the perspective of the teachers. In addition, differences between students in the intervention and waitlist control groups at posttest in terms of academic engagement and classroom cultural diversity climate were assessed (controlling for baseline levels of these variables). Hence, this thesis focused on the pre-test survey data that were collected 1 week before the intervention started as well as the post-test survey data collected 1 week after the intervention was completed. Qualitative data collected during focus groups with teachers and students was also analyzed. The main research questions guiding this study were as follows:

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[3] Study coordinated by Professor Moscardino and Dr. Chiara Ceccon from the University of Padova (Italy), in collaboration with Professor Umaña-Taylor from Harvard University (USA) and Professor Maja Schachner from the Universität of Halle-Wittenberg (Germany)

1. ***Is the adaptation of the IP feasible, salient, and appropriate in an international school setting from the teachers' perspective?***

One of the main objectives of the IP is to provide adolescents with tools to explore their cultural identity through reflection and sharing elements of their culture. With regards to teachers' perspectives, they can often feel unprepared to handle the complexities of a culturally diverse classroom. They may have used a one-size-fits-all approach that does not fully support the needs of all students (Schachner et al., 2016). After participating in the IP, teachers reported feeling more confident and equipped to engage with cultural diversity in their teaching practices. They adopted more inclusive teaching methods and developed stronger relationships with their students, fostering a more supportive and engaging learning environment (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2023). Previous research focused on this intervention in Germany (Juang et al, 2020), Italy (Ceccon et al, 2023) and in the USA (Umaña-Taylor, 2018b) supported the feasibility, appropriateness and salience of implementing the IP in multi-ethnic school contexts. Based on this evidence, it is hypothesized that from the teachers' perspective, the IP will demonstrate feasibility, salience and appropriateness in the context of an international school setting due to the natural fit with the culturally diverse student population, its flexibility and adaptability within the curriculum, the alignment with social-emotional learning goals, the existing expertise of teachers, and the supportive environment of international schools.

*2. **Do students in the intervention and waitlist control groups differ in their perceptions of classroom cultural diversity climate at posttest, after controlling for baseline levels of this variable?***

Investigating the extent to which the classroom cultural diversity climate has changed from before to after the IP intervention is essential for evaluating the program's impact on fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning environment. The cultural diversity climate of a classroom encompasses the norms, values, and practices that influence how students from different backgrounds interact and are treated (Schachner et al., 2016). Enhancing this climate is vital for reducing prejudice, promoting cross-cultural understanding, and supporting the academic and social development of all students. Previous research provides evidence that adolescents perceive more unequal treatment in their classroom after having gone through the IP curriculum (Juang et al., 2020). In addition, further research shows that students who participated in the IP reported a stronger critical consciousness climate post-intervention, indicating that students became more aware of and engaged in discussions about social inequalities and systemic racism (Schachner et al., 2024). In light of this research, it is expected that students in the intervention group compared to the control group will show differences from T1 to T2 in perceptions of the classroom cultural diversity climate, particularly in regards to the dimensions of contact and cooperation and unequal treatment.

3. *Do students in the intervention and waitlist control groups differ in academic engagement at posttest, after controlling for baseline levels of this variable?*

Research conducted by Umaña-Taylor et al. (2018b) found that students who participated in the IP reported higher levels of ethnic-racial identity exploration and resolution. This was associated with improved academic engagement and performance, as well as better socio-emotional adjustment. In addition, research suggests that culturally relevant pedagogy and interventions that address students' cultural backgrounds and identities can significantly enhance motivation and engagement in the classroom (Skinner et al, 2008). Engaged students are more likely to achieve higher academic performance, exhibit positive attitudes towards learning, and demonstrate resilience in the face of academic challenges (Martins et al., 2022). Considering these findings, it is plausible that students who participate in the IP intervention will show higher levels of academic engagement than their peers who do not participate in the intervention.

3.2 Adaptation of the Identity Project to the specific study context

The adaptation process of the IP at the international school began with the convening of three focus groups comprising school heads, teachers, and psychologists, aimed at exploring various aspects of student relationships, curriculum, school initiatives, and the capacity of students to engage with the program. The focus groups took place two weeks before the intervention and on average lasted one hour. The insights gathered from these

focus groups led to significant adaptations in the project in both the content and organization in order to better align with the needs and context of the school.

The first set of focus groups included heads of school and teachers, focusing on student relationships, curriculum, and the school's capacity to address topics in the IP. The participants included the Head of School, Assistant Head of School, IGCSE Coordinator, and Head English Teacher, along with instructors from Math, English, Biology, Business, and Economics. Notably, two teachers present in these focus groups also participated in the classroom during both the first and second waves of the intervention. Their discussions centered around several key areas: strategies for facilitating the inclusion of new families and students into the school, interactions among students from different backgrounds, evaluation of how the school curriculum addresses cultural diversity and related issues, training for staff on handling cultural diversity, methods used in classrooms to enhance learning, students' ability to discuss abstract topics and engage in self-reflection, and needs based on age and cultural background, including school-led initiatives and projects.

The second set of focus groups involved psychologists, focusing on student relationships, school climate, resources, and policies. The participants included an elementary/secondary school psychologist (part-time) and a middle and high school life coach/psychologist. Their discussions addressed major challenges and opportunities in working with a culturally diverse student population, the role of psychologists within the school context, the cultural climate at the school, policies and action plans for addressing

intercultural clashes, school resources available for students facing cultural dynamics issues, and needs identified through school-led initiatives and projects.

The discussions from these focus groups led to several key adaptations to the intervention. These adjustments ensured that the needs of students and the context of the school were adequately considered. Due to the background knowledge and advanced level of understanding among students on the topics addressed throughout the intervention, more time was allocated for in-depth discussions. Focus group revelations about cultural divisions among students prompted the incorporation of strategies to integrate students into more dynamic groups, representing different cultural groups in examples and activities within each meeting. Teachers highlighted that academics were a priority for many students and families. Consequently, the duration and delivery of the final meeting were adapted to align with exam schedules.

There were several other more specific adaptations implemented as a result of the insight provided during the focus groups (see Table 2).

Table 2. Adaptation of the IP for the context of a private international school setting

Session	IP for public multiethnic schools in Italy	IP for international school in Padova
Session 1	● Introduction to how the Identity Project will be conducted.	● Drawing upon the pre established IB ground rules of the international school, these were used as a foundation to create

	● 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.	ground rules for the meetings at the beginning of the project.
Session 2	● 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	● instead of asking students if they are bilingual we asked if they speak another language other than ****** at home
Session 3	● "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,	● For session #3 an example of someone from Chinese origin was added to adapt to the demographics of our student population - many of whom are from China.

	typologies, comparison with the stereotypes; ● Stories from Our Past: Five episodes of discrimination involving people from different cultural backgrounds in Italian history is 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	● Included systemic discrimination as students had a solid foundation and understanding of the topic beforehand. ● Perspective taking activity/discussion - Instead of each group discussing all three perspectives, each group was assigned a specific perspective to discuss and then present to the whole group. ● Practical consequences of discrimination were discussed and then anti discrimination strategies were provided and discussed with students at the end of the session.
Session 4	● 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	● No changes made
Session 5	● 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	● No changes made

	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	
Session 6	● 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.	● Students could not send their photos to facilitators so many were not prepared for that meeting and did not come to the meeting with their photos prepared or printed. ● Students were given the option to complete the task in class during the meeting. ● Faces and personal photos were also not allowed for privacy reasons.
Session 7	● 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 represents one's cultural origins. ● Reflections.	● The video was changed and adapted to the context and cut to 10 minutes to adapt to the length of each meeting. The interviews that were most relevant to the student population of EISP were kept. ● Cultural interviews couldn't be recorded for privacy reasons therefore many did not complete this task. ● Presentation of the video was divided into small parts to allow for continuous reflection and discussion as opposed to showing the entire video at once.
Session 8	● Brief review of the topics covered during the meetings. ● Sharing of materials with visitors: the "I am"	● Students could not share and display activities and work from previous sessions for privacy

	cards, the storyboards and typical elements of one's own culture.	issues and also because they had either misplaced or did not have their materials with them . ● Couldn't make a playlist because students were not able to access the link to create a playlist for privacy issues.

For example, in Session 1, ground rules were established based on the IB Learner Profile already in use at the school. Session 3 added examples relevant to the demographics of the school, such as including individuals of Chinese origin. Systemic discrimination was included in the discussion as well as anti-discrimination strategies. Activities were adapted in Session 6 due to students not being able to share personal photos for privacy reasons. A video presented in Session 7 was shortened to a10-minute segment and divided into short sections in order to allow for continuous reflection and discussion. The final session of the intervention was adapted to account for students not being able to share information due to privacy issues and logistical constraints.

Organizational changes were also made to enhance the efficacy of the intervention. The session duration was reduced from 55 minutes to 45 minutes. Due to curriculum demands only students in Grades 9 and 11 were able to participate in the intervention. Materials were kept individually by students for privacy reasons. Sessions were referred to as meetings to avoid connotations of a psychological intervention. The frequency of group and pair work was increased to foster communication and small group discussions.

Multiple parental consent forms were required, which affected participation rates due to logistical challenges.

The focus groups provided crucial insights for adaptations that shaped the intervention, ensuring it was responsive to the unique needs of the school's diverse student body. The adaptations made were essential in fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of the intervention.

3.3 Participants

Participants were students in grades 9 and 11 at an international school in Padova. 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). Overall, the total number of students in Grades 9 and 11 was 69. A total of 49 students provided informed consent to participate in the surveys yet 42 students completed both the pre- and posttest. The participants' average age was 15.45 years (range = 13-18, SD=1.23); 57% self-identified as girls, 41% as boys, 2% as non-binary. Participants reported 10 birth countries: Italy (71%), China (2%), England (5%), Russia (5%), Turkey (5%), United States of America (5%), Germany (2%), Lithuania (2%), and Spain (2%). Those who were not born in Italy had been living in the country for 3 years on average (range = 1-12 years). Overall, 19 different countries of origin (including mother and father's birth country) were reported: Australia, Brazil, Bulgaria, China, England, France,

Germany, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Lithuania, New Zealand, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, South Korea, Turkey, Ukraine, and the United States of America. In total, 36% of the participants' parents were born in China and 43% of their parents were born in Italy, comprising the two largest groups. Regarding the education level of participants' parents, both mother and father's educational background was taken into account. The majority of parents had obtained a university degree (45% mothers and 43% fathers), 33% of mothers and 43% of fathers had obtained a high school diploma, and 12% of mothers and 7% of fathers completed middle school. Regarding participant families' socioeconomic status (SES) as measured by the Family Affluence Scale (FAS; Boyce et al., 2006), the mean score was 7.62 (SD =1.23, range = 5 to 9) indicating that the participants generally had a high SES.

3.4 Procedure

This project received approval from the Ethics Committee of the School of Psychology at the University of Padua (protocol n. 222b**).** As described in par. 3.2, prior to piloting the intervention, 3 separate focus groups were conducted with teachers, and school staff (e.g., psychologist) to better understand the specific school context, with a particular attention to intercultural dynamics and cultural identity-related issues. This information was used by the research team to adapt the existing intervention manual
as well as the proposed activities of the IP sessions to the target population.

Prior to the commencement of the project, an information session was conducted for all students who were provided with a pamphlet that outlined the study's purpose, data handling, and protection procedures, as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. These brochures and informed consent forms were distributed by the research team during school hours to students attending the four classrooms, with a request that they be returned signed by both parents (or those who had legal responsibility for the student) within one week. The study procedures were also thoroughly explained to parents and teachers during two separate online meetings.

The school director served as a contact person, organizing the intervention schedule to fit in with preexisting activities. Following the pre-consultation and recruitment phase, the four participating classrooms were randomly assigned to the intervention or control condition. Students in the intervention condition ($n = 42$) first attended the 8-week curriculum during school hours, while their peers in the control condition ($n = 42$) were scheduled to participate in a subsequent round of the program ("waitlist control group") once their sessions were completed. At the end of January 2024, self-report surveys were administered to adolescents from all 4 classrooms (pretest). Each student was asked to report on their sociodemographic characteristics, cultural identity, personality characteristics (e.g., ethnocultural empathy, cognitive flexibility), interpersonal relationships (family and friends), academic engagement, and classroom cultural diversity climate.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the four classrooms were subsequently assigned to two groups: Group A (a ninth and eleventh grade participating in the first cycle of sessions between the end of January and end of March) and Group B (a ninth and eleventh grade participating in the second cycle of sessions between the end of March and the beginning of June 2024).

Figure 1. Timeline for the Identity Project at the international school
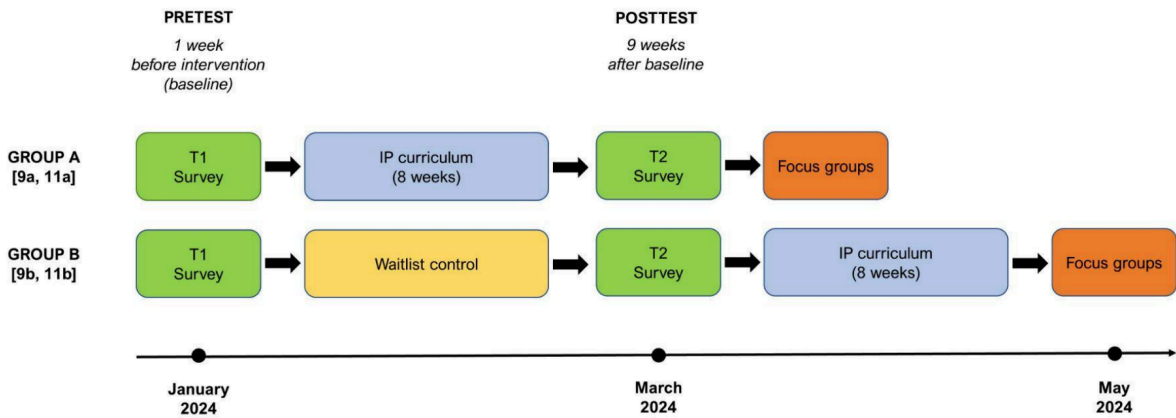
After 1 week, students in the classrooms assigned to Group A participated in 8 weekly sessions of the IP, each session lasting for 45 minutes. The topics covered during the sessions focused on the concept of identity, specifically cultural identity, stereotypes, experiences of discrimination, intercultural 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. Sessions were facilitated by two trained master-level psychology interns, who had participated in 10 hours of training 1 month prior to the beginning of the project. One week after the conclusion of the eight sessions, students of all four classrooms again completed the above-mentioned survey.

Moreover, those who participated in the IP sessions were asked to join (on a voluntary basis) a focus group aiming to gather feedback on the experience. The same activity was proposed to the teachers responsible for those classrooms. Starting in April 2024, students of the two classrooms assigned to Group B participated in the second cycle of sessions involving the same laboratory activities. Due to time constraints and other school activities occurring during the scheduled sessions, we were able to run 5 meetings instead of 8. At the beginning of June, students of this second cycle were asked to join (on a voluntary basis) a focus group aiming to gather feedback on the experience. Again, the same activity was proposed to the teachers responsible for those classrooms.

This study utilized data collected during the pre- and posttest phase. During the former phase (T1), all students completed questionnaires 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. On average, each data collection session lasted approximately one hour. To ensure participant anonymity, a unique identifier was assigned to each individual and this identifier remained consistent across all questionnaires.

It is essential to acknowledge that although the participating high school primarily used the English language for instruction, considering the cross-cultural backgrounds of some students, all written materials were translated into the primary minority language based on targeted surveys. Therefore, students were given the option to complete the surveys in English, Italian or Chinese. These students were provided with appropriate materials in their preferred language. 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 coordinator, one postdoctoral research fellow and a habilitated psychologist, to monitor the program's progress and address any issues that might arise during classroom activities.

3.5 Measures

This study employed both quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (focus groups) methods. Data collection was done through a questionnaire administered twice: one week before the intervention (pre-test) and one week after the intervention (post-test). Students were given approximately one hour to complete all items independently using the paper format of the questionnaire. Questionnaires were translated by the project coordinators using the translation-back translation method. The following is a brief description of the instruments used to address this study's research questions.

3.5.1 Socio-demographic characteristics

Participants were asked to report on their age, gender, date of birth, class attended, language spoken, years in Italy, and country/region of birth. Information about the nuclear family, such as the number of cohabitants, presence of siblings, country of birth, parents' level of education, and occupation, was also collected.

3.5.2 Socioeconomic status

SES was assessed using the Family Affluence Scale (FAS) developed by Boyce et al. (2006). The FAS consists of four items: "Does your family own a car/van/truck?" (no, yes one, yes two or more); "At home, do you have your own bedroom for yourself?" (No, Yes); "How many computers does your family own?" (0, 1, 2, more than 2), "How many bathrooms are in your home?" (0, 1, 2, more than 2); "How many times did you and your family travel out of Italy for a holiday/vacation last year?" (Never, once, twice, more than twice). Each item was assigned a score, and the total score was calculated by summing the scores of all items. A score between 0 and 2 indicates a low SES, a score between 3 and 5 a middle SES, and a score between 6 and 9 a high SES. The scale is appropriate for an adolescent population and has been tested for validity and reliability in 35 countries, including Italy (Boyce et al., 2006).

3.5.3 Classroom Cultural Diversity Climate Scale

Classroom cultural diversity climate was assessed using the Classroom Cultural Diversity Climate Scale (CCDCS) developed by Schachner and colleagues (2021). The CCDCS is designed to assess the perceptions of students regarding the cultural diversity climate within their classroom. It includes six subscales that measure various aspects of this climate and the extent to which students from different cultural backgrounds interact and work together in the classroom. The subscales are as follows:

1. **Contact and Cooperation:** This subscale assesses the extent to which students from different cultural backgrounds interact and work together in the classroom. The scale consists of 3 items. High scores indicate a classroom environment where students from diverse backgrounds frequently interact and cooperate, suggesting a positive and inclusive climate. An example item is: *"Students in my class from different cultures get along well with one another."*

2. **Unequal Treatment:** The subscale for unequal treatment aims to measure students' perceptions of fairness and equality within their classroom environment, particularly in terms of how students from different heritage cultures are treated. It captures the extent to which students perceive that certain heritage cultures receive more favorable or harsher treatment compared to others. The scale consists of 5 items. An example item is: *"Students from certain cultures get away with more with our teachers than other students"* (this item is reversed in scoring). High scores (after

reversing) indicate perceptions of unequal treatment and bias against certain cultural groups, suggesting a need for greater equity and fairness in the classroom.

3. **Color Evasion:** This subscale assesses the tendency to ignore or minimize cultural differences, often referred to as "colorblind" attitudes. The scale consists of 5 items. High scores indicate a tendency to ignore cultural differences, which can lead to overlooking important aspects of students' identities and experiences. An example item is: *"In school we are taught that we are all people, regardless of where we are from."*

4. **Heritage Culture and Intercultural Learning**: This subscale evaluates the recognition and integration of students' heritage cultures into the learning process and the promotion of intercultural understanding. The scale consists of 7 items. High scores suggest a classroom environment that values and incorporates students' cultural backgrounds, promoting intercultural learning and respect. An example item is: *"During class we learn about the cultures of fellow students."*

5. **Critical Consciousness**: This subscale measures students' awareness of social inequalities and their ability to critically analyze issues related to cultural diversity and social justice. The scale consists of 5 items. High scores indicate a classroom climate that fosters critical thinking about social justice and encourages discussions on social inequalities. An example item is: *"In school we talk about how people from certain cultures have to work harder than others to get a good job."*

6. **Polyculturalism**: This subscale assesses the belief in the interconnectedness and mutual influence of different cultural groups, rather than viewing cultures as separate and distinct. The scale consists of 6 items. High scores reflect a recognition of the interconnectedness of different cultural groups and the benefits of cultural diversity. An example item is: *"In school we talk about how people can be influenced by more than one culture."*

The statements for each subscale are rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (not at all - a little - quite enough - very much - extremely). The scores of items 4-8 are reversed. The calculation is carried out by averaging the scores of each subscale. The tool has proven to be reliable in the German context (Schachner et al., 2021) In this study, Cronbach Alphas were .80 (contact and cooperation), .63 (unequal treatment), .84 (color evasion), .82 (heritage culture and intercultural learning), .68 (critical consciousness), and .81 (polyculturalism).

An additional question focused on this variable was added to the posttest to gather qualitative data for the intervention group only. To address the classroom cultural diversity climate, participants were asked; *"After participating in the Identity Project, did you notice any changes in the classroom environment in terms of respecting and celebrating cultural diversity? (e.g., getting to know your classmates' cultures better, working well with classmates from different origins, teachers encouraging reflection and discussion about cultural diversity...)"*

3.5.4 Academic Engagement

The Engagement vs. Disaffection with Learning (EvsD) Student Report Scale, developed by Skinner and colleagues, (2008), is designed to measure students' engagement and disaffection in learning activities. The scale assesses how actively involved and emotionally invested students are in their learning process, as well as their tendencies towards withdrawal or negative feelings about learning. The scale focuses on two components of the construct: behavioral involvement (5 items, e.g., *"When I'm in class, I participate in class discussions"*) and emotional involvement (5 items, e.g., *"When we work on something in class, I feel interested"*). In both subscales, students responded using a Likert Scale from 1 to 4 (not at all - a little - quite enough - very much) indicating the degree to which each statement applied to them. Scores are calculated by averaging the scores for each subscale. The literature reports good psychometric properties of the EvsD scale in terms of scale validity and reliability (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012). The scale has been applied to student populations of varying ages, cultures, and socioeconomic statuses. In this study, Cronbach Alphas were .84 (behavioral engagement) and .78 (emotional engagement).

An additional question focused on this variable was added to the posttest to gather qualitative data for the intervention group only. To address academic engagement, participants were asked; *"After participating in the Identity Project, did you notice any changes in how much you enjoy participating in classroom activities (e.g., taking part in class discussions, paying attention to lectures, feeling good at school...)"*

3.5.5 Focus Groups

The quantitative measurement was enhanced with qualitative data obtained from focus groups conducted at the end of the project implementation. In this study, those who participated in the IP sessions were asked to join (on a voluntary basis) a focus group aimed at gathering feedback on the experience. The same activity was proposed to the teachers responsible for those classes who took part in the intervention. These focus groups were conducted one week after the final IP meeting of Group A. Each focus group was facilitated by the same facilitators who had conducted the eight IP sessions. While one facilitator moderated the discussion, the other took notes on participants' answers. The overall perception of the IP was explored among students by gathering qualitative feedback in order to obtain an overall assessment of the project's quality and impact. 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.

The student focus group discussion lasted approximately one hour and was guided by the following questions: *"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?"*

The post intervention focus group discussions for teachers also lasted approximately one hour and were guided by the following question: "How did you find students' participation?"; Were there any references and/or activities related to the workshop themes that complimented themes explored during regular curriculum hours?"; "Regarding the topics covered in the meetings;is there anything you would add, remove or modify? If so, what and why?"; "Were there any issues encountered throughout the intervention?" General comments and impressions about the workshop were also discussed. A qualitative analysis of the transcripts of the responses provided by the focus group participants was conducted.

3.6 Data analysis

For the first research question, in order to examine teachers' perception of the feasibility, salience and appropriateness of the IP, a qualitative analysis was conducted on participants' responses during the focus group to identify the most frequently reported themes.

For the second and third research question, SPSS statistical software version 28.0.1.0 was utilized to analyze survey data. Specifically, to examine whether participation in the intervention led to any differences between students from the intervention vs. control condition in academic engagement and perception of classroom cultural diversity climate at follow-up, separate univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were performed. In these models, the total scores of the two EvsD subscales (behavioral and emotional) and the total scores of the CCDCS subscales (contact and cooperation, unequal treatment, color evasion,

heritage culture and intercultural learning, critical consciousness and polyculturalism) were used as dependent variables, the independent variable was the condition (intervention vs control) and baseline levels of each variable measured at pretest (T1) were the control variables.

In addition to the quantitative analysis of the variables investigated in the second and third research question, a qualitative analysis was conducted on participants' responses during focus groups to identify the most frequently reported themes. Students' responses to open-ended questions in the survey were also analyzed by being grouped into larger categories for which frequency counts are reported.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive statistics

In this chapter, the results of data analyses are presented to address the research questions.

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the study variables.

Table 3. Mean, standard deviation, and range of study variables at pre- and posttest ($n = 42$)

	Intervention group ($n = 20$)			Control group ($n = 22$)		
	M	*SD*	*Range*	*M*	*SD*	*Range*
Academic Engagement						
Behavioral, T1	2.84	.55	1.40-3.60	2.94	.53	1.80-3.60
Behavioral, T2	2.92	.72	1.60-4.00	2.69	.60	1.00-3.40
Emotional, T1	2.72	.55	1.60-3.60	2.64	.61	1.40-3.60
Emotional, T2	2.67	.69	1.20-4.00	2.62	.52	1.60-3.60
Classroom Cultural Diversity Climate						
Contact and Cooperation, T1	3.72	.64	2.33-5.00	3.61	.83	2.33-5.00
Contact and Cooperation, T2	3.57	.59	2.33-5.00	3.03	.91	1.00-4.00
Unequal Treatment, T1	1.89	.54	1.20-3.20	1.76	.61	1.00-3.40
Unequal Treatment, T2	1.77	.62	1.00-3.40	2.22	.98	1.00-4.20

	Intervention group (n = 20)			Control group (n = 22)		
	M	*SD*	*Range*	*M*	*SD*	*Range*
Color Evasion, T1	3.22	.98	1.60-5.00	3.35	.87	2.20-4.80
Color Evasion, T2	3.08	.88	1.20-5.00	3.01	1.09	1.00-4.80
Heritage culture and intercultural learning, T1	2.79	.59	1.71-3.71	2.47	.65	1.71-4.14
Heritage culture and intercultural learning, T2	2.82	.73	1.57-4.57	2.57	.78	1.00-4.43
Critical consciousness, T1	2.22	.65	1.20-3.80	2.08	.57	1.00-3.20
Critical consciousness, T2	2.54	.75	1.40-4.00	2.50	.72	1.00-3.40
Polyculturalism, T1	2.80	.68	1.33-3.83	2.36	.67	1.00-3.50
Polyculturalism, T2	2.60	.77	1.00-4.00	2.68	.78	1.00-4.17

4.2 Feasibility, salience, and appropriateness of the IP

The qualitative data collected from focus groups with teachers who participated in the sessions, aimed at evaluating the first research question addressing the feasibility, salience, and appropriateness of implementing the IP in a private international school setting. A qualitative analysis of the transcripts of the responses was conducted and the analysis was structured around three main issues: feasibility, salience, and appropriateness.

The feasibility of implementing the IP was a significant focus of the discussion. Time allocation was a prominent theme that emerged from the discussion. In order to be

feasible**,** the intervention must fit into the existing schedule without causing significant disruptions. There was a consensus among participants in the focus group that implementing the IP at the start of the academic year would be more effective, as students have more time and fewer competing demands within the existing curriculum. *"This project is good to be done again but maybe next year, better do it at the start of the year since students have more time and less things to do."* Some of the sessions conflicted with the end of the year exam schedule causing disruptions in the intervention schedule. In addition, participants emphasized that incorporating structured activities and randomized group formation could effectively engage students even more in meaningful discussions about cultural identity. However, it was noted that IB students (in Grade 11) often miss these types of opportunities due to high curriculum demands.

With respect to the salience of the IP, the school curriculum was a critical theme. Feedback supported the fact that the content of the intervention with respect to the curriculum and school context was culturally relevant and sensitive to the backgrounds of the participants, while addressing the needs and concerns of the school as a whole. The challenges in managing assignments underscored the importance of integrating IP activities into the lesson itself or turning them into interactive activities. Participants explained that integrating IP activities directly into the sessions led by the facilitators, ensures that students can engage with the content without being overburdened by additional homework assigned throughout their regular courses, therefore making the IP more relevant and

impactful in their daily school experience. Participants noted that more interactive sessions are preferred by students, as they help maintain interest and engagement. One teacher commented that *"it was interesting to discuss and see the students engage with the topics in a more personal way because in the global studies course at school it's not focused on them but more on the global view."*

Finally, addressing the appropriateness of the IP, cultural sensitivity and ethical considerations were pivotal. The appropriateness of the IP was discussed in terms of its focus on structured discussions about identity, stereotypes, and discrimination. Participants felt that these discussions aligned well with the need for more personal engagement in these topics at the school. Organizing events for cultural occasions like Ramadan and Chinese New Year were noted as being something that is missing from the culture of the school. *"Celebrating cultural diversity within the school is currently lacking."* The implementation of the IP is highly appropriate for promoting inclusivity and awareness of the inherent cultural diversity in a private international school setting. Another factor affecting the appropriateness of the intervention related to its content. Participants suggested less focus on theory of the topics presented during each session in order to better engage the students. They reported that students already had a high level of knowledge and awareness about many of the topics presented, therefore time would be well spent exploring these themes in more depth.

In summary, from the perspective of educators, implementing the IP in an

international school setting proved to demonstrate its feasibility, salience, and appropriateness for several reasons. It addressed the need for structured and engaging activities that increase students' academic engagement, it integrated cultural discussions seamlessly into the curriculum, and promoted a more inclusive and celebratory school environment. Overall, there was overwhelming support of the project from the teachers' perspective and a desire to implement it again in the future, recognizing its importance and value in a private international school context.

4.3 Effects on classroom cultural diversity climate

The second research question aimed to assess the extent to which perceptions of the various dimensions of classroom cultural diversity climate changed based on students participation in the IP, after controlling for baseline levels of these dimensions. The following details the results for each of the 6 subscales of the CCDCS (Schachner et al., 2021).

Regarding contact and cooperation, the univariate analysis of covariance revealed a significant effect of the condition with a medium to large effect size, $F(1, 39) = 4.60$, $p = .038$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. As shown in Figure 2, at posttest (T2), participants in the intervention group had higher scores on this variable than their peers in the control group. Error bars in all the subsequent graphs represent the 95% confidence interval.

Figure 2. Contact and Cooperation in the intervention and control group at posttest (*n* = 42)
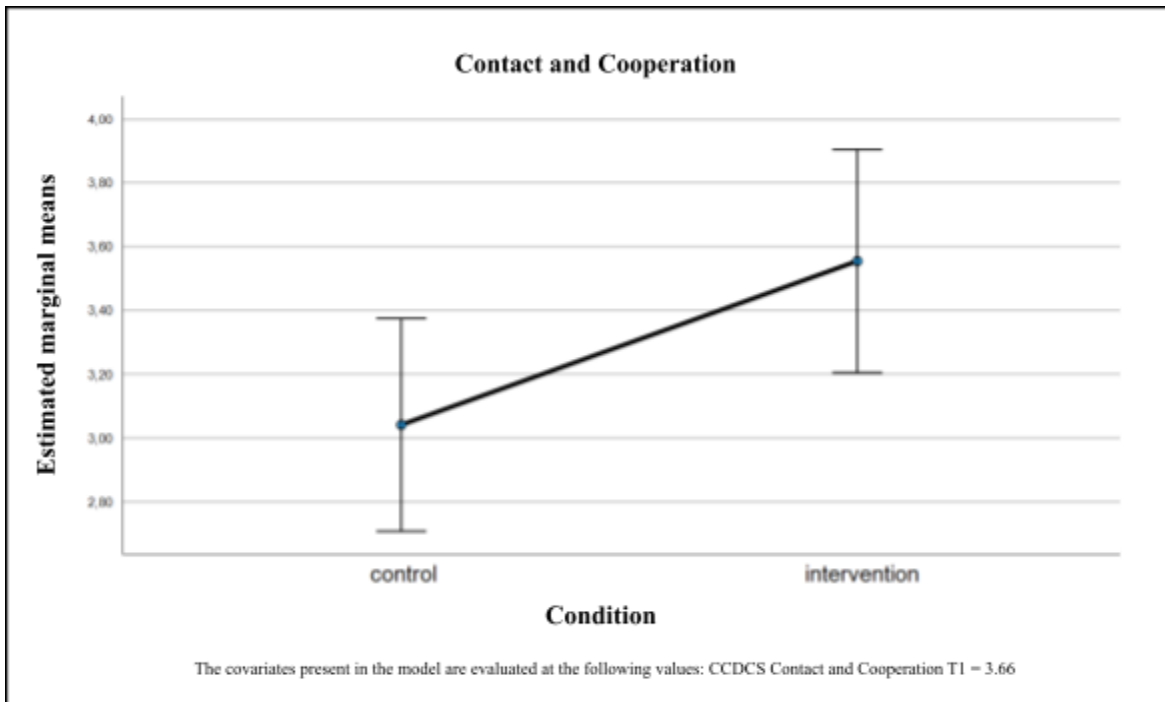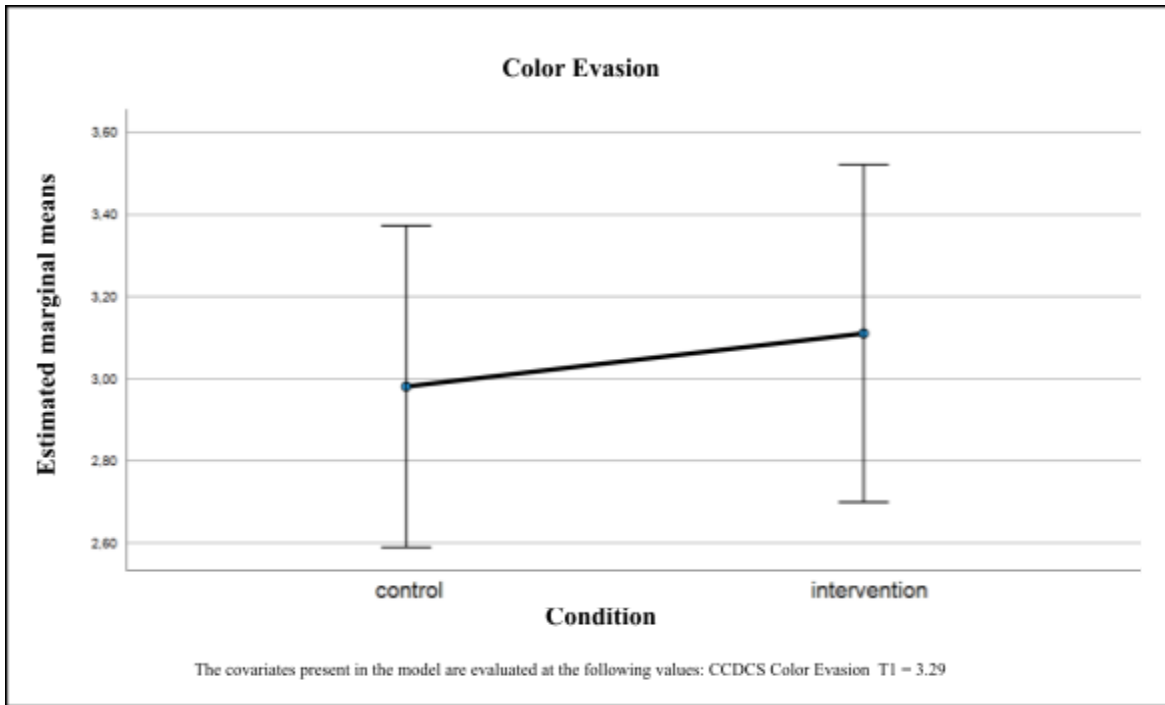

For the subscale of unequal treatment, the ANCOVA revealed a significant effect of the condition with a medium to large effect size, $F(1, 39) = 4.72$, $p = .036$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. As shown in Figure 3, at posttest (T2), participants in the intervention group had lower scores in this variable than their peers in the control group. As these items were reversed scored, the results indicate that after participating in the intervention, students perceived less equal treatment than before. It indicates students' perceptions of unequal treatment and bias against certain cultural groups had increased after the intervention.

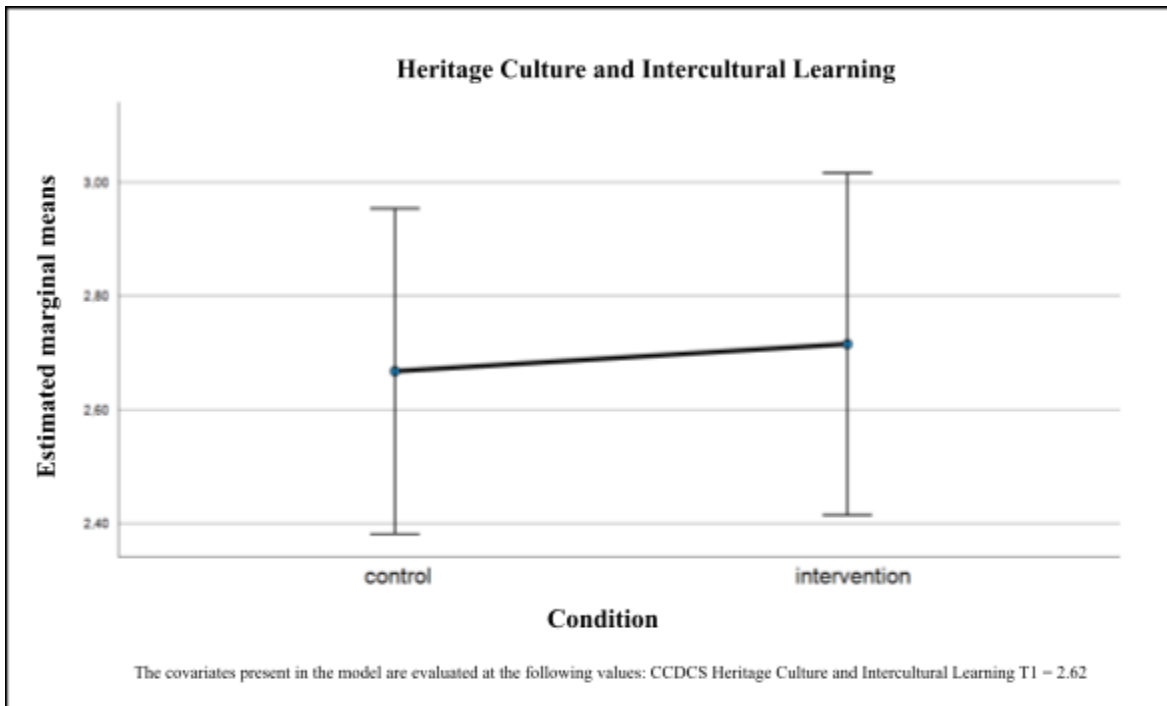**Figure 3. Unequal Treatment in the intervention and control group at posttest (*n* = 42)**
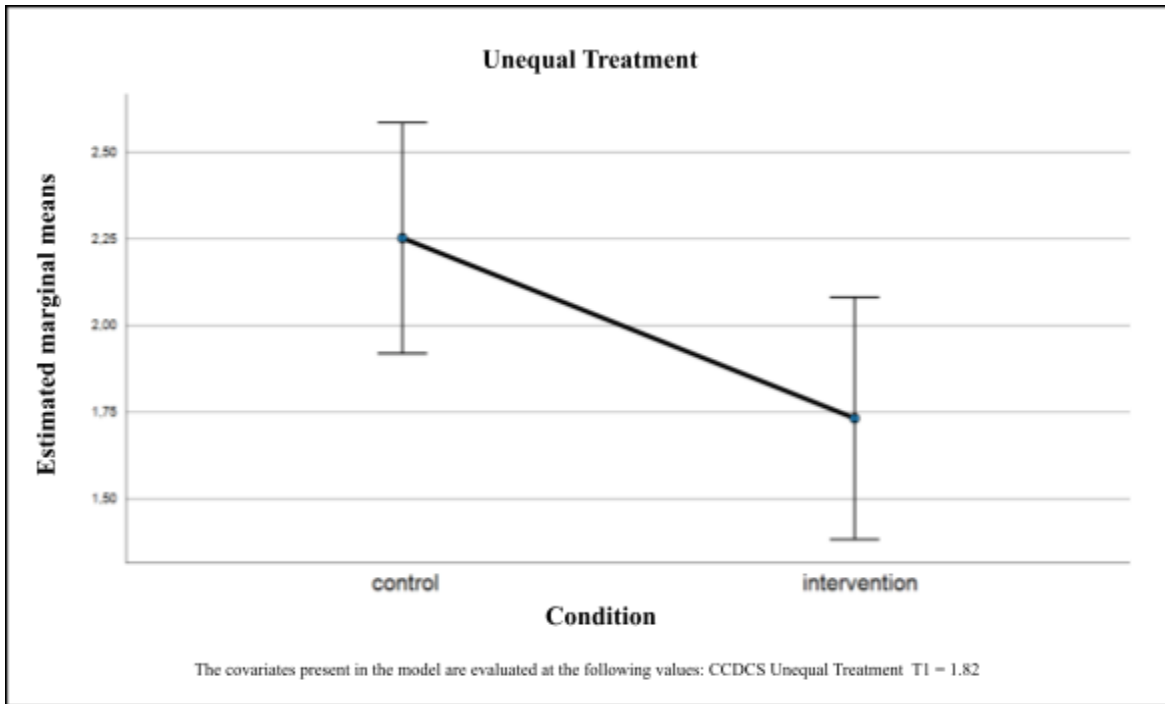
Concerning the subscale for color evasion, the univariate analysis of covariance revealed no effect of the condition, $F(1, 39) =.210$, $p =.649$, $\eta_p^2= .01$. As shown in Figure 4, at posttest (T2), participants in the intervention group had slightly higher scores in this variable than their peers in the control group, although this difference did not reach statistical significance.

Figure 4. Color evasion in the intervention and control group at posttest (*n* = 42)

Color Evasion

The covariates present in the model are evaluated at the following values: CCDCS Color Evasion T1 = 3.29

With regards to Heritage Culture and Intercultural Learning, the univariate ANCOVA revealed no effect of the condition, $F(1, 39) = .052$, $p =.821$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$. As shown in Figure 5, at posttest (T2), participants in the intervention and control groups had overall similar scores in this variable.
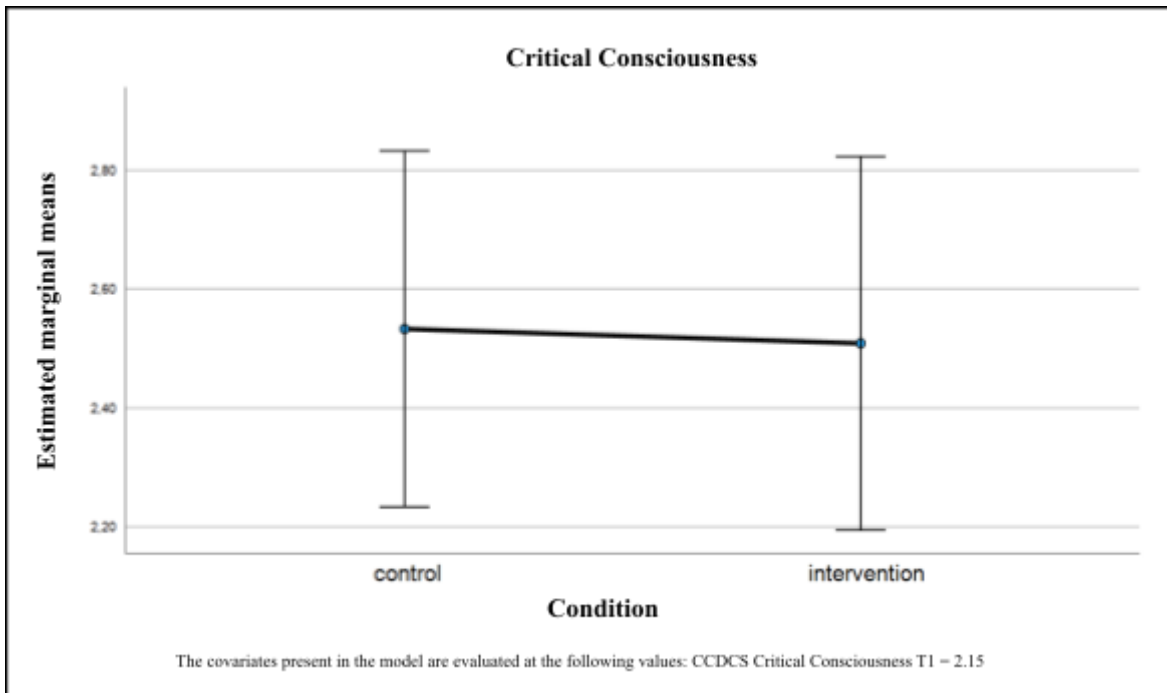
Figure 5. Heritage Culture and Intercultural Learning in the intervention and control group at posttest (*n* = 42)

The covariates present in the model are evaluated at the following values: CCDCS Heritage Culture and Intercultural Learning T1 = 2.62

For the subscale of critical consciousness, the univariate ANCOVA revealed no statistically significant differences between the intervention and control groups, with $F(1, 39) = .013$, $p = .911$. Again, as shown in Figure 6, at posttest (T2), participants in the two groups had overall similar scores in this variable.

Figure 6. Critical Consciousness in the intervention and control group at posttest

(*n* = 42)

Critical Consciousness

The covariates present in the model are evaluated at the following values: CCDCS Critical Consciousness T1 = 2.15

The ANCOVA results for polyculturalism indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups, $F(1, 39) = 1.37$, $p = .248$. As shown in Figure 7, at posttest (T2), participants in the intervention group had slightly lower scores in this variable than their peers in the control group.

Figure 7. Polyculturalism in the intervention and control group at posttest (*n* = 42)
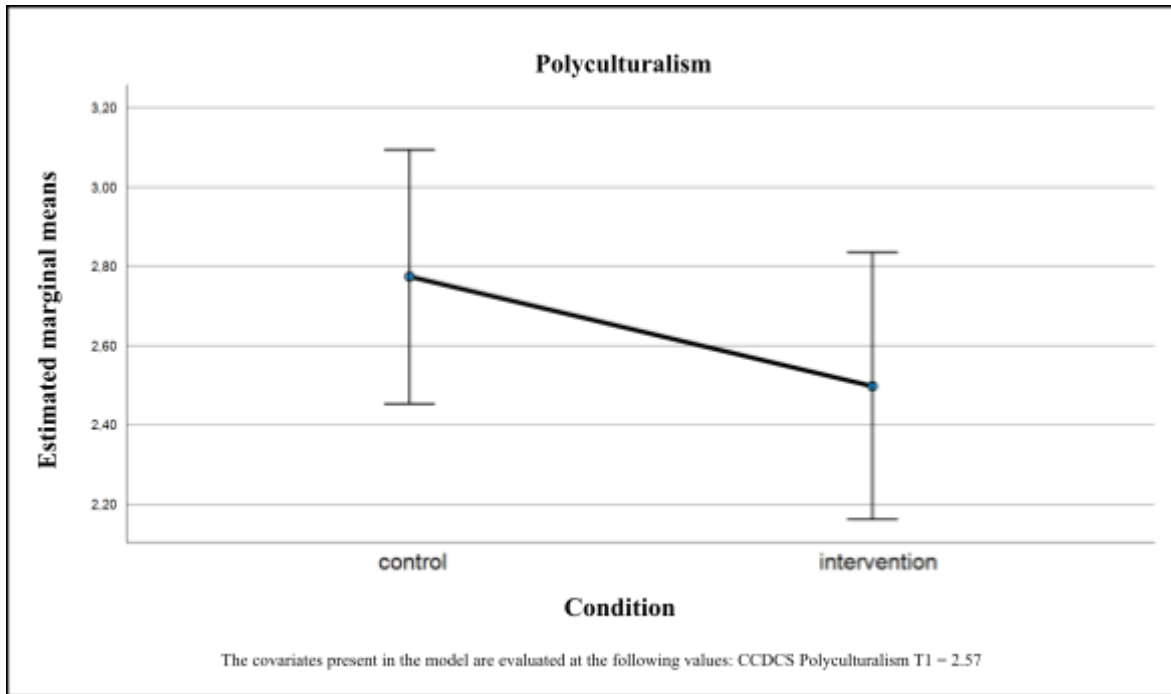
Overall, analyses indicated that the intervention generally had a positive impact on various aspects of students' perceptions of cultural diversity within the classroom. The most notable effects were seen in contact and cooperation, and increasing perceptions of unequal treatment. Other areas such as color evasion, heritage culture and intercultural learning also showed positive trends, though to a lesser extent.

In addition participants were asked the following open-ended question in the posttest survey: *"After participating in the Identity Project, did you notice any changes in the classroom environment in terms of respecting and celebrating cultural diversity? (e.g., getting to know your classmates' cultures better, working well with classmates from different origins, teachers encouraging reflection and discussion about cultural diversity)."*

While 48% of the participants responded negatively, 52% responded positively noting changes in their perception of the classroom environment in terms of respecting and celebrating cultural diversity after the intervention. The most frequent responses could be grouped into the following four themes: (1) Respect and understanding of cultural differences (17%), (2) Learning and curiosity about other cultures (28%), (3) Enhanced classroom dynamics through cultural activities (17%), and (4) Personal connection and inclusivity (39%).

The first theme that emerged was respect and understanding of cultural differences. Student responses highlighted their efforts to be open-minded and empathetic towards their peers from diverse backgrounds. For example, one student commented, *"I tend to be more open-minded and put myself in the other students' shoes, understanding their cultural background"* and *"I try to understand what my teachers or classmates say even if it doesn't make sense to me. I think by this I am respecting other cultures and opinions."* These responses emphasize the importance of respecting and understanding different cultural perspectives. Responses highlighted students' efforts to be open-minded and empathetic

towards their peers from diverse backgrounds. This aligns with the results on the contact and cooperation subscale, as it reflects increased interactions and mutual respect among students from different cultural backgrounds. The contact and cooperation subscale measures the extent to which students from different cultural backgrounds interact positively and collaborate effectively in the classroom and focuses on the quality and frequency of interactions among students and between students and teachers, emphasizing cooperative learning and mutual respect. These qualitative responses mirror the results presented in Figure 2, outlining the significant effect of the intervention on the subscale of contact and cooperation.

The second recurring pattern was in regard to learning and curiosity about other cultures. These responses reflected a keen interest in learning about different cultures. Students expressed an enjoyment in discovering new aspects of their classmates' backgrounds and finding value in these cultural exchanges. One student responded, *"I like learning new things about my classmates' cultures."* Another student added, *"In class, we showed the characteristics of our respective cultures including food, clothing architecture and festivals and so on. It led me to getting to know my classmates' culture."*

The third theme that was evident in students' responses was the enhanced classroom dynamics through cultural activities. Many of the interactive activities presented throughout the eight sessions of the IP provide students with an opportunity to share experiences, photos, symbols and family traditions related to their culture. After the intervention, one

student remarked that through these experiences, *"I learned more about my classmates and their ways of doing and seeing things, I found out we had things in common, and understood how they are different from me."*

Finally, personal connection and inclusivity emerged as the last theme from the qualitative data analysis. Patterns in students' responses indicated that students felt more connected and included in their classroom environment by learning about their classmates' backgrounds. They highlighted the personal connections and inclusivity fostered by understanding and engaging with different cultures. *"Knowing my classmates' cultures helps me fit in more as I feel more connected with them."* While students were able to articulate their understanding of the importance of inclusivity fostered by understanding and engaging with different cultures, they also commented, *"We don't do activities on my culture, we have only celebrated Italian cultural festivities"* as well as *"I believe we should respect other cultures and appreciate them but I feel like sometimes when we celebrate people from cultures that tend to be discriminated they can feel a bit like they're being treated unfairly."* This aligns with the data presented above regarding unequal treatment and mirrors the significant effects of the intervention on students' perception of unequal treatment in the classroom. This subscale involves the perception and experiences of bias or discrimination based on cultural background within the classroom setting. It measures whether all cultural backgrounds are respected and treated equally. This student's response precisely compliments this point; *"I have always believed that respect is the most important*

thing, especially in the classroom. But, after the Identity Project, I linked that being

conscious of respecting each other goes with understanding cultural background."
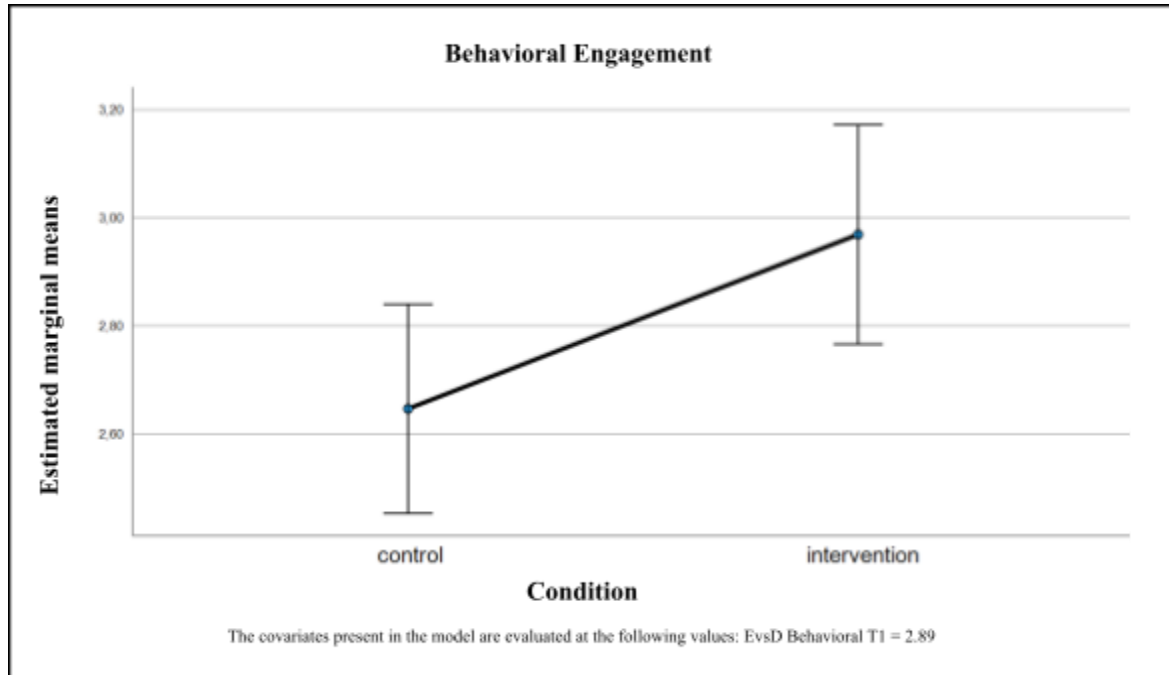

4.4 Effects on academic engagement

The third research question aimed to evaluate the extent to which students who participated in the IP intervention showed more academic engagement than their peers who did not participate. This presents the results for each of the 2 subscales (behavioral and emotional) of the EvsD (Skinner et al, 2008).

Regarding to behavioral engagement, the univariate ANCOVA revealed a significant effect of the condition with a medium to large effect size, $F(1, 39) = 5.38$, $p = .026$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$. As shown in Figure 8, at posttest (T2), participants in the intervention group had higher scores in this variable than their peers in the control group. Error bars in the subsequent graphs represent the 95% confidence interval.

Figure 8. Behavioral Engagement in the intervention and control group at posttest

(*n* = 42)

The covariates present in the model are evaluated at the following values: EvsD Behavioral T1 = 2.89

With regards to emotional engagement, the ANCOVA revealed no significant effect of the condition, with $F(1, 39) = .00$, $p = .911$. As shown in Figure 9, at posttest (T2), participants in the intervention and control groups had similar scores in this variable.

Figure 9. Emotional Engagement in the intervention and control group at posttest

(*n* = 42)

Figure: Emotional Engagement. Y-axis "Estimated marginal means" ranging from 2.40 to 2.90. X-axis "Condition" with categories control and intervention. The covariates present in the model are evaluated at the following values: EvsD Emotional T1 = 2.68
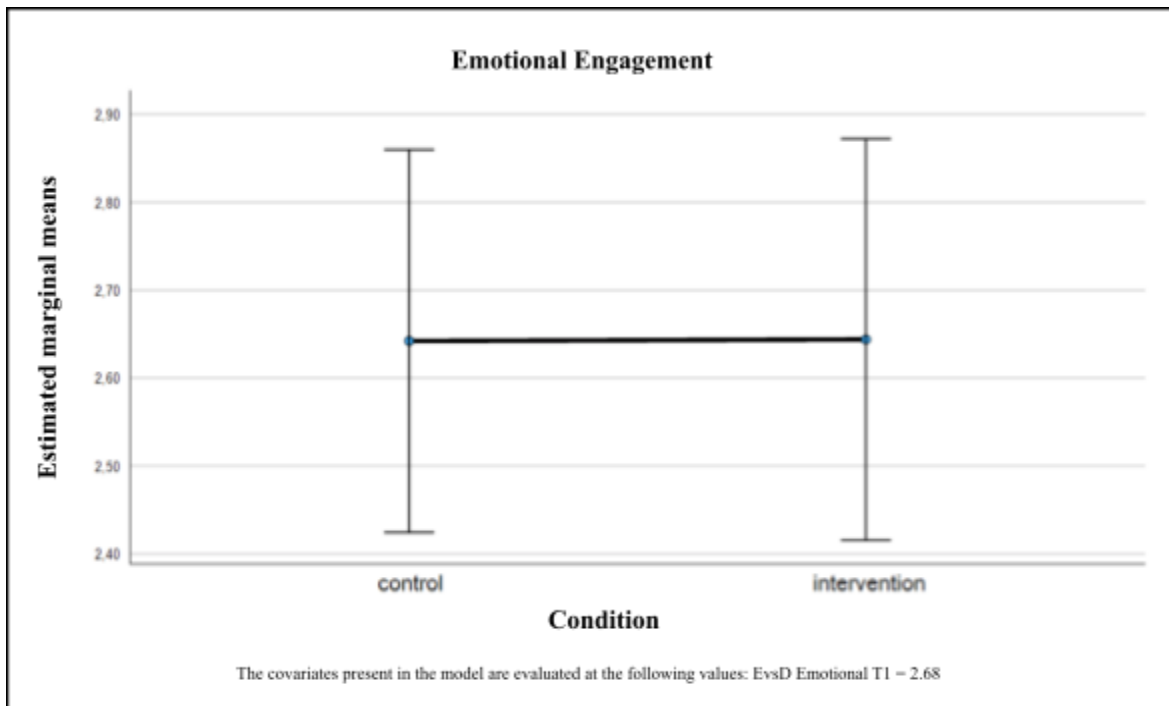
In order to further explore this research question, qualitative data was collected from the post test survey where participants were asked the following open-ended question; *"After participating in the Identity Project, did you notice any changes in how much you enjoy participating in classroom activities? (e.g., taking part in class discussions, paying attention to lectures, feeling good at school).*

Most of the participants' responses, at 52%, reflected positive academic engagement, indicating that after participating in the IP, they noticed changes in the level of

interest, enjoyment and interaction in classroom activities. Conversely, 48% of the responses indicated a lack of interest and participation, reflecting negative academic engagement. Across all responses, two common themes that emerged were: (1) Interest in classroom activities (64%), (2) Participation in class discussion (43%). Although the open-ended question did not differentiate between the emotional and behavioural aspect of academic engagement, these themes corresponded to the emotional and behavioral subscales of the EvsD scale, respectively. For example, one student responded, *"I really enjoyed participating and discussing different things. The main changes are that usually in class I am not really interested."* Another student reported that after the intervention, *"I became more prone to conversations and debate."* These responses align with the subscale of behavioral engagement and mirror the significant effect of the intervention at posttest (T2), as participants in the intervention group had higher scores in this variable than their peers in the control group (see Figure 8). These responses illustrate how behavioral engagement is reflected in students' willingness to participate and interact during class discussions.

In summary, the results indicate that the intervention generally had a positive impact on the behavioral aspect of academic engagement while its impact on emotional engagement was not as relevant.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

5.1 General comments

The purpose of this pilot study was to assess the feasibility, salience and appropriateness of the IP in an international school context from the teachers perspective. Furthermore, the aim was to analyze the impact of the IP on students' perception of classroom cultural diversity climate as well as academic engagement, after controlling for baseline levels of these variables. The unique context of this pilot study aims to address a gap in current research as this was the first of its kind at an international school. The findings from this pilot study highlight educators feedback supporting its feasibility, salience and appropriateness in the specific context as well as the positive impact of the IP on aspects of the classroom cultural diversity climate and behavioral academic engagement.

The first research question aimed to determine feasibility, salience and appropriateness of the IP in an international school context from the teachers perspective. Analysis of the qualitative data collected from the teacher focus group indicated that the intervention does in fact meet these criteria. Given the fact 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, teachers viewed the IP as salient because it addresses the diverse cultural backgrounds of students, feasible due to its

adaptability to existing teaching practices, and appropriate because it aligns with the school's mission of fostering intercultural understanding and supporting students' social-emotional development. In an international setting, where cultural identity is often central to students' experiences, such a project offers meaningful opportunities for personal growth and community building. This is in line with prior research in Germany (Juang et al, 2020), Italy (Ceccon et al, 2023) and in the USA (Umaña-Taylor, 2018 A OR B) supporting the feasibility, appropriateness and salience of implementing the IP in multi-ethnic school contexts. A possible reason for this is that often teachers are unprepared in dealing with the diversity in the classroom and that the IP offers an opportunity for them to adopt inclusive teaching methods and build solid relationships with their students.

The second research question aimed to investigate if students in the intervention and waitlist control groups differed in their perceptions of classroom cultural diversity climate at posttest, after controlling for baseline levels of this variable. The intervention improved cooperation among participants, reflecting a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment. Significant results were also observed with respect to unequal treatment. These findings are supported by past research from Germany providing evidence that adolescents perceive more unequal treatment in their classroom after having gone through the IP curriculum (Juang et al., 2020). This suggests that adolescents are more sensitive to discrimination happening in their immediate environment at school as a result of having engaged with ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity as part of the intervention. A

possible explanation for these results could be that students may have been more ready or open to engage with dimensions of connection and unequal treatment because they are more directly tied to their personal and immediate social experiences at school. Other dimensions of classroom cultural diversity climate, such as critical consciousness, cultural heritage, polyculturalism, and color evasion, may involve more abstract thinking, which can be harder for students to engage with in a short period of time, particularly if they are not accustomed to discussing these concepts on a regular basis at school. These dimensions often involve more complex and nuanced understandings of culture and diversity.

The third research question aimed to explore if students in the intervention and waitlist control groups differed in academic engagement at posttest, after controlling for baseline levels of this variable. The results of this pilot study showed a notable increase in behavioral academic engagement among students in the intervention compared to the control condition. Due to the fact there was no initial distinction made between differences in behavioral and emotional academic engagement, the findings confirm to some extent, the initial hypothesis that the intervention would positively impact academic engagement in general. These outcomes suggest that the IP is effective in fostering a more stimulating learning environment, validating the initial hypothesis and demonstrating the intervention's potential benefits. These findings align with past research which has documented that the intervention positively affects behavioral engagement, highlighting its role in fostering a more inclusive and engaging classroom environment (Schachner et al., 2024). While the IP

was shown to increase behavioral academic engagement, some possible explanations as to why the same results were not observed in terms of emotional academic engagement could be that the emotional aspect of academic engagement often requires deeper relationships and a greater sense of belonging, which may not develop immediately. For example, while students may behave in ways that show academic engagement (e.g., participating in class discussions), they might not feel a deeper emotional connection to the learning content or process.

5.2 Limitations and direction for future research

While this pilot implementation of the IP demonstrated various strengths and potential benefits, several limitations must be acknowledged to provide a comprehensive understanding of the study's outcomes and the intervention's efficacy. These limitations include a small sample size, the implementation by external facilitators, self-report biases and the lack of long-term assessments.

The small sample size in this pilot study is a notable limitation, restricting the generalizability of the findings. Attributing the causes for the small sample size was the fact that some students were excluded from participating in the pre- and post test surveys due to incomplete consent forms, therefore further reducing the number of participants. Future studies should aim to include larger and more diverse samples to capture individual differences and contextual factors influencing the processes of cultural identity exploration.

Replicating the study in other private international schools in different geographical areas of Italy (e.g., Central and Southern Italian regions) would extend and assess generalizability of the IP within a broader national context. It would also enhance the ecological validity of the findings by ensuring that the results are applicable across diverse demographic compositions. This approach would enable a better understanding of whether the observed effects of the IP hold true in different international school environments, providing a more comprehensive understanding of its impact and generalizability.

The IP curriculum's implementation by external researchers and trained facilitators poses another potential limitation. External facilitators, who are not part of the regular teaching staff of the school, will not have the same level of ongoing interaction and relationship with the students as regular teachers. This can lead to a lack of continuity and integration of the IP curriculum into the broader educational experience of the students. Students might perceive activities in the IP as isolated events rather than integrated parts of their education. The existing literature on the IP has primarily focused on its efficacy when implemented by researchers in controlled research settings and results have been promising. However, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the effectiveness of the IP when implemented by teachers in real-world classroom settings. Preliminary evidence addressing this gap exists from the U.S, that demonstrates how educators can be trained to efficaciously implement the IP with high school students and, furthermore, that this approach to program dissemination may not only facilitate scale-up but also result in

greater gains for adolescents relative to research-led implementations (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2024). A key goal of addressing this gap would be to expand the reach of this program. While external facilitators ensure standardized delivery, regular teachers might foster a more profound, far reaching and sustained impact through ongoing relationships with students as well as integrating culturally responsive teaching practices into their regular daily interactions. It is important to note that his approach would require careful training to ensure teachers are equipped to deliver the program effectively and therefore sensitively address students' identity-related needs and vulnerabilities.

Another significant limitation is the use of self-report tools, which are susceptible to biases such as social desirability, inaccurate self assessment, response bias, and participant fatigue. For instance, students often found the questionnaires lengthy and repetitive, which might have led to inaccurate responses. Additionally, the logistics for the participants to complete the posttest survey was suboptimal, as students were removed from their regularly scheduled classes to participate and placed in a setting with restricted space, potentially impacting their focus and attentiveness.. Future studies could improve data accuracy by incorporating teacher or parental reports as well as conducting surveys in more controlled settings.

The study's reliance on a pre- and post-test design without conducting long-term follow-up assessments is another limitation worth noting. While some immediate effects of the IP were observed, the absence of a long-term evaluation limits understanding of the

intervention's sustained impact. Future projects should include follow-up assessments to gauge the long-term effects on psychological well-being and cultural identity. Such longitudinal data would also allow for comparisons with studies conducted in different contexts, such as those in the U.S. (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018), and provide a deeper understanding of the trends and associations over time.

Addressing these limitations in future research will enhance the understanding of the IP's efficacy and contribute to developing improvements in the intervention in order to promote cultural identity exploration and well-being among adolescents.

5.3 Implications

Several implications of these findings are possible. The IP was shown to enhance cooperation and behavioral engagement in the classroom, fostering a more inclusive atmosphere that better supports students from diverse cultural backgrounds. This is particularly important in international school settings where cultural diversity is a defining characteristic. The success of this intervention highlights the potential for similar programs to be implemented in other international schools, both within Italy and abroad, to promote cultural inclusivity and enhance student engagement. Although further research is needed to corroborate our findings, our study suggests that educational interventions focusing on cultural identity can play a crucial role in reducing social barriers and fostering mutual

respect and understanding among students. Notably, international schools typically have students from higher SES families compared to the general immigrant-descent population in Italy. This point is crucial as often differences attributed to cultural origins might instead be explained by socioeconomic disadvantages (OECD, 2019). By highlighting the relationship between immigrant background and SES, this research demonstrates the necessity for customized educational strategies that consider both cultural and socioeconomic influences on students.

Based on the feedback received during the focus group discussion with the teachers, the recognition that they view the IP as feasible, salient, and appropriate in an international school setting holds significant implications for the future of multicultural education. When teachers find such interventions practicable and relevant, it suggests that the program is well-designed to fit within the existing educational framework, making it easier to implement and sustain over time. This positive reception also indicates that the IP effectively addresses the diverse needs of students, fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment that enhances cultural awareness and empathy. The intervention was perceived as a safe space for students to explore topics considered salient for identity development. During the students focus group, one student shared that, *"we'd like for the school to continue doing something like this. It's interactive, fun to have different things than normal classes and have more opportunities to talk and share."* Given these promising results, it is crucial to continue exploring and refining the IP in this same context to further

validate its efficacy. Moreover, extending this research to other international schools in Italy could provide broader insights into its applicability and benefits across different contexts, ultimately contributing to the development of best practices for promoting cultural identity and intercultural competence in diverse educational settings.

Regarding the classroom cultural diversity climate, the IP showed significant positive effects, particularly in the areas of cooperation among peers of different cultural origins and a greater awareness regarding differential and/or unfair treatment towards peers from minority backgrounds.The intervention facilitated a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment by encouraging critical consciousness and intercultural understanding. Students reported increased awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity, which contributed to a more cohesive and harmonious classroom dynamic. One student shared, *"I think the identity project made me think more about how different people from other cultures see and understand the world."* This improvement in the classroom cultural diversity climate underscores the potential of the IP to create educational settings that value and respect cultural differences.

In terms of academic engagement, the study revealed significant results specifically in behavioral academic engagement (i.e. positive conduct, adhesion to academic tasks and school-related activities). Students who participated in the IP reported higher levels of active participation and involvement in classroom activities compared to their peers in the waitlist control group. This increase in behavioral engagement highlights the intervention's

ability to motivate students and enhance their commitment to their academic pursuits. While the impact on emotional engagement was not found, the significant improvement in behavioral engagement is a noteworthy outcome of the IP implementation in this context that warrants further investigation. The findings of this research emphasize the importance of integrating cultural identity development into educational curricula, ultimately paving the way for more inclusive and effective educational practices in a variety of contexts.

The journey of implementing the IP in an international school setting was both enlightening and challenging. Throughout the research process, significant logistical and bureaucratic delays were encountered that required immense patience and persistence. Coordinating with multiple stakeholders, navigating administrative hurdles, and ensuring compliance with various regulations tested the team's resolve. However, these challenges were overcome through persistent effort and collaborative teamwork, which underscored the importance of flexibility and resilience in conducting field-based research. These experiences have not only broadened the understanding of the complexities involved in implementing educational interventions but also reinforced the value of collaboration and adaptability.

5.4 Conclusion

Overall, the literature supports the efficacy of the IP as an effective intervention for promoting the psychosocial well-being of adolescents. This pilot study, conducted in an international school setting in northern Italy, indicates that according to teachers feedback, the IP was feasible, salient and appropriate in this context. Moreover, preliminary results showed that it improved students' perception of some aspects of the classroom cultural diversity climate as well as their behavioral academic engagement. These findings align with previous research, reinforcing the importance of targeted cultural identity interventions in fostering adolescents' overall well-being.

In conclusion, this pilot study paves the way for refinements and additional testing as further implementations are necessary to test efficacy. The implementation of the IP at an international school has proven to be a valuable tool for improving certain aspects of the classroom cultural diversity climate as well as increasing behavioral academic engagement. These outcomes can be used by teachers to improve their culturally sensitive teaching practice and create a positive climate that values and celebrates diversity. The benefits of this research extend beyond the immediate educational context, offering practical implications for schools and educators seeking to foster inclusive and supportive learning environments. By promoting cultural identity development, the IP contributes to the creation of a more equitable and enriching educational experience for all students.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Moscardino, for her invaluable guidance, support and perseverance, throughout the entire research process. I am truly grateful for her time and effort in helping me refine my work and for taking a chance on exploring a new context for the implementation of the Identity Project in Italy.

A special thank you to Dr. Chiara Ceccon for initially inspiring my interest in the Identity Project and leading by example with passion, enthusiasm and a wealth of knowledge in this field of psychology. Many thanks to Daniela Bossi for her insightful training sessions and continued guidance throughout the project. Thank you to the whole IP team for creating a welcoming space to learn and explore together and to my co-facilitator, Adriana, whose consistent support and thoughtful contributions enriched every meeting and greatly helped in the entire research and thesis writing process.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have met and learned from Professor Umaña‑Taylor from Harvard University whose pioneering work in the development of the Identity Project provided the foundation for this thesis. I would also like to extend my thanks to the faculty members of the DPSS at the University of Padova whose courses both

challenged and inspired me in many ways. Sincere thanks to the entire EISP community - the staff, parents and students - for their participation and collaboration with UniPD in this research project and making it all possible.

I am forever grateful to my parents for their unwavering support and encouragement. To my extended family, incredible friends from near and far, colleagues and classmates, your support has been a constant source of light throughout this process, and I am truly thankful for your encouragement.

Thank you all for making this journey a truly enriching and unforgettable experience.