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**Implementing an intervention curriculum to  
promote adolescents' cultural identity development:  
first evidence from an international school**

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## INTRODUCTION

As the world becomes more globalized, many borders that limited mobility and an international lifestyle are subsiding. This makes moving across countries and relocating for various purposes, such as work, more feasible. As expatriates adopt such a lifestyle, their families tend to move along with them. The spread of international schools is a consequence of this process, as they offer a unified program for these expatriate children while providing a multicultural environment that reflects the reality of current society for local families as well. However, this creates a challenging developmental experience for youth as they try to adjust to their new realities. Since adolescence is crucial for identity development, including cultural identity and consequently psychosocial well-being, school-based interventions that tackle these topics are essential, but still limited.

This thesis presents the first results from a pilot study of the *Identity Project* (IP), a school-based intervention targeting cultural identity formation in adolescence (Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2017), implemented in the past academic school year within a private international school in Padua, Italy. Specifically, the goal was to investigate whether the project could effectively benefit students in an international school, particularly by encouraging them to explore and resolve their cultural identity, while also examining the role that ethnocultural empathy might play in this process. In doing so, we used both qualitative and quantitative tools to assess the feasibility, salience and appropriateness of the IP intervention's adaptation to this context based on the students' perspectives.

The thesis is divided into six chapters. The first provides an overview of the expatriate experience, the phenomenon of “third culture kids”, and international schools and their system. Chapter 2 addresses identity formation while expanding on cultural identity and the role of ethnocultural empathy in the process. The theoretical background of the IP is elaborated in the third chapter, with evidence of its efficacy in the USA, Germany and Italy. Chapter 4 presents the study’s aim and methodology, delving into the adaptation process to the particular context and including the research questions, participants, procedure and measures, the chosen analytic approach and the focus groups that were conducted. The fifth chapter presents the quantitative and qualitative results obtained. These results are then discussed in light of the current literature in the sixth and final chapter, concluding with the study’s limitations and applied implications.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE EXPATRIATE EXPERIENCE

#### 1.1 Expatriates and adjustment challenges

While migration has always been a phenomenon in human society and has prevailed throughout history, the modern world has made it more accessible and widespread. According to the most recent international migrant estimates as of mid-2020, nearly 281 million individuals resided in a country different from their country of birth. This figure reflects an increase of approximately 128 million compared to the number recorded in 1990 (153 million) alone (International Organization for Migration, 2024).

While the United Nations uses the term "migrants," others refer to sojourners, travelers, global nomads, and cultural hybrids (Greenholtz & Kim, 2009; Sussman, 2000; Tanu, 2015). These terms describe individuals who move from one country to another for various reasons. The literature identifies several types of global workers, such as immigrants, refugees, and expatriates (Sam & Berry, 2006). To distinguish between different cultural groups, Berry et al. (2011) proposed three criteria: (a) migration, (b) voluntariness, and (c) foreseen permanence. Expatriates fall into the category of global workers characterized by migration, voluntariness, and no foreseen permanence. Additionally, expatriates often have a high educational level and, if not self-initiated, receive support from their organization.

Expatriates are defined as individuals who move to another country and change their residence with the specific goal of working in a new environment (Andresen et al., 2014). This includes various types of international assignments, such as long-term, short-term, and extended business travel (McNulty, 2015). Research on expatriate adjustment has traditionally focused on the individual adaptation of expatriate employees (James et al., 2004). The concept of the expatriate family was first introduced by Cleveland, Mangone, and Adams (1960), who discussed the challenges faced by families living abroad. Hays (1974) later found that the family situation is a significant factor in the success or failure of expatriate employees, suggesting that addressing family needs can greatly enhance expatriate performance.

Research on the significant influence of families on expatriate assignments is crucial, given that 62% of expatriates are either married or have a partner, and another 6% are single but accompanied by dependent family members (Cartus, 2016; InterNations, 2019). Despite recent studies on successful expatriate family adjustment and increased awareness of the need to support expatriate families before and during assignments, the challenges of international assignments remain largely underestimated by both organizations and families (Lazarova et al., 2015). The inability of family members to adjust to foreign environments is a critical cause of expatriate failure (Haslberger & Brewster, 2008).

Traditionally, research has focused on the success of expatriates from a management perspective, particularly those supported by their companies. The stress and coping literature has identified various stressors and hardships faced by expatriates

(Brown, 2008), while social capital theories have explored the types of social support needed in host countries (Lauring & Selmer, 2010). Family systems theory has been commonly used to study the adjustment of expatriate families and children (Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012). However, there is a lack of cultural theories explaining the process of family adjustment to new environments. The literature on expatriate family adjustment needs a comprehensive, up-to-date general theory that incorporates different aspects of this complex issue (Sterle et al., 2018).

Black and Stephens (1989) defined adjustment as the degree of fit or psychological comfort individuals feel with various aspects of a foreign culture. An individual is considered adjusted if they are effective in their new environment, perceive themselves as knowledgeable about the local context, and experience neutral or positive emotions overall. Successfully adjusting can enrich expatriates' lives (Kempen et al., 2015), while failure to do so can lead to mental health issues (Brown, 2008).

Key stressors for expatriates include adjusting to a new job, relocating abroad, a partner giving up their job, children attending new schools, long periods of separation from loved ones, changing family routines, shifts in financial status, cultural differences, and role conflicts (Bahn, 2015; Haslberger & Brewster, 2008). Unresolved stressors can lead to ongoing tensions and increased psychosocial distress, depression, increased alcohol and substance abuse, decreased physical health, lower marital satisfaction, and reluctance to accept future assignments as well as a deteriorating work environment (Lazarova et al., 2015). Emotional complaints often stem from identity issues, uprooting, repeated goodbyes, losses, constant changes, and unresolved grief (Bushong, 2013).



When facing these stressors and challenges, expatriates apply various resources and coping behaviors (Patterson, 1988). Studies have identified several individual characteristics that can modify stress responses and aid adjustment to a foreign environment, including internal locus of control, self-esteem, education, language proficiency, past foreign experience, cultural intelligence, communication ability, extraversion, agreeableness, emotional stability, and open-mindedness (Holopainen & Björkman, 2005; Lin et al., 2012).

Expatriates and their partners are not the only ones that have to adjust to a new life in the host country. Children in expatriate families also have to juggle many changes at once, including major shifts in their developments and new environments.

## **1.2 Third Culture Kids**

Globalization and technological progress have greatly increased international mobility, leading to a rise in the number of children experiencing life across different countries and cultures. Understanding the psychosocial effects of these experiences is crucial. Children may live internationally for various reasons, such as being immigrants, refugees, or expatriates. While there are commonalities in these experiences, significant differences also exist (Tan et al., 2021).

The term "Third Culture" was introduced by Ruth Hill Useem and her husband John Useem (Useem et al., 1963) to describe the unique cultural interactions between American expatriates in India and their local colleagues. They observed that these interactions

created a distinct "third culture," which was neither fully American nor Indian, but an interstitial space between the two. The American expatriates they studied were primarily missionaries and diplomats sent abroad by their organizations.

Ruth Useem also focused on the children of these expatriates, coining the term "Third Culture Kids" (TCKs) to describe children who grow up outside their parents' passport countries. She found that TCKs shared common experiences regardless of their parents' professions or the countries they lived in. In a seminal article, Useem explained how these international experiences shaped TCKs' identities (Useem, 1973).

In the 1970s, David and Betty Pollock, who worked as dorm parents at an international school, began organizing conferences and seminars for TCKs, further spreading the concept. They defined TCKs as individuals who spend a significant part of their developmental years outside their parents' culture. This broader understanding of the term was popularized in their book "The Culture Kid Experience," often referred to as the "TCK Bible" (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999).

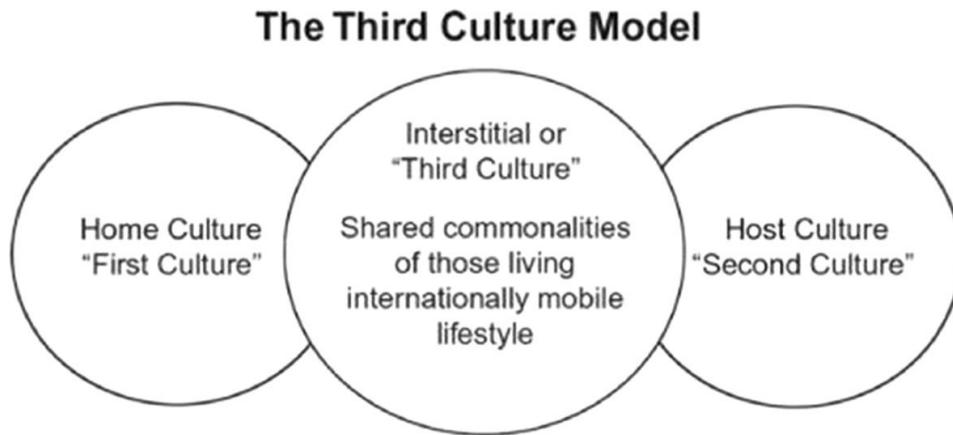
Given that the broad definition of TCKs could include various cross-cultural childhood experiences, both domestic and international, Van Reken introduced the term Cross-Culture Kid (CCK). This concept acknowledges the similarities across diverse experiences while recognizing their differences. Examples of CCKs include children of cross-cultural marriages, immigrant children, and international adoptees (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009; Van Reken & Bethel, 2005).

To distinguish TCKs as a specific type of CCK, the definition was refined to emphasize the involvement of another country and the reason for being abroad. A traditional TCK is defined as a person who spends a significant part of their first 18 years accompanying their parents to a country different from at least one parent's passport country due to the parent's work or advanced training (Pollock et al., 2017). TCKs build relationships with multiple cultures, but do not fully belong to any single one. Their sense of belonging is tied to others with similar backgrounds, forming a shared "third culture." This abstract, interstitial culture arises from the common experiences of people from various backgrounds living a mobile international lifestyle.

The authors argue that this shared experience transcends geographical boundaries and nationalities, allowing TCKs to explore their connections to multiple places and cultures in a "both/and" way rather than an "either/or" manner (Pollock et al., 2017). Walters and Auton-Cuff (2009) describe this as a "culture between cultures". TCKs are also sometimes referred to as "global nomads," a term coined by Norma McCaig in 1984 for TCKs who grew into adulthood and preferred not to be labeled as "kids."

Pollock and Van Reken (2001) also introduced the "Third Culture Model". This model demonstrates the cultures encountered by individuals with international lifestyles. As seen in Figure 1, the first two cultures represent one's home culture (e.g., the United States) and the host culture (e.g., Germany). The third culture comprises individuals who share the common experience of international mobility.

**Figure 1.** Exploring identity in *The Third Culture Model*



*Source:* Miller et al. (2020), adapted from Pollock & Van Reken (2001)

TCKs encompass a diverse group, including expatriate children from various countries, missionary children, military children, refugees, and others living in a third culture (Cole, 2018; Davis et al., 2010; Limberg & Lambie, 2011). These children have unique educational, identity, and cultural development experiences (Hayden & Thompson, 2004; Limberg & Lambie, 2011). While TCKs often exhibit adaptability and flexibility, they may struggle to develop a strong sense of identity (Cockburn, 2002; Davis et al., 2010; Limberg & Lambie, 2011).

Living in a third culture exposes TCKs to diverse people, cultures, and ideas, directly influencing their development. They can connect with multiple cultures, but often find it challenging to identify with or feel a sense of belonging to any specific culture or place (Limberg & Lambie, 2011; McGregor et al., 2013). Pollock and Van Reken (2001) described TCKs as "cultural chameleons," indicating their comfort with new locations, cultures, and people, and their skill in navigating these new environments. However, they

may struggle to form deep or meaningful relationships (Fail et al., 2004; Limberg & Lambie, 2011; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001).

TCKs typically possess a global mindset, proficiency in a second language, cognitive flexibility, open-mindedness, higher resilience, and leadership qualities (Abe, 2018). Despite these strengths, they often exhibit lower emotional stability compared to non-TCKs (Limberg & Lambie, 2011). Consequently, the well-being and identity development of TCKs are primary concerns for advocates and researchers.

### **1.3 International Schools**

As society becomes increasingly diverse, schools are evolving to reflect this reality, though their approaches to embracing and addressing diversity can vary significantly depending on the type of school. Multicultural schools and international schools serve different educational purposes and demographics, though both operate in culturally diverse environments (Banks & Banks, 2019; ISC, 2020).

Multicultural schools focus on integrating cultural diversity within the educational framework, aiming to create an inclusive atmosphere where students from various backgrounds can learn from each other. Their curriculum often reflects the diversity of the student body, emphasizing cultural competence, equity, and social justice, which is vital in preparing students for life in a multicultural society (Banks & Banks, 2019). Therefore, multicultural schools aim to promote cultural understanding within a national context, whereas international schools focus on providing an education that meets the

needs of a transient global population, such as children of expatriates and diplomats (Bunnell, 2014).

The International Schools Consultancy (ISC, 2020) reported that there are 11,659 international schools worldwide, catering to 5.98 million students. Of these students, at least 20% are children of expatriates who live outside their home countries. These institutions cater to expatriate children from various parts of the globe, creating a multicultural and diverse environment. They often offer instruction in the languages of students' home countries, like French or English, and provide diplomas that are internationally recognized or valid in the students' home countries (Expatica, 2024).

Although international schools are mainly designed for expatriates, they also attract some native students from the host country. This choice is often driven by the desire for a more international education, the opportunity to learn English or other widespread languages, or the advantages of specialized programs. Indeed, they are a great choice for families and students who want to improve their language skills or learn in a language other than their mother tongue. International private schools also provide various curricula, such as the International Baccalaureate (IB), British GCSEs and A-levels, and American high school diplomas. This range of educational programs equips students for higher education and career opportunities worldwide (Expatica, 2024). Government bodies and organizations tend to offer financial incentives and support to international schools, which can influence the overall education market and the spread of international schools across the globe (Hayden & Thompson, 2004). Another essential factor that motivates parents to opt for this choice of school is the values of cultural diversity and

open-mindedness that international schools adopt and focus on in their philosophy (Expatica, 2024).

However, looking at the expatriate demographic of these schools, many of them face adjustment issues and go through many obstacles in their identity development journeys. TCKs often grapple with the feeling that they represent not only themselves but also something larger, such as their parents or the organization that brought their family abroad (Meier, 2015). Due to their transient lifestyles, TCKs frequently lack close friendships, extended family connections, and community support (Cockburn, 2002). Trusting others can be a significant challenge for TCKs, often considered one of their greatest weaknesses (Bell, 1997). Their constant relocation can lead to identity issues, making it difficult to form lasting relationships (Sears, 2011).

TCKs may adapt their identities to fit various school environments and countries they live in, which can prevent them from developing a complete personal identity (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). This extended period of uncertainty about one's identity can result from difficulties connecting with peer groups, social causes, or cultural anchors (Gilbert, 2008). TCKs often struggle with the question, "Where am I from?", with responses varying across individual experiences. For instance, in a study by Sears (2011), adolescent twins identifying as TCKs answered this question differently: one felt a connection to Egypt, while the other identified more with Qatar.

The challenges faced by third culture students highlight the need for effective transition programs in international schools. It is essential for transition programs to focus

not only on psychosocial well-being and school connectedness, but also on addressing the specific strengths and challenges TCKs encounter during their developmental stages (Morales, 2015). However, Mahoney and Barron (2020) found that only about half of international schools have a transitions-care program, and very few of these programs are considered successful. Many school leaders feel unprepared to manage issues related to cross-cultural transitions, and cross-cultural transitions-care is often not prioritized within the school's culture, operations, or budget. There is a lack of both intentional curricular and non-curricular opportunities to support transitions-care, and most schools do not have formal methods to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs. Among those with alumni programs, very few leverage alumni feedback to gain insights into the success of their transitions-care initiatives (Mahoney & Barron, 2020). This lack of standardization leaves a gap in adequately supporting TCKs in their transition, identity formation, and psychosocial adjustment.

For this reason, the current thesis investigates whether and how a psychosocial school-based intervention for cultural identity such as the IP can benefit students attending an international school. The next chapter will elaborate on the process of identity formation in adolescence, with a special focus on cultural identity development and factors that can influence it, as this a salient and fundamental topic for this particular population and context.



## CHAPTER 2

### CULTURAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN ADOLESCENCE

#### 2.1 Identity Formation

Establishing one's identity is a crucial task all individuals encounter over their lifespan (Erikson, 1968). This process remains ongoing and subject to frequent changes that are especially heightened during the adolescent years (Crocetti et al., 2023). Adolescence is the transitory and transformative phase from childhood to adulthood, where teenagers aim to attain a new equilibrium within various life domains. This period also embodies a time of considerable uncertainty, characterized by a societal suspension that, notably in Western culture, has significantly diversified compared to earlier times (Bonino, 2008).

During the adolescent stage, individuals reevaluate the identities they have developed in childhood and explore various new options, seeking answers to questions about their self-definition and their place in society (Raemen et al., 2022). This heightened focus on exploring and defining their identity stems from the significant changes they are undergoing, ranging from physical and sexual puberty to new cognitive skills. These skills, such as hypothetical-deductive reasoning, enable them to think about themselves in more abstract and intricate ways. Additionally, they face social changes and challenges, such as transitioning to a new school, forming new friendships and relationships, and renegotiating family dynamics (Crocetti et al., 2023; Erikson, 1968).

In Erikson's psychosocial development theory (1968), identity is seen as a personal framework that helps individuals make sense of their experiences, assign meaning to them, and set goals and direction for their lives. As a result, it plays a crucial role in promoting healthy psychosocial functioning by offering clarity, self-confidence, and a sense of control over one's life circumstances while also nurturing a positive self-image and the capacity to engage in fulfilling relationships with others.

While newer theories regarding identity formation processes have been suggested, the Erikson model remains the primary theoretical framework (Schwartz et al., 2013). According to this framework, the identity crisis and the period of psychosocial moratorium experienced by adolescents can lead to two possible outcomes: a state of identity confusion, marked by a lack of meaning and direction in life, or identity synthesis. The latter entails a clear understanding of oneself and a sense of consistency between one's choices, actions, and goals (Crocetti et al., 2023; Erikson, 1968; Raemen et al., 2022).

An expansion of Erikson's psychosocial development theory was presented by Marcia (1966; 1993), who introduced four identity states derived from two main processes: Exploration involves discovering and evaluating different identity options to make decisions about one's goals, values, and attitudes, while commitment entails a clear and conscious dedication to chosen identity paths. From this basis, he derives four identity statuses: diffusion, moratorium, foreclosure, and achievement. Diffusion describes individuals neither actively exploring identity nor committing to a specific direction. Moratorium refers to those exploring identities without firm commitments. Foreclosure

involves passive adherence to existing identities, avoiding exploration. Lastly, identity achievement denotes individuals who have actively explored options and made long-term commitments (Marcia, 1966). These states are not sequential stages individuals must pass through; however, achieving a distinct identity typically follows a period of exploration. Indeed, the author suggests that adolescents are compelled to explore due to a combination of biological, cognitive, and social changes that prompt self-restructuring and self-definition.

Berzonsky (1988) offers a unique view on identity development, emphasizing how it is shaped by individuals' information processing methods and their ability to respond to their surroundings. He categorizes identity into three distinct styles: information-oriented (individuals actively seek and process information before committing to a specific path), norm-oriented (people either accept the identity bestowed upon them by family or conform to societal or group expectations without making independent choices), and avoidance-oriented (individuals with low levels of exploration and commitment).

Indeed, identity is not constructed in a relational vacuum, but within contexts and everyday spaces within a web of significant relationships (Branje, 2022; Galliher et al., 2017). School is one of the main contexts in which adolescents engage with developmental tasks typical of their age (Bonino, 2008).

Considering the impact of the environment and social context on identity formation is essential. Bronfenbrenner (1979) posited that individuals actively engaged within their living context undergo changes within it and reciprocally instigate changes themselves.

From this perspective, identity undergoes continual transitions between individuals and their surroundings (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). Adams and Marshall (1996) assert that socialization processes play a pivotal role in shaping identity. They identify two primary functions of socialization: at an individual level, as personal agency, addressing the individual's need for unique recognition, and at a collective level, as communion, satisfying the urge to belong to a community and engage with others. Undoubtedly, the social aspect emerges as crucial in identity development and construction (Erikson, 1968).

Adolescents invest more of their time at school than in any other environment, except perhaps their own beds (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). School emerges as a fertile ground for identity development (Lannegrand-Willems & Bosma, 2006). It offers a space where young minds encounter valuable cultural insights, explore and refine their interests and aspirations, and take their first steps in decision-making. Moreover, it functions as a dynamic social space, allowing them to experiment with various facets of identity and engage in meaningful daily interactions, especially with peers who share similar developmental journeys and thus become pivotal sources of intimacy and support (Crocetti et al., 2023).

The formation of self is a product of the interplay between individuals and their environment, involving cognitive, evaluative, and social elements. Numerous positive outcomes accompany the establishment of an explored and well-defined identity. Crafting an identity entails self-definition within a specific social circle and aids in shaping a cohesive self-image (Grotevant, 1992). Moreover, securing a strong sense of identity correlates with enhanced psychological well-being among adolescents alleviation of

psychosomatic and neurotic symptoms (De Lise et al., 2023). Furthermore, attaining a personal identity is linked to increased emotional resilience and reduction in depressive tendencies (Ruiz & Yabut, 2024) as well as decreased anxiety levels (Sharma & Chandiramani, 2021).

## **2.2 Cultural Identity**

As immigrants settle into a new society, their sense of self undergoes a transformation over time, regardless of their motive for moving. According to research by Berry and colleagues (2022), initially migrants strongly identify with their nationality of origin upon arrival. However, as they integrate into the host environment, their sense of identity constantly changes. This shift occurs as they adapt to the new language and customs. The evolving multicultural dynamics alter their perception of cultural group membership, leading them to view themselves not solely as part of one specific identity, but as belonging to a broader ethnocultural group. This may manifest in the adoption of double ethnic labels, such as identifying as Afro-Americans, reflecting a broader sense of cultural belonging. Thus, recognizing plural identity is essential, as it acknowledges affiliations across diverse cultural groups (Bolognesi, 2008). Individuals navigate this complex terrain differently, with some maintaining separate identities, others balancing multiple affiliations, and some rejecting aspects incongruent with their personal identity (Phinney, 2006).

In the late 1990s, mainstream developmental psychology began acknowledging the significance of cultural acquisition in the developmental process (Romero & Roberts, 1998). This era prompted a call to explore the influence of ethnocultural factors on youth development, a topic that has since been investigated by numerous scholars. These investigations are grounded in theories highlighting the interplay between social identities—such as race, ethnicity, and culture—and individuals' social behaviors, decision-making, and self-perception. Key theories informing this research include Erikson's (1974) psychosocial development theory and Tajfel's and Turner's (1979) social identity theory, which have provided the framework for much of the developmental inquiry into ethnic identification among adolescents.

The notion of cultural identity is closely linked with social identity theory. Tajfel and Turner (1986) argued that an individual's self-perception, derived from social categories, encompasses their social identity. Tajfel (1981) defined social identity (i.e., the adoption of identity in socially constructed terms) as “that part of an individual's self-concept that arises from their awareness of being a member of one or more social groups, along with the emotional significance connected to this membership status”. Thus, according to this theory, an individual's self-concept is largely influenced by their social identities, and consequently, to maintain their self-esteem, individuals seek and rely on their in-group's perception of them.

Because ethnic groups can be regarded as social entities, cultural identity can be likened to social identity, thereby constituting a form of group identification that influences how members of ethnic groups perceive themselves (Romero & Roberts,

1998). Consequently, individuals who hold positive perceptions of group membership are likely to exhibit higher levels of self-esteem. However, if the societal context fails to value the ethnic group and individuals encounter prejudice or discrimination, they may demonstrate lower self-esteem compared to members of groups unaffected by such experiences (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004).

In recent decades, there has been rapid expansion in research concerning ethnic and racial identity, recognized as integral to the normal development of ethnic minority children. Studies indicate that children's and adolescents' comprehension of these identities typically progresses in parallel trajectories (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). According to Berry and colleagues (2022), immigrant adolescents undergo the transition from childhood to adulthood much like youth globally. Although this experience may vary across cultures, it is nearly universal among young people. Furthermore, similar to first-generation migrants, second-generation adolescents must navigate the dual cultural landscapes of their peers, schools, and broader society, in addition to their own families and cultural communities.

In the scientific literature in the United States, the meta-construct known as "ethnic-racial identity" (ERI) is commonly used. This term combines racial, ethnic, and cultural elements under a unified framework, defining it as "a multidimensional, psychological construct that reflects the beliefs and attitudes individuals hold about their ethnic-racial group memberships, as well as the processes through which these beliefs and attitudes evolve over time" (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). The identification of members within an ethnic group is based on their shared exposure to cultural components. Membership in an

ethnic group serves as a significant social context influencing the development of self-identity (Umaña-Taylor, 2002). According to the author, ethnic identity pertains to individuals' perceptions and understanding of their ethnicity, particularly their level of identification with their ethnic group. The formation of ethnic identity is a gradual process occurring as individuals contemplate and reach conclusions about the importance of their ethnicity in their lives.

This study opts to substitute the term ERI with the overarching term "cultural identity". The concept of "culture" encompasses tangible objects, subjective experiences, ideologies, and customs in a more comprehensive manner than ethnicity. This shift is prompted by historical events, particularly those of the Second World War, which underscore the inadequacy of terms like "race" and "ethnicity" and the heavy stigma associated with them (Möschel, 2011).

Cultural identity is a multifaceted concept encompassing various dimensions. As highlighted by Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2014), it involves the developmental stages wherein individuals explore and attain a nuanced comprehension of their backgrounds, alongside the beliefs and emotions they harbor regarding their affiliation with their ethnic-racial group. These developmental stages are categorized as exploration and resolution, while the beliefs and emotions regarding group affiliation constitute its contents. Furthermore, it delves into the diverse ways individuals interpret and attribute significance to their membership in a cultural group, and how these interpretations can shape their social behaviors and beliefs.



It is important to acknowledge that cultural identity constitutes an exceedingly intricate and multifaceted aspect of human life. Our self-perception and interactions with the world are intricately molded by our beliefs, values, traditions, languages, and behaviors. While cultural identity can instill a profound sense of belonging and pride, it is also subject to alteration, influenced by factors such as globalization, migration, societal shifts, and discrimination. Embracing the diversity and intricacies of cultural identities is essential for fostering mutual understanding, respect, and communication especially in multicultural environments.

### **2.3 Ethnocultural Empathy**

As industrialized Western societies witness increasing cultural diversity due to the previously discussed rising migration flows, interactions between people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds become more common across different contexts (Albiero & Matricardi, 2013). This growing diversity brings individuals into contact in workplaces, educational institutions, neighbourhoods, and social settings, fostering economic and cultural exchange. However, this also implies differences in points of view and the ways different people experience the world, leading to different misunderstandings occurring in informal and professional settings (Ibrahim, 1991).

One way to examine the resulting instances of intolerance, prejudice, conflict, and implicit societal tension (McLaren, 2003) is to explore them through the lens of empathy. Many researchers and studies have confirmed empathy's fundamental role in these

interactions over the past several decades (Bobba & Crocetti, 2022; Klimecki, 2019). Empathy has been investigated in a range of disciplines and fields, from philosophy to anthropology and psychology. Even within psychology, it has been discussed in various subdisciplines such as social psychology, personality psychology, clinical psychology, and developmental psychology (Rasoal et al., 2011). This vast interest in the concept of empathy, defined by Strayer and Eisenberg as “feeling in oneself the feelings of others,” sustains its critical role in different psychological phenomena, relationships, and interactions (Duan & Hill, 1996). Indeed, empathy has the power to mitigate hostile attitudes and behaviors, thereby fostering better relationships among diverse ethnic groups and subcultures (Miklikowska, 2018). Research indicates a clear link between a deficiency in empathy and the presence of negative attitudes and aggressive conduct (Falla et al., 2021).

Duan and Hill (1996) additionally outlined various theories that characterize empathy as a personality trait or a general ability. These theories encompass the capacity to understand another person's internal experiences and to feel their emotions. This definition and construction of empathy allow for the possibility of change and transformation of the concept. Empathy is thus regarded as an ability that can be influenced to promote a greater appreciation for the welfare of others and as a catalyst for changing attitudes toward marginalized and oppressed groups (Batson et al., 1997).

Given empathy's impact on social interactions and justice orientation, it only makes sense to examine it more deeply in intercultural contexts where it might be more challenged. Understanding the viewpoint and perspective of an individual from a different

cultural background might pose a greater difficulty compared to someone sharing the same cultural background (Rasoal et al., 2011). This led the researchers Ridley and Lingle (1996) to introduce the term “cultural empathy,” a concept that extends beyond general empathy to involve more specifically understanding and accepting another’s culture. Ridley and Lingle emphasized that cultural empathy entails a deepening of the empathic response, facilitating a sense of mutual understanding despite significant disparities in values and expectations inherent in cross-cultural interactions (Ridley & Lingle, 1996).

Cultural empathy then takes into account the person’s cultural context by trying to understand the individuals’ experiences after placing them in the context and never isolating them from it. The ethnocultural empathic capability also involves the necessity to manage personal biases and prejudices toward individuals and communities of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Lastly, ethnocultural empathic ability is unique from general empathy in the way it relies not only on theoretical comprehension of the other’s experience, but also on practical engagement with the respective culture (Rasoal et al., 2011). The authors propose following the definition of ethnocultural empathy as “feeling, understanding, and caring about what someone from another culture feels, understands, and cares about.”

Many researchers and authors have talked about the construct of empathy in intercultural settings, using interchangeable words to refer to it such as as cultural empathy (Ivey et al., 1987; Ridley & Lingle, 1996), empathetic multicultural awareness (Junn et al., 1995), cultural role taking (Scott & Borodovsky, 1990), ethnic perspective taking (Quintana et al., 2000), and ethnotherapeutic empathy (Parson, 1993). As it has

been regarded as an ability that can be altered, Quintana and his colleagues (1994) defined ethnocultural empathy as a cognitive–developmental ability made of associated levels, each attained as the individual reaches and advances into a new developmental life stage.

Additionally, Ridley and Lingle (1996), who had defined cultural empathy as a ‘learning ability’, developed the most complex and complete model of cultural empathy (Ridley & Lingle, 1996). This model is made up of cognitive, affective, and communicative processes. The cognitive or intellectual ability entails how someone from another culture simply thinks or feels and perceives the world, which is known as ethnic perspective taking. The affective part of empathic ability involves being attentive to the culturally different person’s feelings to the point of managing to perceive and feel their emotional state from their own cultural perspective. This also encompasses an individual’s emotional reaction to people from different cultural groups’ displays of emotion. And finally, the communicative aspect of cultural empathy involves expressing the two other components, intellectual and affective, to people from different cultural backgrounds in a verbal or active manner.

Furthermore, given all this evidence of the fundamental role empathy plays in social relationships and intercultural contexts, it is interesting to examine its role particularly in adolescence when substantial changes and shifts are taking place (Buckingham, 2019). As multiculturalism spreads and the world becomes more globalized, research on identity development, peer relationships, and empathic skills is expanding as well. Researchers have investigated the link between empathy development and identity development. Greater levels of identity development are believed to be associated with advanced

empathic skills, including internalized moral controls and non-egocentric thinking (Loevinger, 1976). This hypothesis was supported by research showing that adolescents with higher ego identity status such as achievement or moratorium report greater levels of empathy (Blackshire, 2004; Pecukonis, 1990). Other studies also emphasized empathy's fundamental role in moral development and thus in identity formation during adolescence (Hoffman, 2000; Matthys & Schutter, 2023).

Adolescents with higher empathy levels tend to have a more coherent and integrated sense of identity. This is for a multitude of factors. Empathy requires individuals to engage in perspective-taking and emotional understanding, which are essential for self-reflection. This cognitive and emotional engagement allows individuals, particularly adolescents, to better understand their own feelings and motivations, facilitating a more nuanced self-concept and identity formation. McAdams (2001) discussed how empathy contributes to the development of narrative identity, where individuals construct their life stories. It allows individuals to incorporate the perspectives and experiences of others into their narratives, enriching their identity development. In that sense, those with a strong sense of empathy may find it easier to form connections with others, enhancing their social identity while a lack of empathy can lead to rigid group boundaries, limiting identity exploration and development across diverse social contexts.

For these reasons, it would be interesting to explore the particular role of ethnocultural empathy in influencing cultural identity development in adolescence. Research is starting to delve into these concepts' interconnectedness. A study by Peifer et al. (2016) examined this association in the context of mentoring minority girls, finding a

potential positive association between the two. Another study also found that emerging adults who can empathize with diverse perspectives are more likely to embrace diverse identities and foster a sense of belonging in broader social contexts (Gerson & Neilson, 2014). This thesis will also examine if a stronger sense of ethnocultural empathy in students can lead to more exploration and resolution of cultural identity after they participate in the *IP* intervention, which will be the focus of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE IDENTITY PROJECT

#### 3.1 Theoretical background and characteristics

The IP developed by Umaña-Taylor and Douglass (2017) in the United States, is an intervention program designed to enhance the well-being of adolescents through the exploration and resolution of cultural identity (Umaña-Taylor, 2018), while also aiming to foster positive intercultural relationships within classroom groups. The project was created with consideration of the social and historical context of the US, which has been characterized by events of discrimination, racism, conflict, and cultural tension (Umaña-Taylor, 2011).

As previously mentioned, the development of cultural identity is a lifelong process, but adolescence is a critical period for identity formation due to significant cognitive, socio-emotional, and relational changes (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). The IP is tailored to this specific developmental stage to encourage a thorough exploration of one's own culture, helping adolescents achieve clarity about this aspect of their identity (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). This approach aligns with the identity development tasks described in theories by Erikson (1968) and Marcia (1980). This is accomplished through a period of self-exploration and observation, leading to increased self-awareness (Erikson, 1968).

An important point to emphasize is that the IP is a universal mental health promotion program. This means it was not designed for populations considered to be at

risk or vulnerable, but aims to benefit all adolescents, whether belonging to minority groups or the majority group.

The overarching goals established by the authors of the IP focus on:

- Highlighting and increasing awareness of both one's own and others' cultural backgrounds;
- Enabling awareness and discussion of the diverse experiences of discrimination among various cultural groups.
- Clarifying that there are as significant differences within cultural groups as between groups
- Gaining knowledge about one's cultural heritage.
- Clarifying ambiguities in the categorization of cultural groups, fostering awareness of the various possible paths in forming cultural identity.
- Offering tools for exploring personal identity, such as symbols, rites, and traditions.
- Creating a safe space for reflection and discussion.

The project targets high school students and consists of a series of eight weekly sessions, each lasting 55 minutes. These sessions are led by trained researchers or teachers. During the sessions, students engage in various activities individually or within small and large groups, subsequently sharing their work with the entire class. The sessions utilize diverse materials, including slides, key terms and definitions, interviews, video clips, worksheets, and icebreaker activities, to help the students feel comfortable with their classmates and the supervising adult (Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2017). The activities cover a range of themes, including historical, social, and cultural issues (Umaña-



Taylor & Douglass, 2017), as outlined in Table 1, which details the topics and objectives of each session. To evaluate the program's effectiveness, the intervention was implemented in eight classrooms at a high school in the United States (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018a).

**Table 1.** Overview of the IP objectives for each session

Session	Objectives
<i>1. Identity backpack</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Introduce the idea of identity as a multidimensional and fluid construct.</li> <li>b. Identify and categorize the different components of student identity, including personal and social components.</li> <li>c. Underline how the various components of students' identity can change over time and in different situations.</li> </ul>
<i>2. Differences between and within groups</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Introduce stereotypes as based on the presumed homogeneity of groups; enable students to differentiate themselves from stereotypes.</li> <li>b. Introduce the idea that there are more differences within groups than between groups.</li> <li>c. Introduce the idea that differences are continuous and not categorical.</li> </ul>
<i>3. Stories from our past</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Raise awareness of how some groups have been marginalized throughout Italian history by sharing real-life incidents of discrimination.</li> <li>b. Use episodes to create a sense of community.</li> <li>c. Resume the contents previously addressed</li> </ul>
<i>4. Symbols, traditions and rites of passage</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Define symbols/traditions/rites of passage and how they relate to cultural background.</li> <li>b. Understand how symbols/ traditions/ rites of passage are indicators specific to each cultural group.</li> <li>c. Promote exploration of the symbols/traditions/rites of passage of one's cultural group.</li> </ul>

<p>5. <i>Family trees</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Increase students' exploration and knowledge of their own cultural background.</li> <li>b. Increase students' understanding of complex and diverse family and relationship systems and how various members can have different degrees of influence on them.</li> <li>c. Demonstrate the similarities that derives from the diversity that exists in all families and relationship stories.</li> </ul>
<p>6. <i>From photos to words</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Help students reflect on the photos they took as homework by discussing them with peers and creating a personal storyboard.</li> <li>b. Identify differences and commonalities among their storyboards.</li> <li>c. Stimulate greater understanding and clarity regarding the meaning that different symbols have for each person.</li> </ul>
<p>7. <i>The journey of cultural identity</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Normalize the fact that some students' cultural experiences may be more relevant to them than others.</li> <li>b. Increase students' understanding that cultural identity can be informative but represents only a part of identity and has variable importance</li> <li>c. Understand that the meaning of cultural identity can change over time and space.</li> </ul>
<p>8. <i>Grand Finale</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Review of the topics covered.</li> <li>b. Celebrate and share the cultural heritages explored.</li> <li>c. Allow students to set up the classroom with the various materials created during the various sessions</li> </ul>

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

### 3.2 Evidence of efficacy

#### 3.2.1 United States of America

To evaluate the efficacy of the IP intervention program, Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2018b) conducted the study involving eight high school classes in the US. Using a randomization procedure, four classes were assigned to the intervention group, which

participated in the IP activities, while the other four classes were assigned to the control group, which received lessons on future educational and professional opportunities. The initial hypothesis posited that students in the intervention group would report greater exploration of cultural identity after completing the IP (posttest), and that this heightened level of exploration would subsequently lead to an increase in identity resolution (follow-up).

In total, there were 218 participants, aged 15 years on average ( $M_{\text{age}} = 15.02$  years,  $SD = .68$ ), with diverse cultural backgrounds. Both the control and intervention groups attended eight weekly sessions conducted during school hours over a period of ten weeks. Additionally, all eight classes completed three self-report questionnaires: the first survey, the pretest (T1), was conducted one week before the program began; the second survey (T2) was administered 12 weeks after the initial survey; and the final questionnaire (T3) was given 18 weeks after the initial survey.

In this initial implementation of the IP, findings revealed no significant differences between the intervention and control groups in terms of exploration at T1, while differences emerged significantly at T2. Notably, adolescents in the intervention group demonstrated higher levels of cultural identity exploration compared to those in the control group, with this effect being particularly pronounced among youth from ethnic minority backgrounds. Moreover, students who engaged in the IP exhibited increased levels of cultural identity resolution at T3 in comparison to their peers in the control group.

Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2018b) conducted a follow-up assessment one year after the pretest, specifically 56 weeks after the conclusion of the intervention in the classrooms (T4), to examine whether the enhanced exploration and resolution of cultural identity resulting from participation in the IP had led to improved long-term psychosocial adjustment. The assessment focused on various indicators, including global identity cohesion, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, school engagement, academic performance, and orientation towards other groups. Findings for the intervention group revealed increased global identity cohesion, enhanced academic performance, higher levels of self-esteem, and fewer depressive symptoms. However, no significant effects were observed regarding school involvement and orientation towards other groups.

Overall, implementing the IP in the school setting in the US suggests that a program providing adolescents with resources and tools to delve into different facets of their cultural background, along with opportunities for intercultural interaction, can foster the formation of a coherent and comprehensive understanding of one's cultural identity which, over time, can contribute to improved psychosocial adjustment across the dimensions previously mentioned.

### *3.2.2 Germany*

Some events that had occurred in Germany and other countries in the Western world, such as the shootings in Halle against a Jewish synagogue in October 2019 (ANSA, 2019), the Hanau attack against German ethnic minorities which took place in February 2020

(ANSA, 2020), and the murder of George Floyd by the US police and the resulting protests that took place (USA Today, 2020), had highlighted the need to explicitly address the racist sentiment present in contemporary German society. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic accentuated existing inequalities between cultural groups in terms of exposure to health risk and poor access to new educational means (OHCHR, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

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

The original project developed by Umaña-Taylor and Douglass (2017) was thus adapted to the German context, respecting the recommended practices for cultural adaptations of evidence-based interventions (Barrera & Castro, 2006). In particular, the main changes were the following: (1) the intervention was adapted for seventh grade students instead of ninth graders, since this represents a significant transition year into the secondary year in the German school system in which interventions are most effective (Sherman et al., 2013); and (2) the concept of "ethnic-racial identity" was replaced with the term "cultural heritage identity". This choice was made based on the fact that in the European context, 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 migratory background or a parent born abroad at least. Overall, the sample included 34 different cultural origins. The intervention was conducted in two distinct cohorts (2018-2019 and 2019-2020), for each of which 4 classes were randomly assigned to the following groups: Two classes to the intervention group and two to the control group. For the classes involved in the first cohort ( $n = 99$ ), the intervention took place over 13 weeks during the 2018-2019 academic year, while the classes in the second cohort ( $n = 96$ ) completed the intervention in 8 weeks during the 2019-2020 school year.

Data from the 2018-2019 cohort were collected across 4 measurements: 6 weeks pre-intervention (pretest, T1) and 1 week (T2), 6 weeks (T3) and 17.5 weeks (T4) post-intervention. The two classes belonging to the control group received the intervention one 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 the spring of 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 carried out concerned only the data collected at T1 and T2 for both cohorts. Furthermore, at the end of the intervention with the students of the 2018-

2019 academic year, focus groups were held with teachers and students to ask about their impressions regarding the intervention and if they had any suggestions for improving the IP.

During each session, two trainers were always present to lead the intervention as well as an observer to ensure that the sessions dealt with all the main topics in a coherent manner by completing a fidelity-checklist, and at least one teacher from the respective class. The results confirmed only some of the hypothesized effects: A greater increase in the exploration of one's cultural identity was observed in the intervention group compared to the control group for the 2018-2019 cohort, but not for the 2019-2020 cohort, while no changes in cultural identity resolution and global identity cohesion were observed at posttest. This could be due to the posttest measurements (T2) occurring shortly after the end of the intervention in the classrooms, for which it would have been necessary to carry out a follow-up one year after the end of the IP as in the study conducted by Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2018a). Furthermore, no changes were observed from pretest (T1) to posttest (T2) regarding better classroom climate towards cultural diversity; however, male and female students in the intervention group reported a significant increase, compared to the control group, in the dimensions of awareness of treatment disparity between groups and critical awareness (Juang et al., 2020).

The exploratory analyses concerning correlations among variables revealed that only in the intervention group, exploration of cultural identity was linked to greater global identity cohesion at T2. In addition, greater cultural identity resolution was linked to greater global identity cohesion and higher self-esteem, as well as fewer depressive

symptoms, better school adjustment, and more positive attitudes toward people from other cultural groups.

Additionally, during the focus groups, students reported that they mostly appreciated the opportunity the project provided to listen and learn something new from the experiences and cultures of their classmates. Similarly, teachers were pleasantly surprised to discover new aspects related to the cultural backgrounds of their students.

### *3.2.3 Italy*

The adaptation of the IP to the Italian sociocultural context followed, as in the German case, international guidelines for the cultural adaptation of psychological interventions (Barrera & Castro, 2006). In particular, to make the implementation of the intervention in the specific context as efficacious as possible, the 5 phases of (1) information gathering, (2) preliminary adaptation design, (3) preliminary adaptation trials, (4) perfecting fit, and (5) testing cultural fit were followed.

During the information-gathering phase, differences between the contexts in which the IP was applied (the US and Germany) were examined through a literature review and ongoing discussions with the German research team. This analysis of cultural diversity also extended to investigating the migration situation in Italy. Additionally, 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with first- and second-generation young adults with migratory backgrounds. The questions addressed symbols and traditions of their cultures, unique cultural characteristics, experiences of discrimination, religion, language,



migration history, stereotypes, thought patterns, beliefs, and values related to their cultural origins.

Focus groups were held with five cultural mediators from diverse ethnic backgrounds representing major nationalities in Italy to assess the cultural appropriateness of the laboratory activities in the original IP. In these meetings, each of the eight sessions of the project was discussed individually, concentrating on the activities, topics, methods of addressing these topics, and overall adequacy and feasibility of the IP.

In the second phase of adaptation, the original project manual and self-report measures were translated into Italian. The contents of the activities, including videos, textual elements, and slides, were also reviewed and modified. Following the guidelines suggested by McKleroy et al. (2006), the adaptation ensured fidelity to the central themes and objectives while tailoring the intervention to the Italian context. The primary change involved terminology: in line with the German adaptation by Juang et al. (2022), the terms "race" and "ethnicity" were replaced with "culture." Additionally, various adjustments were made to make the content more relevant and accessible for Italian students, including historical events that took place in Italy or to Italians abroad and personal episodes experienced by individuals with some type of Italian background (Ceccon et al., 2023).

In this phase, the adaptation process involved ongoing collaboration between the US, German, and Italian research teams, as well as with the cultural mediators. This

collaboration included weekly discussion meetings focusing on specific aspects of the IP, allowing mediators to offer their perspectives as experts in their heritage cultures, thus ensuring a culturally sensitive adaptation. The modifications aligned with previous adjustments made in the German implementation (Juang et al., 2020) and were approved by the original project authors.

The primary aim of the pilot study was to assess the feasibility, acceptability, and cultural appropriateness of the intervention (Ceccon et al., 2024). The sample included 153 adolescents, with an average age of 15 years, from diverse cultural backgrounds. Of these students, 37% had a migration background, originating from 21 different countries. The study was conducted across nine classes within a secondary school (a technical institute) in the city of Padua.

Due to complications arising from the pandemic, classrooms were assigned to either the intervention group ( $n = 5$ ) or the control group ( $n = 4$ ) based on the requests and availability of the teaching staff. The IP was conducted over eight weeks during school hours by a PhD student, supported by a team of pre-graduate trainees and overseen by the project's scientific coordinator. The intervention group sessions, each lasting about 55 minutes, were held once a week remotely via the Google Meet platform, in accordance with COVID-19 restrictions. Meanwhile, the control group continued with their regular lessons as scheduled by the school. Through ongoing discussions among the working group members, the project was continuously refined and adapted to fit the specific context of each class. This process included periodic reviews of previous sessions to reinforce the key concepts covered in each session.

Data collection was carried out between March and the end of May 2021. All students, both in the intervention and control groups, completed questionnaires one week before (pre-test, T1) and one week after (post-test, T2) the series of sessions. The instruments used encompassed various self-report measures designed to evaluate socio-demographic information, cultural identity, intercultural intelligence and competence, identity cohesion, environmental sensitivity, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, prosocial behaviour, orientation towards other groups, family ethnic socialization, perceived discrimination, academic engagement, and classroom climate concerning cultural diversity. Additionally, in June 2021, once the pilot study was completed, students and teachers voluntarily participated in separate focus groups to provide qualitative feedback on the project's feasibility, acceptability, and cultural relevance in the Italian socio-cultural context.

The main quantitative findings of the pilot study showed a significant increase in cultural identity resolution and openness towards people from different cultures in students from the intervention group, although there were no observed differences in cultural identity exploration or classroom climate before and after the intervention.

The focus groups revealed that students particularly appreciated having a space to explore their own cultural backgrounds and learn about their classmates' cultures. They also valued the role of significant others, such as family members, in their self-definition. The critical points they made concerned the length of the survey. Teachers noted an increase in solidarity and sensitivity within the class groups that participated in the

intervention and recommended further exploration of the role of language in identity in future implementations of the project.

In light of the data collected and the experience carried out in schools, the project was refined and proposed again in the following school year on a larger scale. The main study was thus conducted between October 2021 and April 2022 as a randomized controlled trial (Ceccon et al., 2023). For ethical reasons, the authors used a waitlist control design, with classrooms randomly assigned to either the intervention group ( $n = 23$ ) or the control group ( $n = 22$ ). The variables of interest were measured one week before the intervention (T0, pretest), 9 weeks after baseline (T1, posttest), and 13 weeks after baseline (T2, follow-up). Adolescents in the waitlist control group received the intervention 2 weeks after the T2 follow-up data collection, which was fifteen weeks after baseline.

Participants were recruited from public upper secondary schools in northeastern Italy, in the Veneto region, an area with a significant proportion of legally residing citizens of immigrant descent (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2022). Public technical and vocational schools were targeted because immigrant families often prefer these schools due to contextual factors such as the potential for immediate work and income. This approach ensured that 20%–25% of the sample consisted of adolescents of immigrant descent. The focus was on middle adolescence as this stage is considered the most receptive and sensitive to identity-related issues, as previously mentioned (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018b).

To reach the planned sample size of 600 students, 1037 students from 45 classrooms in six different public upper secondary schools in urban areas were invited to participate. One teacher from each school coordinated the intervention schedule to fit with the schools' preexisting plans. Participants' eligibility was based on the following criteria: (1) they were in the 10th grade during the data collection period; (2) they had sufficient proficiency in the Italian language; and (3) they had no certified intellectual disabilities or neurodevelopmental disorders. To prevent feelings of social exclusion, students who did not meet the second ( $n = 6$ ) or third ( $n = 6$ ) criteria were excluded from the survey assessments but were invited to participate in the IP sessions. These students received additional assistance from a facilitator or support teacher, and non-Italian speakers were provided with materials translated into their native languages or support from a cultural mediator. Out of the eligible participants, 68 did not return parental consent forms which resulted in a participation rate of 92%.

The study's findings confirmed the initial hypothesis that adolescents in the intervention group, compared to those in the control group, showed increased levels of cultural identity exploration from pre- to post-test. This suggests that the IP adaptation for the Italian school context effectively encouraged adolescents to reflect on their heritage cultures, fostering meaningful exploration and consideration of this crucial aspect of their identity. Despite the participants' diverse sociocultural backgrounds, the project proved effective in engaging adolescents with their heritage cultures in this context. However, the study did not find evidence for a cascading effect, where the intervention group's increased cultural identity exploration at post-test would lead to

greater resolution at follow-up. Thus, participants did not report a clearer sense of their own cultural identity one month after the initial increase in exploration processes due to their participation in the IP.

Given the IP's promising results in this study and the importance of replicating studies on the efficacy of interventions in different socio-cultural contexts, the IP was replicated in the next school year 2022-2023. In the next chapters, the adaptation of the IP to an international school as well as the first results of the pilot implementation in this unique context are presented.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE STUDY

#### 4.1 Study aim and research questions

Given the widespread phenomenon of international schools in the world and particularly in Italy, and the multicultural environment students spend most of their days in as a result, it was decided to adapt and pilot the IP in an international school<sup>1</sup>. Through a qualitative-quantitative approach incorporating questionnaires and focus groups, this study collected the primary evidence of efficacy of the adaptation from the students' perspectives, whilst also exploring any changes in cultural identity dimensions and ethnocultural empathy.

The following research questions were addressed:

- 1) *Is there evidence for the feasibility, salience and appropriateness of the IP intervention adapted to an international school in Italy based on the students' perspectives?*

The IP is a school-based intervention developed in the US that aims to stimulate ethnic racial identity exploration and resolution (Umaña-Taylor & Douglass, 2017), which consequently has a positive impact on adolescents' psychosocial functioning (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018b). With the spread of immigration in Europe and its complex

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<sup>1</sup> The English International School of Padua was founded in Padua in 1987. It is a private international institute that offers a child-centered learning environment that is dynamic in its pace, differentiated, challenging, and rewarding. It currently has 700 students enrolled from 46 different nationalities.

implications for cultural identity formation, this project was adapted and implemented in many different multicultural contexts, such as Germany (Juang et al., 2020) and Italy (Ceccon et al., 2023, 2024), where its feasibility, salience and appropriateness were all supported. However, no study to date has implemented this intervention in an international school, where there is a unified rigorous curriculum and unique student composition. The students, which are usually TCKs or locals who have been exposed to this particular context, frequently face identity development challenges due to the difficulties of constant relocation or change, which also hinders their ability to form stable relationships with their peers (Sears, 2011).

Based on the previous school-based implementations of the IP and on the context of international schools in Italy, as well as on the cultural identity needs of expatriates' children, we expected the adapted version of the IP for this unique environment to prove feasible, appropriate and salient to the multicultural adolescents in the school based on their perspectives.

- 2) *Do students in the intervention group report higher levels of cultural identity dimensions (exploration and resolution) at posttest compared to their peers in the control group, after controlling for baseline levels of these dimensions?*

Cultural identity is a crucial aspect of identity development, as it encompasses the dimension of the self that is associated with one's cultural belonging, which is significantly influenced by changes and evolutions throughout life (Umaña-Taylor, 2018).



This is particularly important for adolescents in international schools as they navigate different forms of immigration and diverse cultural environments at such a critical age.

As previously highlighted, the IP proved to be efficacious in stimulating identity exploration, although evidence for effects on resolution are less clear-cut, especially in the European implementations. Indeed, the implementation of the IP across various European countries yielded different results. For example, studies conducted in Germany, Italy, and Sweden demonstrated that the program was efficacious in promoting adolescents' exploration of identity (Abdullahi et al., 2024; Ceccon et al., 2023; Juang et al., 2020). However, the expected progression from exploration to identity resolution was not consistently observed in all countries (e.g., Ceccon et al., 2023; Schachner et al., 2024).

Based on these results, we expect to observe an increase in the levels of exploration of cultural identity in the intervention group in comparison to the control group at post-test (T2), although no hypothesis for resolution was proposed given these contrasting results.

- 3) *Do students with more (vs less) ethnocultural empathy report higher levels of cultural identity dimensions (exploration and resolution) after participation in the IP compared to the control group, taking initial levels of these dimensions into account?*

Since empathy plays a crucial role in social interactions, its role has been investigated also in multicultural contexts where differences might lead to conflict and tension. The

concept of ethnocultural empathy was thus studied as the ability to understand and care about the worldview and experiences of someone from another culture. Specifically, researchers have found that empathizing with different points of view is associated with a flexible and shifting sense of self and belonging, and thus empathy as a variable can contribute to the degree in which an individual identifies with their ethnic roots (Gerson & Neilson, 2014).

Implementing this project whose goal is to promote cultural identity in such a multicultural school context presented a good opportunity to further examine this association. Adolescents with greater ethnocultural empathy are good at forming connections, practicing self-reflection and incorporating flexible group boundaries (Gerson & Neilson, 2014).

Although no study to date has investigated the possible influence of students' ethnocultural empathy on intervention effects, it is reasonable to expect that adolescents who are more ethnoculturally empathic at the beginning of the IP will be more receptive and open to exploring their identity and eventually resolving it. Hence, these adolescents might benefit more from the intervention in terms of exploration and resolution compared to their less empathic peers.

## **4.2 Adaptation process**

International schools are a unique context as they host students from different environments. These students are usually a mix of local students as well as foreign

students who might frequently change schools and locations. Additionally, even among international schools exist stark differences in their compositions, the way they operate and their relationship with the local system. For this reason, it was necessary to explore the context of the international school where we piloted the project.

The school offers a multicultural learning climate with more than 45 nationalities enrolled every year. The high school curriculum spans four years and is divided into the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) and the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP).

The IBDP is an internationally recognized program that goes beyond standard academic learning by employing a holistic approach that develops transferable personal skills and competencies. The IB pathway encourages continuous inquiry and the pursuit of independent knowledge, fostering open-minded individuals who appreciate the importance of respecting diverse cultures and their responsibility to the planet (The English International School of Padua, 2024). Part of the curriculum includes the *Theory of Knowledge* program, which investigates the nature of knowledge across various disciplines and promotes respect for diverse cultural viewpoints. Another program is *Creativity, Activity, Service* which includes artistic, sports, cultural activities, and community service, offering learning experiences beyond the traditional classroom setting.

With these characteristics in mind and the differences of this school from the Italian public school system in terms of curriculum and environment, it was essential to revise

the Italian adaptation of the IP and make the necessary adaptations beyond the translation of the material.

Once the school, university, and legal teams agreed on a convention to start their partnership on the project, the IP team started the adaptation process. Three focus groups were held three weeks prior to the beginning of the project. One was held with the high school principal, his assistant, and the IGCSE coordinator and Head English Teacher. Another focus group was held with four teachers, two of whom proceeded to follow the intervention sessions in the first and second wave.

The focus groups addressed the following topics:

- Transition process for new families and students to the school
- Relationships between students from different backgrounds
- Cultural diversity and related issues in the school curriculum
- Professional development for staff in addressing cultural diversity at the school
- Pedagogical strategies used in the classroom
- Students' capacities in discussion of abstract topics and self-reflection
- Student needs according to age and cultural background
- School led initiatives/projects

While there were conflicting answers on the availability of support for new students and their families at the school, there was consensus on the remaining topics. The staff perceived isolation and division between different cultural groups, especially during unsupervised time, with one teacher expressing that *“If I could wave a magic wand, I*

*would want to break that barrier between Chinese and Italian communities.*” While there is a lack of professional development in cultural diversity, the staff were open to it and thought it would be important. They also tried to incorporate cultural diversity awareness in their classes through examples and case studies, but encountered limitations due to curriculum demands and time constraints. However, the school system relied heavily on international mindedness and an inquiry approach which were reflected in the students’ abstract thinking and reflection abilities. Lastly, the school staff had a zero-tolerance policy regarding bullying, so conflicts based on cultural differences rarely occurred at the school.

The second focus group was held with the school psychologist and the school life coach. It focused on student relationships and dynamics, school climate, resources and policies, and school initiatives. They also highlighted the issue of isolated cultural groups, not only among students but also among parents and teachers at the school, commenting that *“the issue is there is no socialization between groups.”* They also remarked that the concentration on academic achievement limits the capacity to work on other dimensions in the students’ life and the psychologists’ capacity to help. They would advocate for more space and time for integrative and social events, especially to address topics such as stereotypes which are an issue at the school.

Following these qualitative insights, the IP team started the necessary changes. Firstly, the organization of the sessions underwent several changes. Sessions were reduced to 45 minutes to fit the school period duration. Since exam periods overlapped with the IP schedule sometimes, we adapted the duration and delivery of some sessions,

particularly with the second implementation of IP that was done with the waitlist control group. The term "meetings" was used instead of "sessions" to avoid the psychological intervention connotation associated with "sessions." Group and pair work became more frequent, aligning with students' familiarity with this format and facilitating more elaborate small group discussions. Most sessions were also conducted in a circle to enhance engagement.

However, regardless of class participation and student engagement, privacy concerns necessitated that participants' parents complete multiple consent forms, leading to a reduction in overall participation in the IP study since many forms were returned incomplete or late. Another consequence of the adapted privacy policies was that materials were kept with the students individually, not with the team, which led to many materials getting lost and inconsistency in the reflection task incorporated at the end of each session. Table 2 highlights how these changes affected each session and all the content changes that were also applied.

**Table 2.** Adaptations made to the IP curriculum for the international school

Session	IP in Italian multicultural schools	Changes to IP for international school
Session 1	<p><b>Introduction</b></p> <p><b>Basic rules:</b> established together with the students to ensure a respectful and safe environment.</p> <p><b>Identity backpack:</b> used as a metaphor for identity, always with the person but its contents can change over time.</p> <p><b>"I am" activity:</b> participants</p>	<p><b>Basic rules:</b> Used preestablished IB ground rules of the school as a foundation for the IP sessions ground rules</p>

	<p>write down five identity characteristics and share one with their peers.</p> <p><b>Explanation of concepts:</b> personal identity, social identity, cultural identity.</p> <p><b>Reflections:</b> each student will write on own sheet reflections on the session.</p>	
Session 2	<p><b>Review</b> of the previous session.</p> <p><b>Stereotypes:</b> definition and explanation of the phenomenon using relevant examples.</p> <p><b>Video presentation:</b> there are more differences within groups than between groups.</p> <p><b>"Sorting" activity:</b> game of responding to six questions highlighting similarities and differences among students. Differences are continuous, not categorical.</p> <p><b>Homework assignment:</b> think about stereotypes associated with their cultural group. <b>Reflections.</b></p>	<p><b>"Sorting" activity:</b> game of responding to six questions highlighting similarities and differences among students. Asked students if they speak another language at home other than their native one</p> <p>Differences are continuous, not categorical.</p> <p><b>"I am... but I am not" activity:</b> 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.</p>
Session 3	<p><b>"I am... but I am not" activity:</b> 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.</p> <p><b>Discrimination:</b> definition, types, stereotypes vs discrimination;</p> <p><b>Stories from Our Past:</b> Five episodes of discrimination involving different cultural backgrounds in Italian history. Students must hypothesize the cultural origin of the protagonists.</p> <p><b>Anti-discrimination strategies:</b> a made-up story is read by students in order to think about helpful strategies. Use of the 5 stories to <b>create a sense of community</b> among the students.</p> <p><b>Reflections.</b></p>	<p><b>Discrimination:</b> definition, stereotypes vs discrimination types, including systemic discrimination as students had a solid foundation and understanding of the topic beforehand</p> <p><b>Stories from Our Past:</b> Three episodes of discrimination from different cultural backgrounds in Italian history. Students must hypothesize the cultural origin of the protagonists.</p> <p>Added an example of someone from Chinese origin to adapt to the demographics of the student population</p> <p>Each group was assigned a specific perspective to discuss from one of the episodes and then present to the whole group</p>
Session 4	<p><b>Review</b> of previous sessions;</p> <p><b>Definition of symbols, traditions, rites of passage and rituals;</b></p>	<p>Homework: think of 4 symbols of your culture(s), photograph them or find photographs of them;</p>

	<p><b>Linguistic-cultural mediation:</b> intervention of an external professional;</p> <p><b>“Language and identity”</b> activity: research and sharing in small groups idioms and proverbs from one's own culture of origin;</p> <p><b>Reflections</b></p>	
Session 5	<p><b>Review</b> of previous sessions;</p> <p>Homework: think of 4 symbols of your culture(s), photograph them or find photographs of them;</p> <p><b>Highlighting that there are many different types of families.</b></p> <p><b>“Relationships Trees”</b> activity: students create a list of influential people in their lives then draw a tree including the names from the list with the cultural origins</p> <p><b>Sharing</b> in small groups;</p> <p>Concept: each of us has a unique cultural background;</p> <p><b>Reflections.</b></p>	
Session 6	<p><b>Review</b> of previous sessions;</p> <p><b>Homework:</b> interview a person from your culture;</p> <p><b>“Cultural symbols and where to find them”</b> activity: student share photos of chosen cultural symbols in small groups;</p> <p><b>Reflections.</b></p>	<p><b>“Cultural symbols and where to find them”</b> activity: students share photos of chosen cultural symbols in small groups. Students could not send their photos to facilitators so many were not prepared</p> <p>Faces and personal photos were not allowed for privacy reasons</p>
Session 7	<p><b>Discussion</b> of the home interviews;</p> <p><b>Review</b> of cultural identity characteristics;</p> <p><b>Video viewing:</b> 8 people tell how it has changed over time. It is specified that there is no “right” or “wrong” path;</p> <p><b>Class discussion</b> on the reflections resulting from the vision of the video;</p> <p><b>Reflections.</b></p>	<p><b>Video viewing:</b> The video was cut to 10 minutes</p> <p>Interviews that were most relevant to the student population were kept</p> <p>Presentation of video in small parts to allow for continuous reflection and discussion</p> <p>Cultural interview task: students could not record the interview happening for privacy rules so many did not complete this task</p>
Session 8	<p>Preparation of the classroom with all the materials produced during the sessions;</p> <p><b>Cruciboo:</b> students form two teams that help each other guess key words</p>	<p>Students could not display material from previous sessions for time constraints, and also many either misplaced or did not have them due to privacy rules</p>



	from the IP sessions making up a crossword puzzle. <b>"The last word"</b> : the students write on a post-it a comment on the IP.	
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### 4.3 Participants

The IP took place in an international school in Padua, in the Veneto region. Specifically, the project was proposed to 4 classes (2 classes from grade 9, 2 classes from grade 11) which constituted in total 69 students. Of these, 42 returned informed consent signed by their parents, with a 60.87% participation rate. This thesis will consider the data of these students.

The participants' mean age was 15.45 years ( $SD = 1.23$ ), and 57.1% self-identified as girls, 40.5% as boys, and 2.4% as non-binary. While the majority of students were born in Italy (71.4%), their countries of origin varied. Among the 15 different countries of origin, 42.9% of participants had Italian mothers and fathers and 35.7% had Chinese parents. This is representative of the two largest cultural groups at the school. As regards parents' educational level, the majority were university graduates (45.2% of mothers and 42.9% of fathers), while 33.3% of mothers and 42.9% of fathers had obtained a high school diploma. 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 = 0-9).

### 4.4 Procedure

The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the School of Psychology at the University of Padova (protocol n. 222 b). Many meetings were conducted between the university and the school for creating and revising the convention ('convenzione'). Since the school had different guidelines and concerns regarding privacy protection from the previous public schools we had worked with, the convention had to be adapted as well as many of the project's activities.

Prior to the start of the project, we provided all recruited participants with 3 documents: one containing all the information on the processing of personal data, one brochure for consent to participate in the sessions and surveys and focus groups, and one document for consent to the processing of the minor's sensitive data.

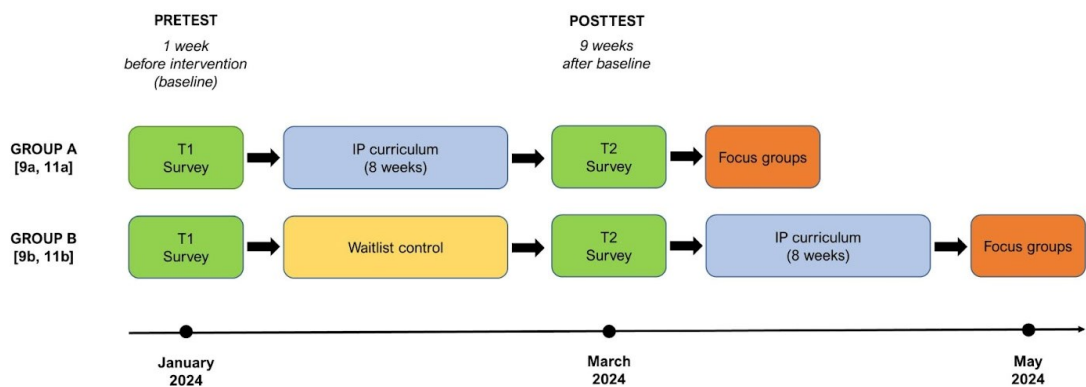
The information sheets were available in various languages (Italian, English, Spanish, German, Chinese, and Russian). Students were asked to take the forms home and to return them after approximately 1 week signed by their parents if they were interested in participating in the data collection. In addition to meetings held to explain the project to the school staff, an online meeting was organized where the scientific supervisor explained thoroughly the project's background and results from previous implementations to the parents.

After the legal and ethical phases were completed and the necessary adaptations took place, the project started in January 2024. The classrooms were randomly assigned to the intervention or waitlist control group with students unaware of their group placement. For ethical reasons, all students received the intervention, but those who were

assigned to the intervention group received it in the first cycle of the project (January-March), while their peers from classrooms in the control group were put on a waitlist and received the program in the second wave of sessions (April-May).

Data collection took place at two points: one week before the intervention (T1) and one week after the intervention (T2). The project’s timeline is presented schematically in Figure 2.

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



The sessions were led by two facilitators, including myself and another psychology intern, both fluent in English and having completed over ten hours of training. We introduced ourselves and the project to the students a week before administering the survey to them. After the survey completion, the 8 sessions, which were adapted by the team and lasted 45 minutes, of the first cycle began. Through weekly team meetings, the

facilitators were continuously supervised by the scientific supervisor, one senior researcher and one habilitated psychologist to monitor the IP's progress, address any rising obstacles and regularly adapt the sessions to meet student needs.

#### **4.5 Measures**

This study employed both quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (focus groups and open-ended questions) methods, as described below.

The following constructs were investigated: cultural identity, cross-group friendship, openness to diversity, cultural intelligence, ethnocultural empathy, well-being, cognitive flexibility, academic engagement and classroom cultural diversity climate. Questionnaires that were not available in Italian were translated by the project coordinators using the translation-back-translation method.

This thesis explores the constructs related to cultural identity dimensions (exploration and resolution) and ethnocultural empathy. Qualitative data was collected after students participated in the intervention in the form of focus groups and open-ended questions that were added to the T2 (post-test) survey.

##### *4.5.1 Socio-demographic characteristics*

In the survey, students were asked to provide personal information, including their age, gender, date of birth, grade level, languages spoken, years spent in Italy, and country of

birth, as well as details about their family, such as the number of family members, their parents' country of birth, educational level and occupation.

To determine the family's socioeconomic status (SES), the FAS was used (Boyce et al., 2006), which includes four items: "Does your family own a car?" (0, 1, more than 1); "Do you have your own room at home?" (no, yes); "How often do you go on vacation with your family in a year?" (never, 1 time, 2 times, more than 2 times); and "How many computers do you have at home?" (0, 1, 2, more than 2). The total SES score is the sum of the item scores: a score between 0 and 2 indicates low SES, 3 to 5 indicates medium SES, and 6 to 9 indicates high SES.

#### *4.5.2 Cultural identity*

To measure this construct, we used the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004), which is grounded in Tajfel's social identity theory (1981) and stage theories of self-formation (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980; Phinney, 1989). The EIS consists of 17 items assessing three aspects of cultural identity: exploration (7 items, e.g., "I have experienced things that reflect my culture, such as eating food, listening to music, and watching movies"); resolution (4 items, e.g., "I know what my culture of origin means to me"); and affirmation (6 items, e.g., "I dislike my culture of origin"). Participants responded on a 4-point Likert scale (from 1 = not at all to 4 = very much), with scores calculated by averaging the responses for each subscale. For the purposes of this thesis, we used the exploration and resolution subscales.

The psychometric properties of the EIS have been validated in multiple studies, confirming its reliability and validity across different cultural groups (Umaña-Taylor & Shin, 2007). In this study, the Cronbach's Alphas were .87 for the Exploration subscale and .90 for the Resolution subscale.

The following open-ended question was also added to the posttest survey to investigate students' perception of their cultural identity exploration after participating in the intervention, "After participating in the *Identity Project*, did you notice any changes in how much you are interested/participate in your cultural group and its traditions?"

#### *4.5.3 Ethnocultural Empathy*

The Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (SEE) developed by Wang et al. (2003) was used for measuring this construct. It was built specifically to measure the construct in adolescents and adults. It is made of 31 items and 4 subscales: Empathic Feeling and Expression, Empathic Perspective Taking, Acceptance of Cultural Differences, and Empathic Awareness. This thesis used and focused on the Empathic Feeling and Expression subscale, which consists of 15 items such as "I am touched by movies or books about discrimination issues faced by cultural groups other than my own" and "When I hear people make racist jokes, I tell them I am offended even though they are not referring to my cultural group". This subscale focuses on the emotional responses individuals have when witnessing or learning about the discrimination and emotions experienced by different cultures and their expression of that concern through words and actions.

Participants responded on range from 1 = not at all to 5 = extremely, with higher scores indicating more ethnocultural empathy.

The literature reports good psychometric properties for the Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy with culturally diverse samples (Albiero & Matricardi, 2013). In the current work, Cronbach's Alpha for the target subscale was .74.

#### *4.5.4 Focus groups*

A focus group is a data collection method where a group of 4 to 12 individuals engages in a discussion about a specific topic, generating qualitative data (Kitzinger, 2006; Powell et al., 1996). This method can be employed in the preliminary, ongoing, or concluding phases of a study to evaluate its direction, progress, or outcomes (Race et al., 1994). A moderator facilitates the session, explaining the purpose of the group, encouraging participation by asking open-ended questions, and helping participants feel at ease (Gibbs, 1997). Group discussions can be necessary to comprehend participants' perspectives and reflections on a project, and for this reason they are a useful investigation and assessment method that completes the results obtained through other tools (Albanesi, 2004).

A focus group was conducted with each class a few days after their participation in the last session of the 8 IP sessions. Participation was on a voluntary basis with the condition of having the full consent from parents returned at the start of the project. The focus groups were carried out during school hours and lasted approximately 45 minutes. My colleague and I, who had facilitated all the IP sessions, also led the focus groups.

Throughout the 4 focus groups, we alternated between the roles of moderating the discussion and taking notes of participants' responses. Students were asked the following open-ended 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?"*

Additionally, a focus group was held with two of the teachers that followed all the sessions of the IP to collect feedback about their opinions on the project. It also lasted approximately 45 minutes and included the following questions: *"What are your general comments and impressions about the curriculum?"*; *"How did you find students' participation?"*; *"Were there any references and/or activities related to the project themes in the curricular hours?"*; *"Regarding the topics covered in the sessions: is there anything you would add, remove, or modify? If yes, what and why?"*; *"Any issues encountered?"* For the purpose of this thesis, only the student data were analyzed.

#### **4.6 Data Analysis**

To answer our research questions, the following analyses were carried out:

- To evaluate the feasibility, salience and appropriateness of the intervention based on the students' perspectives, qualitative feedback obtained from the focus groups conducted with students who participated in the 8 sessions of the IP in both the first and second cycle was used.



- To assess the presence of potential differences between adolescents in the intervention vs. control group in the cultural identity dimensions (exploration and resolution), two univariate analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were conducted. The two subscale scores of exploration and resolution at T2 served separately as dependent variables, with the independent variable being the condition (intervention vs control), and exploration and resolution at T1 respectively as the control variables.
- To evaluate whether ethnocultural empathy moderated the expected intervention effects on the dimensions of cultural identity (exploration and resolution), we used the same model described above and added the interaction ethnocultural empathy x condition (intervention vs. control) to assess whether the condition impacted differently exploration and resolution, depending on the levels of ethnocultural empathy.

## CHAPTER 5

### RESULTS

#### 5.1 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, divided by intervention and control group.

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics of study variables by intervention and waitlist control group.

	Intervention group ( <i>n</i> = 20)			Control group ( <i>n</i> = 22)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Cultural identity						
Exploration, T1	3.09	.57	2.29-4.00	2.67	.67	1.14-3.86
Exploration, T2	2.94	.32	2.43-3.43	2.68	.50	1.29-3.57
Resolution, T1	3.15	.39	2.25-3.75	2.97	.85	1.00-4.00
Resolution, T2	3.24	.40	2.50-4.00	2.99	.59	1.25-4.00
Ethnocultural empathy, T1	3.02	.49	2.13-3.93	3.03	.51	2.13-4.07

## **5.2 Feasibility, salience, and appropriateness**

The first research question aimed to investigate the feasibility, salience and the appropriateness of the IP's adaptation and implementation in the context of the international school based on the students' perspectives.

Many factors made this project feasible, while some presented to be obstacles for the team to navigate. The changes in organization that were highlighted in the adaptation part of this thesis allowed for a successful implementation. The constant coordination between the IP team and the school staff, in addition to the initial meetings that were carried out with staff and parents of students at the school, contributed to the project's feasibility. Additionally, the intercultural environment of the school and the foundation of knowledge and openminded culture allowed for in-depth discussions and reflections on the activities carried out.

However, some challenges the team had to face was the timing. Because of how rigorous the curriculum at the school is and the overlap with exams and trips, some sessions had to be shortened, especially during the second wave of the IP (waitlist control group) where sessions had to be reduced to 5 instead of 8. Another concern was related to the specific privacy policies of the school and the multiple consent forms the students and their parents received and possibly to the way they were handled. Many students who wanted to partake in the study lost the opportunity because of incomplete or incorrectly returned consent forms. This also prevented many students who wanted to participate in

the focus groups from doing so. Ultimately, this issue also led to having a smaller sample than expected.

Regarding the salience of the intervention, the focus groups that we carried out with students from each class after the intervention highlighted the themes and activities they found relevant and important. Many students really appreciated session 2 that focused on stereotypes. They explained that it is a prominent topic that is seen everywhere nowadays. One student remarked that, *“It affected the first impressions one makes; when you see someone on the street, you think he/she might act a certain way, but it is what your mind says and not actual reality.”* Another session they found particularly relevant was the third that discussed discrimination, its different types, and real-life examples from different cultural groups’ experiences. To directly quote a student on its significance, *“Discrimination is so common; it is good to have more conversations about it because it is a hot topic in international schools because of the diverse students. However, teachers avoid talking about it.”* Some also expressed that the IP is the only time they felt their school recognized other cultures at the school, since they felt that cultural diversity and certain cultural groups were not celebrated.

Furthermore, students appreciated learning about other cultures through the different activities of the project. They found session 4 involving a linguistic-cultural mediator particularly interesting, since many had never heard of the role itself, but also because it enabled them to see their own culture from a different perspective. Many also enjoyed the cultural symbols activity (session 6), with a student elaborating that *“Our cultural identity is so complex. It was nice to see how people associate identity with*

*different symbols such as food and family, but it is also hard to take a picture of something so vague and abstract.*” Many also commented that the video shown in session 7 intrigued them, since it showed different personal stories and journeys, how other people integrate and try to fit into other cultures, and also how dynamic identity is. Some students resonated with a young adult in the video who did not identify with his culture when he was young, but then identified himself proudly when he grew up, as they realized they are not alone in having this experience. The examples also shared by students and facilitators contributed to an intercultural exchange and to learning new things. One student also highlighted, *“Facilitator (i.e., author of this thesis) helped me to identify with Arab cultures which we had very little or no contact with previously,”* referring to the examples and contributions to class discussions I made as a Lebanese facilitator.

Students also noted how the project helped them learn more about themselves and their own culture. Many admitted that, while they used to take this topic for granted, the relationship tree for example (session 5) helped them realize and visualize how diverse their family and friends were and how that influenced their identity in different ways. Many realized through this process that identity is not constrained. They used to think that cultural identity is just about where their parents are from, but after the project they recognized that it is also linked to what one thinks and feels; as a student illustrated, *“I’m half Venetian and half Sicilian, but I don’t feel that much Sicilian. And it is okay to not have those characteristics.”*

Moreover, students recognized that the project created a safe space where conversation evolved organically with the weeks. They mentioned that sessions were

*“interactive, inclusive, understanding of different points of view, and personal.”* They enjoyed interacting and participating as a whole class as it helped them bond and get to know each other better. They highlighted the importance of having time to reflect on such themes, which they recognized as something they previously lacked. While the concepts were not foreign to them, discussing them in groups and sharing personal moments together helped them appreciate these topics more. For some students, this also encouraged conversations at home with their parents, “We have talked to our parents about this - they think it is important to have this experience especially at an international school.” This allowed them to also discover new things about their parents’ own cultural identity journeys through activities like the cultural interview.

Concerning the project’s appropriateness, ninth grade students in the focus group remarked that it was a good level for them, not too hard nor too easy, while eleventh grade students added that they would like to go more in depth in certain topics. The activities were not too challenging and motivated reflection according to both groups, but most students in the eleventh grade found the backpack activity (session 1) to be too simplistic and suggested starting the project with something more interactive. This shows that the adaptations we made at the start after the initial focus groups with staff and the constant changes we made after meeting the students were mostly appropriate, but for the future, activities and topics could be explored in greater depth and complexity with older students.

Also going along with the students’ preferred modalities, most sessions were carried out in a circle, so students felt more at ease to participate. We also incorporated a lot of

group and pair work, Kahoot, and class discussions which were appreciated. While assignments were modified to fit their schedules and most were completed by everyone, students suggested changing them to class activities because of the homework load they already had. The focus groups were on a voluntary basis which the students appreciated, and many were happy to join to give their feedback on the project and how to ameliorate it. They would recommend implementing it in the next years as well especially for the ninth grade who have more free time than the eleventh graders.

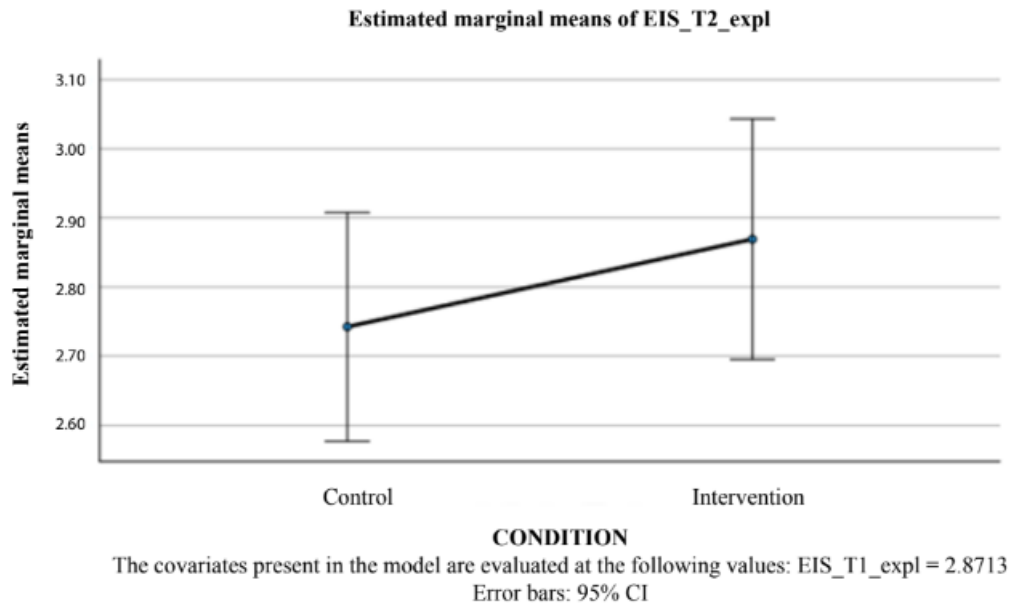
Lastly, the ethical guidelines were respected, and the privacy policies were taken very seriously by the IP team who were in constant contact with the school staff to ensure all terms of the agreement were aligned with the activities.

### **5.3 Cultural Identity**

The second research question addressed whether there were any differences between the intervention and control group in levels of identity exploration and resolution at post-test, after taking baseline levels of these variables into account.

Regarding cultural identity exploration, the univariate ANCOVA revealed that there was no significant effect of condition,  $F(1,39) = 1.08$ ,  $p = .305$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .03$ . As shown in Figure 3, a slightly higher score in this dimension was found at post-test (T2) among adolescents in the intervention group compared to their peers in the control group, but the difference did not reach statistical significance.

**Figure 3.** Cultural identity exploration in the intervention and control group at post-test  
( $n = 42$ )



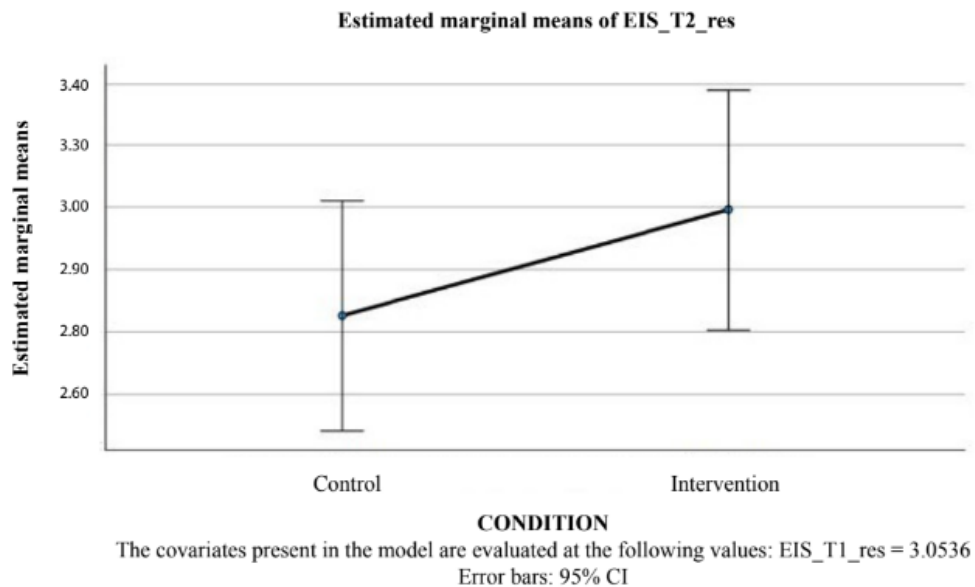
Regarding the qualitative feedback to the open-ended question, “*After participating in the Identity Project, did you notice any changes in how much you are interested/participate in your cultural group and its traditions?*”, the results were mixed with more than half of students responding positively. Many noted an increase in their interest in understanding and participating in their own cultural traditions, in order to build cultural awareness and identity. One student remarked that, “*I understand that it is really important to develop a cultural background both to enrich your own personality but also to become more conscious of other people's,*” while another elaborated the following, “*because I love Chinese traditional foods and river racing as it is tons of fun and actually helps me understand my culture better, along with that I get to interact with*



*people of my similar interest.*” Many students also asked their families to discover more about the traditions of their cultures of origin and highlighted their excitement in learning more about it. However, some students answered negatively because they were already interested and had already engaged in a lot of cultural activities. One student elaborated that *“I’ve always been interested in my cultural group, especially in Chinese school. We have many activities that taught us about our culture. So, my degree of curiosity and interest about my cultural group hasn’t changed.”* Other students explained that time constraints and family attitudes toward traditions contributed to a lack of participation or change in cultural interest.

When it comes to cultural identity resolution, univariate ANCOVA also revealed no significant effect of condition,  $F(1,39) = 1.64, p = .208, \eta^2_p = .04$ . Again, while Figure 4 shows a slightly higher score in this dimension at posttest (T2) among students in the intervention group compared to the control group, the effect was not statistically significant.

**Figure 4.** Cultural identity resolution in the intervention and control group at post-test  
( $n = 42$ )



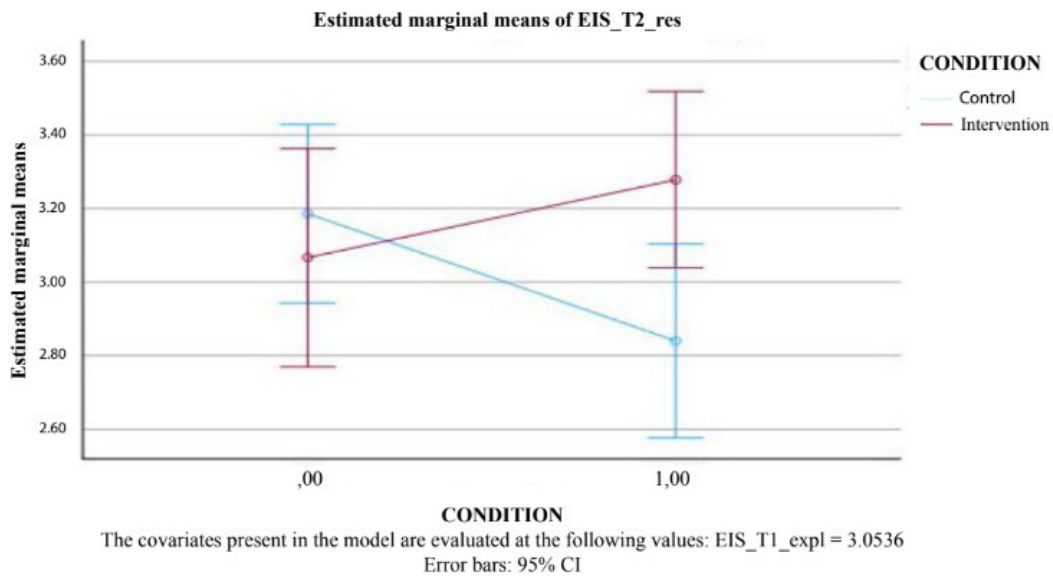
#### 5.4 Ethnocultural Empathy

The third research question aimed to investigate whether ethnocultural empathy moderated potential intervention effects on the dimensions of cultural identity (exploration and resolution).

Concerning cultural identity exploration, univariate ANCOVA revealed the presence of a marginally significant interaction effect of condition x ethnocultural empathy, with a large effect size,  $F(1, 37) = 4.03, p = .052, \eta^2_p = .10$ . As can be seen in Figure 5, at low levels of ethnocultural empathy, students in the two conditions reported similar levels of exploration at post-test, whereas at high levels of this variable, participants in the intervention (vs. waitlist control) group scored higher on exploration

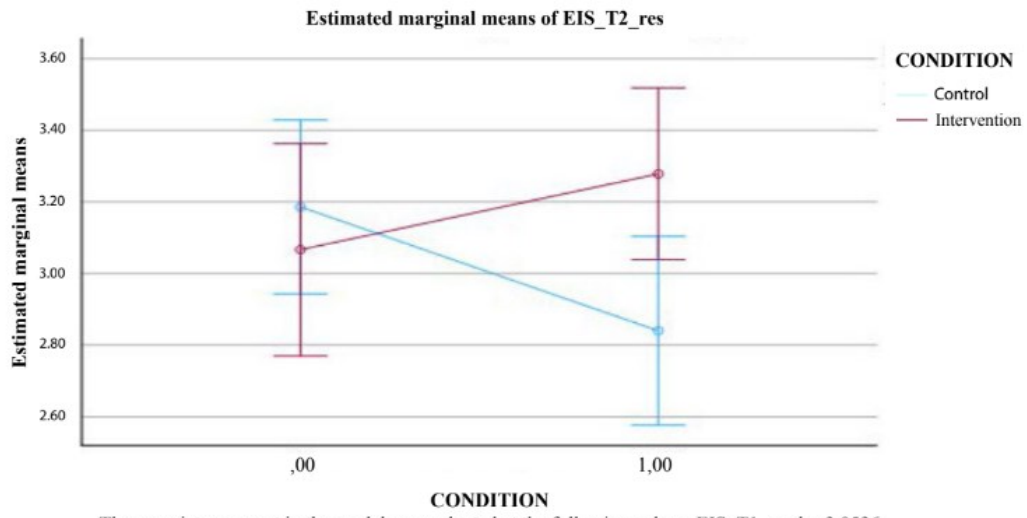
at post-test. Hence, the intervention was more beneficial (in terms of exploration) for those who initially had higher levels of ethnocultural empathy.

**Figure 5.** Interaction of condition and ethnocultural empathy on cultural identity exploration at post-test ( $n = 42$ )



Lastly, the ANCOVA did not show any significant interaction effects of condition x ethnocultural empathy on resolution, with  $F(1, 37) = 2.93, p = .095, \eta^2_p = .07$ . However, from a qualitative perspective, a similar trend can be observed (see Figure 6), i.e., at high levels of ethnocultural empathy, students in the intervention group scored higher on resolution than their less empathetic counterparts.

**Figure 6.** Interaction of condition and ethnocultural empathy on cultural identity resolution at post-test ( $n = 42$ )



## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION

#### 6.1 General Comment

The main purpose of this study was to evaluate whether a school-based intervention like the IP could prove beneficial in the distinctive setting of an international school once adapted. The IP, developed by Umaña-Taylor and Douglass (2017), aims to foster cultural identity among adolescents in multiethnic classrooms and thus was hypothesized to be valuable for TCKs and their peers. Overall, the findings suggest that while the analysis of survey data did not reveal any statistically significant effects, students who participated in the intervention demonstrated higher levels of cultural identity exploration and resolution compared to those in the control group, which was supported by their qualitative feedback. Furthermore, ethnocultural empathy emerged as a potential moderator, with high (vs. low) empathic participants in the intervention group showing greater engagement in identity exploration and resolution. Results of the pilot study that was presented in this thesis provide important information on how to modify and improve the IP for future implementations in international schools, not just in Itay but also across different countries.

Integrating quantitative methods (pre- and post-test questionnaires) and qualitative methods (focus groups and open-ended questions) was a valuable way of obtaining a

detailed and cohesive view of the results of the curriculum's adaptation and implementation in this unique context.

The first research question addressed feasibility, salience and appropriateness of the IP's adaptation and implementation to the context of an international school from the students' perspectives as it had been originally designed and applied to public multicultural schools. While multicultural schools incorporate diverse cultures into their curriculum to promote inclusivity (Banks & Banks, 2019), international schools aim to address the educational needs of a mobile global community, including expatriate families and the unique demands and challenges they face in terms of curricula, identity and relationships (Bunnell, 2014). Since the characteristics of these two contexts and populations are so distinct even within the same country, key to the project's feasibility were the ongoing coordination between the IP team and school staff and the organizational and content adaptations that resulted. Challenges included timing issues due to the demanding school curriculum and overlapping exams and trips, which is a common situation in private international schools (Öztabak, 2022) that led to the reduction of some sessions. Additionally, students struggled with the consent forms method which resulted in missed opportunities for some students to participate, impacting the focus groups and ultimately leading to a smaller sample size than expected with only 42 participants out of 69 total students.

Regarding the salience of the themes discussed, the students particularly appreciated the sessions discussing stereotypes and discrimination. Students voluntarily shared personal experiences with these topics, participated in class activities such as

perspective-taking, and engaged in classroom conversations on the impact of these themes and how to cope with them. This is consistent with the literature highlighting TCKs' unique identity and cultural development experiences as they exhibit cultural flexibility and adaptability (Limberg & Lambie, 2011) but struggle to connect with peer groups, social causes, or cultural anchors (Gilbert, 2008). It thus emphasizes the importance of addressing these issues in international schools (Öztabak, 2022) which was also highlighted in some students' comments on the prevalence of the topic to their lives.

However, students also suggested some points to improve the project for its recipients. Many commented that they would prefer to learn more about each classmate's culture and experience since that would help create a stronger class bond. They also all agreed that interactive activities are the best way to get the information and theory across, which aligns with the literature on successful school projects (Deslauriers et al., 2019).

When it comes to the appropriateness of the topics and activities carried out, the students expressed enjoying the classroom discussions and the opportunity to share their personal experiences and opinions on these themes. They found the project to be at a suitable level of difficulty. Sessions were held in a circle, and the use of group work, Kahoot, and discussions were appreciated. Students preferred class activities over homework due to their busy schedules. Many students were happy to volunteer for the focus groups which led to recommendations for future implementation, particularly for ninth graders. The IP team followed ethical guidelines and privacy policies, ensuring compliance with all agreements. In general, the difficulties encountered during the intervention mostly concerned schedule and time constraints.

The second question aimed to analyze potential changes in adolescents' exploration and resolution of cultural identity from pre-test to post-test after participating in the IP, as is consistent with the study by Umaña-Taylor et al. (2018a).

Analysis of survey data did not reveal any significant change in the exploration dimension of cultural identity (item example: "*I have participated in activities that have exposed me to my culture of origin*") regardless of the small increase that was observed in the scores. This result could be because of the very small sample, and the fact that many students had already participated in a lot of cultural events because of being TCKs or growing up in an international school (Miller et al., 2020). This was also highlighted in some students' responses to the open-ended question in the survey as one student answered, "*No because I think I already partake in enough things about my culture.*" However, more than half of the students did notice an increase in their interest in participating and discovering the traditions of their cultures which was reflected in the increased scores. Finally, another possibility to consider is that the adaptations that were made, such as shortening some materials and sessions, could have affected the sessions and their impact on students' exploration process.

While there were also slightly higher scores for identity resolution (item example: "*I know what my culture of origin means to me*") at post-test, the effect was not significant. However, this outcome is actually consistent with the research conducted by Umaña-Taylor et al. (2017, 2018b) and Juang (2020), which did not observe an increase in cultural identity resolution immediately after participating in the IP, but rather at the follow-up assessment (i.e., 6 weeks post-test). Indeed, according to the theoretical



foundation of the IP, such an increase is expected to manifest over the long term due to the introspective processes required to achieve clarity in one's cultural identity, which may take more time (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2017, 2018b). Additionally, Umaña-Taylor et al. (2017, 2018b) suggest a "chain effect," where increased exploration of cultural identity during the post-test period, which unfortunately was not substantial in this study, leads to greater identity clarity and resolution at a later stage, usually tested in a follow-up assessment five weeks after the project. This was however supported by qualitative feedback gathered from the students during focus groups and through open-ended responses, where they highlighted a newfound recognition of the importance of their cultural backgrounds and an increased acceptance of their feelings toward it, as a student remarked, *"The value of this experience is that it sparked reflection on themes of cultural identity but also about what it is to us. Where do we put ourselves on the spectrum of different identities? It is important for us to take the time to think about this."*

The third question aimed to explore the possible moderating effect of ethnocultural empathy (item example: *"When I hear people make racist jokes, I tell them I am offended even though they are not referring to my cultural group"*) on the expected effects of the IP on the cultural identity dimensions. Regarding identity exploration, there was some evidence for moderation indicating that pre-existing high levels of ethnocultural empathy boost intervention effects on exploration. This is in line with the literature on the links between empathy and adolescents' flexible self-concept and ease in forming connections and embracing diverse identities (Gerson & Neilson, 2014). Although further research is needed to corroborate this finding, it is possible that adolescents who are more

ethnoculturally empathic tend to be more open and receptive to activities that discuss cultural themes, making them more likely to engage in exploring and reflecting on their cultural roots. In relation to resolution, a similar trend was found, albeit not achieving statistical significance. The rise in scores among students with stronger ethnocultural empathy may be attributed to their greater adaptability in shaping their personal narratives, making them more likely to embrace new insights and reflections (McAdams, 2001), ultimately achieving clarity in their cultural identity development.

However, it should be noted that results are preliminary and require further investigation with larger samples using randomized controlled trials.

## **6.2 Limitations**

The current study has several limitations that must be taken into consideration when interpreting its results.

The first limitation is the small sample size. This was because it was hard to find a period to incorporate the IP in it as the students at the target school had a very full schedule. Looking at the exams and curriculum pressure, it seemed that the ninth and eleven graders were the most suitable for participating. While that in itself made a small sample of 69 students, additional obstacles reduced it to a total of 42 participants. Students were handed 3 consent documents and asked to return them fully and correctly signed by parents in one week exactly to be able to partake in the first survey and thus in the project. However, while only very few parents did not consent, many students struggled to return their positively signed forms fully or on time. Future studies might use a different way of

organizing the consent process, particularly making sure to provide students with more time to return the forms and reducing the number of documents as many got lost.

Another limitation concerns not taking special consideration of the population that received the intervention. Indeed, most of the students were either TCKs or native students who grew up around TCKs in all their school career, as the school comprises both primary and secondary school. While the need for programs such as the IP for students, especially TCKs, has been highlighted (Miller et al., 2020), it is likely that their existent level of cultural exposure and awareness was already high. Thus, it could be beneficial to determine their initial state, and on that basis go deeper and more personal in the themes and activities, as suggested by some students from the focus group. Additionally, the nationality and resident status of the students, whether TCKs, permanent immigrants or natives, could be relevant differentiating factors to take into account.

Furthermore, the exclusive use of self-report tools, which could be influenced by social desirability, boredom and fatigue in adolescents, is another limitation of the study. Some students had remarked during the questionnaire administration and later during the focus groups that the surveys were too long or repetitive, which led some of them to fill them out quickly, inattentively or inaccurately. Future studies might also incorporate parental reports or teacher inputs, particularly from the teachers who followed the intervention or in the future might facilitate it themselves.

Another limitation is related to the pre- and post-test experimental design which lacks a further follow-up assessment, such as the one carried out 6 weeks after the

project's completion in the US (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018b). Future applications of the study could organize and schedule this extra administration of the survey in order to highlight the changes that occur once adolescents have taken the time and space for introspection and exploration.

Finally, the specific context of this school can be a limitation to the study results' generalizability. Indeed, each private international school presents a very unique context. While they might share unified academic curricula such as the IB and its values (ISC, 2020), they are composed of a very diverse population of staff and students. The mixture of local and foreign individuals, customs, and regulations all make for a very particular situation that must be taken into consideration with every future adaptation and implementation of the project as well as interpretation of its results.

### **6.3 Conclusions and applied implications**

With the rise of globalization and the notion of a mobile international way of living and working, it seems pertinent to ensure that adolescents are capable of adjusting to diverse climates and forming stable identities through it all. While international schools can provide a familiar unified academic experience, many of them seem to lack programs that address the psychosocial difficulties adolescents face, either from moving around a lot or simply growing up in a multicultural environment without the tools to explore their identities (Mahoney & Barron, 2020).

With these factors in mind, the IP was adapted and implemented in an international private school in Italy with the aim of promoting cultural identity and thus psychosocial wellbeing in its adolescents. Overall, despite the pilot study not resulting in all the significant hypothesized changes, feasibility, acceptability and appropriateness assessed based on the students' perspectives were substantially confirmed, and the activities were highly appreciated by the students. Students at the school highlighted that such a project should be included and part of their international school. They commented on the lack of programs discussing cultural diversity and identity, the lack of space to express themselves, and the underrepresentation of diverse cultures in school holidays and celebrations.

Future implementations of the project at international schools should aim for a greater number of participants for generalizable results. They should take into account the particular context of each school and its students. Additionally, in order to fill the gap of psychosocial projects addressing these themes in international schools, teachers can be trained in facilitating the project to incorporate it as part of the school curriculum and ultimately make it an open prolonged conversation that seeps into different class subjects and classroom climates (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2024).

It would also be interesting to examine how fostering ethnocultural empathy from a younger age can lead to a facilitated cultural identity developmental process and ultimately better psychosocial well-being. Working on ethnocultural empathy seems to be a promising avenue for cultural identity formation, particularly in multicultural and international contexts. Encouraging adolescents to deeply understand and connect with

people from diverse backgrounds enhances their flexibility in engaging with different cultural experiences and forming a sense of belonging (Gerson & Neilson, 2014). This can help adolescents explore their cultural heritage more thoroughly and integrate diverse perspectives into their personal identity which supports a more nuanced and inclusive sense of self.

In conclusion, this project provided a safe open space for students to reflect and express their personal experiences with culture and identity. They discussed stereotypes that bothered them, explored discrimination stories from different perspectives, and discovered new roles and professions in the field. They also got to explore their diverse relationship trees and symbols that made up their cultures as well as their classmates'. They got to know themselves and their classmates a bit better, and that is something they highly appreciated. This project managed to open a conversation for these students, with the goal of providing them with self-reflection and empathy tools that would allow them to celebrate the cultural diversity around and within them.

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