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Reciprocity among teachers from different language and cultural backgrounds
A pivotal strategy to develop an interculturally sensitive attitude in education professionals

abstract

One of the most crucial competences required to face our modern multicultural society is the capacity to establish a fruitful relationship with otherness, especially when the other is from a different cultural background and when intercultural dialogue seems to be difficult. This implies that education has to provide the young generations with the right instruments to interact with diversity, understand the motivations behind differences in behaviour, thoughts and feelings and learn to govern the emotional dimensions of fear and anxiety towards otherness.
In this paper reciprocity is illustrated in its theoretical frame. In adition to this, its role between education professionals from different cultural background is investigated through the analysis of some data collected after an international seminar. On the basis of this analysis and the scientific literature developed on the construct of reciprocity, it seems reasonable to conceive of it as a strategy to generate teachers' intercultural sensitivity and, consequently, their intercultural approach to education.

Keywords reciprocity, intercultural dialogue, intercultural competence, Pestalozzi Programme

MANCA ABSTRACT IN ITALIANO

1. New social and economical contexts demanding new competences

The new social and economical contexts which the world is now facing imply important changes in the educational field. This is due to the competences the new scenarios are demanding of the new millennium citizens in order to meet the challenges posed by complexity. It is not only a problem of a different lenght of time over which learning should take place, namely all through a life instead of just during one's own formal education within the school system, and it is not simply a problem of acquiring additional information or instrumental skills, just because in the name of flexibility we are all expected to be able to cover positions different from the ones we have been used to cover for years. The many social and economical changes of the past decades have caused a significant remodelling of the object of our learning, namely the concept of knowledge itself, which comes to be, as Bateson (1972) put it a few years ago, the aware permanent restructuring of an individual's knowkedge. As a consequence, knowledge does no longer identify itself with a sum of pieces of information, but with an individual's ability to recombine one's own subjective knowlege in the light of the changeable objective conditions of reality. Today, these changeable conditions also include more frequent international contacts due to immigration movements as well as to net-based communities created across frontiers through technological devices. As these conditions expose individuals to different languages and cultures, the ability to achieve deep mutual understanding and cooperation becomes one of the competences of the utmost importance, if peace and harmonious relationships between individuals and within societies are to be achieved. Consequently, from now on, educational agencies are asked to face a further challenge which consists in the teaching and the further growth of the individual's relational competences necessary both to understand and respect people from other cultures and religions, and to encourage the development of the sense of a global community.

These considerations lead us to reflect over the role of alterity in one's own learning processes, as the time has come to become fully aware of how otherness is crucial for one's own learning. The dynamic perspective of knowledge already mentioned above may well be applied to the construct of learning, which is the result of a process of interaction between the self and otherness (Mezirow, 1991). Thus, in terms of educational aims, in order to develop social competences required to give rise to a positive fruitful relationship with alterity *"it is a matter of training the individual to look for authentic communication with otherness and implementing educational strategies aimed at establishing wefts of positive interdependence between individuals"* (Raffaghelli, J., Richieri, C., in press)[1].

All that being stated, it is indisputable that nowadays adults'as well as young generations' new educational needs coincide with two main abilities, the first consisting in learning throughout their whole life, including informal and non-formal situations, and adjusting their competences to the specific contexts determined by socio-economical conditions, the second consisting in developing suitable instruments to establish a positive relationship with otherness.

1 Raffaghelli, J. Richieri, C. (in press) A classroom with a view Networked Learning strategies to promote intercultural education, In Lone Dirckinck-Holmfeld, Vivien Hodgson, David McConnell (Eds) *Exploring the Theory, Pedagogy and Practice of Networked Learning, London: Springer*

It is important to underline how these two competences are intimately linked to each other, as learning is not a solitary activity at all, and by no means, prescinds from the others. On the contrary, it inevitably implies them. Consequently, the pursuing of learning entails cultivating fruitful relationships with other people, which can become really beneficial when they are reciprocity-based since the two parties can mutually gain by exchanging knowledge. Moreover, to be able to foster reciprocal relations, apart from enhancing the development of the bidirectional transfer of knowledge (Zamagni, 1997), satisfies a social need as it helps both parties dismiss autoreferential inclinations and admit the limits of oneness.

2. Teachers can be helped

What is the teachers' role in this new educational context? They are expected to undergo an important, vital change which entails the capacity to shift the focus of their educational action from the curriculum content to transdisciplinary citizenship competences. Becoming less concerned about the quantity of what is taught leaves time and room for quality teaching interested both in engendering in the student motivation for and commitment towards further education, as well as in caring about the relationships within the class group and between the class and what is outside of it.

All this is hard work but we are convinced that having direct experience as a teacher of the contexts our students might be exposed to is extremely helpful in order to understand the emotions, the motivations, the difficulties implied in their leaning processes.

Sometimes anectodes really help understand the very essence of what we mean. Thanks to a flash of insight, they help reveal a truth which is more general than the brief tale itself. This is the reason why now I'd like to tell a little story which will reveal how important our learning experiences are in order to modulate out teaching practice.

One day a young woman from Moldova, whom I know quite well, asked me if a friend of hers could call me to have some information about the Italian school system, as her daughter was going to move to Italy and join her. I said yes, so a few days after the lady called me and I tried to help her answering her questions. The next time I met the young woman, I was congratulated on since my Italian, according to her friend's opinion, was so clear that I had been able to make myself understood very well. Her final comment sounded like this: *"My friend said that the way you speak reveals that you are a language teacher!"* I immediately realized that the way I had conveyed the information needed was peculiar to a person who had had the experience of speaking a foreign language while talking to a native speaker. Infact, I had spoken clearly and slowly, bearing in mind that I was communicating to a foreigner. I had spontaneously adapted my language to the other person's, like in a Tai Chi Chuan armonic movement of two bodies which reshape themselves according to each other's motion. In other words, my past experience as a foreign language learner had proved significant in modelling my approach towards a person with a lower level of language competence in Italian.

The idea that has just been pointed out by means of an anectode became one of the principles on which a teacher training model was developed at St Martin's

College (UK)[2], according to which the future foreign language teachers, apart from receiving specific training in language teaching, are asked to do a two-week course of Italian. The possibility of playing the role of the leaner in a formal educational context is meant to induce teachers'awareness of learning processes by undergoing the learning operations a student may experience, and by reflecting over teaching practices' good and bad points and their didactic implications. This approach to teacher training procedures shows how the link between personal experience and reflection over it is highly considered as a source of awareness which becomes strategical when the trainees start facing a real classroom context.

All this being stated, we can conclude that the more the teachers can be exposed to the learning experiences their students may have, the deeper their insight into learning emotional and relational dimensions can become. This conclusion suggests, for example, that everything possible should be done to promote teachers' participation in in-service seminars and workshops, especially international ones, in order to let them experience how the self and otherness interact in relation to lifelong learning, how reciprocity-based relations can help, what intercultural dialogue is, what it entails and what it can generate.

3. What is reciprocity?

We should now recall the definition of reciprocity, as we are convinced that it is a key generative construct in terms of learning acquisition and relationship with otherness.

Trying to understand what reciprocity is, implies to cover the notion of the gift from Mauss's perspective. Infact Mauss (1950), far from explaining the notion of the gift as what is responsible for establishing an asymmetrical relationship between two individuals as Derrida (1996) did, considers it as a sort of delayed exchange. Each of the three phases of the exchange, in which the gift is given, accepted and returned, has a feature of necessity, when it is given to establish an alliance, when it is accepted to show the pleasure to establish a social tie, and finally when it is given back to keep the tie alive. This feature of necessity is consistent with Mauss's functional vision of the gift, based on his ethnographic studies of primitive cultures, according to which the gift is not free, its aim being to establish or maitain a friendly relationship. Thus, the gift can be considered a political act (Caillé, 1998).

Yet, in our modern western society the gift is often conceived of as free and unidirectional. This is due to the individual's propensity for interpersonal relationship models independent from the obligation category, which may raise the issue of Mauss's theory's up-to-dateness. Godbout (2004) does not explain the issue in terms of a diachronic vision, opposing a modern model to an ancient one, rather than in terms of motivation, that is to say the individual's willingness to seek for a close tie with another person through an act of donation.

2 *European Profile for Language Teacher Education - Final Report*, September 2004, p. 23. <http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lang/doc/profile_en.pdf>. See Richieri, C. (2007). "Spunti per lo sviluppo professionale del professore di lingue". In Margiotta, U., Porrotto, G. (a cura di). *I° Rapporto sulla Ricerca Educativa e Formativa in Italia*. Venezia: Mazzanti, pp. 211-231. On 1 August 2007 St. Martin's College merged with other istitutions to form the University of Cumbria.

Moreover, the nature of the tie affects the way of receiving and returning the gift: the intensity of the relationship allows the person who receives the gift not to perceive the debt towards the giver, with the result that, for the individuals involved in the relationship, there is no difference between giving and returning. The debt becomes the expression of liberty because each individual involved in the relationship does not feel the need to return the gift immediately, on the contrary, one becomes convinced that he/she will never be able to estinguish it, and the experience of this condition brings about pleasure and the awareness of reciprocal delightsome and appreciated dependence (Godbout, 1998).

In the gift relationship the equivalence principle is not given because one does not keep the accounts of what has been received, nor is ever returned the same thing. On the contrary, it is the receiver's state of need together with the giver's resouces at his/her disposal that regulate the gift circulation and establish the value of the exchanged gifts (Gouldner, 1960).

In addition to these principles, studying reciprocity also entails considering the dangers intrinsic to gifts exchange. Infact, it seems that the degree of solidity of the receiver's identity represents a significant variable which can determine the success or the failure of the gift. This is due to the fact that a frail identity is inclined to perceive the gift as a threat, and for this reason attitudes of resistance are developed which are aimed at protecting oneself against the giver's power (Godbout, 1998; Pouillon, 1978). On the other hand, even the giver is exposed to a danger, as he/she can be exploited by the receiver (Gouldner, 1960). This may happen when the gift is given out of altruism, that is to say when it is not a matter of a circulating gift. On the contrary, when the giver and the receiver cultivate reciprocity, the giver's exploitation is neutralised because the action of giving back the gift received, apart from the form it will assume when returned, cancels the negative effects induced by the unidirectional gift.

The exploitation syndrome was also studied by Axelrod (1984), who identified the germinal traits of cooperation in the *Tit for Tat* strategy. The *Tit for Tat* strategy is a form of reciprocity which is both positive and negative as the individual *"cooperates on the first move and then does whatever the other player did on the previous move"* (p. 20). This means that, if the other defects, after a first cooperative interaction, the defection is returned and then cooperation starts again. Thus, also in Axelrod's theoretical framework, generosity is aimed at establishing and spreading cooperation, in this manner showing its high social value as it is able to train individuals to elicit cooperation through the control of defection escalation.

Therefore, after taking into account both Mauss's gift theory and Axelrod's cooperation theory, the construct of reciprocity can be declined as follows:

- you do not donate in order to receive, but to get the other to donate in turn;
- reciprocity is not disinterested, thus it can be generated in unfavourable contexts;
- reciprocity does not imply an equivalent exchange of goods, nor immediate return;
- the exchange of goods is governed by the principle of the receiver's need and the principle of the giver's availability of goods;
- reciprocity neutralises the danger of exploitation which is intrinsic to a unidirectional gift;
- the degree of solidity of the individual's identity affects the way the gift is received;
- reciprocity can be taught and learned.

4. How can reciprocity help?

The exchanges which take place between individuals, apart from belonging to the category of objects, can also include the circulation of knowledge and ideas. From this perspective, reciprocity may well be considered a multi-dimensional generative device affecting the education of both the self and otherness. As table 1 shows, reciprocity can act on dimensions related to the relational context in which work groups operate, namely the search for help, the telling of experiences, the exchanges of roles, the start of an interaction, negotiation[3].

While cultivating reciprocity, individuals assume mutual care on the basis of an almost unperceived distinction between giving and receiving. Yet, in order that the exchange-based relationship may keep on existing, it is necessary that the individuals continuously attain what will possibly be reciprocated. This implies that both parties feel the need to increase their knowledge and abilities since these will be used as exchange equivalent, as a counter-gift the individual will be able to offer at the right moment. This cultivation of the self, originated by the prospect of future exchanges, brings about a feeling of well-being because the individual is certain that he/she can govern the gifts flow, which means being able to reciprocate the gift received. Moreover, this very cultivation of the self implemented with the prospect of future exchanges helps the individual win one's bashfulness to look for other people's help when needed. Thus, the care of the self gets a greater value because it not only substantiates the individual's developlment as an end in itself, but produces other people's education. In other words, having this impacts, reciprocity can be conceived of as a device bringing about positive social outcomes.

It is not only a matter of knowledge circulation, but also of exposition of the self to existential trasformation. Thanks to mutual exchange, individuals are induced to abandon individuality and autoreferential inclinations, give a special value to differences which identify individuals, understand different analysis categories, admit the limits of oneness and discover themselves through otherness.

Thus, reciprocity becomes an intervention on the relation, not on the other individual. Consequently, there is no exploitation but the research of the conditions which can determine the beginning, or the maintenance, of a certain kind of relationship. What is most fascinating is that the subjects who cultivare such a relationship do not win the one over the other, but the one and the other discover that they are both winners thanks to the gains they are able to offer each other in order to develop one's own potentialities and refine one's own differences. The relationship, since it is based on exchange, does not produce dependence but interdependence which, paradoxically, is aimed at the subject's autonomy. The contradiction is only apparent as interdependence is not the ultimate end of education, but the medium, the bridge to get to know the other and take advantage of the established relationship.

3 The table shows part of the results of a research undertaken to elaborate a doctoral thesis in Cognitive and Educational Sciences (Richieri C., *Autoformazione di reciprocità*, Ca' Foscari University, Venice, 2009).

Dimensions	How can learning benefit from reciprocity?
Searching for help	Reciprocity promotes individual competences and gives meaning to one's own learning which becomes care of one's self as well as of the others' Reciprocity consolidates the individual's awareness of the necessity of the other's existence Reciprocity keeps the work group alive because feeds the osmosis between inside and outside the group by means of helping relationship
Telling experiences	Reciprocity trains the subject to focus the form of his/her narration Reciprocity trains the listener for active listening and reflexivity (which allows the individual to detect the learning opportunities offered by the context) Reciprocity promotes self-knowledge through the reading of oneself in the other and with the other, by means of the adoption of different perspectives (self-reflective learning) helping to demolish the wall which everyone builds up to defend one's own identity
Exchanging roles	Reciprocity promotes responsibility as well as increased self-esteem by offering the opportunity to measuring oneself against new challenges and inducing new learning (which can be instrumental, dialectical and relational) Reciprocity promotes the admission of the limits of oneness Reciprocity promotes the adoption of different points of view
Starting an interaction to: a. ask for opinion b. offer formative opportunities c. facilitate mutual understanding	Reciprocity trains the subject to understand one's own cognitive structure Reciprocity helps recognize one's own contribution to the group work and promotes self-appreciation Reciprocity promotes the transformation of one's own relational models by means of the the use of appropriate forms of communication
Negotiating	Reciprocity increses the capacity to participate through one's willingness to listen and the continuous monitoring of mutual understanding Reciprocity promotes the capacity to exchange Reciprocity promotes the evolution of identity through the connection with otherness

Table 1. The role of reciprocity in learning

5. The European dimension of teachers' professional development: the Pestalozzi Programme

The reciprocity-based relational model presented above thoroughly suits Europe's educational guidelines which strongly recommend cooperation (which, as we have already seen in the previous paragraph, can develop when and where exchange between individuals takes place)[4] and mutuality[5]. This position harmonises with the aim the member states are asked to pursue, namely an intercultural society fully respectful of each individual's identity, as illustrated in *A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism*, which is a recommendation of the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions:

> The European Union is founded on 'unity in diversity': diversity of cultures, customs and beliefs – and of languages […]. It is this diversity that makes the European Union what it is: not a 'melting pot' in which differences are rendered down, but a common home in which diversity is celebrated, and where our many mother tongues are a source of wealth and a bridge to greater solidarity and mutual understanding[6].

As Balboni (2006c) points out, these statements show strong dissociation from the American *melting pot* model where differences cohabit but are not supposed to provoke any kind of mutual transformation. On the contrary, an intercultural society is here foretold, based on mutual understanding and reciprocal contamination. With this aim to realize, Europe has been promoting both multilingualism[7] and mobility for years[8] and, as a result of this political decision, Euro-

4 Cresson E., *White Paper on Education and Training. Teaching and Learning towards the Learning Society*, 1995, p. 14, http://europa.eu/documents/comm/white_papers/pdf/com95_590_en.pdf (retrived 10/11/2010). Buchberger F., Campos B. P., Kallós D., Stephenson J. (Eds.), *Green Paper on Teacher Education in Europe. High Quality Teacher Education for High Quality Education and Training*, TNEE, Umeå (Sweden) 1998, Part IV, p. 50, http://tntee.umu.se/publications/greenpaper.html (retrived 10/11/2010). *Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications*, version 15/03/2005, pp. 3, 6, http://www.etuce.homestead.com/News/June2005/principles_en.pdf (retrived 10/11/2010). In this last document the terms used are *collaborate* and *collaborative* which, here, we assimilate to *cooperate* and *cooperative*. The difference between the two is discussed in Richieri (2008), p. 373.

5 *European Profile for Language Teacher Education - A Frame of Reference- Final Report*, September 2004. The document, written by Michael Kelly, Michael Grenfell, Rebecca Allan, Christine Kriza and William McEvoy, pp. 44, 88, 123, http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lang/doc/profile_en.pdf (retrived 10/11/2010). *Comunication from the Commission to the Council and to the European Parliament*, COM (2006) 481 final, pp. 2, 11, http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/comm481_en.pdf (retrived 10/11/2010).

6 *Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism*, 22-11-2005, http://eurlex.europa.eu/smartapi/cgi/sga_doc?smartapi!celexplus!prod!DocNumber&lg=en&type_doc=COMfinal&an_doc=2005&nu_doc=596 (retrived 10/11/2010). Quoted by Balboni (2006c), p.36.

7 In *A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism*, multilingualism is conceived of as twofold: personal ("*a person's ability to use several languages*") and social ("*the co-existence of different language communities in one geographical area*"). Quoted by Balboni (2006c).

8 See Mezzadri (2006) for references to Europe's promotion of communicative competences in foreign languages and mutual understanding among European countries.

pean students and teachers[9] are being offered interesting opportunities of studying abroad. Thus, they can develop both their communicative competence in a foreign language and their intercultural communicative competence which, in addition to the knowledge of one's own culture as well as of the one of the country which is being approached, implies relational competences and specific attitudes such as curiosity and openess towards the others (Byram, 1997)[10].

The Pestalozzi Programme is one of many opportunities European education professionals are offered for their professional development. The programme has been developed by the Council of Europe "*to respond to the challenges of the Third Summit of Heads of State and Government of 2005. At this summit leaders called for a concerted effort by the Council of Europe to ensure that its values of respect of human rights, democracy and rule of law are placed at the centre of our education systems. They emphasised the key role of teacher education in this process*".[11] For this reason, the Pestalozzi Programme works on such themes as children's rights, the values of democracy, equality, democratic citizenship, the prevention of violence and crimes against humanity. In such a context, teachers become acquainted with the work of the Council of Europe in the field of education, are involved in a multicultural experience, share information, ideas and teaching material with colleagues from other countries and, then, act their role of multiplier in informing their colleagues.

As I was given the opportunity to taking part into the three-day seminar *School culture(s) – values – identities* (related to the Council of Europe Projects *The intercultural dimension of religious diversity* and *Intercultural education and exchanges*)[12], I thought that might be an interesting chance of investigating the participants' attitudes and feelings concerning their idea of reciprocity as a strategy to develop interculturally sensitive attitude in education professionals.

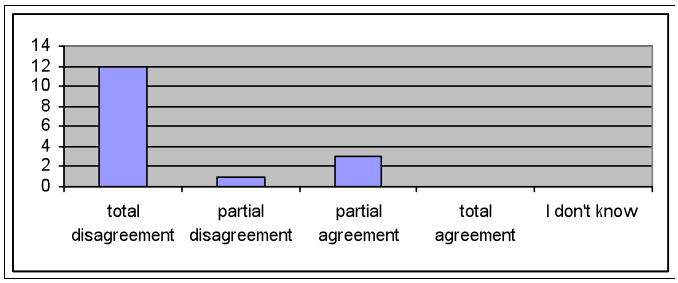
The data which are presented and analysed in the following paragraph were collected through a multiple choice questionnaire (Likert scale) whose last question was an open one in order to try to collect a few qualitative data. The participants were told a questionnaire about reciprocity would be administered at the end of the seminar. It was decided to give this information before the start of the seminar because it was thought that the participants would be able to activate their awareness throughout the three-day seminar and their answers would be more relevant thanks to their focused attention on the exchanges taking place in the group.

6. Teachers reflecting over the construct of reciprocity: data presentation and analysis

The group of education professionals who answered the questionnaire was formed by twenty people, nine from the host country, Austria, and eleven from other countries in – or not-yet-in – the European Community: Germany (1), Italy

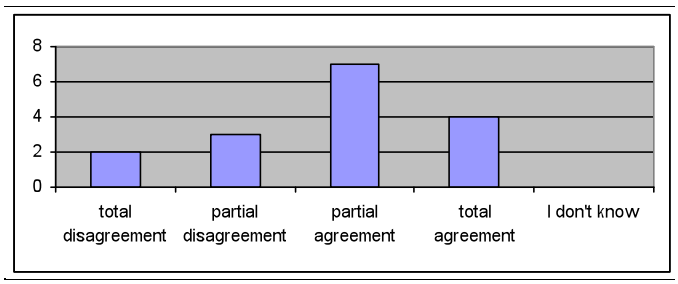
9 See De Matteis, Guazzieri (2007) for teacher training experiences abroad.
10 Quoted by Spinelli (2006).
11 http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/pestalozzi/About_us_en.asp (retrived 10/11/2010).
12 The seminar took place from 3rd to 5th October 2010 at Bildungshaus Schloss Puchberg, Wels (Austria).

(2), Norway (1), Portugal (1), Cyprus (5), and Turkey (1). The questionnaire was answered within the prescribed time by seventeen out of twenty members[13]. The researcher, who was one of the members of the group, did not answer the questionnaire. Two out of twenty were headteachers, being the others foreign language teachers in a secondary school or all-subjects teachers in a primary school. The consequence of this was that communication took place without much difficulty, being everybody's competence in English rather high. After inquiring (through item 1) about this aspect of communication, which was fundamental for reciprocity to establish and develop, a set of other questions were asked to investigate about the gains each member of the group perceived as the results of being exposed to an enlarged cultural context.

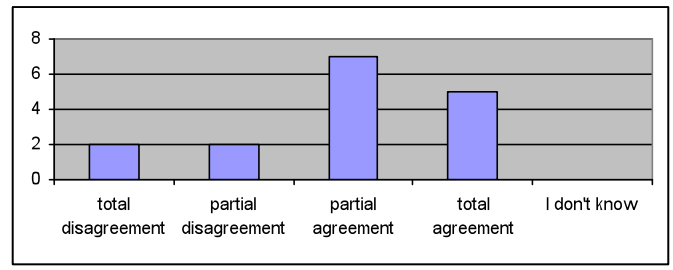


1. It was difficult to understand each other because of the language

As a result of the time spent together exchanging opinions, practices, and knowledge, some gains were perceived in the dimension of educational values (item 2), some previous ideas about other cultures underwent some kind of transformation (item 3), and some useful learning took place within the group (item 4).

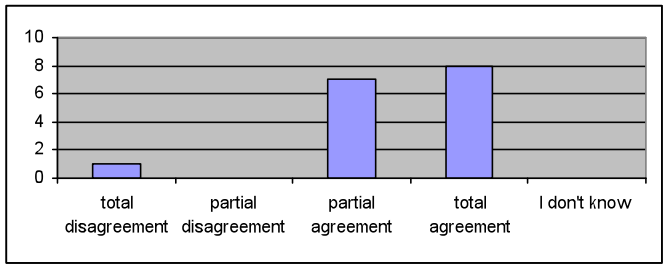


2. After the workshop you perceived some transformation in your own educational values



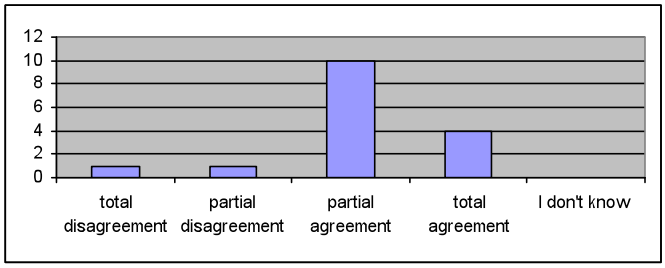
3. After the workshop you perceived some transformation in the ideas you used to have about other cultures different from your own.

13 I would like to thank all the colleagues met in Wels for taking part in this research by answering the questionnaire. Many thanks also to Juliana Raffaghelli for her advice and assistance in the administation of the questionnaire.

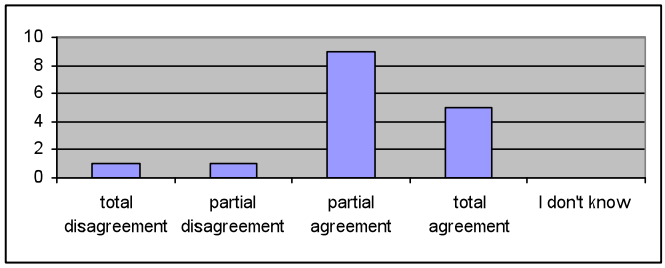


4. You could benefit from the experience in Wels because you learnt something new from the others which will be useful to you as a teacher/headmaster.

Other two questions were conceived of with the aim of understanding the subjects' awareness of the value of the experience they were having. Infact, by being part of an international work group, they were supposed to have the opportunity of understanding what being exposed to an intercultural educational context means and what this awareness implies in terms of newly acquired suitable instruments for them to develop intercultural competence in their students (items 5 and 6):



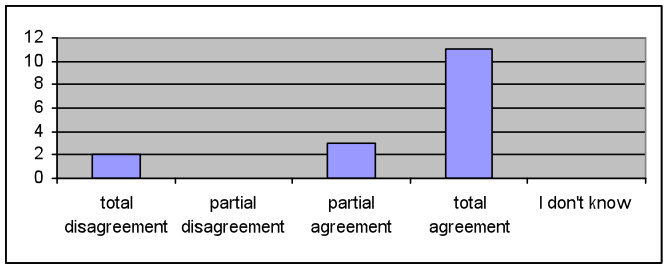
5. Thanks to the experience in Wels, you have realized what being exposed to an intercultural educational context means.



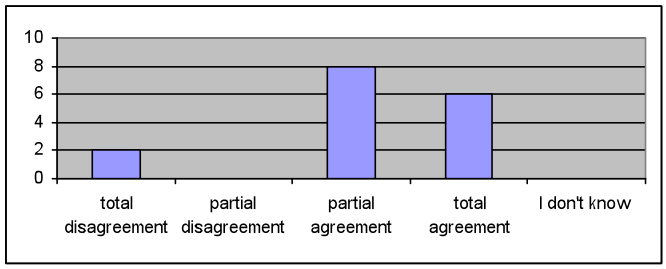
6. After realizing what being exposed to an intercultural educational context means, you feel better equipped to improve your educational work aimed at developing intercultural competence in your students.

The data show that sharing experiences with colleagues from other countries may help teachers feel empathy with their students who are more and more exposed to international contacts, mainly due to immigration movements but also to net-based communities created across frontiers through technological devices. The ability to imagine oneself in the position of those students, either they are the immigrants or the natives, sharing and understanding their feelings, seems to be useful for planning educational activities aimed at developing intercultural competence in the students.

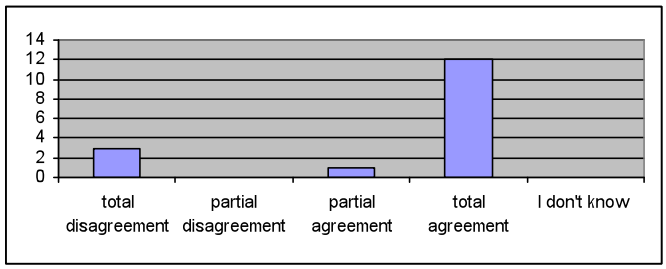
Another set of items were about the role of reciprocity in the development of intercultural competence according to Byram's thoretical frame (1997).



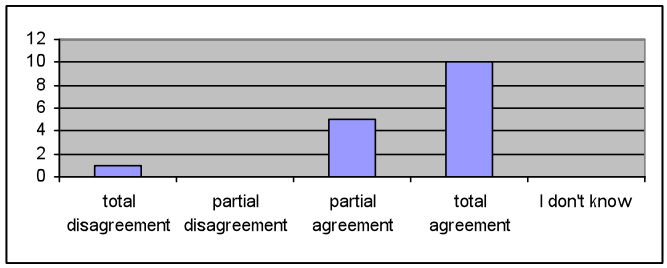
7. Reciprocity between teachers/headteachers from different cultures plays a crucial role in getting to know other cultures.



8. Reciprocity between teachers/headteachers from different cultures plays a crucial role in understanding the motivation behind differences in behaviour, thoughts and feelings in relation to one's own.



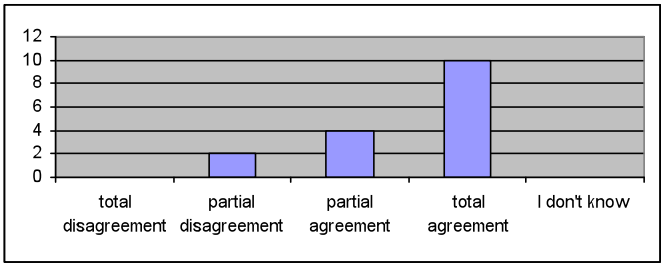
9. Reciprocity between teachers/headteachers from different cultures plays a crucial role in the emotional dimensions of fear and anxiety towards otherness.



10. Reciprocity between teachers/headteachers from different cultures plays a crucial role in learning how to interact with diversity.

The data collected through items 7, 9 and 10 show respectively that there is strong agreement on considering reciprocity between teachers from different cultural backgrounds as responsible for their students' curiosity to know about other cultures (cognitive dimension), their control over negative feelings such as fear and anxiety towards otherness (affective dimension), and their acquisition of the instruments which facilitate their interaction with diversity (social dimension). On the other hand, the data collected through item 8 seem to suggest that the metacognitive dimension is not so easily affected by reciprocity. Actually, we might observe that school activities planned to acquire knowledge about a different culture (cognitive dimension) can be successfully realised without much trasformation of personal values. As far as the affective and social dimensions are

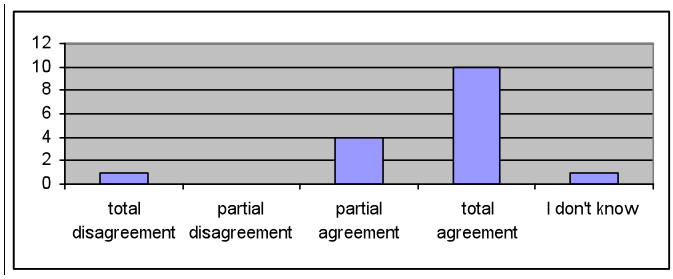
concerned, it is possible that the model offered by the teacher's positive and open behaviour can be easily reproduced by the students[14]. On the contrary, understanding other cultures in relation to one's own implies suspending judgement and rejecting prejudice, which may be strongly and deeply embedded in one's own attitude to reduce complexity to preconceptions according to culturally learned models. It also implies critical awareness of one's own culture which can be fully acquired only thanks to its understanding through the other's eyes. These reasons might explain the cautious answers to item 8. Nevertheless, the data collected through item 11 (which, focusing on intercultural competence, sums up the dimensions mentioned above) clearly show that reciprocity between teachers from different cultures can be crucial in developing students' intercultural competence, even if it has been observed above that in some dimensions the effects can be attained more easily than in others.



11. Reciprocity between teachers/headteachers from different cultures plays a crucial role in the dimension of intercultural competence.

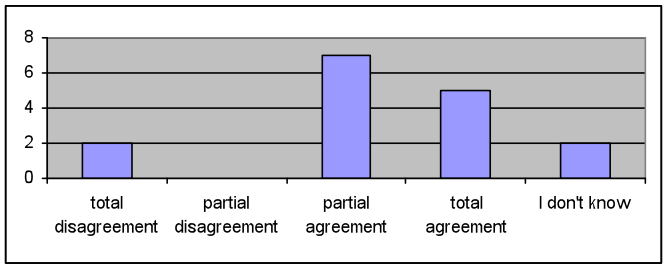
Finally, the role of reciprocity between teachers from different cultures has been investigated in terms school culture and school practices. The data collected through item 12 show that there is strong agreement on conceiving of reciprocity as crucial in building intercultural dialogue within schools, both among children and among parents from different cultures. On the other hand, the dimension of school practices seems to be less affected by reciprocity between teachers from different cultures, as it is shown by the data collected through item 13.

Here again, caution is expressed by the respondents who partially agree on the role of reciprocity between teachers from different cultures in determining transformation in school practices.



12. Reciprocity between teachers/headteachers from different cultures plays a crucial role in the dimension of intercultural dialogue within schools, among children and among parents from different cultures.

14 It is reasonable to think that mirror neurons play a role in modelling students' behaviour and feelings on the basis of the teacher's performances and emotions observed and perceived by the students (Fadiga, Fogassi, Pavesi, Rizzolatti, 1995).



13. Reciprocity between teachers/headteachers from different cultures plays a crucial role in the dimension of school practices.

Choosing to partially agree on item 13, they show to be aware of the complexity of planning and implementing educational actions aimed at promoting intercultural dialogue and intercultural competence. This complexity may be related to the difficulty to devise and develop dedicated educational projects within the narrow boundaries of the school curriculum.

The analysis of the free observations which close each respondent's questionnaire points out how school practices might be affected by reciprocity between teachers from different cultures. The dimensions pondered by the respondents are (1) teachers exchange, (2) mutual narration and (3) common projects:

> (1)
> *"For me it would be the best to be all the year in contact with teachers of other countries to get new ideas to work to the same topics. Our pupils should have the possibility to know foreign teachers, to meet them in their classes. Teacher exchange!!!! If you know a person you can understand some problems better and its a way to clear out prejudices!!! We had best experiences with the Comenius project in our school!!"* (teacher from Austria)
> *"Reciprocity between teachers brings in lots of questions which should be answered in further sessions, which means more time for meeting each other."* (two teachers from Austria)
> *"Learning must be based on personal experience, as it is essential for understanding."* (teacher from Germany)
> (2)
> *"There should be space for personal stories."* (teacher from Austria)
> *"Share activities across frontiers."* (teacher from Cyprus)
> *"It would also be very useful to talk to students from different countries to hear about their experiences."* (headteacher from Norway)
> *"More teachers all over Europe should join that process of exchanging ideas and teaching methods. The way it was done in Wels was really appropriate. Films about different projects could be spread easily via you tube."* (teacher from Austria)
> *"Time and space for telling stories about one's own background."* (teacher from Austria)
> (3)
> *"[Have] common programmes. Create a platform where we can exchange ideas."* (two teachers from Cyprus)

These data show that the respondents are convinced that having direct experience of different cultural contexts can produce effects on school practices. This is the reason why one of them stresses the value of teacher exchange. In addition to this, the importance of developing the links created within seminars, such

as the one in which these data were collected, is underlined by another one. Teacher exchange is closely connected with the practice of narration mentioned in the second group of observations, both face to face and through technological devices. What is interesting is that narration, apart from being conceived of as between teachers from different countries (*"[…] exchanging ideas and teaching methods"*), could also develop profitably beetween teachers and students from different countries, thus helping the teachers to understand those students' perspectives which might be of some help for their own ones. Finally, having common *programmes* is considered to be useful for promoting mutual understanding, school practices sharing and, consequently, fostering reciprocal transformation. Having this vision of the possible outcomes, a wiki called *SchoolCultureValuesIdentities* was opened by one member of the Wels group in order *"to continue the efforts to communicate and collaborate about educational issues and activities"*. Thanks to this virtual space, the members of the Wels group will be able to edit pages, upload files, and join discussions.

6. Conclusions

On the basis of the above analysis, it is reasonable to underline the value of international experiences for teachers. This means that both exchanges and net-based connectiveness should be fostered. We are convinced that these experiences have a great impact on education professionals' identity because they can help develop their awareness of the absolute need of reciprocal interdependence. The transformations which take place in teachers' identity in terms of professional and existential contaminations strengthen their intercultural sensitivity and, consequently, will develop their students' intercultural competence.

What is extremely necessary to promote is all teachers' communicative competence in a foreign language in order to create networks not only among foreign language teachers, but also among social studies teachers, music teachers, P.E. teachers. Indeed, the teachers of these specific subjects could deeply affect their students' acquisition of intercultural competence through their subjects, their specific approaches, and the extraordinary projects which might be carried out across frontiers.

Of course, even pre-service teacher education should include a training period abroad for all teachers, not only for foreign language ones. This model of pre-service teacher education might include the use of a dedicated section in a portfolio in which the student teachers would be invited to record the intercultural experience, describing, analyzing and valuing the encounter with the other culture. They might be asked to reflect over the strategies which have proved successful in order to solve conflicts, the progressive development of their behaviour towards openess, and the process of reciprocal discovery (Byram 2000)[15].

All this being stated, teachers' mutual learning in informal and non-formal contexts across frontiers, together with their consequent intercultural sensitivity which can generate cultural competence in their students, appears to be the possible answer to the problems generated by world complexity and its repeated denial of the individual. Infact, it implies greater attention to relationship and

15 See Spinelli (2006), pp. 176-7.

strongly asserts the power of connectiveness in terms of mutual learning mover. From this viewpoint, teachers' mutual learning across frontiers takes charge of social responsibilities because it implies the search for the relationship with otherness and promotes reciprocity in individuals' behaviour, whose educational value in *enlarged cultural contexts*[16], we believe, needs more empirical evidence and pondering in order to fully understand its potentiality.

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16 Using Raffaghelli's concept, this publication, chapter 2 and 10.

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