

University of
Massachusetts
Amherst

College of Education

Department of Teacher Education and
Curriculum Studies

Marialuisa Di Stefano

Lecturer – Language, Literacy, & Culture Concentration

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Alla cortese attenzione della professoressa Rosalba Larcana,

In qualità di direttrice del CeRIP (Centro di Ricerca e di Intervento Psicologico) presso l'Università degli Studi di Messina, con la presente le chiedo la disponibilità del CeRIP nel fornire supporto alla mia ricerca, intitolata "Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in the Italian Schools". Il progetto sarà inviato alla commissione Fulbright U.S. Scholar per la richiesta di fondi. Se accettata dalla fondazione Fulbright, la ricerca verrà svolta presso il CeRIP, che si impegna a fornire il supporto logistico alla ricerca e che non comporta alcun onere finanziario.

Per maggiori informazioni sugli scopi e le modalità della ricerca, la prego di consultare il progetto di ricerca allegato a questa lettera. Qualora il progetto risultasse di interesse del CeRIP, le chiedo gentilmente di inviare una lettera di invito. La lettera di invito è richiesta dalla fondazione Fulbright e deve essere allegata al progetto di ricerca. Rimango in attesa di un suo pronto riscontro.

Cordiali saluti,



Marialuisa Di Stefano, Ph.D.

Lecturer - Language, Literacy, & Culture Concentration

University of Massachusetts - Amherst

College of Education, Department of Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies

813 N. Pleasant St., Furcolo W259, Amherst, MA 01003

September 9, 2019

**Fulbright U.S. Scholar Program 2020-2021
Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in the Italian Schools**

Project Details

This is a proposal for the development of a partnership between the College of Education at the home institution University of Massachusetts – Amherst (UMass Amherst) and the CeRIP, Center for Research and Psychological Intervention (Centro di Ricerca e Intervento Psicologico, for its Italian acronym) at the host institution the University of Messina (Università degli Studi di Messina) through the sponsorship of the Fulbright U.S. Scholar Program. The discipline and specialization field for this study is: Bilingual/Multilingual Development & Multicultural Education. I propose research grant activities for three months, between September 2020 and January 2021

Project Statement

The purpose of this research study is to explore instructional strategies and approaches in primary (K-5) schools in Italy. In particular, we will explore teachers' understanding of inclusive practices and their perception of multilingualism and multiculturalism in their classroom. In addition, we will explore students' perceptions of inclusive practices and of multilingualism and multiculturalism in their classrooms. For this purpose, we will develop and validate a mixed-methods instrument including both quantitative and qualitative data, with the goal of advocating for an asset approach (Nieto, 2000) and departing from a deficit-approach of "allievo problematico" [an at-risk student] (D'Alonzo, 2012). This means to look at students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds from an asset approach means valuing their cultural and linguistic repertoire and developing educational strategies and approaches to further strengthen such diversity.

Research Design and Methods

This is an exploratory convergent mixed methods research study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The survey will be balanced with Likert-scale questions and open-ended questions. The research will be developed according to these three phases:

Pre-Award Phase (about 2 months before the beginning of the research study in Italy)

- Submit and obtain approval of the IRB protocol at the University of Massachusetts – Amherst.
- Share IRB documents with the CeRIP at the University of Messina and obtain permission to develop the research study.

Phase 1 (Month #1):

- Review the literature on validated research instruments for multilingual language development. Review the literature on diversity and inclusion educational approaches in Italian schools.
- Recruit 10 participant teachers in K-5 schools and up to 30 students in each of their classrooms. Participants will include teachers and students from different cultural backgrounds (i.e., local, international, exchange students and teachers, etc.). Participants will be recruited in the metropolitan Messina area and will serve to collect preliminary data, needed for the development of the survey instrument.
- Collect signed informed consent forms from teachers, parents/guardians, and students.
- Collect qualitative data from the 10 primary school teachers will be taken using a case study protocol. This will include open-ended questions and inquiries about teachers' experiences in the classroom. Examples of questions may include: How do you teach students whose first language is different than Italian? How do you promote inclusive practices in your classroom? (d'Alonzo, 2012, p. 168-173)
- Collect qualitative data from 30 primary school students (including students from different backgrounds, i.e., students from Italian heritage, students from foreign countries heritage cultures) will use an open-ended semi-structured interview protocol. Examples of questions for students from Italian heritage could include: How often do you interact with other students from different linguistic and cultural background? What do you do to help your friends who do not speak Italian at home to learn Italian? Examples for students with a diverse background could include: What is your perception of the overall classroom climate? How often do you have the opportunity to talk about our heritage culture? How often do you speak languages different than Italian in school?
- Develop the mixed methods survey including both Likert-scale and open-ended questions based on literature review and preliminary data from participant recruitment.

Phase 2 (Month #2):

- Develop and validate the mixed methods survey. The survey will be developed using Qualtrix online application. Faculty working at CeRIP and graduate students attending courses at CeRIP (University of Messina) will assist with the development of the instrument.
- Recruit a participant sample of 100 teachers and 100 students for survey validation.
- Analyze qualitative data using both inductive and deductive thematic analysis
- Analyze quantitative data will be using principal component analysis and factor loading analysis to test for validity, reliability, and internal consistency of the instrument.

Phase 3 (Month #3):

- Disseminate findings to conferences, journals, and the local communities of researchers and students.
- Researchers and students in Psychology and Educational courses at the University of Messina will be invited to attend a public lecture in which the results of the research study will be presented and disseminated.

Significance

In its institutional role, the European Union (EU) has always emphasized the importance of promoting the integration of children and youth from migrant backgrounds both in the schools and the society through public education policy. There are many political initiatives that the EU has developed over the years to address the multiple benefits and challenges of diversity and inclusion in schools, such as the European Commission action plan on the integration of third-country nationals (European Commission, 2016) and the European Commission communication on the protection of children in migration (European Commission, 2017).

Despite all the policy and efforts made at the European and national level, research seems to confirm the achievement gap between migrant and international students and local students in most European school systems (OECD, 2016a, 2016b). In addition, students who speak languages different than the official languages of instruction experience more difficulties in the development of a sense of belonging and are at a greater risk of discrimination and bullying (IEA PIRLS, 2016; ICCS, 2016).

This is particularly true in countries like Italy, where relevant restrictions in the immigration policy have been introduced in the last five years. This has contributed to a less welcoming school environment for migrant and international students. While inclusion policies exist in the Italian schools, they mainly address the needs of special education children, leaving out children whose first language is different than Italian or that come from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. In the Italian scenario, Sicily plays a key role because of its geographical and socio-cultural history. Sicily is considered the door to the Mediterranean and has experienced a consistent immigration flow in the last 20 years.

In the last few decades, the Italian school system has been characterized by an increasing migration wave due to different factors such as globalization and Europeanization. This increasing diversity is an overarching theme that includes but is not limited to race, ethnicity, languages, and sociocultural background. Depending on the abundance or scarcity of resources, this diversity can be seen as a resource for communities and also bring to light the community limitations.

According to the survey published by the Ministry of Education regarding the integration of foreign students and intercultural education (Bussotti, 2017), Italy follows three lines of action. First, Italy has actions for *integration*, which are procedures to guarantee students the access to resources for education, equality in educational paths, and access to participate in school activities. Italy has actions for *intercultural interaction* which include pedagogical and didactic management of school and community changes, with specific consideration for the actors and resources inside and outside of the school (Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 2007 – Italian Department of Public Schools).

Using an intercultural and transcultural pedagogy lens, diversity and inclusion become part of the educational setting and everyday life of K-5 children and teachers. This is no longer simply the work of the foreign student who is looking for a place in a new school, but the inclusion work being done by the teachers and students on a daily basis. Although the notion itself of pedagogy has been rethought, important limits are found in the day-to-day school practice. Teachers tend to implement compensatory strategies with the aim of “normalizing” the academic experience of the foreign student without assuming a perspective of openness and exchange between cultures. (Zadra, 2014).

Some studies show that foreign students have high levels of psychological indicators in terms of sense of belonging and stress compared to Italian samples (Patel & Kull, 2011), however data on the correlation between sense of belonging and psychological, emotional and behavioral aspects of immigrant students are still lacking (Georgiades, Boyle e Fife, 2013; Auslander, 2018; Margari et al., 2013). For this reason, it is important to explore these aspects and to develop an adequate tool, with the aim of identifying promising practices to increase inclusion and diversity in multilingual, multinational Italian classrooms.

It is fundamental to explore possible connections between emotional-behavioral reactions and a sense of belonging. The school, in partnership with the home and family, represents the main context in which children explore themselves, their environment, and their personality. For these reasons, it is extremely important to understand the classroom inclusion models better and to develop and implement appropriate school policies to support the work of teachers in creating dynamic inclusive classrooms that honor diversity.

Very often the degree of integration of the foreign student is evaluated exclusively through academic outcomes (e.g., grades, exams, tests scores, etc.), which ignore the student’s socio-emotional development and psychological well-being. It is necessary to conduct further studies to better explore the psychological implications of migration in the school environment. It is imperative to see both the perception of students and teachers.

Exploring the perceptions of teachers and students in K-5 Italian schools in terms of diversity and inclusion practices may lead to further study and potential follow up exploration, for example about the role of non-immigrant students, their role in intercultural process (e.g., active role vs. spectator, etc.), and their perception of the inclusive practices in the classroom (e.g., fear vs. openness).

Benefits for the home and host institutions

This partnership between the University of Massachusetts – Amherst (UMass) and the CeRIP, (Centro di Ricerca e di Intervento Psicologico, for its Italian acronym) (Università degli Studi di Messina) aims to meet three specific strategic goals: (a) promote global awareness and cross-cultural relationships between students and faculty from different socio-cultural and geographical origins; (b) advance a better understanding of the psychological and educational processes related to diversity and inclusion in both the U.S. and the Italian primary schools; (c) expand the opportunities for collaboration between faculty and students in the U.S. and Italian higher education institutions.

The College of Education at UMASS Amherst is devoted to increasing diversity and inclusion in U.S. school system while advocating for equity and social justice. The values in practice at the College of Education include holistic teaching, the development of collaborative research, the pursuit of community engagement, and advocacy for social justice. In this sense,

the partnership with the CeRIP will adhere to the UMASS Amherst's mission and goals and substantially contribute to strengthen global awareness and cross-cultural relationships between the two institutions. In particular, faculty and students at the UMass – Amherst College of education would benefit from:

- Understand how inclusion and intercultural process are perceived and enacted in a European county;
- Explore the impact of foreign policy on educational and psychology process in elementary school;
- Layout the basis for a future collaboration among foreign institutions, including exchange programs between teachers' candidates, teacher educators, educational psychologists.

Through this partnership, the CeRIP, Center for Research and Psychological Intervention (Centro di Ricerca e Intervento Psicologico, for its Italian acronym) at the University of Messina can engage in innovative research practices, offer their students the opportunity to interact with faculty from a foreign institution, and engage in cross-cultural practices. There are multiple potential benefits that can result from this partnership for the CeRIP and the local community in the metropolitan area of Messina:

- Undergraduate and graduate students in the Psychology and Education programs will access research and increase scientific knowledge about the linguistic, cognitive, and social-cultural benefits associated with multilingual development in Italian primary schools;
- The scholar community will access scientific information and knowledge that will be disseminated through the CeRIP webpage and journals.
- Teacher candidates, teachers, and educators in Italian primary schools will be able to access updated materials about promising practices that promote the learning, engagement, and participation processes of multilingual students in Italian schools;
- Educators and families will have access to the findings of this research through dissemination and learn about recommendations for actionable strategies that can support students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in the Italian primary schools.

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Department of Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies

813 N. Pleasant St., Furcolo W259

Amherst, MA 01003

Voice: 413-545-3675

Email: marialuisadi@umass.edu

Gender pronouns: she, her, hers