

## **INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AND THE ITALIAN SCHOOL SYSTEM: THE ASSESSMENT OF RETURNEES FROM INDIVIDUAL LONG-TERM EXCHANGE**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to explore how the Italian secondary schools deals with the issue of assessing intercultural competence and, in general, transversal competences gained by returnees (16/17 years old) who participated in an annual individual exchange program. The considerations proposed in the present paper are the first results of ongoing doctoral research developed through a qualitative approach. The outcomes indicate a lack in the assessment of intercultural competence as well as a difficulty in assessing transversal competences by the Italian secondary schools. However, first attempts that seek to identify shared answers to the challenges posed by the student mobility to educational policies are developing.

*L'obiettivo del presente articolo è di esplorare in che modo le scuole secondarie di secondo grado in Italia affrontano la questione connessa alla valutazione della competenza interculturale e, più in generale, delle competenze trasversali acquisite dalle studentesse e dagli studenti (16/17 anni) che hanno partecipato a un programma annuale di mobilità studentesca individuale. Le considerazioni proposte in questo contributo rappresentano i primi risultati di una ricerca di dottorato in corso, sviluppata mediante un approccio qualitativo. I risultati indicano che nelle scuole secondarie di secondo grado in Italia vi è un'assenza di valutazione della competenza interculturale e vi è difficoltà nella valutazione delle competenze trasversali. Tuttavia, si stanno sviluppando dei tentativi di risposte comuni alle sfide poste dalla mobilità studentesca alle politiche educative.*

**Key words:** *intercultural competence; transversal competences; internationalisation of school; student mobility; intercultural school programs; secondary school; students' assessment; Italian legislation.*

**Parole chiave:** *competenze interculturali, competenze trasversali, internazionalizzazione della scuola, mobilità studentesca, programmi scolastici interculturali, valutazione degli studenti, legislazione italiana.*

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## Introduction

In the contemporary era, rapid global changes challenge educational policies and practices with the goal of shaping the future citizens. Accordingly, in today's landscape the process of internationalisation of education seems to be one of the possible responses in order to prepare the global citizen<sup>2</sup>. However, the internationalisation is a complex and broadly debated concept and process which can be tackled in different ways<sup>3</sup>. One of these includes the mobility of people who are involved in schools and universities.

The present study focuses on Italian secondary school returnees (16/17 years old) who participated in an annual individual exchange program. This kind of international experience raises crucial questions to secondary schools such as, what do students learn abroad beyond the disciplinary contents? Which kind of competences have returnees acquired? How can they be assessed? Furthermore, what could the whole school gain from the intercultural/international experience undergone by its student?

The article tries to explore some of the above-mentioned questions through a qualitative approach; eventually, the intention is to discuss the preliminary results of ongoing doctoral research. Initially, the applied theoretical framework points out the key question of the present article. Secondly, after a brief description of the methodology adopted in the research, the Italian legislation concerning student mobility is explored in detail in order to understand the 'governance' of this phenomenon. It shows that the Italian Ministry for Education promotes and encourages international experiences, although it does not give a clear set of rules for the assessment of returnees. In the final part of the article, the very first results of the research are presented and discussed. It shows that schools analyzed do not assess intercultural competence as well having difficulties in assessing transversal competences. At the same time, school networks, which are the first serious attempts to find agreed solutions to the challenges that student mobility poses to the educational governance, are presented.

## 1. Theoretical framework

The process of internationalisation of education has dramatically expanded within educational policies and practices in the last decades. However, this process can be interpreted in more than one possible way, as

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<sup>2</sup> Cfr. B. HUNTER - G. P. WHITE - G. C. GODBEY, *What does it mean to be globally competent?*, in «Journal of Studies in International Education», 2006, 10(3), pp. 267-285.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. J. KNIGHT, *Concepts, rationales, and interpretive frameworks in the internationalization of higher education*. In DEARDORFF D. K. - DE WIT H. - HEYL J. - ADAMS T. (a cura di), *The SAGE handbook of international higher education*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2012, pp. 27- 42.

there is no common definition of internationalisation<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, its aim is controversial: some authors<sup>5</sup> argue that, beyond the rhetorical discourse seeking interculturality, the internationalisation of school tends to be led by economic interests. In other words, the main force guiding the internationalisation would be an economic one.

The concept of internationalisation of education, proposed in this work, is conceived as international/intercultural activities promoted by educational institutions. In particular, as already mentioned, the focus of this article is on student exchanges: even if the process of internationalisation of education is complex and multifaceted, the most visible part of it is probably the mobility of academics, students and staff<sup>6</sup>.

Migration for study or research purposes is not a new phenomenon<sup>7</sup>. However, nowadays, it is often perceived as an unavoidable moment within students' curriculum. Consequently, the contemporary academic flows have risen faster than ever before.

At the European level, several documents have considered academic mobility as one of the tools (i) to promote and to strengthen the intercultural dialogue, which is the key to create an open and inclusive society; (ii) to create the conditions for a more competitive economy with higher employment. For instance, the Council Conclusion on Intercultural Competence recognizes "the encouragement of mobility schemes among learners, teachers and other teaching staff as an effective tool for the promotion of intercultural dialogue"<sup>8</sup>.

Overall, the discourse of internationalisation of education is more

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<sup>4</sup> Cfr. R. YANG, *University internationalisation: its meanings, rationales and implications*, in «Intercultural Education», 2002, 13(1), pp. 81-95; DEARDORFF D. K. - DE WIT H. - HEYL J. - ADAMS T. (a cura di). *The SAGE handbook of international higher education*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2012; DE HAAN H., *Internationalization: Interpretations among Dutch practitioners*, in «Journal of Studies in International Education», 2014, 18(3), pp. 241-260.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. P.G. ALTBACH - J. KNIGHT, *The internationalization of higher education: Motivations and realities*, in «Journal of Studies in International Education», 2007, 11(3/4), pp. 290-305; C. BOLSMANN - H. MILLER, *International students recruitment to universities in England: Discourse, rationales and globalisation*, in «Globalisation, Societies and Education», 2008, 6(1), pp. 75-88; M. HAIGH, *Internationalisation, planetary citizenship and higher education*, in «Compare», 2008, 38 (4), pp. 427-440; T. KIM, *Transnational academic mobility, internationalization and interculturality in higher education*, in «Intercultural Education», 2009, 20(5), pp. 395-405; M. TIAN - J. LOWE, *Existentialist internationalisation and the Chinese student experience in English universities*, in «Compare», 2009, 39(5), pp. 659-676.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. OECD, *Approaches to internationalisation and their implications for strategic management and institutional practice*, OECD Publishing, 2012; L. E. RUMBLEY - P. G. ALTBACH - L. REISBERG, *Internationalization within the higher education context*. In D. K. DEARDORFF - H. DE WIT - J. HEYL - T. ADAMS (a cura di), *The SAGE handbook of international higher education*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2012, pp. 3-26.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. H. DE WIT - G. MERKX, *The history of internationalization of higher education*. In DEARDORFF D. K. - DE WIT H. - HEYL J. - ADAMS T. (a cura di), *The SAGE handbook of international higher education*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2012, pp. 43-59.

<sup>8</sup> EUROPEAN UNION, *Council conclusions of 22 May 2008 on Intercultural Competences*, (2008/C 141/09).

connected with higher education. Nevertheless, at the level of secondary schools the trend of student mobility is quickly becoming more frequent. As far as Italy is concerned, The *Osservatorio nazionale sull'internazionalizzazione delle scuole e la mobilità studentesca*<sup>9</sup> estimates that, in 2014, there were around 7300 Italian secondary school students who participate in individual exchange programs. However, it should be highlighted that the number of participants in 2014 significantly increased compared to 2011 (+55%). This increase clearly shows that what used to be an experience reserved for a few, and usually rich students, has become an available opportunity for a broader mass of pupils<sup>10</sup>.

Nowadays, a wide range of options concerning students' mobility programs is offered. Indeed, beyond the annual program, it is possible to take part in a six or three-month long program. Nevertheless, only school programs where Italian students spend a whole academic year (usually the penultimate year) of secondary school abroad will be taken into consideration in this work. More specifically, the research on which this paper is based, focuses on programs promoted by the *Intercultura*<sup>11</sup> association that has been a leading Italian organization in arranging exchange school experiences since 1955. The association is the Italian partner of *AFS Intercultural Programs* and a member of the EFIL (*European Federation for Intercultural Learning*). *Intercultura*, which is divided into more than 130 chapters with around 3000 volunteers, provides intercultural learning experiences in 45 countries for about 1600 Italian students per year. At the same time, 770 students from 53 different countries are hosted in Italy.

It should be emphasized that *Intercultura*'s participants live with a host families and attend local secondary schools as a full-time students during the course of an academic year, semester or trimester. In addition, the program offers learning camps and other instruments that guide and support the pupils during the whole experience abroad. As Deardorff<sup>12</sup> and Savicki<sup>13</sup> have shown, an adequate preparation and support are vital for students' growth. Indeed, not all experiences produce learning. In particular, attention

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.scuoleinternazionali.org/Infografica.03/> Previous data in OSSERVATORIO NAZIONALE SULL'INTERNAZIONALIZZAZIONE DELLE SCUOLE E LA MOBILITÀ STUDENTESCA, *All'altezza del compito. Presidi, insegnanti, studenti e genitori si misurano con la sfida dell'internazionalità*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. BYRAM M. - FENG A. (a cura di), *Living and studying abroad*, Multilingual Matters, Clevedon, 2006; SAVICKI V. (a cura di), *Developing intercultural competence and transformation: Theory, research and application in international education*, Stylus, Sterling, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. <http://www.intercultura.it>

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. D. K. DEARDORFF, *Intercultural competence. A definition, model, and implications for education abroad*. In V. SAVICKI (a cura di), *Developing intercultural competence and transformation: theory, research, and application in international education*, Stylus, Sterling, 2008a, pp. 32-52; DEARDORFF D. K. (a cura di), *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2009b.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. SAVICKI V. (a cura di), *Developing intercultural competence and transformation: Theory, research and application in international education*, Stylus, Sterling, 2008.

should be paid to reflection activities because they are considered the key for learning from experience<sup>14</sup>.

The intercultural learning programs, which entail formal, non-formal and informal education, deeply engage the whole person because the pupil lives completely within a different cultural environment and copes with rather new and unfamiliar difficulties. Savicki affirms that students' exchanges have to be considered as experiential education:

students studying abroad are immersed in real, not simulated, experiences in which they come face to face with a wide range of new, exciting, challenging, and sometimes scary and exasperating experiences. [...] They find that their habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving do not function as expected in the host culture<sup>15</sup>.

Hence, as an outcome of their experience also beyond disciplinary knowledge, the returnees have usually acquired transversal competences and, more precisely, intercultural competence. These specific competences are the main pedagogical added value for long-term individual student exchanges<sup>16</sup>. The empirical research conducted by Hammer<sup>17</sup> has shown that in addition to fluency level of foreign language achieving benefits received from a long-term international school program include, for instance, the personal growth, a broader perspective on the world, a wider knowledge of the host culture, as well as a greater intercultural awareness, etc.

As far as intercultural competence is concerned, it is important to underline that there is not yet a common understanding as to its definition<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Cfr. SAVICKI V. (a cura di), *Developing intercultural competence and transformation: Theory, research and application in international education*, Stylus, Sterling, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> SAVICKI V. (a cura di), *Developing intercultural competence and transformation: Theory, research and application in international education*, Stylus, Sterling, 2008, p. 74.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. M. R. HAMMER, *Assessment of the impact of the AFS study abroad experience*, AFS Intercultural Programs, New York, 2005; C. ROVERSELLI - A. R. PAOLONE, *The assessment of competencies acquired by returnees from individual student exchanges: European key competencies and the Italian School*. In L. WIKANDER - C. GUSTAFSSON - U. RIIS (a cura di), *Enlightenment, Creativity and Education: Politics, Politics, Performances, Sense*, Rotterdam, 2012, pp. 169-190; C. ROVERSELLI - A. R. PAOLONE, *Competenze trasversali. Valutazione e valorizzazione delle esperienze di studio all'estero*, Fondazione Intercultura, Colle di Val d'Elsa, 2013; M. BAIUTTI, *La competenza interculturale: uno dei principali risultati attesi dalla mobilità studentesca*, in «Rivista Scuola Iad. Modelli, Politiche R&T», 2014/2015, 9/10, pp. 82-113.

<sup>17</sup> M. R. HAMMER, *Assessment of the impact of the AFS study abroad experience*, AFS Intercultural Programs, New York, 2005; for other theoretical and empirical researches see R. RUFFINO, *Quindici studi sulla mobilità giovanile*, Commissione delle Comunità Europee, 1981; B. HANSEL, *The AFS impact study: Final report*, in «AFS Research Reports», 1986, July, pp. 1-31; UNESCO, *Youth Exchange*. Meeting of Governmental and Non Governmental Officials Responsible for Programmes of Youth Exchange, Rome, 1987, 22-26 June; C. ROVERSELLI - A. R. PAOLONE, *Competenze trasversali. Valutazione e valorizzazione delle esperienze di studio all'estero*, Fondazione Intercultura, Colle di Val d'Elsa, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. D. K. DEARDORFF, *Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization*, in «Journal of Studies in International Education»,

Indeed, scholars<sup>19</sup> from a variety of disciplines and international agencies<sup>20</sup> have been focusing their attention on the concept of intercultural competence for the past five decades. Consequently, the literature review has highlighted that many models have been developed to define this concept<sup>21</sup>. However, it still remains a subject of debate. Comparing the models, it is possible to identify commonalities, even if, as Deardorff suggests, “this lack of specificity in defining intercultural competence is due presumably to the difficulty of identifying the specific components of this complex concept”<sup>22</sup>.

Without a clear definition of intercultural competence, it is complicated to find methods and tools for assessing the interculturality of students after a period spent in another country<sup>23</sup>. However, taking

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2006, 10(3), pp. 241-266.

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. M. J. BENNETT, *Towards ethnorelativism: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity*. In R. M. PAIGE (a cura di), *Education for the intercultural experience*, Intercultural Press, Yarmouth, 1993 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), pp. 21-71; M. BYRAM, *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*, Multilingual Matters, Clevedon, 1997; D. K. DEARDORFF, *Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization*, in «Journal of Studies in International Education», 2006, 10(3), pp. 241-266; D. K. DEARDORFF, *Intercultural competence. A definition, model, and implications for education abroad*. In V. SAVICKI (a cura di), *Developing intercultural competence and transformation: theory, research, and application in international education*, Stylus, Sterling, 2008a, pp. 32-52; D. K. DEARDORFF, *Intercultural competence – The key competence in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?*, Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2008b; D. K. DEARDORFF (a cura di), *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2009b; A. E. FANTINI - A. TIRMIZI, *Exploring and assessing intercultural competence*, in «World Learning Publication», paper 1, 2006; B. HUNTER - G. P. WHITE - G. C. GODBEY, *What does it mean to be globally competent?*, in «Journal of Studies in International Education», 2006, 10(3), pp. 267-285; B. H. SPITZBERG - G. CHANGNON, *Conceptualizing Intercultural Competence*. In D. K. DEARDORFF (a cura di), *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2009, pp. 2-52; M. D. BARRETT, *Intercultural competence*, in «EWC Statement Series», 2011, 2, pp. 23-27; A. PORTERA (a cura di), *Competenze interculturali*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2013; A. PORTERA, *Intercultural competence in education, counseling and psychotherapy*, in «Intercultural Education», 2014, 25(2), pp. 157-174; P. REGGIO - M. SANTERINI (a cura di), *Le competenze interculturali nel lavoro educativo*, Carocci, Roma, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. COUNCIL OF EUROPE, *Intercultural competence for all. Preparation for living in a heterogeneous world*, Strasburgo, 2012; UNESCO, *Intercultural competences. Conceptual and operational framework*, Parigi, 2013; COUNCIL OF EUROPE, *Developing intercultural competence through education*, Strasburgo, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. B. H. SPITZBERG - G. CHANGNON, *Conceptualizing Intercultural Competence*. In D. K. DEARDORFF (a cura di), *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2009, pp. 2-52.

<sup>22</sup> D. K. DEARDORFF, *Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization*, in «Journal of Studies in International Education», 2006, 10(3), p. 241.

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. D. K. DEARDORFF, *Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization*, in «Journal of Studies in International Education», 2006, 10(3), pp. 241-266; D. K. DEARDORFF, *Implementing intercultural competence assessment*. In D. K. DEARDORFF (a cura di), *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2009a, pp. 477-491; A. E. FANTINI, *Assessing intercultural competence: issues and tools*. In D. K. DEARDORFF (a cura di), *The SAGE*

inspiration from Hunter, White and Godbey<sup>24</sup>'s research question, since educational institutions are increasing the offer of intercultural and international activities, how would schools and universities know if the returnees have become (more) interculturally competent?

This question leads us to the key question of the present paper:

*RQ: How does the Italian secondary schools deal with the issue of assessing the intercultural competence gained by returnees who participated in an annual exchange school program?*

## **2. Brief description of research**

Bearing in mind the aim of this article, the qualitative approach could be considered one of the most useful<sup>25</sup> because the Italian legislation states that each class council handles the assessment of returnees on its own. Hence, the research is conducted through multiple-case studies which have been chosen from three different regions of Italy: from the North, from the Center and from the South.

Different kinds of tools are used to understand the present situation regarding the assessment of returnees. These tools include the analysis of Italian legislation about student mobility, semi-structured interviews conducted with school heads and teachers, the analysis of the available documents produced by schools, and questionnaires filled out by returnees who spent their annual school program abroad during the academic year 2012-13.

Furthermore, in order to discern what will be the future of the returnees' assessment, interviews conducted with key informants have been included.

## **3. Italian legislation concerning student mobility<sup>26</sup>**

As far as the legislation is concerned, it is important to state that the Italian Ministry for Education has implemented only a few rules on the topic of students' exchanges (Figure 1), where it promotes, encourages and legally recognizes the period spent in foreign schools. In other words, individual

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*handbook of intercultural competence*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2009, pp. 456-476.

<sup>24</sup> B. HUNTER - G. P. WHITE - G. C. GODBEY, *What does it mean to be globally competent?*, in «Journal of Studies in International Education», 2006, 10(3), pp. 267-285.

<sup>25</sup> Cfr. A. R. PAOLONE, *I returnees di "lungo corso": l'atteggiamento degli insegnanti*. In D. PALOMBA - A. R. PAOLONE - C. ROVERSELLI - O. NICEFORO - C. CAPPÀ, *Internazionalizzazione della scuola e mobilità studentesca. Il ruolo degli insegnanti*, Fondazione Intercultura, Colle di Val d'Elsa, 2010, pp. 17-86.

<sup>26</sup> See also M. BAIUTTI, *La competenza interculturale: uno dei principali risultati attesi dalla mobilità studentesca*, in «Rivista Scuola Iad. Modelli, Politiche R&T», 2014/2015, 9/10, pp. 82-113

school programs are recognized in terms of the students' readmission into the original schools.

According to the ministerial documents, within the process of internationalisation of the Italian school, these kind of intercultural experiences have to be considered as a crucial tool for the personal growth of pupils and, for that reason, these programs are a complementary part of the students' curriculum.

Overall, during the last fifteen years the Ministry's attitude towards student mobility has been changing. More precisely, it has gradually become more attentive to the experience as a whole, rather than considering only the coherence of competences acquired with the didactic objectives provided by the Italian syllabi. As we shall see discussing the preliminary results, this 'revolution' has not necessarily produced a real change in the practice of assessing returnees.

**Main Italian legislation concerning student mobility**

- Ministerial Circular 17/03/1997 n.181: "International student mobility".
- Decree of the President of Italian Republic 275/1999: "School's autonomy regulation".
- Note of the General Direction of School System prot. 2787, 20/04/2011: "Qualifications obtained abroad".
- Note of the Department for Education prot. 843, 10/04/2013: "Guidelines about the international mobility of individual students".

Figure 1 *Main Italian legislation concerning student mobility*

As already mentioned, the topic of student exchanges is tied to the school's autonomy regulation, which attributes to each class council the responsibility and the freedom to assess the studies done in foreign countries in order to assign the formative credits:

Scholastic institutions provide all the means needed for the fulfillment of the pupils' school career and they regulate, through binding legislation, the registrations, the attendances, the certifications, the documentation, the assessment, the recognition of studies done in Italy and in foreign countries in order to allow the pupils' progress in their career of studies, the assessment of the formative credits and formative debts, the participation to local and international projects, the realization of international student exchanges<sup>27</sup>.

The latest ministerial document which disciplines student mobility within Italian secondary schools is the Note of the Department for Education "Guidelines about the international mobility of individual student"<sup>28</sup>. This ministerial note, other than affirming the value of international experience within pupils' growth, points out some problematic issues which individual long-term student mobility raises towards school governance. In particular, the ministerial note pays attention to (i) the

<sup>27</sup> DPR 275/199, art. 14, c. 2, author's translation.

<sup>28</sup> Prot. 843, 10/04/2013, author's translation.

recognition of studies done abroad; (ii) the comparison between disciplines studied abroad and those provided by the Italian syllabi; (iii) the admission to the next scholastic year; (iv) the assessment and the certification of study experiences. It appears that scholastic questions concerning student mobility depend on a mixture of factors, even if they are fundamentally connected with the topic of returnees' reintegration.

In order to solve these difficulties, the Ministry suggests:

- the introduction of a way to promote, to support, to value and to capitalize the experiences of student mobility into the Plan of the Formative Offer (POF);
- the regulation of procedure in order to assure clearness and coherence of attitude between different class councils belonging to the same institute;
- to value the exchange experiences with the aim of promoting a participation growth of all the scholastic components;
- the identification of specific persons such as the tutor of exchange students.

Entering more deeply into the issue of returnees' assessment, the ministerial note states that, first of all, the class council has the duty to examine the documentation produced by the foreign school. If necessary, the class council might ask the students for a verification, which consists of supplementary tests about fundamental contents necessary to attend the next class. However, the ministerial document stresses the fact that the assessment of returnees has to consist of a global evaluation, or rather, in order to assign the credits, the class council should assess not only the disciplinary contents, but also the transversal competences.

In the end, the main problem which the ministerial note does not consider is *how* the assessment of competences connected to personal growth should be carried out in practice. Moreover, Italian law does not explain the value of transversal competences have for the purpose of assigning the credits. In other words, the question remains how and whether to assess competences gained more in non-formal and informal contexts in the terms of formal education.

#### **4. Preliminary results and discussion**

It is important to underline that some studies<sup>29</sup> suggest that one of

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<sup>29</sup> Cfr. A. R. PAOLONE, *I returnees di "lungo corso": l'atteggiamento degli insegnanti*. In D. PALOMBA - A. R. PAOLONE - C. ROVERSELLI - O. NICEFORO - C. CAPPÀ, *Internazionalizzazione della scuola e mobilità studentesca. Il ruolo degli insegnanti*, Fondazione Intercultura, Colle di Val d'Elsa, 2010, pp. 17-86; D. PALOMBA - A. R. PAOLONE, *Competencies vs. interculturality: Student exchanges in the age of PISA*. In M. A. PEREYRA - H.-G. KOTTHOFF - R. COWEN (a cura di), *PISA Under Examination: Changing, Knowledge, Changing Tests, and Changing Schools*, Sense, Rotterdam, 2011, pp. 109-122; C. ROVERSELLI - A. R. PAOLONE, *The assessment of competencies acquired by returnees*

the most critical moments of the long-term school programs concerns the time when the student returns back home. For that reason, the school's attitude is crucial as it can create favourable conditions for the returnees' reintegration within the original institute<sup>30</sup>. One of the most important parts of this reintegration is represented by the returnees' assessment. In this part of the article the very first results concerning the returnees' assessment which are drawn from the ongoing empirical research are discussed.

Even if the incidence of the phenomenon of student mobility is increasing in Italy, the concept of intercultural competence is not mentioned within the ministerial documents. In other words, the Ministry for Education has not (yet) taken into account this concept as an important outcome after an intercultural long-term experience, although it constitutes one of the main pedagogical pillars of this kind of experience<sup>31</sup>.

Not surprisingly, the expression 'intercultural competence' does not appear into any available documents produced by the schools analyzed, for example POF (Plan of the Formative Offer). Moreover, the interviews conducted with school heads and teachers show that the concept of intercultural competence is still not adopted within the context of the Italian school.

At the same time, another interesting result has surfaced from our empirical research: although in the schools analyzed the expression 'intercultural competence' is not explicitly employed, it is sometimes possible to find some linked concepts such as 'promotion of intercultural dialogue' within the school documents. However, these 'linked concepts' are usually perceived as the general mission of the school, rather than being an object of assessment.

As already mentioned above, the topic of intercultural competence is usually a rather difficult and complex issue. Even if the concept of intercultural competence has been discussed at length in international academic environments, in Italian pedagogical literature it has appeared only recently<sup>32</sup>. This is an important point to underline as it might be one of the possible keys to understand and interpret the state of art of intercultural

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*from individual student exchanges: European key competencies and the Italian School.* In L. WIKANDER - C. GUSTAFSSON - U. RIIS (a cura di), *Enlightenment, Creativity and Education: Politics, Politics, Performances*, Sense, Rotterdam, 2012, pp. 169-190; C. ROVERSELLI - A. R. PAOLONE, *Competenze trasversali. Valutazione e valorizzazione delle esperienze di studio all'estero*, Fondazione Intercultura, Colle di Val d'Elsa, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Cfr. A. R. PAOLONE, *I returnees di "lungo corso": l'atteggiamento degli insegnanti*. In D. PALOMBA - A.R. PAOLONE - C. ROVERSELLI - O. NICEFORO - C. CAPPÀ, *Internazionalizzazione della scuola e mobilità studentesca. Il ruolo degli insegnanti*, Fondazione Intercultura, Colle di Val d'Elsa, 2010, pp. 17-86.

<sup>31</sup> Cfr. D. K. DEARDORFF, *Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization*, in «Journal of Studies in International Education», 2006, 10(3), pp. 241-266; M. BAIUTTI, *La competenza interculturale: uno dei principali risultati attesi dalla mobilità studentesca*, in «Rivista Scuola Iad. Modelli, Politiche R&T», 2014/2015, 9/10, pp. 82-113.

<sup>32</sup> Cfr. A. PORTERA, *Intercultural competence in education, counseling and psychotherapy*, in «Intercultural Education», 2014, 25(2), pp. 157-174.

competence within the Italian school context. What Yershova, DeJaeghere and Mestenhauser claims at the beginning of century appear to be still valid:

Being a relatively new concept that has its origins in often haphazard attempts to help sojourners cope with the challenges of living in another culture, intercultural competence has never been considered by academia as a potentially desirable outcome of education. Until now, it has been in the domain of intercultural training, where it is rarely addressed systematically, and intercultural communication courses, where it is most often just another concept in the textbook<sup>33</sup>.

As far the topic of transversal competences, as already seen when presenting the Italian legislation, they are mentioned in the ministerial note. It is also possible to find them within available school documents. However, even if the Italian school, as stated clearly by the ministerial note, should take them into account in order to give a global evaluation of the student, there are still some unresolved problems.

As already mentioned, the autonomy school regulation gives to the class council the responsibility as well as the freedom to assess returnees. The problem here is that Italian law does not explain how the competences have to be assessed in practice and how important the transversal competences are for the purpose of assigning the credits. As a result, teachers have a feeling that they are left alone in dealing with this complex issue<sup>34</sup>. Accordingly, the alternatives teachers face seem to be the following: on the one hand, they might assess just disciplinary contents; on the other hand, they may figure out creative tools in order to assess also the transversal competences. This confirms what other research has already shown: “teachers are puzzled, *inter alia*, by the overall growth of the returnees because they cannot frame it into the (inadequate) formal schemes of the Italian school system, especially in terms of their assessment”<sup>35</sup>.

As an end-result, each class council has its own approach to assess its returnees. Sometimes, as the empirical research has been showing, in particular with regard to the questionnaires, it could happen that returnees from different class councils, but belonging to the same school, have received a different treatment. For example, one returnee was asked to make a presentation about his/her experience; the other one had to do tests for

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<sup>33</sup> Y. YERSHOVA - J. DEJAEGHERE - J. MESTENHAUSER, *Thinking not as usual: Adding the intercultural perspective*, in «Journal of Studies in International Education», 2000, 4(1), p. 66.

<sup>34</sup> A. R. PAOLONE, *I returnees di “lungo corso”: l’atteggiamento degli insegnanti*. In D. PALOMBA - A. R. PAOLONE - C. ROVERSELLI - O. NICEFORO - C. CAPPÀ, *Internazionalizzazione della scuola e mobilità studentesca. Il ruolo degli insegnanti*, Fondazione Intercultura, Colle di Val d’Elsa, 2010, pp. 17-86.

<sup>35</sup> D. PALOMBA - A. R. PAOLONE, *Competencies vs. interculturality: Student exchanges in the age of PISA*. In M. A. PEREYRA - H.-G. KOTTHOFF - R. COWEN (a cura di), *PISA Under Examination: Changing, Knowledge, Changing Tests, and Changing Schools*, Sense, Rotterdam, 2011, pp. 181; see also D. PALOMBA - A. R. PAOLONE - C. ROVERSELLI - O. NICEFORO - C. CAPPÀ, *Internazionalizzazione della scuola e mobilità studentesca. Il ruolo degli insegnanti*, Fondazione Intercultura, Colle di Val d’Elsa, 2010.

each subject.

In last analysis, the assessment of returnees depends on the attitude of the teachers who are part of the class council<sup>36</sup>.

Another important point worth noting is that in Italy the assessment practices have had the tendency to assess knowledge rather than competences<sup>37</sup>. To put it simply, the usual trend within the Italian school tradition has been to pay more attention to the disciplinary contents rather than to the competences. And this could be another reason explaining teachers' attitude.

In brief, the Italian school tends to take less account of extra-disciplinary competences rather than subject contents entwined with the difficulties of assessing intercultural competence<sup>38</sup> and transversal competences, the deficiency of a clear set of rules guiding the assessment of returnees might explain the controversial moment of assessing returnees in Italy. Probably, other reasons will come to light with a deeper interpretation of the data.

However, during the last years, after the last ministerial note, things have slowly started to change. Indeed, as the empirical research has shown, some schools have produced a protocol which each class council must follow in order to balance the returnees' assessment within the same institute. Usually modalities and times of assessing are explicitly stated within these protocols, as well as a list of fundamental contents necessary to attend the next class being sometimes handed out to all students belonging to the same institute. The latter represents an important first step toward a

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<sup>36</sup> Cfr. A. R. PAOLONE, *I returnees di "lungo corso": l'atteggiamento degli insegnati*. In D. PALOMBA - A. R. PAOLONE - C. ROVERSELLI - O. NICEFORO - C. CAPPÀ, *Internazionalizzazione della scuola e mobilità studentesca. Il ruolo degli insegnati*, Fondazione Intercultura, Colle di Val d'Elsa, 2010, pp. 17-86.

<sup>37</sup> Cfr. M. CASTOLDI, *Valutare le competenze*, Carocci, Roma, 2009; S. DE ANGELIS, *Competenze interculturali a scuola*, in «Quaderni di Intercultura», 2009, 1, pp. 1-10; C. ROVERSELLI - A. R. PAOLONE, *The assessment of competencies acquired by returnees from individual student exchanges: European key competencies and the Italian School*. In L. WIKANDER - C. GUSTAFSSON - U. RIIS (a cura di), *Enlightenment, Creativity and Education: Politics, Politics, Performances*, Sense, Rotterdam, 2012, pp. 169-190; C. ROVERSELLI - A. R. PAOLONE, *Competenze trasversali. Valutazione e valorizzazione delle esperienze di studio all'estero*, Fondazione Intercultura, Colle di Val d'Elsa, 2013; F. BATINI, *Insegnare per competenze*, Loescher, Torino, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. D. K. DEARDORFF, *Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization*, in «Journal of Studies in International Education», 2006, 10(3), pp. 241-266; D. K. DEARDORFF, *Implementing intercultural competence assessment*, in D. K. DEARDORFF (a cura di), *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2009a, pp. 477-491; A. E. FANTINI, *Assessing intercultural competence: issues and tools*. In D. K. DEARDORFF (a cura di), *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2009, pp. 456-476; L. SERCU, *Assessing intercultural competence: more questions than answers*. In A. PARAN - L. SERCU (a cura di), *Testing the untestable in language education*, Multilingual Matters, Bristol, 2010, pp. 17-34. D. K. DEARDORFF - E. JONES, *Intercultural competence*. In DEARDORFF D. K. - DE WIT H. - HEYL J. - ADAMS T. (a cura di), *The SAGE handbook of international higher education*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2012, pp. 283-303.

new Italian school's 'culture', as it must increasingly face the international context.

Finally, new aspect that should be emphasized is the creation of regional school-networks – *Rete Promos(s)i* –, which are seriously dealing with the challenges posed by the student mobility to educational governance. In cooperation with *Intercultura* association, these networks has the goal to find common ways to manage the issue of student mobility and thereby to balance the assessment practices not only within each single institute, but also within all schools belonging to these networks.

## 5. Conclusions

The main topic of the present paper concerns student mobility, which represents one of the means employed in order to increase the internationalisation of education. In Italy this intercultural and international activity challenges the traditional 'culture' of secondary schools. The article analyzed one of these challenges, i.e. how the school system deals with the assessment of returnees. In particular, the paper took into account two anticipated outcomes of a long-term exchange experience, which are the intercultural competence and, more generally, the transversal competences. In order to answer the research question, the very preliminary results of an ongoing doctoral research developed through a qualitative approach were presented and discussed.

The first analysis suggests that the overall experience of a long period of studying abroad is difficult to assess as the competences acquired are both disciplinary and non-disciplinary in nature. This finding is supported also by the literature review.

The intercultural competence, more specifically, has not been taken into account either by the Italian legislation or by school documents. On the other hand, the transversal competences, which are explicitly mentioned in the Italian legislation and school documents, do not seem to be taken into sufficient consideration when it comes to assigning formative credits. This situation seems to be caused not only by the lack of a clear set of rules, but also by the Italian school tradition which pays more attention to subject contents rather than to the extra-disciplinary competences. Another possible explanation might be that the concept of competences, and in particular the intercultural competence, have been inserted within Italian pedagogical academic debates only recently. Hence, teachers are not yet prepared to assess them.

At the same time, the empirical research has shown that something is slowly changing. To start with the entire Ministry's attitude has become more interested in the global experience rather than in the mere study done abroad. Moreover, during the last year, some schools have implemented protocols with the aim of balancing the assessment practices of returnees within the same institute. Lastly, we can notice the creation of the first new

school networks. They represent valuable attempts to identify shared approach to the challenges of student mobility with the goal to adopt common 'good practices' toward the growing phenomenon of student mobility.

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