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# Teaching Non-Italian Students: Italian Adaptation of the Questionnaire on Teachers' Perspectives \*

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## INSEGNARE AGLI STUDENTI NON ITALIANI: ADATTAMENTO IN ITALIANO DEL QUESTIONARIO SULLE PERCEZIONI DEGLI INSEGNANTI

### ABSTRACT

*The survey of teachers' perspectives on the teaching of refugees and immigrant pupils by Kurbegovic (2016) is used to evaluate five dimensions of teachers' self-perception: Self-efficacy, Implementation Practices, Cultural Competence, Competence/Preparation and Student Needs. The present study is aimed at analysing the self-awareness of primary school teachers of the teaching of refugee and immigrant students in Italy. The survey of Kurbegovic within its 30 items (Cronbach's Alpha = .86) was conducted on a sample of 190 teachers who teach in primary schools in Rome. After removing 2 items that are cross loading, the exploratory factor analysis (Maximum likelihood method with Oblimin rotation) confirms a five-factor structure and shows a good construct validity and reli-*

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\* The research contribution is the result of joint work; É. Du Merac is the author of paragraph 1; G. Benvenuto is the author of the paragraphs 2 and 5; C. Şensin is the author of the paragraphs 3 and 4.

*ability. Current research reveals that the survey of teachers' perspectives on refugee and immigrant populations is appropriately adapted to assess Italian primary school teachers' views. This tool demonstrates its usefulness not only for research but also for pedagogical practice and can help to create an inclusive classroom environment that provide students with equal access to the curriculum and learning experiences.*

*Keywords:* Cross-cultural adaptation; Immigrant pupils; Primary School; Refugee pupils; Teacher perceptions.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL FRAMEWORK

Refugee flows through the Mediterranean Sea to Greece and Italy have been particularly large, especially after the EU-Turkey Agreement (European Council, 2016). There is still concern about the transfer of a large number of refugees and Vieira (2016) pointed out that the Italian press talked about immigration as an emergency and, in that way, contributed to crystallizing over time a univocal interpretation of immigration. This interpretive frame led to policies that did not guarantee the right conditions for promoting an effective integration (Campani, 2007).

The access to integrated classrooms and schools, where both groups are together, is crucial and has a significant effect on communication (Tropp & Prenovost, 2008); therefore it can be said that schools in general play a key role in the process of settling migrants into their new environments whilst providing an ideal environment for implementing integration for immigrant children (Dooley, 2009). Within this objective, different national education systems follow different strategies. According to the statistics published by the Italian Ministry of Education (MIUR, 2019), during the 2017-2018 academic year, 9.7% of school population was with immigrant roots. In the decade of 2008-2018, the number of foreign students increased by 33.7% in Italy and most of the foreign students are second generation students. The schooling rates of immigrant students are close to those of Italians both in the age group 6-13, corresponding to elementary school, and in the age group 14-16, corresponding to the first three-year degree of secondary school.

According to the technical report by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, the school drop-out rates, among natives, first and second-generation migrants, show particularly worrying results for first-generation migrants in Greece, Spain and Italy (traditional destinations for low-educated migrants), where one in three foreign-born individuals is an early school leaver (Filsì, Meroni, & Vera-Toscano, 2016).

Knowing that young immigrants are a rapidly growing population, which constitutes a structural reality in Italy (Colombo, 2007; Farina *et al.*, 2009; Caponio & Schmoll, 2011), therefore the aspect of learning from other cultures and building bridges at schools should be promoted. In short, it is essential to work in the direction of true inclusion and, for this reason, a student with non-Italian citizenship should be considered a student with linguistic problems related to special educational needs, that is what Melero Rodríguez (2015) claims. As he explains, students may need special attention for different reasons: disability; specific developmental disorders; and, last but not least, the socio-economic, linguistic and cultural disadvantage (Tabarelli & Pisanu, 2013). The intervention tools for pupils with special educational needs published by MIUR (2012) recommends the use of Personalized Education Program. According to their report published later (MIUR, 2019), the central aspect of the school inclusion process for pupils with non-Italian citizenship is their distribution among schools and, within of schools, between classes. To avoid the concentration of pupils with non-Italian citizenship in some schools and to favour their balanced distribution, MIUR has established some organizational criteria regarding their distribution among schools and in individual classes.

As observed in two different studies, the immigrant pupils were more successful when the teachers modified their long-established pedagogic approaches to better engage the refugee students and re-organized school activities from easy to difficult (Dooley, 2009; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010).

However, Taylor (2008) stated that not only children's language needs, but also their other learning and emotional needs should be taken into account. Considering the literature and the role played by school teachers in the education of refugee and immigrant children, this study starts from the assumption that, to contribute to improving their learning conditions and performances, it is essential to refer to the experience of the teachers, the difficulties they encounter and their opinions and perceptions of the education path of refugee children.

The way in which the educational context influences the development of the child has been studied in the psychological and pedagogical literature (Dewey, 1923; Piaget, 1997; for a summary of the main empirical studies, see Sutherland *et al.*, 2008). The organization and quality of curricular and extra-curricular activities and classroom interactions are the tool to contrast inequalities in learning and dispersion in studies (Benvenuto, 2011), but also have a significant impact on the development of attitudes (du Mérac, 2015; 2017; Lucisano & du Mérac, 2015; Stanzione & du Mérac, 2018) and transversal skills (De Santis & du Mérac, 2019; Lucisano & du Mérac, 2019). Other studies on this topic highlight how

students have a better attachment to school and do best when teachers show attention and interest and take care of them (Hallinan, 2008; Kindermann & Vollet, 2014). Therefore, it is essential to point out what teachers think about the experience of teaching immigrant and refugee students and to record their opinions and perceptions in order to understand more about the difficulties encountered and necessary resources.

In line with this idea, the questionnaire that was used by Kurbegovic (2016) was found appropriate for adaptation into Italian in order to investigate teachers' beliefs and attitudes to the following factors in meeting the needs of refugees and immigrant children in Italy: self-efficacy perceived by teachers, attitudes towards the implementation of new and innovative practices, cultural competence, preventive preparation and general competence and perceptions of the needs of refugee and immigrant students.

## 2. THE ADAPTATION OF THE SURVEY FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS IN ITALY

The adapted version of the Kurbegovic's questionnaire (2016) is aimed to investigate teachers' perceptions of themselves about the school contexts of refugee and immigrant pupils in their classes and how to teach strategies (Şensin, 2016; 2019; Khaperskaia & Şensin, 2019). To this end, Kurbegovic's questionnaire has been validated in its Italian version. The goal that guided the study was to obtain valid context indicators that could be related to the teachers' perception factors examined by the original questionnaire. For this purpose, in order to readjust the tool to a sample of Italian teachers, the original version of the questionnaire was administered first, to then conduct the statistical analyses necessary for a solid factorial structure with good reliability indices.

The statistics were used to answer the following question: What are teachers' beliefs and attitudes in teaching refugee and immigrant students in terms of social / emotional / behavioural and mental health needs?

## 3. THE RESEARCH METHOD

### 3.1. *The research model*

The purpose of this study is to examine the views of primary school teachers about this process to determine its flaws. In this study, an online survey



(Cronbach's Alpha = .858) with elementary school teachers (N = 190) was conducted to examine teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards the following factors in meeting the needs of refugee and migrant children: perceived self-efficacy of teachers, attitudes towards the implementation of new and innovative practices, cultural skills, preventive preparation and general competence and perceptions of the needs of refugee and immigrant students.

### *3.2. The research sample*

This study was conducted in the year 2019 and the sample consisted of a total of 190 elementary school teachers. The sample involved eight schools in Rome and the province of Rome in Italy. The eight schools were chosen according to the territorial criteria, whereas the foreign population of their neighbourhoods is known as higher than the rest of the city (i.e. Centocelle, Castelnuovo di Porto).

In summary, 177, or 93.1%, were female teachers and only 6.9% of participant teachers were male. Half of the teachers belonged to the age group between 41 and 54. 85 teachers who have teaching experience for over 20 years are equal to 44.7% of all participants, which is the highest percentage among all other groups of years of teaching experience. Statistics also show the teachers taught the following subjects: a large portion of teachers were teachers of Italian language (32.1%) and the rest teachers of mathematics (20.5%). Most of the participants, 73.7%, had had experience in teaching refugees and/or immigrant students in the previous five years, but among all the participants, only a small number of 20 teachers currently have refugee and/or immigrant students in their classes. A greater number of participating teachers, equal to 75.3%, said they had second generation immigrant students, compared to the number of teachers who had first generation immigrant students.

### *3.3. Procedure*

The original search tool (Kurbegovic, 2016) was modelled on several different research tools (Schwarzer, Schmitz, & Daytner, 1999; Vassallo, 2012; Aarons, 2014; Kurbegovic, 2016). Kurbegovic's (2016) final form in American English has been translated into Italian. Then, ten Italian teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire with the aim of receiving feedback as a first pilot study. In that stage, the tool was examined, mainly

regarding the differences between the cultural contexts. The feedback to the differences between the two contexts was taken into account and changes were made accordingly to improve the new version of the questionnaire. Subsequently, the updated questionnaire was administered to another sample of 16 teachers in Rome. Teachers of the second pilot study commented on two items of the research tools and argued that two elements needed explanation, in fact, these elements have been found to disturb the exploratory factor analysis. After adding examples to these two elements in order to explain the meaning behind, the questionnaire was found ready by the researcher and her supervisors. After all, statistical analyses were carried out on IBM SPSS 25 programme.

As a limitation of this research, some of the teachers (N = 3) decided not to participate in the study considering that their immigrant students were children of diplomats, which limited the study to the teachers who teach refugee/immigrant pupils but did not include the teachers of third-culture kids (TCKs) even though refugees and immigrants may share similar experiences with TCKs, yet, third-culture individuals do not plan to stay or settle in the host cultures (Luksic Hacin, 2010; Lyttle, Barker, & Cornwell, 2011; Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2014).

Administrations took place from February to June 2019 within the schools, paper-based and in electronic format via Google Form. To protect the privacy of the research participants, no identifying information was collected in the survey information.

### 3.4. *The research tool*

The investigation tool included 30 closed elements (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.86) consisting of a measurement scale made up of five different conceptual subcategories derived from other scales. A 4-point Likert scale was used as it collects enough data with variability among respondents and reduces neutral responses (Alwin, 1997; Dillman *et al.*, 2014). The Teacher's Self-efficacy scale (Schwarzer, Schmitz, & Daytner, 1999) was used and adapted to the self-efficacy for this questionnaire. Cronbach's alpha scale was .84. Similarly, the Evidence Based Attitude Scale (Aarons, 2004) was adapted to the implementation of practices for this survey. To measure cultural competence, a survey on multicultural skills was used and adapted (Vassallo, 2012). The objects were chosen to see different aspects such as awareness, knowledge, attitude and ability. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .77. For the competence/preparation and needs of the students, the scales were adapted by Kurbegovic (2016). Cronbach's alpha for these

scales was .77 and .83. Eight basic questions were included at the start of the survey. For each element of each category, the words «students with non-Italian citizenship» were added to each statement to describe refugee and immigrant students. All categories included the following format of the agreement-disagreement statements: «Completely disagree», «Slightly disagree», «Slightly agree» and «Completely agree».

The examined subcategories are Self-efficacy (6 items), Attitudes towards Implementation Practices (7 items), Intercultural Dimension (6 items), Competence/Preparation (5 items) and Students' Needs (6 items).

## 4. ANALYSIS

### 4.1. *Exploratory factorial analysis*

When the questionnaire, used by Kurbegovic (2016), was directly applied to the participating teachers in Italy, seven factors emerged from the exploratory factor analysis.

For this study, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was applied by direct oblimin rotation and maximum likelihood extraction as a prediction method to evaluate the underlying dimensions of teachers' perspectives on teaching refugee and immigrant children. Exploratory factor analysis was performed using SPSS and correlations between items and factors were evaluated by Pearson's correlation coefficient. Results show factor loadings ranging from .35 to .86. The 7 factors cumulatively explained 52.18% of the variance and their correlation coefficients ranging from .12 to .50.

Two items from the scale «Attitudes towards implementation practices» (IM 6 and IM7) are seen to cause difficulty in factor analysis. Given the emergence of five factors in the original questionnaire, these elements have been excluded from the scales in order to calculate the Pearson correlation coefficients. The two elements are associated with their own factor of Implementing Practices ( $r = .677$  and  $634$ ;  $< .01$ ), however they are also related to the dimensions of Self-efficacy ( $r = .37$  and  $.47$ ;  $< .01$ ) and Intercultural Dimension ( $r = .32$  and  $.43$ ;  $< .01$ ).

These two items were an outcome of the translation process from American-English and were then modified in accordance with the comments after the pilot study. The need to clarify the items and make them understandable to participant teachers, examples of items had to be added, which resulted in having items with long explanations. Each item consisted

of two dependent clauses, which may have caused confusion for participant teachers. In light of this, after the elimination of two items from the research tool, the factorial structure identified 5 factors, such as those by Kurbegovic (2016), that cumulatively explained 47.19% of the variance and whose Cronbach's alpha coefficients were between .77 and .91. In *Table 1*, the item saturations, variance explained, and Cronbach's alpha values are presented. The first factor is Implementing Practices with saturations ranging from -.76 to .87; the second is Student Needs with saturations ranging from .48 to .86.; the third is Competence with saturations ranging from .47 to .82; Self-efficacy shows saturations ranging from .49 to .79. Finally, the Intercultural Dimension shows saturation from .46 to .68.

*Table 1. – Item saturations and Cronbach's alpha values for the 5-factor model.*

| FACTORS                   | SATURATIONS      | VARIANCE EXPLAINED | CRONBACH'S ALPHA |
|---------------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Implementing Practices    | From -.76 to .87 | 21.75              | .87              |
| Immigrant Students' Needs | From .48 to .86  | 10.71              | .82              |
| Competence/Preparation    | From .47 to .82  | 6.17               | .77              |
| Self-efficacy             | From .49 to .79  | 4.62               | .84              |
| Intercultural Dimension   | From .46 to .68  | 3.94               | .76              |

#### 4.2. Pearson correlation coefficients

*Table 2* describes the correlations between the 5 factors found in this study.

*Table 2. – Correlations among the scales.*

| FACTORS                   | SE    | IM    | ID    | CO  | SN |
|---------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-----|----|
| Self-efficacy             | 1     |       |       |     |    |
| Implementing Practices    | .52** | 1     |       |     |    |
| Intercultural Dimension   | .49** | .47** | 1     |     |    |
| Competency/Preparation    | .31** | .22** | .32** | 1   |    |
| Immigrant Students' Needs | -.06  | -.03  | .02   | .12 | 1  |

*Note:* \*\* = The correlation is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed); \* = The correlation is significant at .05 level (two-tailed).

Further analyses, carried out in order to evaluate relationships among scales, showed a series of significant correlations ranging from .516 to -.057.

Moderate positive correlations have been found between the Teachers' perceived Self-efficacy and the two other scales of Implementing Practices and Intercultural Dimension. This means that the higher the degree of self-efficacy of teachers, the greater the likelihood of positive attitudes towards the implementation of classroom practices. Self-efficacy has stronger correlation with competence as the assessments of the participating teachers increased their confidence in the education of refugees and immigrant students, they were more likely to register the feeling of being able to meet the needs of those populations of pupils, which is a discovery consistent with the research linking self-efficacy to the effectiveness of the teacher in the classes (Holzberger, Philipp, & Kunter, 2013). The variable of the Implementation Practices shows a positive correlation with the variable of competence. As the teachers' scores in their willingness to implement practices increased, they were more likely to feel more competent in their ability to educate refugee and immigrant students, which is a finding consistent with the research linking the competence and willingness to implement new and effective practices (Callahan, Henson, & Cowan, 2008; Ely *et al.*, 2014).

Findings showed no correlation between Immigrant Students' Needs and the other four factors. The explanation for that is that the items of the Immigrant Students' Needs factor included opinions about students with non-Italian citizenship, but all the remaining factors included teachers' assessments themselves.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The current study examined the measurement equivalence of the Kurbegovic's questionnaire, by providing a first step towards cross-cultural validation of this model and develop a translation and adaptation of the questionnaire for the Italian students. The other purpose of the survey was to obtain information from primary school teachers on their perspectives and perceptions of the teaching of refugees and immigrant pupils in their classes in Rome.

To this end, the questionnaire was administered and adapted for the reference sample and statistical analyses aimed at validating the model.

With respect to the research methodology employed, the Italian version of the questionnaire have adequately met the standards of validity and reliability and exploratory factor analysis confirmed that a five-factor structure best fit the data, namely: self-efficacy, implementation practices, cultural competence, competence/preparation and student needs as in the original form.

Although future studies with probabilistic sampling procedures would be useful to avoid distortions in the interpretation of Italian scores, the results of the present study indicate that the Italian version of the Kurbegovic's questionnaire can be used to evaluate the primary school teachers' perception of the class context in the Italian school. This tool demonstrates its usefulness not only for research but also for pedagogical practice and can help to create an inclusive classroom environment that provide students with equal access to the curriculum and learning experiences.

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## RIASSUNTO

*Lo strumento sulla percezione degli insegnanti nei confronti dell'insegnamento degli studenti rifugiati e immigrati di Kurbegovic (2016) è utilizzato per valutare cinque diverse dimensioni: autoefficacia, pratiche attuate, competenza culturale, competenzaal*

preparazione e bisogni degli studenti. Il presente studio si propone di misurare l'auto-percezione degli insegnanti di scuola primaria nei confronti dell'insegnamento degli studenti rifugiati e immigrati in Italia. Il questionario di Kurbegovic, composto da 30 item (*Alpha* di Cronbach = .86), è stato somministrato online presso un campione di 190 insegnanti di scuole primarie di Roma. Dopo aver rimosso due item che correlavano con più fattori, l'analisi fattoriale esplorativa (con estrazione massima verosimiglianza e rotazione obliqua) conferma la struttura originale a cinque fattori e mostra una buona validità e affidabilità del costruito. La presente ricerca indica un corretto adattamento del questionario di Kurbegovic che permette una valida valutazione delle opinioni degli insegnanti della scuola primaria in Italia. Questo strumento si rivela utile non solo per la ricerca, ma anche per la pratica pedagogica e può aiutare a creare un ambiente scolastico inclusivo che fornisca agli studenti pari accesso all'istruzione e alle esperienze di apprendimento.

*Parole chiave:* Adattamento interculturale; Alunni immigrati; Alunni rifugiati; Percezioni degli insegnanti; Scuola elementare.

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