

Fostering interculturally responsive educators for a sustainable society

Nicolina Bosco*, Carlo Orefice*, Loretta Fabbri*, Mario Giampaolo**

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic rendered social inequalities more visible in the last two years and negatively impacted different spheres of life all around the world. How do we enhance quality education and reduce inequalities in the teaching and learning process? This paper presents the main results derived from a quantitative study involving university students who are enrolled in Bachelor's and Master's Degree courses in Italy. Students were asked to fill out surveys concerning the Student Measure of Culturally Responsive Teaching (Italian version) and the Sense of Belonging in order to explore their perceptions of culture-based teaching practices applied during lessons and their sense of belonging to the academic context. Data coming from statistical analysis shows a higher level of CRT and SoB, and reveals a moderate and positive correlation between the examined variables. These results allow us to reflect on the role of the active development methodologies, which can be applied in the educational contexts to promote intercultural dialogue and future culturally engaged professionals in order to reduce social barriers in the learning process and promote a more sustainable world.

Key words: universities; measures; students; intercultural learning; sustainability; educators.

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1. A Culturally Responsive Teaching approach to promote multicultural learning in Higher Education

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development outlines 17 goals that would

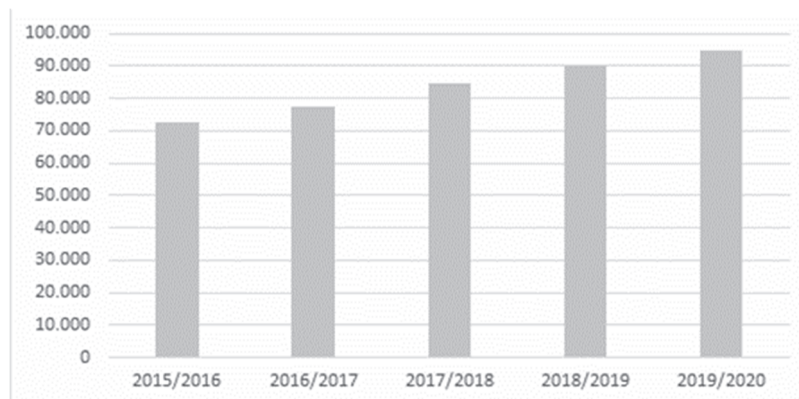
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° The contribution is the result of the joint work of the authors. For reasons of scientific attribution, we specify that Carlo Orefice is the author of §.1 and §.4, Nicolina Bosco is the author of §.2 and § 3, Mario Giampaolo is the co-author of §.3, Loretta Fabbri is the co-author of §.4.

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allow prosperity and peace, reducing inequalities around the world, and fostering lifelong learning opportunities for all¹. The goals are intercorrelated to each other, but in this paper, we direct our attention especially on Goal 4 “Quality Education” and Goal 10 “Reduced inequalities”. This point of view is due to the fact that for almost two years now the COVID-19 pandemic affected families, work, and educational contexts, exacerbating barriers and making social inequalities more visible in all spheres of life (Boeren, Roumell & Roessger, 2020). Those responsible for educational contexts, such as schools and universities, need to understand how to strengthen participation in lifelong educational programs, in order to define useful didactic methodologies, that are able to promote a learner-centered approach for students (James & Thériault, 2020; Stanistreet, Elfert & Atchoarena, 2020; Orefice, 2019). Considering universities, the contexts of this work, the definition of innovative practices may enhance the plural aspects which characterize classes (Fiorucci, 2018; Fabbri & Amiraux, 2020). Plurality is defined here as an opportunity to learn and as an instrument for reducing additional barriers that students may encounter in their educational projects (Bosco, 2022). Changing societies also impact Higher Education. This generates new challenges for students and faculties, which need to be paying attention to these changes (Santagati, 2021; Bosco, Fabbri & Giampaolo, 2022). In Italy, for example, the increasing number of multicultural students (see Figure 1) require universities to understand how to manage, encourage and foster learning processes using cultural knowledge and learning style from students’ experiences in order to prioritize a culture-based process of learning (Gay, 2013; Waller *et al.*, 2020).

Figure 1 - Total number of students with a migratory background in Italian Universities (Source: Bosco, Fabbri & Giampaolo, 2022)



¹ Text available at the website: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals> retrieved on July 5 2022.

At a national and international level, the empirical investigations conducted so far have allowed us to intercept two main trajectories of studies: the first one focuses on the “negative” aspects and on the impact that the dynamics of migration may have on learning outcomes or academic failure involving multicultural students (Rhodes, 2017); the second one investigates the academic successes achieved by them in order to understand the strategies that are negotiated with teachers and peers for improving educational opportunities that can be experienced at university (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009; Giacomantonio, Luciano & Marcuccio, 2019; Snyder & Fenner, 2021; Santagati, 2021; Riva, 2022).

In the field of multicultural education, the potential strategies able to achieve this are referred to as Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), which is defined as a theoretical and methodological approach that evaluates the prior experiences and significant perspectives of ethnically diverse students in order to improve their cultural meaningfulness and their academic achievement (Lucisano, 2012; Yanaprasart & Lüdi, 2018; Melacarne & Fabbri, 2020; Fiorucci, 2020). CRT develops an environment of learning that “celebrates” the differences in each class and makes it possible to explore the socio-cultural capital of students (Fabbri & Melacarne, 2015; Bosco, Orefice & Giampaolo, 2020; Gross, 2021). Scholars in this field highlight some specific factors that may engage students in their learning process, such as 1) the validation of prior experience and frames; 2) creating connections among study materials and the cultural identity of students; 3) creating a multidimensional learning context and classroom climate, consisting of the relationship among teachers and students and the contents of the class. Moreover, the CRT approach applied in classes should empower students, increasing their motivation and their sense of belonging, which could have a potentially transformative impact, because identifying the existing strengths of students improves their future personal and professional prefiguration (Yanaprasart & Lüdi, 2018; Rossi & Giaconi, 2016; Ricchiardi & Coggi, 2019). CRT is thus an “umbrella term which encompasses a variety of approaches, such as culturally relevant, culturally sensitive, culturally congruent, and culturally contextualized pedagogies based on an equity-based approach which places students’ cultures at the core of the learning process” (Rhodes, 2017, p. 45). The theoretical models of CRT which have been analyzed by the authors focus on didactic practices that are able to promote inclusion and positive attitudes towards learning. These aspects are especially highlighted in the Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching (Gay, 2013) which identify teaching practices that may enhance the critical reflection on the real experience and may develop transdisciplinary skills for students. Studies focused on the measures of CRT identify three latent dimensions that characterize this construct (Woodley *et al.*,

2017; Romano & Orefice, 2022; Verhaeghe, 2017), such as diverse teaching practices, cultural engagement, and diverse language affirmation. This last dimension (diverse language affirmation) has been redefined as “relationship-building practices” in a study that involved university students, and which inspired the study reported here. The three dimensions of CRT – diverse teaching practices, cultural engagement, and relationship-building practices – have also been confirmed in Italian university contexts (Bosco, 2022) and specifically referring to: 1) the application and the differentiation of teaching strategies used to reach the needs of the student population (that is, diverse teaching strategies), 2) the evaluation of socio-cultural capital through teaching strategies that enhance culture-based teaching and the development of cross-cultural skills (that is cultural engagement), 3) the ability to develop a positive relationship between teachers and students and among students, which can lay the foundations for the creation of an inclusive learning environment (that is relationship building practices).

“Cultural engagement” as a dimension applied to education, in order to achieve equity and social justice, has been already explored in literature (Dickson, Chun & Fernandez, 2016). The Conceptual Model for Cultural Engagement (CMCE) aims to reach a level of cultural effectiveness that supports positive interactions with the student populations. One of the aims of the CMCE is to create “a level of cultural effectiveness that may support positive interactions within the diverse populations” (Dickson, Chun & Fernandez, 2016, p. 33). Applying these models and approaches during lessons may educate future professionals making them potential agents of change in society.

Thus, knowing student populations and their needs – cultural as well – is crucial for faculties, in order to study how to promote new opportunities for learning. Furthermore, fostering interculturally responsive professionals may help future educators to understand the different cultural meanings which characterize their future work contexts (Gay, 2013) and may lead to reducing inequalities for all people (Coggi & Ricchiardi, 2014).

Starting from these reflections, how can we ensure inclusive and equitable education for all students? And how can we enhance the cultural dimension in the teaching-learning process, in order to facilitate a sense of academic belonging (SoB)? These are the main scientific questions that shepherd this contribution, which is aimed at exploring the CRT and SoB in Italian Higher Education, in order to draw potential useful strategies that may be applied during university lessons, to enhance culture-based learning for all students, teaching them equity and social justice.

2. The Research

2.1 Materials and Methods

The research presented here takes place in Italy where, as stated before, the number of multicultural students increased in the last decades (Bosco, Fabbri & Giampaolo, 2022). The study adopts a quantitative approach (Creswell, 2002; Sorzio & Bembich, 2020) to explore and determine students' opinions about CRT practices during university lessons and their sense of belonging, pointing special attention to measurable observations reported by students with a migratory background.

2.1.1 Participants and Procedures

The participants were 360 university students enrolled in Bachelor's and Master's Degree Courses at the University of Siena, the context where the study took place. The sample has been principally composed of female students (92%) enrolled in Educational Sciences (76%), Languages for Intercultural and Business Communication (17%), Education sciences and Educational Consulting for Organizations (4%), and Economics and Banking (2%). Participants were recruited through a convenience sample procedure which, even if it is not representative of the entire student population, made it possible to obtain the first useful evidence for responding to the objectives and the scientific questions of the research. The authors of this study were available to monitor and ensure the proper administration of the survey packets. Each participant was instructed, regarding the purpose of the study, and expressed her/his consent to her/his participation in the study.

2.1.2 Measures

After collecting all the informed consent statements, we ask participants to fill out the survey composed of three sections: 1) demographical information; 2) perceptions about culturally responsive teaching practices applied in classes; 3) sense of belonging to the academic context.

In the first part, the demographic section solicited information about participants' age, gender, affiliation, and students' cultural background.

The second section measures the students' perception of the CRT through the *Students Measure of Culturally Responsive Teaching Scale* (SMCRT) (Dickson, Chun & Fernandez, 2016; Huang, 2019). The Italian version of these instruments (Bosco, Fabbri & Giampaolo, 2022) present a good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.90$) and, as the original scale (Huang, 2019), is composed of 23 items which use a five-point Likert scales (from 1 = Never to 5 = Always)

to collect measures on its factors: *i*) diverse teaching practices ($\alpha = 0.85$), *ii*) cultural engagement practices ($\alpha = 0.82$), and *iii*) relationship building practices ($\alpha = 0.79$). Scores are summated across 23 items and measure the higher/lower degree of culturally responsive teaching.

The third section of the survey is focused on the sense of belonging. This section is composed of items derived from the three scales aimed at measuring the psychological sense of belonging at school and at universities (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Hoffman *et al.*, 2003; Hess, Lanig & Vaughan, 2007) in order to appropriately reflect the observation for the higher education, context of this study. The scale reported herein (Huang, 2019) presents a good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.82$), it is composed of 11 items and used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) that measures the extent to which students feel that they are accepted and belong within their university. Scores are summated and divided by 11 in order to observe the higher/lower sense of belonging.

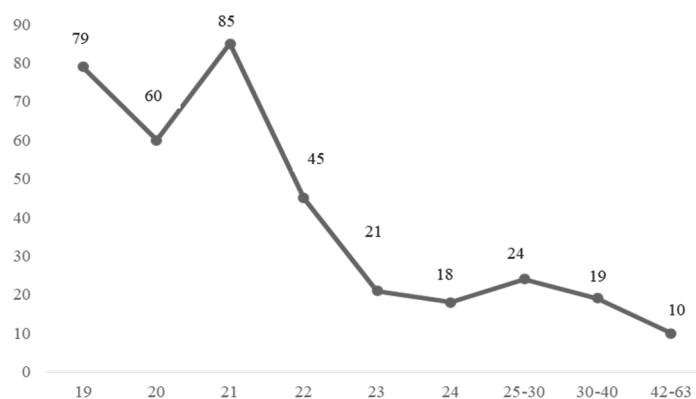
3. The Results

Data analysis has been performed through the Statistical Package for Social Science software (SPSS, version 28). Results emerging from descriptive and inferential statistics (see 3.1) are presented below.

3.1. Statistical Analysis

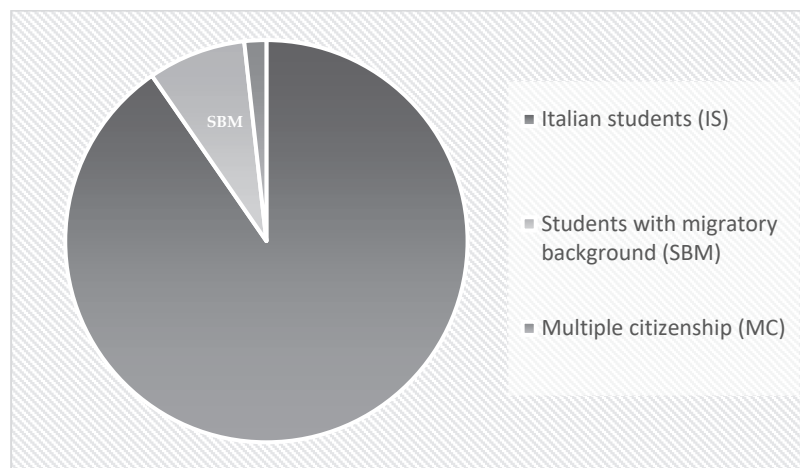
The sample is composed of 333 female (92.5%) and 25 male students (7%) of the University of Siena. Two students provided no information regarding gender. Participant ages ranged from 19 to 63 years old ($M = 23$; $SD = 5.7$) The distribution of the sample by age is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 - Distribution of the sample by age



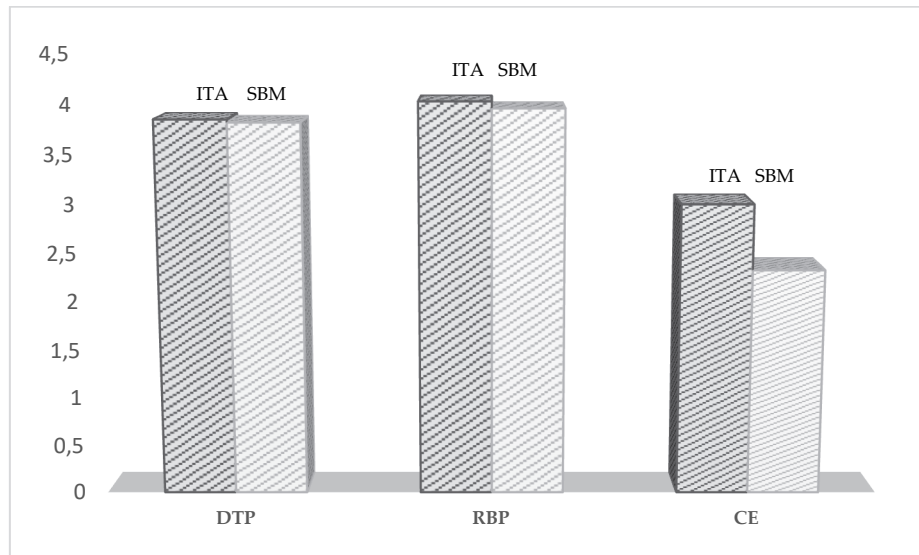
Almost all of the participating students self-identified as Italian (92%) and a minimum percentage of the total number self-identified as students with a migratory background (8%), whose ethnicity refers to Romanian (3%), Albanian (1.5%), Macedonian (0.3%), Ukraine (0.3%), Syrian (0.3%), Uzbek (0.3%) and Colombian (0.3%). A small percentage of the participants (1.8%) declare multiple citizenships and self-identified themselves as Italian-Brazilian (0.3%), Italian-Tunisian (0.3%), Italian-American (0.3%), Italian-Romanian (0.3%), Italian-Filipino (0.3%) and Italian-Colombian (0.3%). The student's cultural identity is reported in Figure 3.

Figure 3 - Students' cultural identity



The investigation of CRT detects a higher degree of culturally responsive teaching. In particular, data shows that students perceive that teachers apply and differentiate teaching strategies in classes to reach the educational and cultural needs of the student population ($M = 4.33$; $SD = 0.15$), and are perceived as able to develop a positive relationship in class in order to facilitate an inclusive learning environment ($M = 4.35$; $SD = 0.5$). This aspect is specifically highlighted by Italian students (SBM: $M = 3.95$; $SD = 0.66$; ITA: $M = 4.02$; $SD = 0.63$). In terms of specific cultural engagement strategies, as a factor detected in the SMCRT scale, students report that teachers apply them to enhance culture-based learning ($M = 3.07$; $SD = 1.31$) but this effort is specifically reported by Italian students (SBM: $M = 2.32$; $SD = 0.81$; ITA: $M = 3$; $SD = 0.8$). Figure 4 shows the average scores of SMCRT for Italian and multicultural students.

Figure 4 - Average scores in Diverse Teaching Practices (DTP), Relationship Building Practices (RBP), and Cultural Engagement (CE) for Italian and multicultural students



How many students feel as part of their academic context? Data shows that participants feel as if they belonged to their university ($M = 3.18$; $SD = 1.41$) and this aspect is not influenced by their cultural backgrounds (SBM: $M = 3.47$; $SD = 0.43$; ITA: $M = 3.48$; $SD = 0.41$). Students declare they feel comfortable contributing to the discussion in the classroom (ITA: $M = 3.35$; $SD = 0.93$; SBM: $M = 3.23$; $SD = 1.07$), which made it possible to build positive relationships and make new friends (ITA: $M = 4.03$; $SD = 0.83$; SBM: $M = 3.85$; $SD = 1.04$). The social dimension of learning has also been promoted by the engagement in the study groups, especially for multicultural students (ITA: $M = 3.87$; $SD = 1.04$; SBM: $M = 4.15$; $SD = 0.73$). Data shows lower scores referred to the disagreement expressed by students for some items, in particular items 6 and 8 of the SoB scale, which express sentences about obstacles (i.e., discrimination and/or negative relationship with faculties) that may occur in students' learning career. As reported in the Table below, these pieces of data are similar in the subpopulation involved in this study (Italian and multicultural students).

The average scores referred to as the SoB are reported in the following Table 1.

Table 1 - Average scores of sense of belonging for Italian and multicultural students

Sense of Belonging (SoB)	Italian Students	Multicultural Students
SoB1	3,35 (SD = ,93)	3,23 (SD = 1,07)
SoB2	4,03 (SD = ,83)	3,85 (SD = 1,05) ¹
SoB3	3,87 (SD = 1,05)	4,15 (SD = ,73)
SoB4	3,94 (SD = ,81)	3,92 (SD = ,67)
SoB5	2,93 (SD = 1,07)	2,77 (SD = ,93)
SoB6	1,82 (SD = ,85)	2,08 (SD = ,9)
SoB7	4,15 (SD = ,56)	4,08 (SD = ,74)
SoB8	1,89 (SD = ,87)	2,08 (SD = 1,05)
SoB9	4,34 (SD = ,62)	4,23 (SD = ,65)
SoB10	4,02 (SD = 0,64)	4,12 (SD = ,65)
SoB11	3,93 (SD = ,78)	3,73 (SD = ,83)

¹ The main average of a Sense of Belonging for Italian and Multicultural students is reported in this table; The scores of Standard Deviation (SD) can be found in brackets.

To explore a potential relationship between CRT and SoB in student populations, we calculate the Pearson correlation coefficient in order to detect both the strength of the relationship and the direction. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumption of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity.

Data shows a strong and positive relationship between variables. In particular, data indicates a positive relationship between the factors of CRT and SoB ($r = 0.34$, $p < .01$) and underlines a positive and medium correlation between SoB and the components of CRT. The strength of the relationship and the direction among variables is reported in the following Table 2.

Table 2 - Relationship among CRT and SoB

	CRT	DTP	CE	RBP	SoB
CRT	1 ¹				
DTP	.90**	1			
CE	.81**	.54**	1		
RBP	.83**	.70*	.46**	1	
SoB	.4**	.38*	.26**	.36**	1

4. Discussion and conclusions

This research aimed to explore how to enhance quality education and reduce inequalities in the teaching and learning process, considering the transformation

of societies, which also impacts Higher Education (Boeren, Roumell & Roessger, 2020). Through a quantitative approach we explore students' opinions considering the multicultural dimension of the student population to investigate and measure their opinion on CRT practices during university lessons and their sense of belonging to their academic context in order to define some potential didactic strategies and methodologies which may educate students, opening them up to a worldview characterized by equity and social justice using a cross-cultural perspective (Gay, 2013; Rhodes, 2017; Snyder S., Fenner, 2021). Data reveals that the differentiation of culturally responsive strategies applied by teachers during lessons, recognizing teachers as culturally competent and culturally sensitive and therefore able to develop and build a positive relationship and a positive climate in classes, impacts the creation of an inclusive learning environment for all (Woodley, Hernandez & Parra, 2017). Even if faculties are perceived as culturally responsive, students report lower scores in terms of cultural engagement. The evaluation of socio-cultural capital in classes may be achieved considering the role of teaching strategies that may enhance culture-based learning and the development of cross-cultural skills for students. These results allow us to reflect on the transformation of the student population which, as reported before in this paper, is changing during the last decades. We require an understanding of the ways in which we can manage, encourage and foster the learning process using cultural knowledge and learning styles of all students. Moreover, in accordance with the previous study (Dickson, Chun & Fernandez, 2016; Huang, 2019), results show higher scores in terms of a sense of belonging for Italian and multicultural students and a positive relationship between CRT and its components associated with SoB. This last results emerging from inferential analysis, underline some practical implications, which may be explored in our future works. In particular, we consider the role that active methodology strategies applied in classes, may have in educating students about equity and social justice. Applying this branch of methodology may facilitate a more inclusive and multicultural engagement for students, evaluating their socio-cultural resources and their role in the learning process. The photovoice, for example, may help to understand how to culturally engage students and how to facilitate a cultural and critical reflection for a more sustainable world. This step will be explored in future works, as well as the involvement of a major number of students with migratory backgrounds, with the aim to explore the different meanings of "culture" with them, which may affect the student's perspectives and evaluation of practices in classes.

The conceptual background in which this research is placed, allows us to highlight a series of important elements in order to promote interculturally responsive educators within a sustainable society. In particular:

- the relevance, according to a socio-constructivist conception of learning, of the processes of active knowledge processing by teachers and students as a function not only of the knowledge objectives but also of the context and the dialogic relationship between the different actors (Mezirow & Taylor, 2011).
- the growing importance of the role of cooperation and intra- and inter-group dialogue in the development of educational processes that distinguish the learning experience of university “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998).
- the role given to students as “novices” capable of actively contributing to the construction of knowledge and the consolidation of the knowledge community according to processes of progressive participation and legitimation (Fabbri & Romano, 2018) appear as some of the structural elements to adequately respond to the new educational challenges and urgencies posed by the contemporary world, as well as to meet the needs of a university that wants to think in a truly innovative and inclusive way.

In this direction, from the first results that emerge from the research presented, the conditions that guarantee a “quality education”, in relation to both the challenges of the world of work and the educational success of the students involved, appear to be a complex and multi-perspective problem with respect to which active development methodologies can play a key role in helping us to question ourselves about the quality of knowledge itself, but also about the practical effects that these have in the daily life of individuals. It is in this relationship that we, in our view, promote the training of future culturally committed professionals.

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