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SHARING AND LEARNING FOR MENTORING IN EDUCATION



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SHARING AND LEARNING FOR MENTORING IN EDUCATION

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Partener 1 - Universitatea Lucian Blaga din Sibiu

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“LEARN PROJECT: MOTHER TONGUE AND THE OTHER LANGUAGES”. MENTORING AND PEER TUTORING EXPERIENCES TO BUILD INTERCULTURAL AND INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Rossella CERTINI⁵⁸

Abstract: *Plurilingualism represents one of the main categories for interpreting post-modern society: due to the growing presence of multiple languages in family and school contexts; moreover, behind the linguistic aspect there are cultures to discover, interpret and better understand. The pedagogical, in the intercultural sense, becomes central to enhancing the diversity of the human, and to making a dialogue alive, which overcomes prejudices and false beliefs. The LEARN pilot project – Mother tongue and other languages – is trying to promote an opportunity for knowledge and comparison between cultures, safeguarding and promoting personal uniqueness, towards a planetary citizenship perspective. The University of Florence was responsible for training Arabic language teachers who worked in schools promoting the alphabet, writing, and spoken language. UNIFI's scientific role was to monitor and supervise all activities, making real tutoring path.*

Key words: *LEARN project; Interculture; Educational Care; Tutoring, Arabic language and culture*

1. Postmodernity as a "planetary" place

For scholars and researchers addressing the topic of multilingualism opens an important window on the integral education of the Person, on multilingual identity and on the beneficial effects that this brings to the psychological, social, and emotional life of the subject (Anolli, 2006). This is a complex path (and complexity is one of the contemporary paradigms that characterizes our postmodern time) and this needs to be studied and well understood, in order to develop the right accompanying strategies and the most appropriate methodologies. The well-being of the person also passes through the recognition and practice of the “mother tongue” and the integration of other languages, which produces a new self-image within an evolving personal history (Augé, 2017).

Knowing and practicing multiple languages is an exercise and a widespread practice today, even if history teaches us (and not just linguistic history) that everyone has more than one linguistic code that they use regularly, for example local and national dialects.

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There are also other implications related to plurilingualism, which do not strictly concern the sphere of glottolinguistics and spoken language: these are linked to the multicultural and educational dimension of our society (Aime,2020).

Within our local communities, family, and peer groups, in schools of all levels, our many diversities intertwine daily. A widespread plurality that characterizes the actions and experiences that each of us carries out every day (Ainscow & César, 2006), Every day we develop new needs for knowledge about the life contexts of others and regards the conception of different values. This could help us in the ability to perceive our own centrality only as a personal perspective (the deconstruction of ethnocentrism).

The identification of the 8 European key competences by the European Union moves in this direction: construction of a richer, more critical, and open identity that promotes the principles of global and planetary citizenship. It is a long journey, which began in 2006 and was profoundly innovated in 2018. A complex process which saw Parliament and the European Commission working in synergy. European key competences represent knowledge, skills, and attitudes appropriate to the context and plurilingualism as well as cultural plurality are the most advanced frontier of our contemporary society.

In every disciplinary field: political, social, technological, economic, educational, and so on. Bateson and Morin had already spoken of the need for a closer dialogue between knowledge and disciplines because knowledge is the result of interaction between the many sciences. We also find this in the social dimension of life and openness and knowledge of languages and cultures other than one's own is certainly an enrichment and a necessity. The LEARN project has developed in this direction and has involved various national and international institutions. The University of Florence, the department of Science of Education – FORLILPSI – was responsible for training Arabic language teachers who worked in schools promoting the alphabet, writing, and spoken language (Cuciniello & Pasta, 2020), UNIFI's scientific role was to monitor and supervise all activities, making real tutoring path.

2. Recognizing cultural uniqueness: the structure of the LEARN project

Intercultural education is a complex issue. It is confronted with a difficult and contradictory reality such as that of immigration. There are still many prejudices in our society on this topic and the policies inspired by hospitality are not enough to build a truly intercultural community; it is necessary to practice and build inclusive actions (Habermas & Taylor, 2008).

The LEARN project – The mother tongue and other languages – was born from the desire to accompany students to experience multiculturalism, with an intercultural perspective in a truly and consciously welcoming and inclusive school. This perspective safeguards the uniqueness of each person and makes the school experience of each student significant, also considering their cultural background of which the mother tongue is part. It is also an opportunity for all students in the class to learn about and compare different cultures, regardless of their cultural background.

The objectives of the project are:

- To become aware of one's own and other people's identities (personal and cultural) and recognize ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity;



- Open new horizons and arouse interest in other cultures, particularly the Arab one, and support understanding and respect for diversity;
- Offer students the opportunity to approach and learn about the Arabic language and culture and experience linguistic plurality;
- Aiming at the value of inclusion and solidarity through moments of sharing and exchanging experiences and raising awareness of the values of peaceful coexistence;
- The deconstruction of one's own ethnocentrism as a prevention of radical positions;
- Move away from monocentric view towards pluricentrism;
- Global educational approach (Global Education).

The project is carried out for primary school students, specifically the fourth and fifth grades, regardless of the presence of students of Arab origin. For some students it represents an opportunity to learn and consolidate their mother tongue and for others it represents an opportunity for openness and exchange and to get closer to one of the most widespread languages in the world. This multicultural education path should not only concern schools because our entire society is involved in this game of linguistic and cultural exchanges. Therefore, many places of social life should take action to create inclusive actions and policies that involve all citizens, from childhood to adulthood.

However, it is worrying to observe that, more than twenty years after the start of the new strong migratory flow towards the European coasts, intercultural pedagogical research, based on mutual knowledge, exchange, meeting and dialogue is practiced almost exclusively at school. It is true that every life is lived as a story, personal and private, but to acquire value and substance it needs the other who listens and, in turn, builds other stories and tales. The relationship between men passes through the verbal and written exchange of information and this gives life to an environment rich in many "diversities" which are at the origin of inclusive education (Augé, 2017). LEARN is trying to chart a lively path in this direction and classroom teaching has been designed to have a real impact outside of school too. This is to create an important connection between all aspects of man's social life. To return to the structure of the project, this involves weekly laboratory meetings to be held regularly throughout the school year. The time will be agreed with the classes based on their lesson timetable. The meetings can be activated in individual classes and one of the truly important aspects of LEARN is the official recognition of it by the schools involved, who have included it in their POF (Piano dell'Offerta Formativa - Educational Plan). The most useful methodology for building the project was laboratory-based, to encourage young students to work actively during the proposed experiences, to independently build an inclusive and peaceful context, respecting each other's cultures.

The great intellectuals of contemporary pedagogy, starting with John Dewey, underlined the importance of experience as a fundamental tool for building all our knowledge. In the essay *Experience and Education*, from 1938, (Dewey, 1938) the American philosopher argued that everything relating to education comes through experience. This means that anyone involved in educating, training, and teaching should assume the concept of EXPERIENCE as the central element of every action to be carried out. Consequently, the project's scientific team was guided by this pedagogical imperative: to offer young students' quality and valuable educational experiences, to better understand cultural plurality and to experience the complexity of our time with greater competence (Kohut & Certini, 2022).





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3. Actors of LEARN project

LEARN was organized by the University of Florence, FORLILPSI department, together with the Good World Citizen association of Florence. The project was supported by the USR Toscana of Florence (Regional School Office, detachment of the Ministry of Education) and by the QFI association based in New York and Washington. The project involved three comprehensive schools of the Metropolitan City of Florence: ITC "Le Cure", ITC "Puccini", plexus "Villani", ITC 3 di Sesto Fiorentino, plexus Balducci. There were 7 classes involved, with students aged 9 and 10. The classes involved are all multilingual because multiculturalism is a natural condition of every society, and it is the knowledge of this phenomenon that can help us improve living environments and build processes of inclusion and peace.

Below is the cultural richness of two classes of the ITC "Le Cure" involved in the project:

a. 42 students: 21 in each class;

b. Ethnic groups present:

- Bangladesh;
- Romania;
- Kosovo;
- Peru;
- Philippines;
- Morocco;
- Albania;
- Sri Lanka;
- Children with bilingual families: Italian-Moroccan e Italian-Irish;
- Italian-Bulgarian.

c. There are also students with special needs and with special supporting law (L. 104).

All teaching activities were carried out by 6 native Arabic speaking teachers and their pedagogical and didactic training was carried out by teachers from the University of Florence. For one hour a week the young students learned the Arabic alphabet, writing, the different spatial arrangement of work tools, pronunciation and reading of sentences, and, finally, many aspects typical of the culture of Arabic-speaking countries (for example Egypt or Morocco). The results were better than our expectations but what we are interested in highlighting is the process that truly put the principles of intercultural pedagogy into practice. The project focused on some key principles of the 2030 agenda to help children understand the Sustainable Development Goals and the impact they have on their lives and the daily actions that can be taken to achieve "quality education" and "reduce inequality". The Sustainable Development Goals are important, world-changing goals that require cooperation among governments, international organizations, world leaders. The Sustainable Development Goals are major, world-changing goals that require cooperation between governments, international organizations, and world leaders. Above all, these need a strong educational system capable of building increasingly inclusive and culturally multifaceted spaces. For these reasons, the training course for Arabic-speaking teachers had three epistemological focuses: 1) relationships and communication in the classroom, 2) intercultural pedagogy, 3) teaching methodologies. The action of



the UNIFI teachers was above all a tutoring action because the mother tongue teachers obviously had strong disciplinary preparation, and the acquisition of pedagogical/didactic information enriched their teaching skills. After an initial brainstorming, the activities shared for their preparation were mainly the following: 1) Lesson; 2) Demonstration; 3) Tutorial approach; 4) Discussion; 5) Case study; 6) Group learning; 7) Problem solving; 8) Simulation; 9) Role playing; 10) Design. As researchers we refer to the classics of contemporary pedagogy and thinking once again about the American philosopher John Dewey, what makes the difference for the learning and education processes is the "quality of the experience" (Dewey, 1938). The central problem of experiential education is to choose the type of current experiences that young people and adults live fruitfully and creatively, and to renew them in the experiences that will come. Continuity and creativity are needed, and above all they must be "useful" experiences both for the contents and for the emotional and cognitive dimension of the subject. "But community life is not organized lastingly in a merely spontaneous way. It requires thought and precise planning. The educator must, on his responsibility, know both the individuals and the subject of study, knowledge that allows him to derive the activities that lend themselves to social organization, to an organization to which everyone can bring his contribution and in which activities, in which everyone participates, are the main means of control." (Dewey, 1938, p. 44).

Dewey's words represent well the work we have done with the Arabic language teachers: we have tried to develop quality and valuable experiences together that we can then offer to the younger ones. We have activated real tutoring paths and not "traditional lessons" because it is the support and accompaniment towards knowledge that can give life to an operational, useful, and inclusive model within society. To define a valuable experience, Dewey indicates three principles:

- A. Continuity: one quality experience promotes subsequent ones;
- B. Growth: transformation;
- C. Interaction: it promotes relational situations between people.

The teacher's responsibility at school is therefore to create learning situations that respect the principles of continuity and growth, connecting past, present and future. LEARN has tried to develop these characteristics, obtaining very good results. The young students learned the use of inverse spatiality, the alphabet, writing and oral language, managing to master the basic elements.

Most importantly, the Arab-mother tongue teachers together with the Italian Team have built a space of true plurilingual sharing, where everyone was able to experience their own linguistic and cultural identity. The role of "tutoring" has been central to developing good inclusive practices: because it is a non-coercive activity; because it has no opposing aims with respect to the objectives to be achieved; because it is a practice of "educational care" that can be activated at any moment of our professional and non-professional experience.

4. Mentoring and Tutoring: observe educational change

Mentoring and tutoring are two complex terms and refer to a wide range of activities and tools that can be used to support students, but also adults, in learning specific skills.

Mentoring is an action that lasts over time and its objective is the holistic development of the person. It is a deeply shared relationship, and it is usually the student, the young person, who





chooses his or her mentor (Dennison, 2000) Tutoring, on the other hand, has short-term objectives and often concern the learning of techniques and knowledge (Dennison, 2000). For LEARN project, the tutoring action involved above all the university staff and the Arabic language teachers. It is an intentional, systematic, and interactive activity that was carried out by the whole group with one Unifi teacher at a time Tutoring methods and techniques are designed according to the principle of interactivity that adequately supports the Arab teaching team and makes best use of resources. The interactive relationship between teachers has developed mainly along three lines: guidance and consultancy; monitoring during the year of the phases of classroom teaching and the results obtained along the way; observation of the dynamics between the class group and the Arab teachers. All these activities were carried out in presence and the technological aids were used in class (interactive multimedia whiteboard – in Italian LIM) to help the young students understand literacy and language. The monitoring activities of the work carried out by the Arab teachers by the tutors have the aim of periodically verifying the overall progress of the learning stages, the acquisition of intercultural skills and linguistic knowledge. This is to allow any adjustments to be activated during the development of the project. The university tutors had teaching simulations carried out during the year, so that the teachers could carry out more competent and more interesting work for the students at school (Certini, 2022).

All members of the educational team perceived the importance of tutoring, and we can highlight some points on the qualitative dimension, in particular:

- 1) Tutoring as "responsibility": the Arabic language teachers felt a strong "responsibility" for what their work in the classroom would be. The pedagogical accompaniment (tutoring) evolved during the project because the pedagogical team responded to the questions and problematic issues proposed by the teachers. They felt the importance of their presence in the classroom and the tutoring was fundamental to implement their skills (especially relational and communicative).
- 2) Peer Tutoring activities. Peer tutoring can be considered an educational strategy aimed at activating an "informal" transfer of knowledge, experiences, and emotions from some members of a group to other members of equal status. The relationship between professors and teachers was on an equal footing, with greater attention on the part of the university tutors to the educational and pedagogical principles to be shared.
- 3) Tutoring as "cooperation": teachers observed that through collaborative activities, sharing, and working in small groups, students were more active and gained greater confidence. The tutoring activities, therefore, were of a dual nature: between teachers and university tutors, and between students at school (Peer Tutoring).

There would be many reflections on tutoring activities and in this context, we would like to underline that the success of the project is certainly due to the methodologies used in the classroom (Cooperative Learning, Peer Education, Problem Solving, Laboratory Teaching, Spaced Learning) and to the values and objectives we wanted to achieve. First, the construction of an inclusive environment, where one can freely practice multilingualism and one's own culture of identity.

Cultural complexity is a natural condition today and only by practicing this complexity can we create educational processes built on dialogue and diversity. Ernesto Balducci's planetarium man can perceive his own space as a space for everyone, and the world should not be a place of divisions but



of shared experiences. Morin reminds us that "planetization now means community of destiny for all humanity. Nations consolidated the consciousness of their communities of destiny with the incessant threat of the external enemy. Now, the enemy of humanity is not external. It is hidden in the consciousness of the community of destiny needs not only common dangers, but also a common identity which cannot be the only abstract human identity, already recognized by all, ineffective in uniting us; it is the identity that comes from a paternal and maternal entity, concretized by the term homeland, and which brings millions of citizens who are not at all related by blood into brotherhood. This is what is missing, in some way, for a human community to be achieved: the awareness that we are children and citizens of the Earth-Homeland. We are still unable to recognize it as the common home of humanity." (Morin, 1993, p. 53). With the LEARN project we began to put into practice the concrete principles of an intercultural pedagogy aimed at building places of understanding and peace.

5. Conclusion

This project was born with the interest of wanting to offer a different possibility of learning a new non-traditional language, trying to go beyond the cultural prejudices that are now part of common sense. What has been written so far allows us to understand how behind learning a language there is something deeper, first of all "living inside" another culture. It would be reductive to think that the experiences completed by the students are sufficient to fully understand the complexity of a language and its culture and it would not be correct to think that the hours dedicated to the project were sufficient to understand the entire structure of the learning process. Although these aspects are of great importance for understanding the work carried out in the 7 months of school (from December 2022 to June 2023), we have seen how important it was to integrate the educational objectives of the project with the teaching and tutoring methodologies. In fact, tutoring actions represent a particular way of "being in the situation" and of understanding the phenomenology of the experience. This allows us to intercept the many changes in the situation and activities to be carried out, which are also linked to the age of the students. The original element is the importance of tutoring as a tool for accompanying and interpreting problems in a formal learning context: school. Today's school actions are often considered ineffective, not well oriented, disaggregated and qualitatively weak. If we tried to replace traditional teaching with tutoring or experimenting with new activities that are closer to children's interests (for example games), perhaps the school could partly obtain important new results. In other words, it is about recognizing the importance of creativity for the construction of educational strategies that aid learning processes. All this also has value for the teachers, who have taken advantage of this methodology to better structure their knowledge and skills.

This exercise of "shared work" and "peer tutoring" allowed us to enhance their interests, passions, curiosities, their perspective on social complexity and their naturalness in practicing a culture truly different from their own, a topic that it still causes a lot of discussion today. The students were eager to take ownership of this new language and say, "I know how to speak Arabic", a difficult but fascinating language, which allowed them to interact outside of school. This was the real educational success: having built together an intentional and useful communication tool; a model of behavior





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that has given positive results not only inside school, but also outside. A transferable behavioral model.

The complexity that characterizes our postmodern society allows us to reflect on the importance of education. The educational challenge is to educate young people who are aware, responsible, equipped with critical thinking that allows them to read and interpret this complexity. All aspects that need to be developed and cultivated through educational support (tutoring) that can guide children towards the search for meaning in their existence. Accompanying young students on their path of growth and knowledge is not simple because it requires the ability to get involved, to show availability and to change perspective. This means paying close attention to their needs, knowing how to listen and dialogue with them. For educators and teachers, offering quality and valuable experiences means first of all being on the side of the children, knowing the situation in which we live well and proposing the most suitable activities for the circumstances. It is through educational action – and methodologies such as tutoring that we can animate the "search for meaning" of our existence – in a theoretical and pedagogical sense – by offering new training experiences, capable of broadening the interest of young students towards the reality that surrounds them. LEARN was a project that opened up many of these new perspectives.

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