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New means and new meanings for multicultural education in a global–Italian context

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ABSTRACT

In today's multicultural world, digital tools may become a powerful means to building a culture of dialogue that supports 'culturally responsive' teaching within imaginative multicultural learning environments. Students can develop global competencies, learning more about others' and their own culture as part of their personal development. Our paper presents the experience of *Rete Dialogues*, a network of Italian state schools that have created a professional learning community and enacted the international project *Generation Global*. Through technologies such as videoconferences and online communities, students, supported by their teachers, can meet peers from various cultures. After referencing the development of the notion of multiculturalism, we interpret our experience through the lenses of Banks' five dimensions. We then focus on a 'teamblogging' initiative that involved 2000 students and over 200 teachers, discussing examples from students' digital dialogues and brainstorming next steps in the practice of multicultural education.

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Introduction

In most education systems, the need to replace a principle of inclusion that emphasizes 'sameness' through mainstreaming, by one that recognizes social and cultural diversity in the school curriculum, is emerging (Osler, 2015). The school is therefore seen as a site of identity achievement in a broadened sense: here students 'get recognized and positioned in various ways and proactively create more positive identities for themselves and for the others' (Gee, 2000, p. 120).

In a moment of intense movement of groups of diverse religions, races and ethnicities, teachers are cultural mediators that can provide students with opportunities to engage in critical dialogue, to explore and reflect on a variety of identities and cultural values (Banks, 2004, 2009; O'Byrne & Smith, 2015). Culturally responsive teaching is becoming in many countries a 'rallying cry' (Gay, 2015), meanwhile, the shift from print to digital culture offers

new, more diverse and inclusive educational spaces. However, at the same time, the global trend towards standardization seems to marginalize culturally responsive teaching policies and bar needed support for teachers to develop professional skills and confront their hesitations (Banks, 2004; Gay & Howard, 2000; Scheerens, 2009).

In Italy, interest in multicultural/intercultural¹ education is growing. While, until the middle of the last century many Italian regions used to be a land of emigration, in the last three decades the trend has been reversed (Distaso et al., 2004; Portera, 2008). Given its geographic positioning as the hub between Europe, Africa, and Asia, Italy is particularly sensitive to migrants and refugees.

In less than two decades the share of 'students with no Italian citizenship'² has raised from 2.2% in 2000 to 9.2% in 2015 (Santagati & Ongini, 2016). This number may not seem high, but behind the national average lies a patchy distribution: some areas, particularly in northern and central Italy, have much higher numbers, with several schools hosting 30–40% of 'students with no Italian citizenship'.

Migration has become a big issue in a relatively short time. Beyond its direct demographic, cultural and political implications, its emotional impact is high. In 2016 only, 181,436 migrants landed on Italian shores; 17.96% more than the previous year (Ministero Interno, Italy, 2016). 5,071 died in the Mediterranean in those twelve months (IOM, 2016). Images such as the photo of a desperate father emerging from the sea holding the body of his daughter, who had drowned before landing on the same beach where people had been blithely sunbathing just a few months earlier, have taken hold of the collective imagination and have entered the classroom too. Meanwhile, terrorist attacks elicit new fears and immigration is too often exploited as a scapegoat by complacent politicians.

Teachers have started struggling with new needs to involve students in constructive discussions and figure out possible future scenarios. Schools are in search of appropriate strategies and tools, even beyond official policies, that often are not adequately updated despite the efforts invested. At stake is the development of culturally sensitive teaching not only concerned with minorities, but also pointing to the development of a new multidimensional culture, involving the whole school community.

Local schools and global projects

In this scenario, in 2010 the Italian Ministry of Education created and supported a national school network – Rete Dialogues (RD). Having started with 6 schools, the network now involves 30 large lower and upper secondary schools (more than 1000 students each) from Piedmont to Tuscany and Sicily³. The main aim of the project was to pilot Generation Global (GG), a global school dialogue programme run by the Tony Blair Faith Foundation (now Tony Blair Institute) within the framework of its activities aimed at preventing religious extremism, prejudices and misconceptions, and to help build open-minded and pluralist societies. The programme⁴ provides teachers in schools in 20 countries in the world with a replicable pedagogy consisting of multidisciplinary resources that become teaching materials in a variety of countries/cultures. Students can participate in activities aimed at developing their critical thinking and open-mindedness and can communicate with peers from different cultures through facilitated face to face videoconferences, or engage in written dialogue through a secure online community.

Three subsequent MOUs regulating GG enactment in Italy were signed in the period 2011–2016 between the Italian Ministry of Education and the Tony Blair Faith Foundation. This has resulted in an effective flexible framework, where GG global strategies and tools are worked out in effective tailor-made practices of culturally responsive teaching, sensitive to the situated contexts of each RD school.

In this paper we briefly describe the project enacted by RD/GG through Banks' five dimensions of multiculturalism (Banks, 1993, 2004) and then focus on concrete examples of activities. Leaving videoconferences aside, we revisit aspects of the learning adventure of some 2,000 students and almost 200 teachers from RD schools who participated in team-blogging activities in 2015 and 2016. This was in fact an intergenerational learning process (Fielding, 2011) where students and teachers were both considered 'learners'. Parallel to the student digital writing, teachers engaged in action-research based on monitoring performances and learning processes, collecting data about perceptions through questionnaires, and reflecting on their own teaching practice.

Seven years after its start, the programme continues and produces important data upon which to reflect such as students' and teachers' digital texts or videoconferences' records. We have collected some 1500 pages of student writing and 250 pages of teachers' observations, still under analysis.

We present here some examples of students' narratives and questionnaire's feedback, showing how they can negotiate their identities, express their curiosities and difficulties using digital writing to dialogue and build new intercultural knowledge.

In the next paragraph we highlight some key concepts underpinning our actions.

Perspectives on culturally responsive pedagogy and multicultural dialogue

Gay (2015) defines culturally responsive teaching as 'using the heritages, experiences, and perspectives of different ethnic and racial groups to teach students who are members of them more effectively' (p. 124). The focus on 'multi-cultural competencies' – she underlines – allows students to learn more about their own and others' culture as part of their personal development and preparation for active citizenship in their country and in the world. Our understanding of 'culturally responsive' is rooted in the curriculum and in the school ordinary life. It concerns all students and aims to enhance a school culture where multiple voices can emerge and become significant: from books, classroom chairs or computer screens (Apple, 2013).

What students think they know about others is often inaccurate, stereotypical. Many young people are actively encouraged by the media and sometimes their education systems to uncritically accept a single world view. Such a rejection of diversity may also include the deliberate 'othering' of groups within societies (particularly of minorities), and even when young people do not agree, they may lack confidence to challenge these views.

In the culturally responsive classroom as we see it, the 'other' is considered a resource to deepen and shape everybody's learning. It is assumed that students must have a lively knowledge about themselves, their own cultures, histories and heritages in order to have substantive interactions with others. Indeed, as Ladson-Billings (2003) observes, the variety of selves that we perform in our lives has made multicultural education a richer and more constructively challenging enterprise. In Mahiri's (2015) words:

every person reflects a relatively unique array of micro-cultural positioning, practices, prerogatives and perspectives [...]. Beyond a racial essence [...] our actual experiences, choices and histories make our identities essentially indeterminate within the limiting contexts of constructed categories of race. (p. 191)

From this perspective, pointing out the artificiality of race and its irrelevance with respect to other more substantial aspects of our human experience can lead us to see issues of 'race' as a means to develop new insights. There is an interplay of race within each of us, literally and metaphorically: we need to explore and become familiar with it to live fully, interact with others and contribute to a more just and peaceful society.

An idea 'at least as old as ancient Athens' (Pinar, 2010, p. 26), the multiculturalism itself hosts a variety of 'races': it is context sensitive and its meanings travel across times and places (Sleeter, 2010). The US scholarship has developed a rich body of knowledge and heuristic tools for examining theories of multiculturalism and assumptions about school practice. For instance, Banks (1993) identifies different phases in the emergence of US multicultural education', evolving from the initial era of *ethnic studies*, to the current *broadening of the field with issues of race, class and gender*. Sleeter (2010) distinguishes four ideal-types that lay along two axes: emphasis on culture vs. emphasis on social justice and equity in the *vertical axis*, and nation-bound perspective vs. global perspective in the *horizontal axis*. Both Banks' phases and Sleeter's ideal-types are not mutually exclusive depictions and may be contemporarily present in theory and practice.

In the European scenario, the idea of 'intercultural education' has gained momentum since the 80s, when the Council of Europe started flagging interaction, exchange and dialogue between cultures as values that could go beyond the forms of simple acknowledgment and respect for differences embedded in pluri or multicultural perspectives (Portera, 2008). However, this perspective is rarely implemented satisfactorily, while risks of misconceptions have become evident (Grant & Portera, 2011; Osler, 2015).

The multicultural/intercultural approach adopted by RD/GG draws on an open vision of multicultural education that encompasses race, gender and religion (Banks phase three/four); in terms of Sleeter's axis it is more global than local and attempts to strike a balance between culture and social justice/equity. Moreover, the culturally responsive pedagogy enacted in RD/GG initiatives assumes that multiculturalism cannot be considered as the mere study of the other, rather encompasses studies of diverse cultures and cultural practices in the human lives (Ladson-Billings, 2003): in 30 RD schools GG activities are officially embedded in the school plan.

To this extent, GG envisions dialogue as an empowering process enabling one to encounter the other in a safe environment; transforming the unfamiliar into the familiar: a profoundly reciprocal experience – 'relation is reciprocity' (Buber, 1970, p. 62) – rooted in an open, mutually respectful approach. This requires developing a capacity to handle emotional and cultural complexity, converging differences, and walking in a 'corridor of voices' where understanding is strengthened, without reducing 'otherness' to sameness (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 121).

Dialogue is not a self-referential exercise between those who are alike. It embodies a social function: it is pivotal in the process of learning and knowing, and a driver for self-analysis and critique. It characterizes an 'epistemological relationship' (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 379), an act of freedom and humility, the encounter 'in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized' (Freire, 1968, p. 88).

Looking at RD/GG experience through Banks' multicultural lens

Crucial to understanding RD/GG experiences is an overview of contents, methodological approach and devices. Banks (1993, 2004, 2009) elaborated five dimensions, describing an operational model of multicultural education that has become seminal for research, policy-making and practice: a powerful tool to depict the processes enacted.

As shown in Table 1, GG resources and activities cover all Banks' dimensions. Several processes have been further developed by RD, building on GG resources.

The main area of expansion of GG proposals in RD concerns teacher professional development and action-research. The school network (a legal entity in the Italian education system as from D.P.R. 8 March 1999, n. 275) and the Ministry provided since the beginning stable links between schools of different northern/southern regions, themselves rooted in very different cultures. A national team was formed, composed of committed teachers of all subjects: religion, math, English, history and Italian, receiving a continuous blended training from GG/RD. They became tutors and teacher-trainers. Experts and scholars from different fields were invited by RD to lecture and comment on the activities in seminars/workshops. Around them, larger regional groups of teachers interested in multicultural activities were working with their classes, eager to discuss their students' experiences and data in RD blended workshops. Within a couple of years, a national 'professional learning community', interested in culturally responsive teaching, was consolidated: 'committed teachers, engaged in professional learning, within the context of a cohesive group, focused on collective knowledge overarched by an ethic of interpersonal caring', aimed at improving students', teachers' and head teachers' achievements (Stoll & Louis, 2008, p. 6).

Enacting multicultural dialogue through digital writing

It is not by chance that we discard the term 'implementation', assuming linear executions of tasks, and rather use 'enactment'. We refer to dynamic, negotiated translation processes (Ball, 2008) that in our case imply a cultural, intentional 'vernacularisation' (Appadurai, 1996) of the GG proposal and engages in contextualizing/expanding the original project, building on its resources.

GG teamblogging is a case in point. It is designed to enable students to exchange their ideas, opinions and stories in a safe space where their own values and attitudes can be expressed, heard and valued by interlocutors. Students can respectfully challenge, and be challenged by perspectives different from their own. It is assumed that the practice of encountering the 'other' helps reduce prejudices and fear, and underpins the skill and aptitude of participants to explore differences successfully, while building resilience against those factors which make them more vulnerable to a range of extremist narratives.

After some pilots, in 2015 and 2016 more structured teamblogging activities were launched by GG. Several Italian classes participated in the global teamblogging in English, involving schools from all the 20 participating countries. However, in Italy it was agreed to parallel global teamblogging with cross-regional versions in Italian, allowing more students to have deeper exchanges in their mother tongue.

The teamblogging, with its accurately designed structure, becomes an assemblage of opportunities and constraints, generates unexpected surprises and can be a powerful pedagogical device catalyzing a variety of processes (Fenwick & Landri, 2012): it works through

Table 1. Banks’ dimensions of multicultural education and *Rete Dialogues/Generation Global* experience: overview.

Dimensions	Description (elaborated from Banks, 1993, 2004)	Perspectives and actions in the RD/GG experience
Content integration	Teaching using examples, data information and content from a variety of cultures	GG learning materials and didactic units tackle global issues and are conceived from a global perspective, including documents from different sources They are the basis for interactions and dialogues in videoconferences, and teamblogging between classes of different countries/regions. RD has adapted/expanded/developed several materials. The diverse cohorts of students learning from one another enrich the resource
Knowledge construction	Exploring and understanding how implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference and biases within a discipline influence the ways in which knowledge is constructed and presented	In GG videoconferences and teamblogging students are expected to be both ‘listeners’ and ‘speakers,’ ‘readers’ and ‘writers,’ participating in discussions and dialogues that advance action. They elaborate information created and shared by peers, learn to use self-produced materials, and participate in peer-centred exchanges. By creating presentations, blogs, videos, students gain confidence in their voice and explore the relationship between information, knowledge and power (Hobbs, Donnelly, Friesem, & Moen, 2013) RD has expanded these activities, creating tutorship groups among teachers and action research initiatives to investigate student attitudes and perceptions towards digital dialogue
Prejudice reduction	Enhancing awareness of racial/cultural attitudes and monitoring how they can be modified by teaching methods and materials	Stereotypes, bias and prejudice are specifically targeted by GG materials and are central to the dialogue pedagogy Videoconferences and teamblogging are important testbed, where also religious and controversial issues are tackled. By meeting the ‘other’ in a facilitated virtual space, students are expected to navigate differences constructively and to become more open-minded
Equity pedagogy	Using a variety of styles and resources in ways that facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse racial, cultural, gender and social class groups. Contrasting cultural deprivation	The nature of GG activities itself encompasses a variety of modes and means, with a particular emphasis on the use of virtual/digital means. The resources seek to draw out and understand diversity in the classroom as well as across national, cultural and religious divides. Storytelling is relevant in RD and often captures the most troubled student voices. When stories are central to the teaching-learning process, opportunities flourish to take the floor, speak, write, be heard and read
Empowering school-culture	Considering schools as socio-cultural systems with specific values, norms, and ethos. Developing a climate of care, curiosity towards differences, and support. Creating learning communities among students and teachers empowering students from diverse racial, ethnic and gender groups	The impact of RD/GG activities is strong in schools, even beyond the classes involved. GG activities are very visible and often produce shared artifacts, disseminating values and ideas in the community The school is seen as a site where identities can be dynamically negotiated and enriched and multiculturalism is a resource RD also emphasizes teacher development rooted in practice, peer-tutoring and ‘intergenerational learning’: teachers and students learn together in a professional learning community (Stoll & Louis, 2008). RD/GG seminars with scholars and experts have become popular, averaging 1000 participants/year, attracting new audiences and spreading ideas Overall, while RD/GG activities empower the culture of each school, they also influence broader professional communities through resources, publications, and website

Table 2. Students' and teachers' participation in RD/GG teamblogging activities 2015–2016.

Topics and questions	N. topics	N. posts	Exchanges per topic (avg) ^a
<i>Teamblogging about identity and self-expression</i> (2015 and 2016)			
• Who am I?	705	7943	10.27
• Am I free to express myself? ^b	203	1706	7.40
• Do I feel I am able to express myself more freely on the Internet?	604	4669	6.73
• How do I express myself? ^c	448	4496	9.04
N. of participating students: 1960			
N. of participating teachers: 191 (86 observers, 90 facilitators, 15 tutors)			
<i>Pilot teamblogging about faiths and beliefs</i> (2016)			
• 'Believing': what does it mean for me?	96	777	7.09
• What are the most important values to me?	94	412	3.38
• I am born again in another country, with another culture and another 'belief'. This is my story...	91	437	3.80
N. of participating students: 281			
N. of participating teachers: 20 (4 observers, 12 facilitators, 4 tutors)			
<i>Pilot teamblogging about food traditions</i> (2016)			
• It is a day of celebration; you are with your family. What dishes cannot be missing from your table?	138	1235	7.95
• What does eating together with your family, friends, classmates mean to you?	148	812	4.49
• Picture the ideal supper table. With whom would you like to eat and what would you prepare?	132	898	5.80
• 'The supper table of dialogue'. What do you talk about at lunch or dinner?	18	242	12.44
N. of participating students: 436			
N. of participating teachers: 32 (10 observers, 21 facilitators, 1 tutors)			

Notes: Some pupils participated in the teamblogging in 2015 and 2016. Total number of participants is 2331.

^aExch. avg. = (N. posts – N. topics)/(N. topics).

^b2016 only.

^c2015 only.

a facilitated platform, a centrally organized agenda and a set of rules. Carefully studied topics and dates are communicated: classes select their slot, book on the platform and form trans-regional teams. Each includes three classes from different schools, committed to blog for three weeks. In each team, classes blog on rotation, tackling the question of the week with individual topics, the remaining two classes comment with posts: the mechanism is simple but rigorous. Specific time at school is allocated, but home writing is also welcome. Students are at the center and write freely about topics given. Teachers can read texts and encourage pre and post class discussions, but cannot write in students' space. RD teamblogging includes a teacher forum through which interactions among class-teachers are facilitated by peer tutors, providing information/support. Leading a student team or being a remote blog observer is acknowledged as official training activity, when teachers are adequately active in the forum.

Table 2 shows the teamblogging's questions, the students'/teachers' participation, and the average number of exchanges per topic, which varies considerably. Among the participants in 2015, a group of 513 students answered both a baseline and follow-up questionnaire (multiple choice and open-ended questions) about their perceptions on digital dialogue (42.3% respondent rate).

The teamblogging experience created an important hub of cultural and micro-cultural exchanges between both students and teachers. A sense of surprise for the revelatory power of the 'device' comes from both teachers and students in their follow-up questionnaire (Cortiana & Barzanò, [in press](#)). As confirmed by teachers' comments, a window has been opened to an often invisible emotional world of students. We focus below on some example.

Students' voices: colors and tones across macro and micro-cultures

Notes from teamblogging

As students observe in the follow-up questionnaire – in which they answer questions about the differences between traditional and digital writing – a new space is offered by digital dialogue for freedom and curiosity through peer discussion, free from any formal assessment.

Writing with peer-reader in mind seems to be a new opportunity, a privilege:

In ordinary school writing I express myself in a formal way, while in the blog I write thinking of what a girl or a boy of my age will understand and I am also interested in figuring out who they are. (*Maddalena, grade 7, Tuscany*)

The blog elicits 'identity work' (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006) by allowing students to achieve identities as 'writers' (Vetter, 2011), becoming part of a new micro-culture (Mahiri, 2015), that has its demands, as Ludovica explains. As part of the writer group she should now be entitled to follow different rules:

You are much more free to write in blogs and you are not assessed. Usually, a class written assignments should be written correctly at a given time on a precise topic. without leaving space to any imagination, which you should have as a writer. (*Ludovica, grade 8, Veneto*)

The students' explanations about the blog's opportunities are often rich in fascinating details, disclosing the typical teenagers' eagerness for freedom, underpinned by aspirations to communicate and share experiences beyond classroom walls:

We have the opportunity to express our emotions and our feelings with children from other parts of Italy. When we finished writing our blog, with a single click it was immediately posted: to the contrary the scholastic writing, if sent by mail, takes a long time. And to whom should we send it? It is only for the teacher. (*Marco, grade 7, Lombardy*)

In Marco's words the blog is perceived as an upgrading of his student identity. Now his written performance does not exist only to be 'assessed' by the teacher, but can address a real audience. The technology opens the world to Marco with an instant 'click'.

As Gee (2000) observes: 'people have multiple identities, connected not to their 'internal states', but to their performances in society' (p.99). Indeed, the school here is a field of opportunities, making possible positive impacts on Marco's identity.

Angela raises another important point:

With the blog I feel free to write what I want, how I want and when I want (but still sticking to given rules) and focusing on the topic that I like best: myself. I feel I can talk about myself without limits, talk of what I love to do in life, the sports I practice in my free time, my biggest interests. (*Angela, grade 6, Piedmont*)

This young student's words mirror the concerns of distinguished scholars in educational technology: 'space and time at school are often strictly controlled and circumscribed to

specific times and spaces' (Rajala, Hilppö, Lipponen, & Kumpulaine, 2013, p.98). Angela finds in teamblogging's tasks ways to escape some traditional constraints, achieving a new status: she can work effectively at her own pace. Her interest in herself may sound a bit self-aggrandizing, but she is sincere: a good teacher would know how to build on her comments, now that they have been disclosed. Indeed, these comments seem to show a world of observations and reflections that elicit questions and further research. With their blogs, students welcome a new 'agentic space' (ib.), rich in dynamic opportunities and also in uncertainties and problems to confront, as other texts that we lack the space to cite here, point out.

These four quotes from students' follow-up reflections intend to provide only a glimpse into the teamblogging learning environment and its potential as a means of multicultural education. They effectively draw our attention to the need of further analyses of the actual functioning of these devices in the field, i.e.: (a) how they make some practices and knowledge more salient than others (b) their consequences, and (c) what implications they generate in terms of inclusion and exclusion processes (Orlikowski, 2009).

We assume that culturally responsive teaching and multicultural education can only be developed starting with the confidence that all students have in themselves. The opportunities they have to become aware of their multiple identities and their positioning across different micro-cultures may be crucial (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Mahiri, 2015). Achieving multicultural skills becomes, then, an enterprise that involves all school actors and influences school culture. One where ethnical minorities can naturally have major roles, because they are a resource rather than a risk (Portera, 2008; Scheerens, 2009).

Exchanges: from chicken's secrets and almond's sand, a lip-smacking dialogue

This simple blog effectively depicts a typical exchange. It is within the teamblogging about food, and the students are discussing special dishes and festivities:

Hello, my name is Said, I am 11 years old and I'm from Morocco.

For me, the most important day of the week is Friday ... You may wonder why? According to us Friday is the day when Allah preached the prophecy through Muhammad and then the faith in Allah began. And so we gather together and eat what our mothers have cooked, and this is a sign of brotherhood. My mom usually prepares couscous served with traditional drinks; she also cooks chicken, her secret recipe, with a special dressing that my grandmother taught her. Here are some traditional sweets that we put on the table: a kind of pancake with a syrup made by honey and herbs with a traditional Moroccan tea; then there is also a sweet with a sandy texture, but it is not sand, it is very sweet with a little almond.

I hope you enjoyed the description of my favorite dishes and I'm curious about your tastes and your regional dishes. (*Said, grade 7, Apulia*)

Hello, I'm Kasimir, I've found your dish very nice, the sweets above all. I'm 11 years old, I like to discover new people and new religions. We eat pasta with pesto, a sauce made with basil, garlic, Parmesan cheese and peanuts. The description of your original dish was lip-smacking- lucky you! My parents are Romanians, but Romanian dishes are not as good as yours. Can you describe Morocco? (*Kasimir, grade 6, Lombardy*)

Hello, I'm Giacomo. The most important day for me is Sunday, because we are Christians and we believe that Sunday is the day on which God rested. Our typical foods are the 'costolicci', the Florentine steak, but I don't have a secret recipe; we have many typical sweets, like 'tiramisú', the 'Grandmother cake', a soft cake with custard and pine nuts - a real treat! - or 'Ricciarelli' and 'Cavallucci'. (*Giacomo, grade 6, Tuscany*)

Hello Kasimir, I've read that you are curious about Morocco: Morocco is a very beautiful country with many beautiful places, and when you wander the stalls in the market your mouths waters and that makes you want to take out your wallet and say, 'Sorry, may I have a piece?'. I've read you care about Moroccan traditions and culture: Morocco is a very religious country. In fact, if you start wandering around you see many religious people and many other things about the Moroccan culture. (*Said, grade 7, Apulia*)

The boys were engaged, their narratives lively. Our reading is attracted by a vibrant intertwining of perspectives. Said uses the food as an opportunity to tell about his religion and introduces Allah and Muhammad. The 'brotherhood lunch' becomes magic with his mother's cooking inspired by his grandmother's 'secret chicken' recipe, followed by the 'almond sand'.

A descriptive chemistry combines warmth (the mother), mystery (the secret recipe) and a trick (but it is not sand!).

From another Italian corner, Kasimir detects Said's culinary pride and writes about his family's 'pesto' recipe in exchange, but regrets that his parents' cooking is not as attractive as Moroccan dishes. They are from Romania, but he already feels Italian. He is interested in cultures, in religions and his curiosity is now springing out: 'how is Morocco?' he asks. While Kasimir literally finds 'food for thought' in Said's words, Said himself sees through Kasimir the opportunity for a new narrative performance. With a few lively words he brings us into the Moroccan market with the delights and the temptations of its tasty street-food. Their effective and detailed narratives let us guess that the two boys share a culinary micro-culture and they are interested in further developing it through the dialogue. Meanwhile Giacomo has also replied. Said's description of Muslim Friday leads him to write about the Catholic Sunday. In doing this he displays a comparative, respectful spirit that he wouldn't have had the chance to mobilize, had he been addressing a peer from his same religion. They are 11–12 years old and in the 400 words of their exchange there is a good slice of the world. In the hands of a skilled and sensitive teacher this exchange would be a mine for other students too. A far bit more interesting than a textbook page.

As another girl observes, reflecting in her blog:

This experience taught us that the world is full of diversity, and that we have to respect every single point of view; but I already knew that. I think that, more than learning something, this was an experience. It is definitely not the same sitting in a classroom learning about some country as hearing from someone who is actually from there. (*Samantha, grade 7, Sicily*)

'Experiencing the other': Samantha's awareness of the impact of the experience and how it may lead her to more personal knowledge than traditional class activities, is intriguing and revealing. She already knew about differences but the practice of teamblogging deepened her notions. There is a lot to unravel and understand behind the words of the children. Their voices, carefully studied, can disclose precious understanding of where to focus when updating multicultural education, in the school community and in society.

Concluding remarks

The development of culturally sensitive pedagogy is the premise for students' achievement of global citizenship skills (Barzanò, Brumana, & Jones, 2009; Di Cristofaro, 2016; Reimers, Chopra, Chung, Higdon, & O'Donnel, 2016) and one of the most important challenges to education today. Attending classes where culturally responsive teaching is enacted is important for both ethnically diverse and mainstream students, particularly in an age of massive

migration. But how does it actually work? Technologies can provide great support, but in what ways must be looked at in specific contexts and must become the focus of well-designed research.

In this paper we have made reference to some seminal studies stressing the multifaceted and diachronically evolving nature of multicultural education and have briefly shown how some 'digital writing experiences' can offer critical contributions and develop multi and cross-cultural dialogues. There is indeed a lot to show and understand. We believe that a socio-material approach in deepening the analysis might offer an important contribution to explore ways that human and non-human materialities combine, and to produce particular purposes and particular effects in education by examining the textures woven through different intersecting networks in pedagogical processes (Fenwick & Landri, 2012).

The teamblogging and videoconferences used in the RD/GG experience have shown to be powerful potential tools. Yet they are not to be intended as 'best practices': they go beyond this notion. They are contextualized and spontaneous assemblages demonstrating both ambivalent and positive outcomes. They may offer excellent opportunities under the right conditions, but must be dynamically monitored. In order to be effective they need teachers 'who, while teaching, learn. And who, in learning, also teach' (Freire, 1998, p. 67). In the case of teamblogging, the contradictory (public) intimacy of digital writing must be made sense of contextualizing the relationship between traditional school writing and online digital writing (Boscolo, 2010) and better investigating the relationship between learning and (digital) identity (Ligorio, 2010).

Finally, we believe that real advancements in multicultural/intercultural education can only occur when schools have the chance to extend themselves beyond their walls, to share and confront ideas and strategies with the community and other schools. It is important that they can ground their action 'in larger projects, respectful of [their] differences, connected to the process of building and defending decentered unities that will give [them] collective strength, and mindful that the path will be long and difficult' (Apple, 2013, p. 165).^{5,6}

Notes

1. The terms 'multicultural' and 'intercultural' are used here as synonyms. 'Multicultural education' is used in the US, while 'intercultural' is more common in Europe to stress a more interactive approach, where different cultures are brought into contact and are in dialogue.
2. Definition reported in official documents.
3. For a description of the activities see <https://retedialogues.it>
4. For a detailed overview of *Generation Global* see <https://generation.global/>
5. The authorship of the article follows an alphabetical order.
6. This article is the outcome of the collaboration of the authors. However, in order to ascribe responsibility, we declare that chapters are authored as follows: Barzanò, G.: chapt. 1, 4, 5 (text); Cortiana, P.: chapt. 6.1; Jamison, I.: chapt. 2; Lissoni, M.: chapt. 6.2; Raffio, L.: chapt. 3, 5 (table). Concluding remarks are co-authored.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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