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Educate to Relationships through Relationships: the Role of Social and Prosocial Abilities in the Construction of Collaborative and Inclusive Educational Communities¹

ABSTRACT

The Youth Report 2014 recognizes the possibility to take positive action towards the others as an element that contributes to let young people achieve a sense of happiness. Despite this, we can observe in schools the presence of individualistic and competitive educational models affirming the predominance of fixed cognitive standards. That can bring to a situation of marginalization of those who are hegemonically located outside of a pre-established definition of *norm*.

Considering these assumptions, the authors have developed an inclusive and prosocial teaching model, based on the Cooperative Learning approach, aimed to encourage prosocial skills among students. The research, that used qualitative data, has involved a sample of 42 students and 12 teachers of the Middle School. The comparison between pre and post test highlights a higher increase in *helping* dimension and in the subsample of males students, joint to general improvements within teaching-learning processes and relationships.

KEYWORDS: educational model, individual and collective well-being,

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INTRODUCTION

According to the Youth Report *Ask me if I am happy ... subjective and social Well-being of young Italian people* (Toniolo Institute, 2014), young people attribute the achievement of the happiness to a set of variables, by individual and social nature. In particular, besides factors relating to the family and emotional life, the possibility to perform activities deemed important for themselves and others is taken in a large consideration. Not surprisingly, the category of working students is the one that shows a greater satisfaction with their lives. In fact, they feel to actively contribute, materially and culturally, to the society. At the same time, as the Report highlights, the activities socially useful are the most significant perceived: «The happiness formula combines being active, doing something useful for society and for others and something that will help to grow and to give value to their own time. This perception gives meaning to your be and act in the world and to build a future» (Bichi& al., Dossier 5, 2014, p. 26). At the same time, the designed capabilities draw a further dimension, *hope*: Report points out in this regard that the young people who appear more proactive harbor more hope in the future and in the people around them, whether right to family network. Those ones who trust in the community and in the others, say the writers, feel «the hope of being able to realize their life plans and manage to dream and to nourish in hopes» (Bichi& al., Dossier 5, 2014, p. 17). Thus, *Planning* and *hope* represent the combination associated with happiness. Therefore, despite the widespread perception of a rampant nihilism (likely outcome of the so-called liquid society described by Bauman), reflections and phenomena emerge (i.e. young people's engagement in volunteer work or community service) that let us think that people reach a state of an authentic happiness if they don't neglect their proper generative dimension. In other words, this phenomenon happens when the *self* dimension is associated *with the others* (Guerrieri, 2012, p.92).

These reflections represent the conceptual background of the debate concerning human sciences. In particular, you can think about the philosophers of dialogue (Martini, 1995), who go from Buber to Levinas, from Ricoeur to Mounier. These ones analyzed the individual dimension as a relational dimension and highlighted the existence of an inescapable interrelationship between identity and otherness. Similarly in pedagogy, a central issue is to shape educational and learning paths (in and out of school) aimed at instilling in the younger generation a sense of responsibility, solidarity and civic engagement. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the European Parliament considers as key-skills those ones belonging to social and civic areas, such as the spirit of initiative and entrepreneurship, the cultural awareness and expression. These ones should be viewed as important as the academic skills, like the linguistic or logical mathematical ones.

School, therefore, as part of education and individual training, should represent the elective institutional framework to provide a concrete and visible response to the implementation of these instances. Such instances should not be held new because they are inscribed in the human nature. However, they become such to the extent that they are conceptualized for the first time the subject of teaching-learning processes, such as the formal knowledge drawn by traditional curricula. Therefore, curricula should assign an equal value to the knowledge and technical skills and to the relational and participatory nature ones.

Although this perspective is widely shared, on a theoretical and a value level, some recent surveys on Italian school reveal a widespread critical situation, involving wide-ranging all the trainers (head teachers, teachers and students). For example, the School Report 2011 highlights the low level of confidence in the power of school in a sample of students of eleven years old (Middle school). According to the report, only the 17% of males and the 26% of female students claims to go to school willingly, while the average of the 40 countries surveyed is, respectively,

of 33% and 43%. The Report also points out that these students generally risk to fail at school. Furthermore, the presence of high levels of stress perceived exceeds the international average and it's expected to grow further in subsequent school years.

On the other hand, teachers, in addition to the persistence of traditional teaching methodologies (Cavalli & Argentin, *Yard Report*, 2010), rarely consider the educational institution as a protective factor (Bocci & al., 2012); furthermore, the same teaching profession is lived in a situation of isolation and demotivation, and even burn out (Ministry of Education, 2014, Talis 2013). Similar data are related to the head teachers who, compared to European colleagues, highlight a marked dissatisfaction with their work. They explain as discontent factor their too great effort in the resolution of disputes and controversies between pupils (84% of Italian head teachers vs 68% of the average of Talis countries).

Several critical issues are also related to inclusive practices: recent researches point out the phenomenon of micro/macro exclusion of students classified as SEN (Demo, 2014) and, secondly, the marginalization of supportive teachers (Ianes, Demo & Zambotti, 2010). In particular, these teachers perform an educational role of just support for students with difficulties, who are often deemed unable to participate fully in the common school life. These students are so relegated to perform parallel activities to the context class.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

From the perspective of Disability Studies (Oliver, 2009, Oliver & Barnes, 2011; Ferri, 2015; D'Alessio, Medeghini, Vadalà, & Bocci, 2015) the critical situation and marginalization felt in the school and in the whole society, stems from an ambiguous interpretation of individual differences. These ones, instead of being understood in their positive sense (as the etymological root of the

word suggests, the greek word *fero*) are identified as indicators of a deviation from a norm considered ideal.

This vision could be viewed as the resultant of a social model based on ableism (Oliver, 1990), which classifies people in categories based on the person's ability to do, to perform predetermined tasks and to assume fixed social roles. Thus, the Cartesian motto *cogito ergo sum* could now be transformed into an unavoidable social imperative: *facio ergo sum*. Being able to do (according to set and regulated rules) becomes the fundamental dimension of the person: the skilled man is the man who *does* things and who *acts* according to what is considered *normal*. Only in this way, he acquires a status that allows him to be considered a full member of the society he's belonging to (Murphy, 1987; Gardou, 2006). The resultant of this social process is the exclusion of people who are framed in predetermined social categories, identified with terms inspired to the politically correct form: the disabled (the different ables), foreigners (ethnic minorities), the poor (groups at risk of social exclusion). These persons are in fact marginalized by a system that tends to approval and homeostasis and whose fundamental mission is the maintenance of prefixed standards. Thus, who doesn't conform to them is stigmatized and, consequently, marginalized (Medeghini, 2015; Monceri, 2012).

The educational and training system, as an expression of a larger social system, was affected by this setting. There are some interesting examples: the prominent role attributed to the cognitive skills at the expense of social and relational ones; the widespread trend, at national and international level, to assess the efficiency and functionality of schools according to the results achieved in the comparative tests rather than to the complexities of resources (especially if intangible) developed and strengthened.

A further trend seen in the analysis of school regulations comes from the critical reading of the schools' rules. These ones are usually written according to a prescriptive form, so to indicate

clearly what are the prohibited behaviors rather than to encourage collaborative attitudes aimed to build a sense of community.

According to the research and the theoretical framework mentioned by the authors, the most obvious gap of traditional curricula is due to the fact that these are constructed through the existence of a prefixed average or typical student. Thus, they fail to significantly fit the whole range of students' skills and the result is the lack of interest and motivation. In addition, within a vision of knowledge as a transmission process, all that diverges in students is considered noising or cheating, even if expression of creativity (Rogers, 1963; Cropley, 1983; Bocci, 2012; Robinson, 2015). Furthermore the school, through its actions finalized to reiterate and perpetuate a vision of education as individual phenomenon, that requires selective and competitive methods and criteria, could arise in contrast these instances and these emerging social values (Kagan, 2000). Thus, for example, while the act of helping socially tends to be considered a positive value, an indicator of maturity and satisfactory individual well-being (Eisenberg, 1986; Roche, 2002), within the schools it is still interpreted by teachers as a negative action. In fact helping is seen as coping, as an act of disrespect for a rule, which usually regulates when, how and who should help and be helped. No coincidence that students classified as having Special Educational Needs are considered persons that *naturally* require help for their *particular situation*. This is an obvious distortion because it deprives them of the opportunity to act in a proactive and constructive way towards other people and to achieve a consequent better self-image and self-efficacy (Bandura, 2000; Caprara & al., 2014).

The basic topic is that we must revive an idea of school and open societies, viewed as dialogue partners and significantly connoted by the socio-relational dimension. This phenomenon can be acted if the development of human potential focuses on dimensions as cooperation, mutual help and co-evolution. These ones should take the place of the competition between single

persons (Axia, 2005; Canevaro, 2006; 2013). Under this perspective, teaching Social (Sprafkin& al., 1992; Bocci, 2005; Bocci& al. 2011), and Prosocial skills (Caprara & al., 2014) seems to be one of the privileged ways to promote in all people a widespread well-being, viewed as a protective factor against the phenomena of marginalization, isolation and disaffection previously resumed.

2. THE RESEARCH: INTERVENTION MODEL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The main research question was to analyze implementation capabilities and outcomes of a teaching practice aimed to allow both students and teachers to act prosocial behaviors. In particular, we refer to a model structured in a way to allow every person to contribute actively and positively through his talents and potential to the improvement of themselves and the others. In other words, each person should be able to act regardless of the influence of external expectations (generated by the explicit and implicit evaluations of a wide range of actors: parents, teachers, peers, the media derived models, social networks etc ...) about what he can or he can't do.

Among the teaching approaches mentioned in the literature as fulfilling the best evidence criteria, our attention has focused on the Cooperative Learning, in particular on the *Learning Together* (Johnson & Johnson mode, 1987) and *Structural Approach* (Kagan, 2000). These approaches stress, through the direct interaction of the students in small groups, the enhancement of cognitive and social skills.

Thus, we have structured an intervention model that joints the use of some Kagan's structures to the ways to teach social skills, according to Johnson & Johnson's theory. In particular, we have focused on the skills which, for their relevance to the dimensions

of prosociality identified by Caprara (2006), can be considered as *prosocial skills*.

The Table 1 shows the suggested model (Travaglini, 2016).

Table 1: Prosociality and inclusive education

PROSOCIALITY	COOPERATIVE LEARNING			
Dimension of prosociality (Caprara)	Prosociality Skills about CL (Johnson & Johnson, 1987)	Interaction Patterns (Structures Kagan, 2000)	Educational purposes	Cooperative plans
helping	Asking for help Offering help (explanations)	Paircheck; Numbered heads	Mastery of knowl-edges	Interest groups Jigsaw Co-op. Co-op
Consoling Caring	Giving support encouraging	Paircheck; Numbered heads	Mastery of knowl-edges	
		Talking chips	Communi-cative skills	
Sharing	Sharing materi-als Sharing ideas	Think, pair, share	Cognitive skills	
		Roundrobin Three steps interview	Informa-tion shar-ing	
		Flash card game; Send a problem	Mastery of knowl-edges	
Empathy	Listening care-fully Understand-ing the other person's point of view	Corners; Paraphrase; Team value lines;	Communi-cative skills	
		Pair, team dis-cussion;	Cognitive skills	

Therefore, we thought that the adoption of the proposed model would help in raising the levels of students' prosociality and in increasing reciprocal help actions. This challenge should be extended to teachers also, who should intensify their cooperation and should more frequently share aims, goals and teaching strategies.

The research took place in two phases: between January and June 2015 (Phase I) and between September to December 2015 (Phase II). It involved a total of two classes of the Middle School (second classes that became third in September), covering an amount of 42 students and 12 teachers (the number of teachers decreased to 9 these in the second phase of the intervention). In addition, steps were taken to involve two additional classes (50 students) with a control function. These last students were identified on the basis of belonging to the same territorial socio-economic background of the experimental group, according to a quasi-experimental research model (Trincherò, 2002).

The experimental group was identified by the existence of two conditions: teachers' statement about the existence of difficulties in their students' learning and relationship, and the consequent desire to implement improvements paths.

In our research, we used the following tools:

1. For students:

- a. *Prosociality Scale* (Caprara & al., 2005), a self-assessment test composed of 16 items in which students must indicate, within a Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always/always) the frequency of the mentioned behavior.
- b. *Peer Rating* (Caprara & Pastorelli, 1993), a hetero-assessment test. Each student, in respect to the four dimensions of prosociality (consoling, sharing, helping, empathy) has to express an opinion about all his schoolmates, assigning a value ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often).
- c. *Semistructured Questionnaire I for students* (Bocci & Travaglini, n.p.);

2. For teachers:

- a. *Semistructured Questionnaire II for teachers* (Bocci & Travaglini, n.p.).

As regards the semi-structured questionnaires, these were build similarly, in order to analyze at the same time, teachers and students in the following areas:

- a) improve of learning (students) and teaching (teachers);
- b) improve of relationships with peers and teachers (students); with students and colleagues (teachers);
- c) the role played by prosocial skills' process teaching (students and teachers);
- d) strengths of the proposed project (students and teachers).

Beyond these tools, self-reflective cards on prosocial skills were added, according to the way suggested by Learning Together (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1996; Comoglio & Cardoso, 1996; Comoglio, 1999), used *in itinere* by students. Their results are not shown in this paper.

Regarding the timing of the interventions in the two experimental classes, our model of Prosociality and Inclusive Education was structured as follows:

- I. January 2015: teacher training in the fields of cooperative learning, inclusion and prosociality;
- II. February 2015: students' incoming Pre-test (Prosociality Scale and Peer Rating);
- III. February-May 2015: implementation of the educational program based on our prosocial and inclusive model mediated by Cooperative Learning (CL);
- IV. June 2015: students' post-test (Prosociality Scale and Peer Rating); delivery of *Semistructured Questionnaires I and II* to students and teachers;
- V. September-December 2015. Second phase of the experimentation:

- a) Restarting of the educational program (prosocial and inclusive model mediated by CL);
- b) Students' Lastestpost test (Prosociality Scale and Peer Rating);
- c) Delivery of *Semistructured Questionnaires I and II* to students and teachers outgoing;

3. RESULTS

The analysis of the pre-test scores (Feb. 2015) of both Prosociality Scale and Peer Rating highlights a different distribution between the experimental and the control group (see Figure 1 and 2). The experimental group, in both tests, shows lower scores than the ones in the control group. This result seems to confirm the perception felt by teachers about the existence of critical issues and relationship difficulties among students.

Regarding the following post-test (June and December 2015), you can observe an increase in scores in both groups, although the analysis of the means (Tables 2 and 3) doesn't reveal a statistically significant difference. However, you can see in the experimental group a greater increase between February and June, period that is coincident with the first phase of intervention in class with the prosocial and inclusive model mediated by CL.

This outcome, in our view, could be related to the different number of teachers involved in the two phases of the project (12 teachers in the first phase, fallen to 9 in the second one). The lower amount of teachers caused some difficulties in terms of classroom management and teaching practices; furthermore, we can add other difficulties related to the start of the new school year (September 2015), that are frequent in the Italian school system. In particular, they concern the replacement of the head teachers and of some teachers, and the delayed assignment of missing teaching posts.

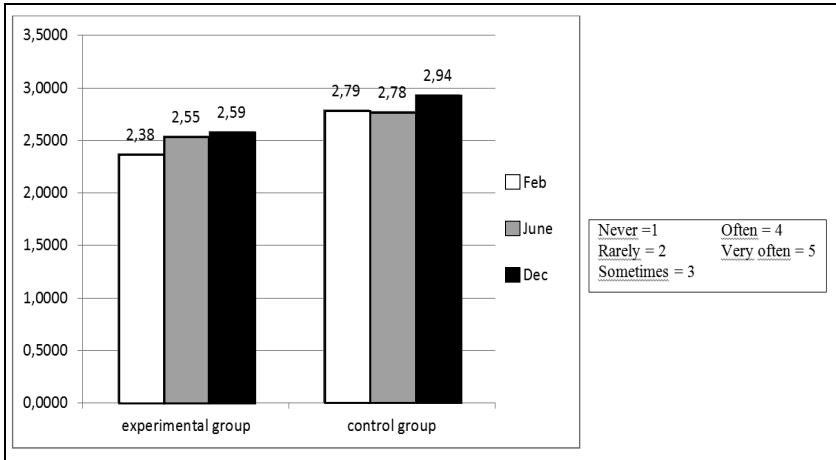


Figure 1: *Prosociality Scale* (mean score)

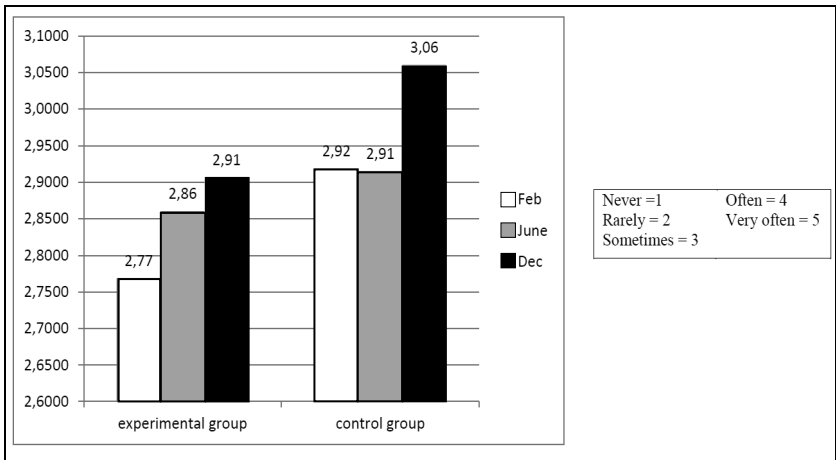


Figure 2: *Peer Rating*(mean score)

Table2: *Prosociality Scale* (mean score)

group		Self Assessment Feb	Self Assessment June	Self Assessment Dec
experimental	Mean	3,5357	3,5997	3,6012
	N	42	42	42
	Std. Dev.	,70388	,73110	,57281
control	Mean	3,7438	3,6613	3,7275
	N	50	50	50
	Std. Dev.	,56557	,53469	,56776
Total	Mean	3,6488	3,6332	3,6698
	N	92	92	92
	Std. Dev.	,63743	,62905	,57044

Table 3 *Peer Rating* (mean score)

group		Peer Rating Feb	Peer Rating June	Peer Rating Dec
experimental	Mean	2,7685	2,8602	2,9067
	N	42	42	42
	Std. Dev.	,51712	,53962	,52950
control	Mean	2,9186	2,9149	3,0605
	N	50	50	50
	Std. Dev.	,44271	,44041	,38686
Total	Mean	2,8501	2,8899	2,9903
	N	92	92	92
	Std. Dev.	,48132	,48620	,46134

Regarding the four dimensions of prosociality identified by Caprara in Peer Rating (*consoling, sharing, helping and empathy*), the best result founded within the experimental group relates to the

dimension *helping*, that highlights an increase of 0,038 compared to the control group (Figure 3). This value, beyond its statistical significance, suggests that the educational prosocial and inclusive model proposed should help to encourage helping relationships among students.

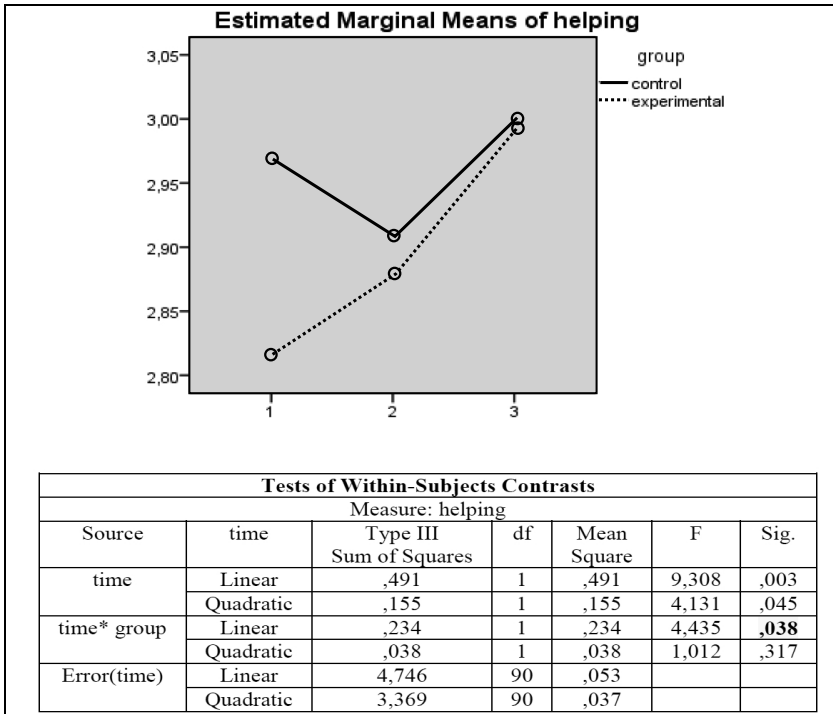
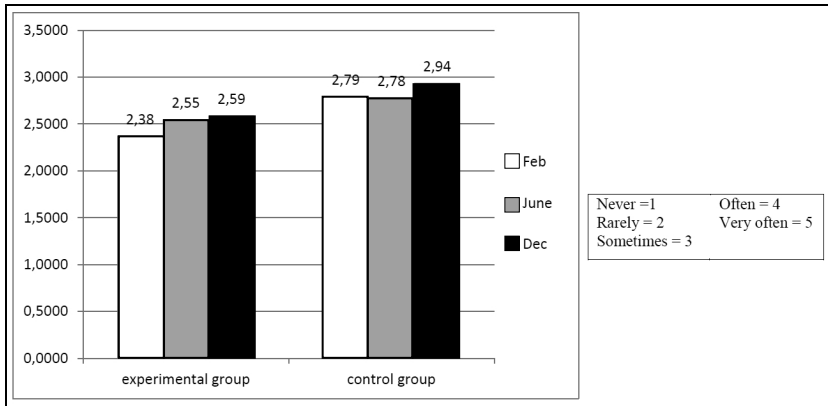


Figure 3. *Peer Rating: helping dimension*

Another important issue concerns the analysis of the distribution of the Peer rating scores within the male and female subsamples (Figures 4 and 5).

Both in the experimental and in the control group, the subsample of students males achieved lower scores than females. These ones are in fact perceived by their male peers as more



Figures 4: Peer Rating (male: 17 experimental and 27 control)

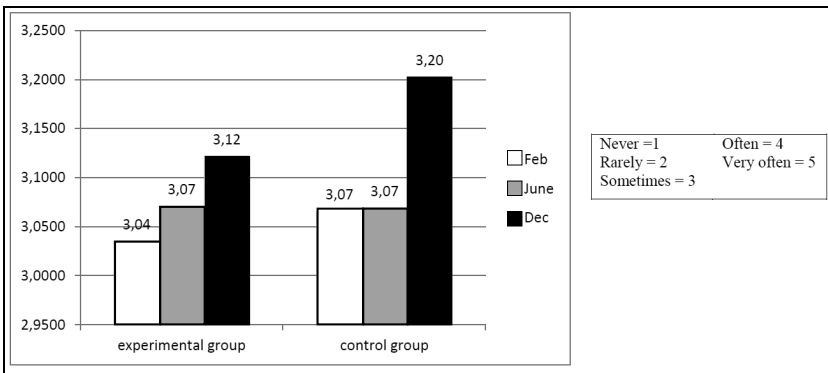


Figure 5: Peer Rating (female: 25 experimental vs 23 control)

willing to sharing and helping, while they do not seem to have the same perception of their colleagues.

This data, in our perspective, should be placed in correspondence with the findings extracted by the *Pupils with disabilities in the Italian school Report: budget and proposals* (TreeLLLe, Charities & Agnelli Foundation, 2011). In Italy the students identified as

having Special Educational Needs (SEN) belong mostly to the male population with an even greater percentage than the average of OECD countries. However, the authors of this document affirm that this distribution is subjected to an over representation, as fueled by socio-cultural factors. In fact, male students should express more visibly dissatisfaction and frustration resulting from school situations; female students, in contrast, should tend to take on more passive attitudes.

These consideration appear particularly interesting since, in Caprara's studies (2006; 2014), higher levels of prosociality act as protective factors against the risk of behavioral problems, as well as those of social exclusion.

This reflection suggests to pay attention to the processes that lead to label students as SEN, as it may cause – as indeed occur – halo effect phenomena and self-fulfilling prophecy.

Table 4: Peer Rating (male: 17 experimental *vs* 27 control)

group		Peer Rating Feb	Peer Rating June	Peer Rating Dec
experimental	Mean	2,3756	2,5498	2,5897
	N	17	17	17
	Std. Dev.	,40589	,47442	,53792
control	Mean	2,7932	2,7833	2,9393
	N	27	27	27
	Std. Dev.	,44307	,50268	,37432
Total	Mean	2,6318	2,6931	2,8042
	N	44	44	44
	Std. Dev.	,47148	,49976	,47123

Table 5: Peer Rating (female: 25 experimental *vs* 23 control)

group		Peer Rating Feb	Peer Rating June	Peer Rating Dec
experimental	Mean	3,0357	3,0713	3,1224
	N	25	25	25
	Std. Dev.	,40410	,48247	,40794
control	Mean	3,0659	3,0694	3,2027
	N	23	23	23
	Std. Dev.	,40315	,29521	,35858
Total	Mean	3,0502	3,0704	3,1609
	N	48	48	48
	Std. Dev.	,39962	,39957	,38316

Regarding the results obtained from semi-structured questionnaires, students and teachers provide a number of rather interesting data.

For example, the answers given by students at the end of the research period path (in December 2015) seem to confirm the positive effect of prosocial and inclusive model mediated by CL proposed to them. Among the most popular sizes are highlighted:

- improve learning (25%);
- sharing, collaborating with others (24%);
- learning to understand and to respect the other's point of view (22%);
- providing reciprocal help (19%);
- improving relationship with others (10%).

The students' account further supports this framework:

Student 1: *«I think that this teaching methodology is advantageous for everybody. Everybody needs to ask for help, you cannot always solve your problems alone, sometimes you have to risk saying what you feel.*

I think this methodology is very important, because it allows you to learn a lot and to be aware of all the things you can do».

Student 2: «*Through the discussions I learned even more respect others when they do not think like me».*

Student 3: «*It was not easy working with others in group because everybody had different suggestions and the challenge was to find an idea acceptable for everybody».*

The answers given by the students emphasize a perception of improvement in terms of peer relationships (a lot + very enough = 68% vs a little + not at all = 32%). However, a less improvement is experienced in the deal with their teachers (a lot + very enough = 41.6% vs a little + not at all = 58.4%)

As regards the teachers, through their answers reveal that our prosocial model has the following strength:

- increase of responsibility and autonomy (29.6%);
- improvement in social and communication skills (18%);
- greater collaboration and reciprocal help (18%);
- improvements in learning (14.9%);
- greater enhancement of individual differences (11.1%)
- increase of motivation for schoolwork (7.4%).

As for the improvement of relationship with students and colleagues, teachers report that their experience has achieved better changes towards the first ones. In fact, the perception of improvement in relations follows these measures:

- teacher-students: a lot + very enough = + 78% vs a little + not at all = 22%;
- teachers-teachers: a lot + very enough = + 45% vs a little + not at all = 55%;

As regard the assessment of the role played by the Social Skills, teachers and students show a favorable impression. These ones, in exactly, has been evaluated as important factor and particularly valuable:

- students: Very important + quite important = 88.9% vs. just + not at all important = 11.1%;

- teachers: Very important + quite important = 92% vs. just + not at all important = 8%.

In this case, to support the quantitative data, we report some thoughts expressed by the teachers:

Teacher 1: «*The educational path has allowed us to surpass a state of isolation and has encouraged the exchange of opinions and reciprocal collaboration*».

Teacher 2: «*The activities helped each student to enter in contact with each other, with no exclusions, and to build strong relationships*».

Teacher 3: «*Working on the social skills was difficult, very difficult, but useful... we can already see the benefits in how frequently students are open to each other, giving and accepting help and talking about their difficulties. Before the project the students did not do it, but they are now willing to be open to others and toward themselves, and I have to say that this has been the best result...*».

CONCLUSIONS

The implementation of the suggested educational path, although not showing a statistical efficacy, has found some positive aspects from different perspectives.

At first, it has resulted in participants' collaborative attitudes, which sparked improvements within teaching-learning processes and relationships among students and teachers.

On the other hand, we have another more significant aspect to stress. The spread in the two experimental group classes of pro-social behaviors has weakened three ways of thinking (genuine pedagogical *formae mentis*) that often represent the background on which even now stand out most of teachers' actions:

1. the ableism, that tends to classify students on the basis of their performances' results, especially by academic nature;
2. individualism and competitiveness. According to this perspective, the achievement of high standards of learning is possible in

so far as each person works in isolation from others and makes efforts to achieve performances judged better than others.

In contrast, the challenge for students to experience positive interdependence has enhanced their individual differences in order to achieve a both individual and collective well-being. It has also hallowed everyone to feel part of an educational community as school, which is not defined by prefixed laws, by economic nature, but by «their value centers, their feelings and their beliefs, which provide the conditions necessary to create a sense of *us* starting by a *I*» (Sergiovanni, 2000, pp. 3-4).

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