

DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE LEARNING COMMUNITIES THROUGH PARTICIPATION AND RELATIONSHIP

SVILUPPARE COMUNITÀ DI APPRENDIMENTO INCLUSIVE ATTRAVERSO LA PARTECIPAZIONE E LA RELAZIONE

Caterina Bembich

Università degli Studi di Trieste
cbembich@units.it

Abstract

The dynamics of participation in school contexts can be supported through educational opportunities and resources that schools can implement, in order to create conditions that reduce barriers to learning. The course of students' study journeys are strongly influenced by the quality of the experiences and interactions that occur in everyday school life. Participation and the quality of social relationships are highly connected, and constitute a possible protective factor against educational risk. This paper undertakes an exploratory inquiry to investigate the network of relationships present within two school classrooms, with the aim of monitoring their evolution following the introduction of a design experiment. The activity aimed to stimulate student participation and inclusion in the classroom, encourage discussion, interaction and empathic and reflective thinking. Our results reveal a positive evolution in relationships between students, as well as the importance of introducing activities that stimulate them to reflect on others' mental states and employ an empathic perspective in order to improve the quality and cohesiveness of relationships in the classroom.

Le dinamiche di partecipazione nei contesti scolastici possono essere favorite dalle opportunità educative e dalle risorse che la scuola può mettere in campo, al fine di creare delle condizioni che riducano le barriere all'apprendimento. I percorsi di studio dei ragazzi e delle ragazze, sono infatti fortemente influenzati dalla qualità delle esperienze vissute a scuola e dalle interazioni che avvengono nella quotidianità della vita scolastica. La partecipazione e qualità del tessuto relazionale sono due aspetti quanto mai connessi e costituiscono un possibile fattore di protezione al rischio educativo. Il presente contributo ha indagato attraverso un'indagine esplorativa i network relazioni presenti all'interno di due classi di una scuola professionale con l'intento di monitorarne l'evoluzione dopo l'introduzione di una sperimentazione educativa. L'attività aveva l'obiettivo di favorire la partecipazione e l'inclusione dei ragazzi della classe, stimolandone la discussione, l'interazione e lo sviluppo di un pensiero empatico e riflessivo. I risultati evidenziano un'evoluzione positiva delle relazioni tra studenti e mettono in luce l'importanza di proporre agli studenti attività che li stimolino a riflettere sugli stati mentali altrui e ad assumere una prospettiva empatica, al fine di migliorare il contesto relazionale in classe.

Keywords

Participation; relationship; social network analysis; inclusion

Partecipazione; relazioni; vulnerabilità; social network analisi; inclusione

Introduction

The dynamics of participation in school contexts play a significant role in shaping the learning pathways of students. Schools can create different participation contexts and various educational opportunities through the resources, both human and material, that they can mobilize, through the methods of interaction and the educational practices employed. Students'

scholastic pathways, especially those who are in a condition of vulnerability, are not only the result of personal characteristics and skills, but also the consequence of interactions between individual aspects, contextual conditions and quality of experiences lived in school (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Vygotskij, 1987; Bruner, 2000). The value of the relationships that can be developed within a school context, is relevant for supporting students' school outcomes, in order to establish a perspective of inclusion. In fact, the quality of relational processes has a significant value for students' learning outcomes, and constitutes a possible protective factor to counteract educational risk (Lee, 2009).

Inclusion is considered a process that should lead to the construction of a sense of community, which is defined precisely through differences (Caldin, 2013). Inclusion is therefore understood as a broad concept, which looks at the active participation of vulnerable persons through the restructuring of educational practice, in order to promote learning opportunities for every student. This means paying attention to the positive involvement of students in the social context and working so that they can experience positive and constructive relationships amongst peers. The concept of inclusion emphasizes the importance of the educational context as an element that may or may not favor the participation of all. Attention is therefore directed to the possible barriers to learning that may arise within an educational context or in its relations with communities.

The concept of inclusion recognizes a plurality of factors as elements that can affect opportunities for participation in school experiences, such as: the development of cultures, policies and practices as responses to the plurality of educational needs in learning pathways; perceived school well-being; the acceptance of diversity as a resource for the group; the support of school-community relations; and the recognition of inclusion in education as an aspect that concerns the culture of society in a broad sense. The importance of creating learning conditions that allow students to best express their potential, is therefore recognized through different resources and educational proposals that respond to a variety of needs (Ianes & Cramerotti, 2013; Canevaro, 2013). Under this perspective, the Ministerial Directive of 27 December 2012 ('Intervention tools for pupils with Special Educational Needs and territorial organization for school inclusion'), with the subsequent explanatory notes (notes of 27 June 2013 and 22 November 2013; note MIUR 562 of 3 April 2019), underlines how schools should favour the inclusion and maximum participation of students who during their growth may present Special Educational Needs (BES). Each student can in fact find themselves in a particular moment of his/her growth, in a condition of vulnerability: the school should therefore respond to this appropriately, taking action and putting in place the most needed and effective resources.

1. The concept of participation

According to Booth (2003), the concept of participation in school contexts is connected to a plurality of factors and to overcoming barriers that hinder access to education. Participation implies learning collaboratively and sharing, the active involvement of students (everyone can make her/his own contribution and express their thoughts), and the recognition and acceptance of each individual in his peculiarities. Participation thus does not only mean being part of a context and participating in the proposed activities; rather it means proactively bringing one's own contribution, being recognized and valued by the members of the group.

Encouraging student participation means creating learning contexts that allow students to experiment, to confront each other, to express their thoughts and feeling in a space that

welcomes their involvement. Participation is intended to work towards the participation of all children, and is not aimed only at those in a situation of fragility, but rather represents a process that encourages practices that should favor the inclusion of every member of the school community. It means thinking about contexts in which each student can experience pursuing answers that are always peculiar to their learning needs (Booth *et al.*, 2000).

The concept of participation is closely related to reducing barriers to learning: encouraging participation means reducing what could hinder it (Florian, Black-Hawkins & Rouse, 2016; Booth & Ainscow, 1998). However, the relationship between these two factors is not always linear; in fact, it may happen that some activities promoted by the school with the intention of encouraging the participation of some students, may in fact hinder or reduce the participation of others. The connection between obstacles and participation must be analyzed in its broadest sense and above all with a critical outlook, given the complexity of the school contexts and the plurality of needs that inhabit them.

Participation views learning as an active process, achieved through collaboration. Students learn by working together, and support each other in a participatory process of elaboration. It is therefore a question of making the best use of the resources for all children, valorizing them as components of growth and learning for all. As such, each person becomes a resource contributing to the group: everyone is recognized for his/her peculiarities, potential and resources. Active participation is on the one hand a right, but also a responsibility for learning: that is, it implies a mutual responsibility between members.

In this interpretative framework, relationships become central, both between students and between students and teachers; not only in the moments of learning that take place in the classroom, but also during informal interactions. Creating an inclusive school environment, which promotes participation, means creating a context in which relationships within the school are constructive and sources of support and growth.

The value of relationships in learning processes has often been identified as one of the key factors in counteracting educational risk (Mahoney, 2014; Pianta, 2001; Kindermann *et al.*, 1996; Riva, 2018). It is difficult to learn and grow in a context where relationships with others are not perceived as positive. For this reason, it is important to promote school activities that help students improve their network of relationships and encourage the development of learning communities that are strongly interconnected.

Thus, to build an inclusive learning community it is important to work on the sense of belonging and to the quality of relationships between students. A learning community where members can experience a strong interconnectedness, will encourage students to perceive that the group is important to them and that everyone's contribution is recognized (Brown & Campione, 1990; Osterman 2000). Therefore, if children feel valued members in their class and feel that the group is a source of support, they are more likely to have the opportunity to experience their skills in a more positive way, participate actively and achieve higher learning outcomes (Greenwood and Kelly, 2019; Shaw *et al.*, 2019). The development of an inclusive class community requires attention to the lived experience of children in the classroom, their points of view and the way they perceive the quality of classroom relationships and participatory processes (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Grion, 2017).

Starting from these premises, this paper describes an exploratory study based on a design experiment (Lumbelli, 1989; Brown, 1992; Collins, 1992), which involved two classes of students attending two years of schooling. The project aimed to promote participation and inclusion, through the introduction of a group activity based on the principles of active

participation, collaboration, and mutual recognition. The study sought to compare two case studies, through the analysis of the experimentation path made with the two classes and to analyze aspects of similarity and difference reached at the end of the experience¹.

The school involved in the experiment included a large percentage of children with fragile school backgrounds, many of whom had Special Educational Needs (disabilities, neurodevelopmental disorders or socio-cultural difficulties). Furthermore, in general, the school context was characterized by strong multiculturalism: especially in the first two-years there were a high rate of foreign-born students who entered into the school without any knowledge of the Italian language.

The experiment aimed to improve the participation and inclusion of students in the class, through group activities that stimulated discussion and interaction, as well as the development of empathic and reflective thinking².

2.Methodology

2.1. Participants

Two classes attending second year at a school in an Italian Region as well as their coordinating teacher, participated in the experiment. All the stages and the objectives of the innovative activities were discussed and agreed upon with the teacher. Both classes presented a particularly complex context, due to the presence of a plurality of Special Educational Needs among students. In addition, there were many students in the school who are in school delay and at risk of dropping out.

The first class consisted of 21 students (F = 14; M = 7; age M = 6.33, SD = 0.72) of which: 8 were in school delay; 7 came from countries other than Italy (largely with little knowledge of the Italian language); and 7 possessed Special Educational Needs. However, two students did not participate continuously in the scheduled meetings and did not complete the project.

The second class was made up of 24 girls (age M = 16.5; SD = 0.28) of which: 9 were in school delay; 5 came from countries other than Italy (largely with little knowledge of the Italian language); and 9 possessed Special Educational Needs. 22 students actually participated in the experiment.

2.2 The design experiment

The experimental activity was agreed together with the teacher coordinating the two classes, with the aim of promoting reflection and interaction processes in the classroom, social cohesion and improving collaboration between students. The activities were organized in 10 meetings, in which the class worked in small groups on the theme of non-hostile communication. The

¹ The experiment was conducted in the 2019/2020 school year in the months prior to distance learning for Covid.

² The study was developed as part of the FAMI-IMPACT xxx 2018-2020 project, funded from 2014-2020 - OS2 Migration and Integration Asylum Fund. The project has been carried out in collaboration with the University of xxx and the University of xxx with the proponent xxx, to promote research and teacher training to combat early school leaving, in particular for foreign students.

‘Manifesto of non-hostile communication’, published by the ‘Parole O_stili’ association³, was used as work material. This tool has stimulated students to reflect on the communication styles adopted by young people, the possible consequences of the use of non-empathic language, and on the importance of taking into account the point of view of the other.

The meetings were organized using the following structure:

- a. Establishment of the working groups: the students were invited to form 5 small groups; it was recommended that groups shouldn’t be composed only on the basis of pre-existing class friendships, but also should include people with whom they were usually not used to working with;
- b. Shared reading: the ‘Manifesto of non-hostile communication’ was read together with the class, with the aim of clarifying the meaning conveyed by each single sentence;
- c. Group work: each group chose a sentence from the Manifesto and worked on the meaning of the text, on the problem raised by the sentence and on the possible ways in which the problem could be addressed;
- d. Artifacts: each group worked on the creation of an artifact that expressed a message to share with the class (the groups worked using different modes of expression such as: writing, images, drawings, comics and role-playing moments);
- e. Sharing: the activity ended with the sharing of the artifacts made with the whole class and with a reflection on the experimental pathway.

2.3 Data Analysis

In order to analyze the quality of social relations and participation within the classes, Social Network Analysis (SNA) was used. Social networks were mapped before and after experiment, in order to analyze the impact of the project in promoting cohesion (Haythornthwaite and De Laat, 2010). Through the study of networks, we verified the degree of inclusion and participation of students within the class, and if the proposed intervention had an impact on the development of positive interdependence. Relevant data relating to students’ social networks were gathered through a questionnaire distributed to students at the beginning and at the end of the activity. The questionnaire explored, through sociometric questions, the social networks constituting within the class and the social bonds maintained by the students outside the school. To answer the socio-metric questions, students were provided with a list of their classmates, which contained a letter code assigned to each member of the group (in order to ensure anonymous data analysis). The students were asked to indicate in the questionnaire the letter code of the partner they had chosen (there was no limitation on the number of choices that could be indicated).

In order to compare the impact of the project in the two classes and reach a deeper understanding of the process that determined both the creation of social networks and their evolution, a final focus group was conducted with teachers and students. The focus group involved the group of students and the coordinating teacher, and was led by the researcher who, through stimulating questions, facilitated communication (a second researcher noted observations and significant elements of the speech).

³ The manifesto is available on the site of the Parole O_stili association: <https://paroleostili.it/manifesto/>; it is made up of a 10-sentence handbook, which identify the fundamental principles of a positive, respectful, empathetic and responsible speech.

This final step of the research aimed to clarify what elements could support the development of relationships and participation, as well as the quality of interactions in the classroom.

2.4 Data analysis

Social Network Analysis (SNA) was applied at the beginning and at the end of the activity, in order to analyze the evolution of the networks of relationships within the two classes. The graphical representation analyzes of the networks has taken into consideration the student in school delay (particularly at risk of dispersion), in order to identify possible risk situations or the isolation among these students and monitor the evolution of relationships over time.

Data analysis was conducted using the UCINET 6.0 software package (Borgatti *et al.*, 2002). Some statistical indices were calculated to monitor the evolution of the network: the network density index (index of the number of links present in the network); and the centralization of the network (index of the presence of individuals with important roles within the group).

Comparison of the evolution of the networks in the two classes is relevant as an indication of potential changes in the participation of students in conditions of fragility.

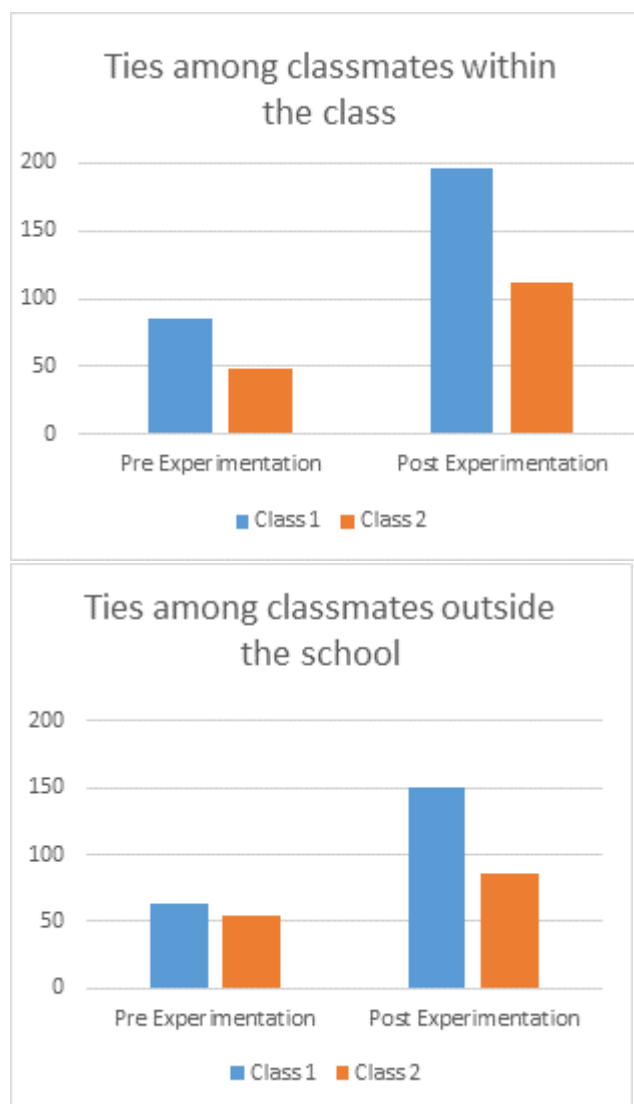
3. Results

In general, the results show an increase in bond density in both classes at the end of the experiment (Table 1).

	Ties among classmates within the class			
	Pre Experimentation		Post Experimentation	
	Index of density	Number of ties	Index of density	Number of ties
Class 1	0.203	85	0.356	196
Class 2	0.087	48	0.203	112
	Ties among classmates outside the school			
	Pre Experimentation		Post Experimentation	
	Index of density	Number of ties	Index of density	Number of ties
Class 1	0.153	64	0.271	150
Class 2	0.097	54	0.156	86

Table 1: Density index

It can be observed that the social network was initially denser in the first class and how this trend grew more pronounced compared to the bonds maintained outside the school (Graph 2).



Graph 1: Numbers of ties among classmates within the class and outside.

The degree of centrality highlights differences in the two classes. In the first class, there is a slight decrease in the score at the end of the experiment, revealing how the number of students with a central position in the network has decreased. This data suggests a more homogeneous distribution of the social network within the class.

In the second class, however, a contrasting trend is observed: the centralization score increases, particularly with regards to the links within the class, indicating how the network has been built around a greater number of students with a central position (Table 2).

Ties among classmates within the class		
	Pre Experimentation	Post Experimentation
Class 1	0.575	0.492
Class 2	0.318	0.423
Ties among classmates outside the school		

	Pre Experimentation	Post Experimentation
Class 1	0.312	0.261
Class 2	0.215	0.291

Table 2: Degree of centrality

3.1 Comparison of the internal network in the two classes

The network within the two classes shows a greater number of links after the experiment.

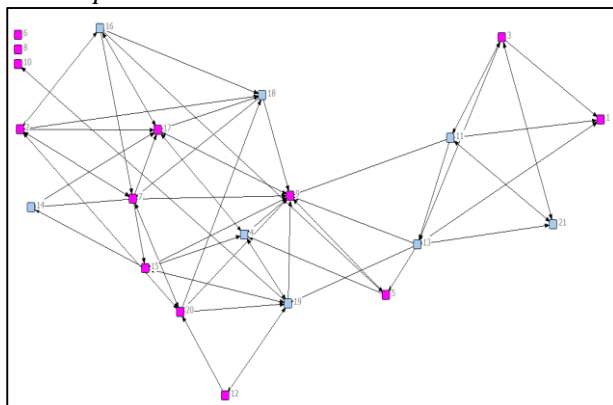
The first class initially presented a denser network, which intensifies a lot the links at the end of the activity. The bonds are generally well distributed: each node on the network has more than one connection. It can be observed that the two students who did not participate continuously in the activity, remain isolated from the rest of the class: they are students who had discontinuous school attendance since the beginning of the year, and who therefore did not fit well into the group.

The second class at the beginning of the experiment presents a more fragile relational situation: the social network is not very developed and has less dense links. At the end of the experiment, the network has expanded in the number of connections, even if a student remains in a condition of isolation from the class and some connections remain at the binary level.

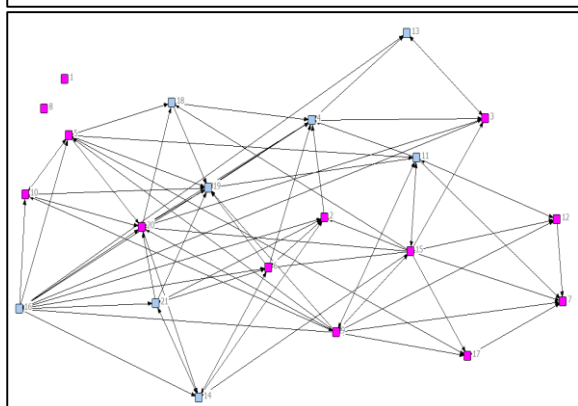
There are no substantial differences in the relationships between students in school delay (Graph 3 and 4).

Class 1

Pre- Experimentation



Post- Experimentation

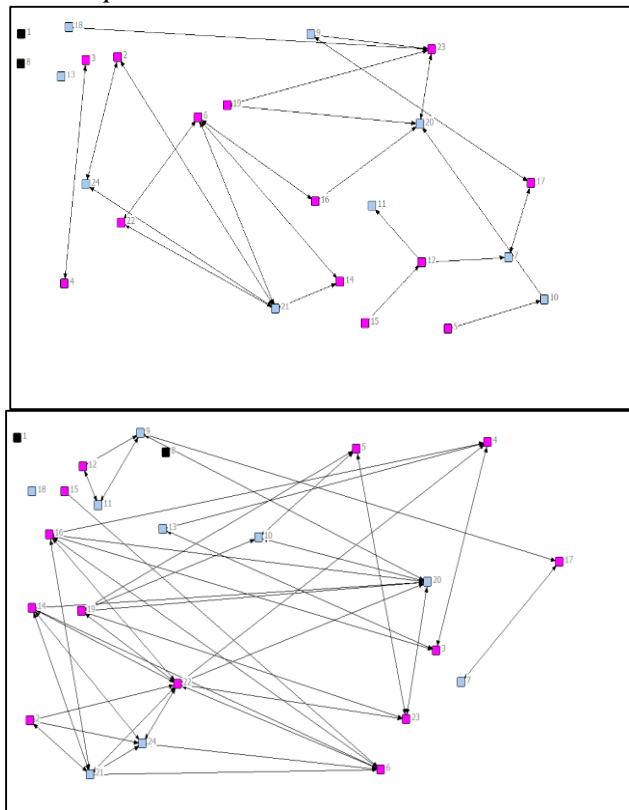


Graph 3: social network among classmates within the class 1. Network before and after the activity: pink square = students not in school delay; blue square = students in school delay

Classe 2

Pre- Experimentation

Post- Experimentation



Graph 4: social network among classmates within the class 2. Network before and after the activity: pink square = students not in school delay; blue square = students in school delay

3.2 Comparison of the network outside the school

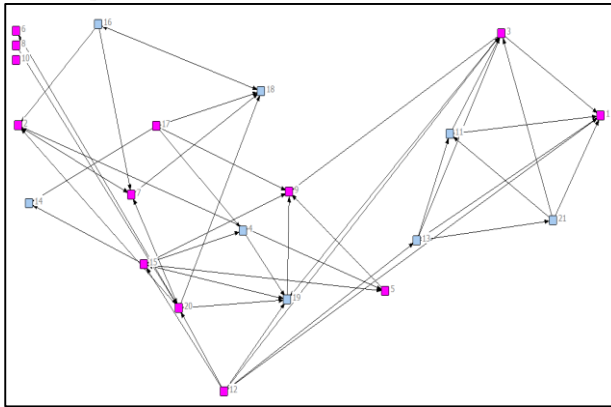
The network of friends kept outside the school context was strengthened as a result of the activity in both classes; also in this case, higher extra school links are present for the first class even prior to the experiment.

In the first class, the evolution of social networks shows an increase in density: many students therefore maintain ties even outside the school with numerous classmates. Even in this condition, we observe that the two students who participated in the activity discontinuously remain in a position of isolation.

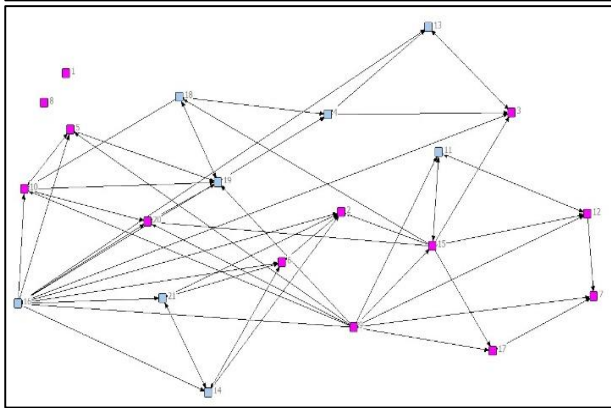
In the second class, the social ties outside the school intensify, even if the presence of subgroups or ties that remain at the binary level can be noted (Graph 5 and 6).

Class 1

Pre- Experimentation



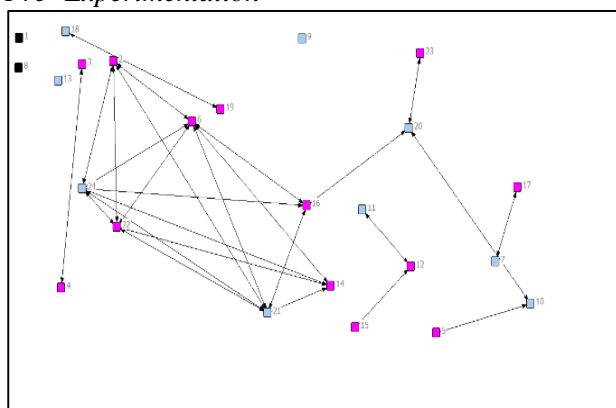
Post- Experimentation



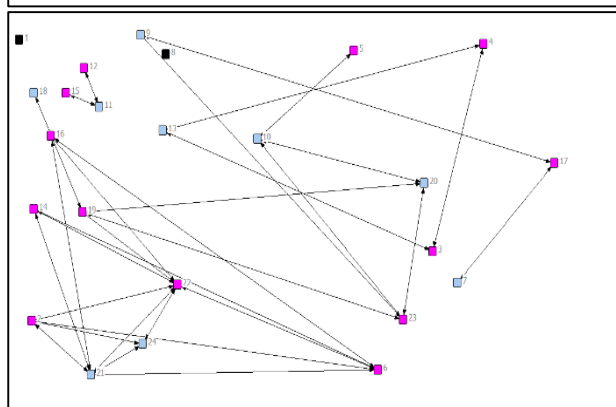
Graph 5: social network among classmates outside the school in the class 1. Network before and after the activity: pink square = students not in school delay; blue square = students in school delay

Class 2

Pre- Experimentation



Post- Experimentation



Graph 6: social network among classmates outside the school in the class 1. Network before and after the activity: pink square = students not in school delay; blue square = students in school delay

3.3 Focus group

After the conclusion of the experiment, it emerged that for both classes collaborative group work was a modality usually adopted by teachers: the implicit cultural background of the class system was therefore based on collaboration and mutual support. However, the initial situation highlighted a very different relational context at the beginning of the activity in the two classes. The first class was already initially more cohesive, while the second presented a more complex relationship context from the beginning and characterized by some problems within the group. It was possible to observe a certain fragmentation in the bonds of the class and the presence of subgroups.

The observation of relational dynamics has highlighted in both cases a collaborative spirit on the part of the students, and a tendency to support classmates in difficulty – an aspect that seems to have been strengthened at the end of the activities.

However, although it was possible to observe an implicit culture in the host class, it was also possible to note how some barriers have hindered the full participation of all. For example, a critical aspect was observed in students who presented a discontinuous school attendance. This aspect has certainly not favored the creation of stable bonds both within the class and outside – a factor that can possibly compound the risk of a future school dropout. Furthermore, for some foreign students, language barriers prevented full and equal participation and also the possibility of creating stable bonds with other members of the class.

The final focus group with students and teacher, highlighted how the activity had a positive impact in both classes. Especially for the second-class students, it made it possible to get to know some classmates better – an aspect that improved the quality of social relations. The

themes proposed also brought out some critical elements that had led to misunderstandings or conflicts that sometimes made relationships within the class difficult.

3.4 Discussion of the results

Collaborative activity has fostered relationships within the two classes and improved the social context. From the comparison between the two groups, it emerged that on the one hand in the class in which the bonds were already good at the beginning of the experiment, bonds further increased. In this case, the proposed activity resulted in greater cohesion between the members of the group who became even more united. On the other hand, in the class where the most relational problems initially arose, a positive change was observed in the social network that has expanded, with consequent improvement in the participation and inclusion of more isolated students.

The proposed working method prompted the students to reflect and share their ideas and listen to other's points of view, making them reflect on the plurality of perspective. The activity therefore showed positive effects on relationships within the class, even in those that were initially more complex.

It is interesting to note that at the end of the activity, the students also indicated that they had developed closer relationships even outside the school context; an aspect that suggests that students got to know each other better and therefore found a space for sharing that they had not previously explored.

Although both classes were to use working in groups and the implicit cultural background within the class was aimed at the inclusion and participation of all, the initial situation present in the two classes had changed. It therefore transpires that, on the one hand, the existence of an implicit cultural background within the class is fundamental to foster inclusion and participation, but on the other hand it is not sufficient to foster a positive class climate and real inclusion. The proposed experiment suggests how important it is to focus in on the relational dynamics of the group and to create conditions in which all students can communicate and express their thoughts, and in this way genuinely relate with each other. Group activity should therefore stimulate reflection: not only sharing the activity itself, but above all the personal aspects that may emerge from that experience.

4. Conclusions

Encouraging the participation of all students means creating contextual conditions that reduce the barriers to learning, and the factors that could hinder the positive participation of students. Participation can be promoted through activities that foster interdependence between children and support their constructive interaction (Brown & Campione, 1990).

Knowledge develops when learning involves the network of individuals and people who actively participate within the community in which they belong. Through exchange and developing relationships, knowledge is built and shared, activating processes of negotiation, deconstruction and reconstruction of ideas (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2003).

However, it is possible that some activities promoted by the school with the intention of encouraging the participation of some students, may not achieve this aim. For example, it is not enough to propose activities that include collaborative elements, to achieve the goal of developing better cooperation and better learning results among children. Rather, it is necessary to work from the outset on the quality of relationships between students; particularly where

there are unresolved problems within the class, it will not be possible to build a learning community that is truly inclusive and participatory. Indeed, only by working on the relational context is it possible to develop strong interdependence, where bonds are felt as significant and a source of mutual support. The group can work in a participatory sense if conditions are created within the class that really allow cooperation, where everyone can best express their potential and at the same time be supported. The material chosen (The ‘Manifesto of non-hostile communication’) to conduct the activity, made it possible to address a significant theme in the life of the students, and consequently to carry out the activity collaboratively, sharing perspectives and elaborating interpretations regarding the reasons for the hostilities.

In fact, the relational dynamics in the groups are always very complex and non-linear; therefore, it is not enough to participate in a social activity to ensure that children feel involved and actively participate. Building an inclusive learning community requires processes and experiences that allow students to reflect and develop intersubjective and empathic thinking. Indeed, the intersubjective dimension assumes a central role in creating truly participatory learning conditions (Bruner, 1995). Dialog between peers allows students to experience an intersubjective exchange, in which it is possible to compare their ideas, change their points of view and expand their skills. In this process, students should be pushed towards empowerment: it means that everyone is required to contribute in a proactive way to the activity, bringing their own thoughts, ideas and opinions.

A school that offers a context where children can feel good and can be supported in improving their relationships with their peers, works to lay the foundations to better support learning paths. Success in learning is in fact closely linked to the contextual conditions, which if they are favorable and generate well-being, can consequently lead to an improvement in school results (Lucisano et al., 2018).

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