



The Intercultural Challenge in Multicultural Education and Formation Communities

Results of the Quantitative Survey*

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Abstract

This contribution aims to reconstruct the theoretical premises and the methodology adopted for the realization of the quantitative research part, conducted by means of a structured questionnaire, which concluded the *Action-Research-Training* project of this extensive report. The contribution focuses on the preparation of the quantitative instrument for data collection, without reconstructing the general theoretical-conceptual framework. It then reports the results of the survey conducted in education contexts, providing the reader with useful insights into the problems and opportunities that can arise from living in a multicultural context, as well as some contextual elements within education areas that are necessary for understanding the learning processes in contexts of linguistic and cultural plurality.

Keywords

Structured questionnaire – Multiculturality – Education contexts – Interculturality – Intercultural competences

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* Translated from the original
Italian by Nina Deliu

Rather than knowledge of others, what determines the success of intercultural dialogue is the basic ability to listen, cognitive flexibility, empathy, humility, and hospitality¹.

1

Premise

This contribution aims to reconstruct the theoretical premises and the methodology adopted for the realization of the quantitative part of the survey, by means of a structured questionnaire. It also concludes the *Action-Research-Training* project entitled *Multiculturality and intercultural competences in ecclesiastical institution of higher education and in formation communities of consecrated life*. Before illustrating the study design, we reconstruct the general theoretical-conceptual framework that guided the research team into the formulation and conceptualization of the research problem, as well as the preparation of the instruments for data collection. The realized research is doubly placed, particularly from the point of view of the different contexts: on one side, universities or Pontifical faculties and ecclesial academic institutions, on the other side, formation communities of consecrated life, both characterized by a certain multiculturalism with respect to both educators and students.

2

A multilevel and integrated approach for the study of the education of intercultural competences in multicultural contexts

The requirement of statistical representativity, or, in other words, the generalizability of the results to the population as a whole, is not always needed in surveys, and sometimes this constraint may actually be an obstacle to producing theoretically relevant results. Although minoritarian, based on this thesis, which recalls the one well-expressed by Johan Galtung: «the choice of the sample has to be made on the basis of the research purpose, a prescription which becomes less trivial in the light of the number of cases where standard recipes are followed just because they exist and are simple to follow»², we made the choice of a multistage sampling strategy according to our research objectives.

As mentioned in the introductory contribution of this research³, the employed sampling strategy is a multistage sampling according to which:

- in the *first stage*, three geographical areas are selected and divided into North, Center, and South of Italy;
- in the *second stage*, within each of the selected first-stage areas, a number of academic communities and a number of communities of consecrated or apostolic life, for which we tried to achieve a balanced sample across male and female communities, were sampled. A particular over-representation interested the Roman area, where we have the highest concentration of ecclesiastical academic institutions and formation communities of multicultural Institutes of Consecrated Life;
- in the *third stage*, we sampled all the students, namely all the consecrated men and women, the priests, and the lay people belonging to the ecclesiastical academic institutions and to the formation communities of Institutes of Consecrated Life, sampled in the previous stage (excluding teachers and formators). Overall, we reached 10 university Institutions (including the 6 selected for the qualitative research part), and 19 formation communities (including the 7 selected for the qualitative research part). From the Questionnaire survey, we also came across other Pontifical universities in Rome that were not contacted by the research team, but which were visited by consecrated men and women from the reached formation communities of consecrated life, which filled-in the Questionnaire.

At each stage, we proceeded with a selection of the (aggregated) units based on criteria that from time to time resulted to be the most adequate and feasible (purposive sampling).

The adopted form of sampling responds to the need for typological representativeness, considerate of its objective (i.e., assessing the relationships between variables), and allows to compare groups (i.e., social types) of equivalent sample sizes. These are identified through a combined reference to variables considered important, and independently on their numerical representativeness within the general population.

The approach of this work is guided by the *Action-Research* methodology and by participative and educative dynamics with the aim of identifying, analyzing, and improving a certain situation *in a participative way*. It is assumed that this occurs with the engagement of all participants, both researchers and individual subjects, both universities and communities. The dynamics of the research and the *auto-analysis in view of change* are combined and merged in a conscious and supervised way by activating knowledge, competences, evaluations, decisions, and actions. In this way, it triggers a process of development and widespread growth of knowledge and competences (within the scientific and academic communities as well as communities of consecrated or apostolic life) and specific *empowerment* for future actions⁴. The same dynamics, experienced within contexts of cultural pluralities, are enriched by processes, elements, and challenges increasingly common in contemporary societies⁵.

The quantitative research work was placed within an integrated perspective and was moved by the qualitative research phase and its instruments (working grids of the focus groups and question lists of the interviews). According to a *Mixed Methods Research* framework, from the analysis of the information that emerged during the focus groups interviews (analyzed with textual analysis software), a structured questionnaire was developed and translated into 9 languages (Arabic, Chinese, Korean, French, English, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Vietnamese).

The choice of integrating the two approaches⁶, rather than treating them as two distinct alternatives, allows to overcome the limitations of each of the two methodologies and to combine their individual strengths, enabling a deeper and increasingly multifaced understanding of the phenomenon under study. The mixed method is particularly useful in the case of complex research questions (as in our case) and strengthens the validity of the obtained results. The adoption of a mixed method enabled a joint qualitative and quantitative analysis of the dimension of intercultural competences in the observed contexts, and the possibility to comprehend their peculiarities. Specifically, the qualitative method was adopted to understand the different interpretations of the two concepts of multiculturalism and interculturality and to define the intercultural competences required for living in intercultural contexts⁷. Furthermore, this qualitative phase allowed us to collect essential elements for the construction of the questionnaire and to better guide the research hypotheses.

As anticipated, during this phase, the number of involved ecclesiastical academic institutions and formation communities of consecrated life was further expanded. The qualitative phase, conducted between September 2018 and January 2020, has contributed to the development of an empirical basis, which introduced additional factors neglected during the problem conceptualization phases; nevertheless, it provided the contents and the structural elements for the realization of the questionnaire, designed between June 2019 and December 2019.

The questionnaire was then subject to a hardworking testing phase, aimed to control potential bias sources related to the formulation of the questions (complexity or unclearness of the question, underdetermination, overdetermination, obtrusiveness) as well as other complex factors due to its translations in 9 languages.

During this phase, twenty *pretesting* interviews were conducted *face-to-face* and additional thirty interviews were administered online. This canonical *pretesting* was also augmented with an *expert review pretesting*. The accurate *pre-test* allowed us to

take action in the wording, the order of the questions, their number, a more adequate formulation of the response types, and the closure of certain questions. Only after this phase, the final version of the questionnaire – consisting of 62 questions⁸ – was drawn up, and the survey was implemented online on the *LimeSurvey* platform. Although an online questionnaire may pose problems of statistical representativeness of the population of reference, it also presents several positive aspects related to the faithfulness and the quality of the collected data⁹. The survey was conducted between March 2021 and June 2021 and collected 535 questionnaires (among which 401 provided answers to the section dedicated to formation communities of consecrated life and 469 dedicated to universities).

3

The research instruments

The multilevel conceptualization, which guided the selection of the relevant hypotheses' properties, based on which the empirical data collection was carried out, is summarized in Tab. 1. It emphasizes how this survey explored several theoretically influent factors of various nature that, despite belonging to different levels of analysis, recall the social process of production of the concept of multiculturalism and intercultural competences.

Tab. 1 – Conceptualization system of the dimensions of analysis with the corresponding utilized instruments

Dimensions explored by the instruments	Questionnaire Items	Focus Groups Questions	Other Instruments*
<i>Socio-demographical characteristics</i>			
Age, gender, life status, education level	1,2,3,4		
Country of birth, living condition	5,12,13		
University attended	14,15,16		
<i>Biographical aspects</i>			
Permanence in Italy or abroad, migration path	6,7,8		
Opportunities/difficulties of inclusion	9,10,11	1.2, 1.3	
Congregation of origin, experience in multicultural communities	37,38,39		
Relations network	59,60		
<i>Intercultural dynamics in multicultural communities</i>			
Opportunities in multiculturalism	21,43	1.2	
Problems in multiculturalism	22-27,44-50	1.3, 3.1	
Relational climate in multicultural contexts	20,42		
<i>Internazionalization of formation communities (U e VC)</i>			
Members internationality	17,18,40,41		
Multilingualism (communications, classes, texts)	19,28,29,45	2.2, 2.3, 2.4	
Pluralism of the teaching model	30,31,32,51,52,53	2.2, 2.3, 2.4	
Proposals to promote interaction		2.2, 2.3, 2.4	
<i>Multiculturalism towards interculturalism</i>			
Concept of interculturalism (and difference compared to multiculturalism)	33,54,58	1.1	
Interculturalism experience	34,55	2.1	
Interculturalism in education contexts	35,36,56,57	2.2, 2.3	
<i>Intercultural competences</i>			
Intercultural competences	61,62	3.2	*

* The dimension "Intercultural competences" is also investigated by means of other two qualitative instruments¹⁰.

Having selected delimited collectives has also enabled the adoption of a multi-level and integrated approach for this survey¹¹. During the data processing, this strategy has allowed connecting individual properties with contextual properties, under the perspective of multilevel analysis. Such an approach can be defined as integrated as it combines standardized and non-standardized data-collection techniques in the same research design, with the perspective of *Mixed Methods Research*.

The inclusion of qualitative instruments in this *action-research-training* has the objective of identifying, analyzing, and improving in a participative way a certain experience through the involvement of every single research participant. The dynamics of the research and the *auto-analysis in view of change* are combined and merged in a conscious and supervised way by activating knowledge, competences, evaluations, decisions, and actions. In this way, it triggers a process of development and widespread growth of knowledge and competences as well as precise *empowerment* for future actions.

4

The results of the quantitative survey

In the previous paragraphs, we reported the theoretical-methodological premises which justified and guided this research; in the subsequent paragraphs, we will illustrate the analytical hypotheses that connect the different aspects to the different identified survey areas.

The profile of the survey participants is characterized by a variety of geographical contexts based on their provenience. The most represented area is the Asian one with 32.6% of the respondents, followed by the African region with 27.1% of the individuals; taken together these represent more than half of the respondents.

Tab. 2 – Respondents based on their geographical provenience (continent)

	Percentage
Asia	32.6%
Africa	27.1%
Europe	21.6%
Latin America	14.6%
North America	1.7%
Oceania	0.4%

The female component amounts of 71.6% and the prevalent age range is the one between 31 and 40 years old. The male collective is younger than the female collective. Based on the ecclesial status, the component of consecrated men and women is 68.4%

Tab. 3 – Respondents based on their gender

	Frequency	Percentage
Male	152	28.4%
Female	383	71.6%
Total	535	100.0%

Tab. 4 – Respondents based on their age class

	Frequency	Percentage
18-30	169	31.6%
31-40	238	44.5%
41-50	84	15.7%
51-60	30	5.6%
61 or more	14	2.6%
Total	535	100.0%

Tab. 5 – Respondents based on their ecclesial status

	Frequency	Percentage
A diocesan priest	27	5.0%
A seminarian	45	8.4%
A consecrated person	366	68.4%
A lay person	97	18.1%
Total	535	100.0%

The education level is very high, with 64.5% having an academic degree; only 6.7% have a low education level and 22.5% own an upper secondary (high) school diploma; a residual 6.4% declare to have an education level not listed in the response options of the questionnaire question.

Tab. 6 – Respondents based on their degree

	Frequency	Percentage
Primary (Elementary) School Diploma	6	1.1%
Lower secondary Education (Middle) School Diploma	12	2.2%
Vocational School Diploma	18	3.4%
Technical or Commercial School Diploma	17	3.2%
Upper Secondary (Senior High) School Diploma	103	19.3%
Bachelor's Degree	218	40.7%
Master's Degree / Licentiate	116	21.7%
PhD / Doctoral Degree	11	2.1%
Other	34	6.4%
Total	535	100.0%

As anticipated, most of the respondents come from countries different from Italy, and their path to arrive in this country was a direct route for just over one-half (54.5%) of them, while the remaining ones have previously lived in another (one) country (24.3%) or more than one (21.1%).

Tab. 7 – Respondents based on their path before arriving in Italy

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes, has lived in only one country	107	24.3%
Yes, has lived in more than one country	93	21.1%
No, has arrived directly in Italy	240	54.5%
Total	440	100.0%

The length of stay in Italy is long-term for 14.5% of the individuals, who have stayed in Italy for more than 6 years, while for those who have arrived recently, i.e., less than a year, the percentage is 10.7%; all the remaining ones have stayed in the country between one and five years.

Tab. 8 – Respondents based on their length of stay in Italy

	Frequency	Percentage
Less than a year	47	10.7%
1-2 years	151	34.3%
3-4 years	122	27.7%
5-6 years	56	12.7%
More than 6 years	64	14.5%
Total	440	100.0%

The prevailing motivation for moving to Italy is to complete their religious formation (78%).

Tab. 9 – Respondents based on their motivation to arrive in Italy

	Frequency	Percentage
I came to Italy before choosing consecrated life or priestly formation	10	2.5%
I chose consecrated life or priestly formation outside Italy, then I was sent to Italy to complete my formation	312	78.0%
I moved to my congregation in Italy from another congregation outside of Italy	11	2.8%
Other	67	16.8%
Total	400	100.0%

The arrival in Italy was affected, for almost half of the respondents (48.4%), by different problems, first, the difficulty of communication due to a limited understanding of the Italian language, reflected also in the reduced ability to study profitably based on texts in Italian or to attend the classes. On average, respondents have identified around 2.8 difficulties each.

The genesis of these problems is to be traced to the cultural diversities and to the different habits which define everyday life. Among these problems, one respondent out of ten has pointed to discrimination episodes, although most commonly reported by those who have lived in Italy for a long time (see Tab. 12). This could suggest that some prejudices could have been overcome or resized, compared to one decade ago, and that the multicultural component has been somehow established in the Italian context, which, compared to other countries, has become an immigration country only in its recent history.

Tab. 10 – Respondents based on whether they have experienced any difficulty upon their arrival in Italy

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	213	48.4%
No	227	51.6%
Total	440	100.0%

Tab. 11 – Respondents based on the main difficulties experienced upon their arrival in Italy

	Frequency	Percentage
Difficulty in communication due to poor knowledge of the Italian language	174	29.0%
Difficulty in studies due to poor knowledge of the Italian language	118	19.7%
Difficulty in getting used to different eating habits (food, meal times, etc.)	100	16.7%
Difficulties due to cultural differences in the way people relate to each other (closeness, gestures, etc.)	90	15.0%
Ethnic bias against me	33	5.5%
Racist behavior towards me	24	4.0%
Difficulties in getting public assistance (health/social services)	25	4.2%
Difficulties in entering the school/university system	21	3.5%
Other	14	2.3%
Total	599	100.0%

Tab. 12 – Respondents based on their length of stay and experiences of prejudice or racism

	How long have you been in Italy?				
	Less than a year	1-2 years	3-4 years	5-6 years	More than 6 years
Ethnic bias against me	7.7%	10.4%	14.3%	11.1%	38.7%
Racist behavior towards me	0.0%	9.1%	8.9%	13.9%	22.6%

While we cannot know exactly where and how these episodes of intolerance have occurred, we can assess their main occurrence based on the attended education context of the respondents. We can notice that, for both items, the percentages are greater for respondents that attend a university context only, while the smallest percentage is registered among respondents that live in communities of consecrated life only.

Tab. 13 – Respondents based on any reported problems of prejudice or racism and education context

	Racist behavior towards me	Ethnic bias against me
	Yes	Yes
Attending only universities	20.0%	25.7%
Attending both universities and communities of consecrated life	10.5%	13.1%
Attending only communities of consecrated life	4.0%	16.0%

These difficulties have been overcome in most of the cases thanks to the help of the congregation or the education context (70.9%), to the help of friends (43.7%), and, to a reduced extent compared to the former two cases, to the help of compatriots (29.6%).

This result points out to a supportive community, aiming to quickly integrate those members that encounter any difficulties. Only 22.1% of the respondents did not ask for help and overcame their difficulties alone by themselves.

Tab. 14 – Respondents based on the strategy they adopted to overcome the difficulties encountered upon their arrival in Italy

	Percentage
I was helped by members of my congregation or by the education program	70.9%
I was helped by friends	43.7%
I was helped by people from my own country	29.6%
I overcame the difficulties alone	22.1%
I was helped by government officials	3.8%
Other	9.4%

Considering their consecrated status, 85.6% of the consecrated men and women live in communities with other people, while those living with family (10.1%) or alone (1.7%) are exclusively non-consecrated men and women.

4.1 Multiculturality and intercultural competences in university contexts and in formation communities of consecrated life

As previously mentioned, the questionnaire is organized in two sections, one for those attending a university, and another one for those living in a community of consecrated life.

The questionnaire section dedicated to those belonging to universities has collected 469 responses, and the one dedicated to communities to consecrated life 401, with a prevalence of female responses in both cases (70.4% for universities, 79.1% for communities). Overall, 45% of the respondents attend a bachelor's course and 25.8% a master course, while the remaining 29.2% are distributed between doctoral courses and other education paths.

The perception of living in multicultural contexts is strongly felt and in 63% of these cases, most of the people come from countries different from Italy, in both investigated contexts. Such percentage increases to 74.6% for universities and 69.6% for communities respectively if we also include in our statistics the response option "more than one half". The difference between the two collectives is relevant only with respect to those reporting to live in contexts where the multicultural component is a minority: 5.3% vs 17.5% for universities and communities to consecrated life, respectively. This last result is related to those small communities made up of a few individuals of the same nationality.

Respondents that live in communities of consecrated life belong to congregations that were founded in Italy in 68.6% of the cases, the remaining ones are distributed between different geographical macro-areas worldwide; the three macro-areas with the highest percentages are Northern Europe (6.7%), Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan / South Africa.

Tab. 15 – Respondents based on their perception of multiculturality (i.e., the presence of people coming from countries different from their own) in their education context

	University	Community of consecrated life
Majority of them	63.3%	63.1%
More than half of them	11.3%	6.5%
Half of them	6.6%	5.0%
Less than half of them	6.4%	7.0%
A minority	5.3%	17.5%
I don't know	7.0%	1.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

The geographical areas of origin of their university colleagues are Asia with a percentage of 44.4%, followed by Africa and Latin America with 25.7% and 10.7%, respectively; the European continent registers 7.7% of cases, and lastly, North America and Oceania amount for a 3% jointly. According to their perception, it is thus evident the wide variety of proveniences. It may be hypothesized that the great heterogeneity of cultures and idioms makes communication difficult and poses a challenge to university education. We can notice how universities respond to this challenge and which actions are implemented to make cultural coexistence an opportunity.

A questionnaire item allows us to find out that university communications are written in multiple languages in 39.2% of the cases, 17.5% in at least another additional language, and 43.3% exclusively in Italian. Despite being auto-reported information, such a percentage is quite high, especially if one considers the strong multiculturality within these institutions.

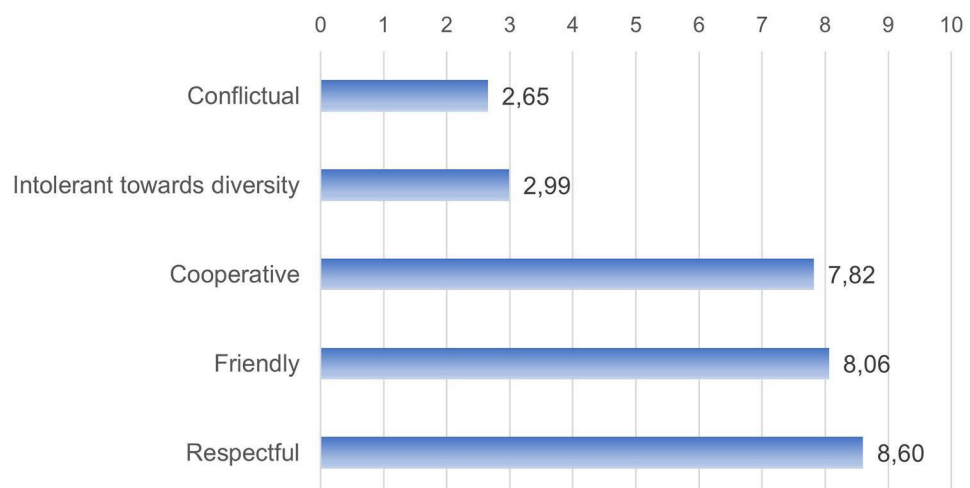
Tab. 16 – Respondents based on their length of stay in Italy

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes, in at least two languages	184	39.2%
Yes, in more than two languages	82	17.5%
No, only in Italian	203	43.3%
Total	469	100.0%

The atmosphere within universities is generally respectful of diversity, friendly and cooperative, although the “negative” questionnaire items report not extremely low values.

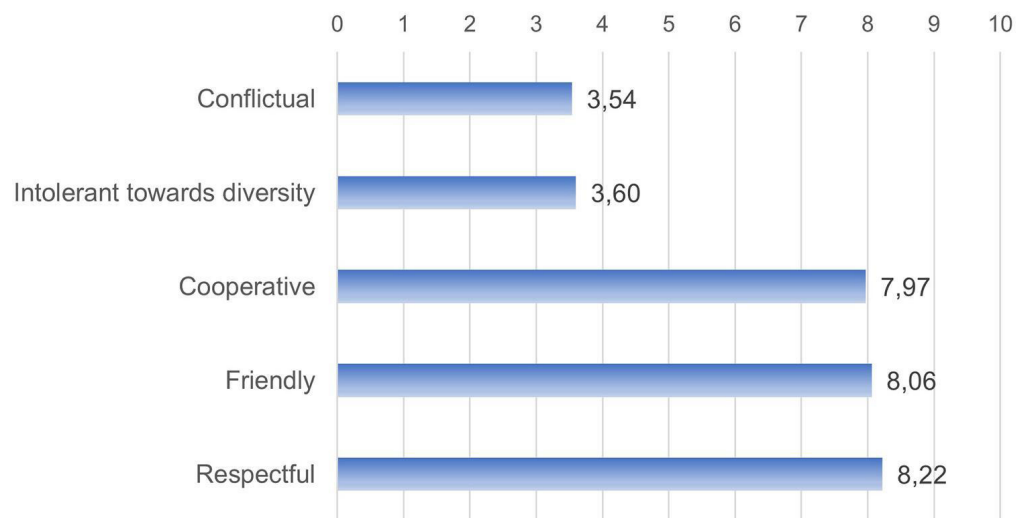
Differently from the university context, in communities of consecrated life, the Italian component has a higher impact, despite being strongly multicultural.

Graph. 1 – Relational climate between people of different nationality in universities



Compared to the other geographical macro-areas, the Asian community is the one with the highest values in the negative dimensions related to the relationships between people of different nationalities, in universities. It may be hypothesized that this geographical macro-area is culturally distant from the other cultures in the academic context.

Graph. 2 – Relational climate between people of different nationality in communities of consecrated life



With similar scores, in communities of consecrated life, the perceived atmosphere is respectful, friendly, and cooperative, although the negative questionnaire items are slightly higher compared to those registered in the academic context. This can suggest that the co-living situation is more often characterized by conflictual episodes due to different cultural belonging and because people share spaces for longer terms compared to the academic context.

The questionnaire has also assessed the extent to which a multicultural context represents an opportunity; the items that registered the highest frequency are pertinent to cognitive dimensions such as the “possibility” of knowing other cultures (20.8% for universities; 20.6% for communities) and of opening-up the horizons on the understanding of the world.

Other responses that question personal identity or represent a point of reflection on its limits are reported by around half of the respondents. Based on gender, male respondents are more likely to choose a response modality that involves a cultural transformation.

Tab. 17 – Opportunities offered by a multicultural context according to the educational institution

Opportunities that a multicultural context offers (percentage)	University	Community of consecrated life
It gives the chance to get to know other cultures	20.80%	20.60%
It opens up one’s horizons on understanding the world	19.90%	18.00%
It teaches how to live with different people	18.10%	20.00%
It enables people to transform their cultural approach, by enriching it	16.40%	15.50%
It helps people to understand the limits of their own cultural approach	13.40%	13.40%
It promotes the learning of new languages	9.70%	10.10%
Other	1.80%	2.40%
Total	100.00%	100.00%

The identified problems of living in a multicultural context are the linguistic differences, which do not allow a deep comprehension between individuals, and the difficulties to adapt to diversities. Furthermore, it is noticed the tendency to create groups

of the same nationality that do not relate to the context. Albeit to a small extent, there are people identifying the risk of personal identity transformation as a problem. The multicultural coexistence needs an effort to adapt to cultural and linguistic diversities, which in turn often leads to an intolerance generated by different ways of living everyday life, mostly highlighted in community contexts.

Tab. 18 – Problems caused by living in a multicultural context according to the education context

Problems deriving from living in a multicultural context	University	Community of consecrated life
The different languages do not facilitate deep communication	28.8%	21.0%
It requires effort to adapt to differences	26.3%	28.5%
Closed groups are formed by people of the same nationality	16.7%	12.3%
It leads to some confusion in the learning activity	8.5%	8.5%
The different ways of doing and thinking can make living together uncomfortable	8.7%	16.2%
Other	7.2%	7.6%
There is a risk of changing one's cultural identity	3.9%	5.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

The conflictual components within education contexts were analyzed as well, and it came out that these are not sporadic but quite frequent episodes, especially within communities of consecrated life. Overall, 21.5% of university respondents and 43.1% of consecrated men and women have had problems with people of a different nationality. Students that mostly experienced such events come from North Europe, North America, and Asia except North Asia. Considering that 43.1% of the consecrated men and women declared to have had problems with people of a different nationality, the indication of difficulty in managing the coexistence of (different) cultures is evident. Such problems are mainly due to everyday life activities, although 25.8% and 24.9% of the respondents from academic contexts and communities, respectively, report having been victims of ethnic bias and/or having been isolated from relationships (22.6% in universities; 17.6% in communities; see Tab. 20).

These problems were less common among people that transited through other countries before their arrival in Italy. Thus, we could probably attribute the origin of such problems to a real difficulty related to multicultural coexistence and sharing of living spaces and times, where differences become more evident, and everyone searches for their own strategy in order to establish their identity.

Tab. 19 – Respondents that had problems with other people/groups within academic contexts and communities of consecrated life

	University	Community of consecrated life
Yes	21.5%	43.1%
No	78.5%	56.9%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

Tab. 20 – Respondents based on the problems they had to face with other people/groups within academic contexts and communities of consecrated life (when they responded Yes to the item reported in Tab. 19)

	University	Community of consecrated life
Being excluded from learning activities	8.1%	9.4%
Ethnic bias against me	25.8%	24.9%
Being isolated from relationships	22.6%	17.6%
Episodes of racism	7.3%	11.2%
Other	36.3%	36.9%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

In academic contexts, such episodes typically occurred with another individual person, but 37.6% of cases are attributable to a group of people. On the contrary, within communities, the reported problems are equally distributed between individuals and groups of people, suggesting that the dynamics of exclusion are shared across multiple people.

Tab. 21 – Occurrence of the problem with an individual person or with a group of people based on the education context

	University	Community of consecrated life
An individual person	62.4%	49.7%
A group of people	37.6%	50.3%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

Comprehending these behaviors and the dialogue have been the main adopted strategies to face and solve the problems within both collectives; the only alternative response option was to speak to a superior or to a person of reference in the university (see Tab. 22). The latter is partially related to the characteristic of certain communities to respond to a specific hierarchy, and consequently to draw superiors' attention for resolving conflicts in the guise of *super partes*.

Tab. 22 – Respondents based on the adopted strategies to face and the problems with other people or groups

Problems deriving from living in a multicultural context	University	Community of consecrated life
I spoke to a person of reference in the university – to my superior	9.7%	21.0%
I spoke to the person(s) concerned for clarification	24.7%	25.2%
I tried to understand the reasons for such behavior	38.3%	34.2%
I ignored the incident	18.2%	12.6%
Other	9.1%	6.9%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

4.2 Cultural model of reference within the analyzed contexts

As anticipated, although the investigated academic contexts are characterized by strong multiculturalism, communications are principally shared in Italian, and in only 13,6% of the cases, these are translated into another language. This suggests a lack of attention toward the multitude of students coming from different parts of the world, who have limited knowledge of the Italian language and who are most likely to have greater difficulties in finding their way in the academic context.

Tab. 23 – In your university curriculum, classes are conducted

	Frequency	Percentage
Only in Italian	402	85.7%
In Italian and in other languages	64	13.6%
Only in another language	3	0.6%
Total	469	100.0%

The cultural matrix is dominated by the presence of European textbooks, and, considering the prevalence of faculties for religious formation, this could very likely create a conflict with the way spirituality has been lived before arriving in Italy.

Tab. 24 – The teachers of the courses/workshops you have attended adopt

	Frequency	Percentage
Only European texts	122	26.0%
Mostly European texts with a small portion of texts from other continents	232	49.5%
Both texts from Europe and other continents, in equal parts	106	22.6%
Mostly texts from other continents with a small portion of European texts	5	1.1%
Only texts belonging to a non-European source	4	0.9%
Total	469	100.0%

Such differences in the university curriculum are confirmed by 36.5% of the students that recognize an educational model which is *very* dissimilar to the one experienced in the country of origin; instead, 38.2% of respondents perceive it as *partially* dissimilar, while the remaining 6.6% very similar.

Tab. 25 – In your university curriculum in Italy, did you find any differences with the educational model of your country?

	Frequency	Percentage
I have always studied in Italy	88	18.8%
Yes, very different	171	36.5%
Yes, partly different	179	38.2%
No, very similar	31	6.6%
Total	469	100.0%

Although the educational model distinguishes itself by a specific Italian peculiarity, marked by an old academic tradition, almost all the respondents agree that the acquired concepts can be used in their countries of origin.

Tab. 26 – Are the concepts you are learning in your study curriculum useful in your country of origin?

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	358	94.0%
No	23	6.0%
Total	381	100.0%

In addition to the competences, also the educational model is considered to be applicable in the country of origin, either entirely (43.8%) or partly (50.9%). Only 5.2% of the respondents believe that the educational model experienced in Italy cannot be replicated in the country of origin.

Tab. 27 – Is the educational model you are experiencing in Italy (classes, testing methods, and homework) applicable in your country of origin?

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	167	43.8%
Yes, only partly	194	50.9%
Yes	20	5.2%
Total	381	100.0%

The bivariate (statistical) analysis of the replicability of the educational model in relation to the macro-areas of origin, identifies geographical areas which suggest incompatibility with the Italian model. Overall, 50% of the respondents coming from the Middle East, and 20% of those from North America and East Europe, do not see any possibility of using this educational model. The reasons for the impossibility of replicating it, are to be searched not so much in the geographical distances as in the cultural differences.

Vice versa, within communities of consecrated life, there is great attention to linguistic diversities, and communications are written in two or more languages in half of the cases. This modality is certainly dictated by practical needs to facilitate coexistence.

Tab. 28 – In your community of consecrated life, are communications written in multiple languages?

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes, in at least two languages	78	19.5%
Yes, in more than two languages	95	23.7%
No, only in Italian	228	56.9%
Total	401	100.0%

Communications are mostly written in the Italian language within Italian congregations; vice versa, these are written in two or more languages within congregations founded outside Italy (see Tab. 29).

Tab. 29 – Place where the congregation was founded and the number of languages for writing communications

	In your community of consecrated life, are communications written in multiple languages?			
	Yes, in at least two languages	Yes, in more than two languages	No, only in Italian	Total
Congregation founded in Italy	51.3%	66.7%	75.4%	68.6%
Congregation founded outside Italy	48.7%	33.3%	25.6%	31.4%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The organization of community life is mostly inspired by a European matrix, with just 22.2% being able to adopt more than one cultural matrix. Less than 10% adopt cultural matrices different from the European ones.

Tab. 30 – The prevailing model of community life in your community (organization of the community, schedules, food, tasks, use of common spaces, etc.) is:

	Percentage
Only European	26.2%
Preferably European with a small part from other cultural matrices	42.6%
Plural and sensitive to models of several cultural matrices	22.2%
Preferably from different cultural matrices with a small part of European matrix	6.2%
Only of matrices different from the European one	2.7%
Total	100.0%

Within communities to consecrated life in Italy, the educational models are perceived as *very* different and *partly* different compared to those experienced in the country of origin, in 29.2% and 47.4% of cases, respectively. Only a small 12.7% consider it to be very similar.

Tab. 31 – In your religious formation in Italy, did you find differences from the formation model of your home country?

	Frequency	Percentage
I don't know, I was formed in Italy	43	10.7%
Yes, very different	117	29.2%
Yes, partly different	190	47.4%
No, very similar	51	12.7%
Total	401	100.0%

The model of spirituality in communities is principally inspired by a European matrix, despite 26.7% of the respondents giving space and attention to a plurality of models and matrices for living spirituality. A total of 5.2% use models of their home geographical contexts.

Tab. 32 – The prevailing model of spirituality in your community (lifestyle, apostolate, prayer, formation, readings, etc.) is:

	Frequency	Percentage
Only European	100	24.9%
Preferably European with a small part from other cultural matrices	173	43.1%
Plural and sensitive to models of several cultural matrices	107	26.7%
Preferably from different cultural matrices with a small part of European matrix	13	3.2%
Only of matrices different from the European one	8	2.0%
Total	401	100.0%

Even if congregations that were founded outside Italy, in virtue of their origins, adopt a model different from the Western ones, most of them can be assimilated to a European model.

Tab. 33 – Prevailing model of community life in your community based on the congregation’s origin

	Only European	Preferably European with a small part from other cultural matrices	Plural and sensitive to models of several cultural matrices	Preferably from different cultural matrices with a small part of European matrix	Only of matrices different from the European one	Total
Congregation founded in Italy	24.7%	47.3%	23.6%	4.0%	0.4%	100.0%
Congregation founded outside Italy	29.4%	32.5%	19.0%	11.1%	7.9%	100.0%
Total	26.2%	42.6%	22.2%	6.2%	2.7%	100.0%

The analysis of the spirituality model with respect to its foundation origin shares the same situation registered for the educational model; a slight difference is seen in terms of the greater inclination to adopt plural models to live spirituality, especially in the case of congregations founded outside Italy (see Tab. 34).

Tab. 34 – Prevailing model of spirituality life in your community based on the congregation’s origin

	Only European	Preferably European with a small part from other cultural matrices	Plural and sensitive to models of several cultural matrices	Preferably from different cultural matrices with a small part of European matrix	Only of matrices different from the European one	Total
Congregation founded in Italy	24.7%	48.7%	24.7%	1.1%	0.7%	100.0%
Congregation founded outside Italy	25.4%	31.0%	31.0%	7.9%	4.8%	100.0%
Total	24.9%	43.1%	26.7%	3.2%	2.0%	100.0%

In summary, the cultural matrix, both in academic environments and formation communities to consecrated life (language, contents, educative methods, organization of the community, schedules, food, tasks, use of common spaces, etc.), is dominated by a European cultural matrix, with a high risk to fall into a monocultural approach. The potential negative consequences of a monocultural perspective may translate into a greater presence of cultural conflicts, learning difficulty and frictions, both at a personal and at a relational level. Furthermore, a monocultural approach is likely to not take into proper account of the “cultural background” of individuals, increasing the chance of misunderstandings.

4.3 Definition of interculturality

Respondents were asked to choose one of the two definitions of interculturality that would reflect their educational/formative context. The first one does not include elements of cultural contamination (A), while the second one involves a transformation process, following an intercultural exchange, which leads to mutual enrichment (B; Tab. 35).

Although with only a slightly increased percentage, compared to members of communities of consecrated life, (university) students opted for the second definition, sharing thus a model which involves contaminations and enrichment during the cultural exchange.

Most of the students and members of communities of consecrated life consider their living contexts as really or sufficiently intercultural, especially among those who chose the first definition of interculturality. In both education contexts, compared to the male gender, females agree mostly with the second definition of interculturality.

Tab. 35 – Respondents based on the definition they give to interculturality

Problems deriving from living in a multicultural context	University	Community of consecrated life
Interculturality implies acceptance and respect for the different, without changing one's cultural identity, even in the daily search for dialogue, understanding, and collaboration	25.6%	28.2%
Interculturality means not only the acceptance and respect for what is different, but also an exchange that can lead to a change in some aspects of cultural identity in the daily search for dialogue, understanding, collaboration, in a perspective of mutual enrichment	74.4%	71.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

Tab. 36 – Considering the definition of interculturality that you chose in the previous question, how would you rate the education context in which you live?

	University	Community of consecrated life
Really intercultural	48.0%	38.4%
Sufficiently intercultural	40.1%	38.4%
Not very intercultural	11.1%	21.4%
Not intercultural at all	0.9%	1.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

* **A.** Interculturality implies acceptance and respect for the different, without changing one's cultural identity, even in the daily search for dialogue, understanding, and collaboration.

* **B.** Interculturality means not only the acceptance and respect for what is different, but also an exchange that can lead to a change in some aspects of cultural identity in the daily search for dialogue, understanding, and collaboration in a perspective of mutual enrichment.

The bivariate analysis of the two definitions of interculturality with respect to the question on the possible coexistence of people of different cultures, naturally shows higher percentages in correspondence to those responses that do not see this coexistence as possible and the first definition of multiculturalism, which does not foresee any change of individual cultural identities but simply a respectful acceptance of the "diversity".

Tab. 37 – Respondents based on the definition they give to interculturality and their opinion on the possible coexistence of people of different cultures

	Definition A*	Definition B*	Total
Yes, because we live in a multicultural world and living together with different cultures is already a reality.	32.1%	67.9%	100.0%
Yes, because every culture has some elements that welcome other cultures	17.5%	82.5%	100.0%
Yes, because the encounter with diversity enriches everyone	21.4%	78.6%	100.0%
Yes, because cultural contamination is a sign of change but also of the vitality of a society	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Yes, but as long as there is no domination of one cultural model over another	27.0%	73.0%	100.0%
No, because local cultures are increasingly characterized by closures and nationalisms	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%
No, because it is difficult for any culture to open up to others	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%
Total	25.6%	74.4%	100.0%

Age is another variable associated with the definitions of interculturality. As the age increases, the association with the second definition is stronger; vice versa, younger people are mostly associated with the former.

It seems that life experiences matured in strongly multicultural contexts generate an experience of mutual sharing and cultural contamination which is not yet experienced among the youngest respondents. The analysis of these two variables reinforces the idea that interculturality is a process that necessitates sufficiently prolonged life experiences in multicultural contexts so as to develop those intercultural competences and those contamination processes that would skew the choice towards the second definition.

Similarly, the educational level provides greater tools to read the complexity stemming from the coexistence between different cultures; and the second definition of interculturality captures a higher number of responses from participants that concluded second-cycle university studies.

The geographic origin sees Europeans more likely to choose the second definition, while the other macro-areas are typically aligned with the general average, excluding North Africa and North America, which register higher percentages on the first definition of interculturality. Students coming from these two geographic macro-areas are certainly affected by a context characterized by a strong identity, very unlikely to be opened to contamination. The permanence in Italy is another dimension that leans toward the second definition of interculturality, confirming what discussed so far.

Tab. 38 – Respondents based on the definition they give to interculturality and their length of stay in Italy (Italians are excluded)

	Definition A*	Definition B*	Total
Less than a year	31.7%	68.3%	100.0%
1-2 years	30.8%	69.2%	100.0%
3-4 years	26.3%	73.7%	100.0%
5-6 years	27.1%	72.9%	100.0%
More than 6 years	26.0%	74.0%	100.0%
Total	28.5%	71.5%	100.0%

Another element that skews the choice towards the second definition of interculturality is the presence of previous experiences in multicultural contexts, prior to the arrival in Italy. Previous experiences in countries other than Italy contributed to additional intercultural competences and a greater ability to understand cultural diversities and observe reality from different perspectives.

Tab. 39 – Respondents based on the definition they give to interculturality and their previous experience of living with people of different nationality

		Definition A*	Definition B*	Total
Before living in this community of consecrated life, did you have other experiences of living with people of nationalities other than your own?	Yes	24.7%	75.3%	100.0%
	No	31.5%	68.5%	100.0%
Total		28.2%	71.8%	100.0%

* A. Interculturality implies acceptance and respect for the different, without changing one's cultural identity, even in the daily search for dialogue, understanding, and collaboration.

* B. Interculturality means not only the acceptance and respect for what is different, but also an exchange that can lead to a change in some aspects of cultural identity in the daily search for dialogue, understanding, and collaboration in a perspective of mutual enrichment.

Among those who have chosen the first definition of interculturality, we can also notice a higher percentage in the case of students that experienced problems of integration. Although the causal directionality cannot be verified, it is possible to hypothesize that people not opened to cultural contamination are more likely to experience conflictual events and cultural misunderstandings.

* **A.** Interculturality implies acceptance and respect for the different, without changing one's cultural identity, even in the daily search for dialogue, understanding, and collaboration.

* **B.** Interculturality means not only the acceptance and respect for what is different, but also an exchange that can lead to a change in some aspects of cultural identity in the daily search for dialogue, understanding, and collaboration in a perspective of mutual enrichment.

Tab. 40 – Respondents based on the definition they give to interculturality and any problems of integration they had with people of a different nationality

		Definition A*	Definition B*	Total
In your university environment, did you ever have problems with people of a different nationality?	Yes	24.7%	75.3%	100.0%
	No	31.5%	68.5%	100.0%
Total		28.2%	71.8%	100.0%

Coexistence of cultures is nowadays a reality, and it is perceived as an opportunity of personal enrichment. In summary, according to this survey, the identified factors that mostly contribute to view interculturality as a transformation process are: demographic age (as age increases, the association with the second definition is stronger; vice versa, younger people are more associated with the first definition); having matured multiple life experiences in multicultural contexts across different countries contributed to experiences of cultural contamination and mutual exchange; education level (it provides greater tools to read the complexity stemming from the coexistence between different cultures; and the second definition of interculturality captures a higher number of responses from participants that concluded second-cycle university studies).

4.4 Promoting intercultural dynamics

In contexts characterized by a strong multicultural component, intercultural competence has to be considered a “necessary competence to *think together* of a possible future”. In education contexts, it is necessary that students and educators get involved together to question their own beliefs and to begin observing things from different perspectives, relativizing and trying to facilitate and develop a new thinking¹².

In universities, several actions are put in place to promote intercultural dynamics, although most of them do not generate a reflection on the personal identity but only an exchange of practices which hardly lead to paths that are useful to resolve or concretely facilitate the problems related to intercultural coexistence.

On the contrary, in communities to consecrated life, the actions implemented to promote the intercultural dialogue are actualized in the presentation of the different customs and traditions of the different cultures belonging to the community, in Italian courses to facilitate deep dialogue, in initiatives that share the territorial context where a community is situated, and in laboratories for managing any conflicts determined by cultural diversity.

Instead, what respondents would like to see extends to a range of initiatives that involve with a greater extent mediation and conflict management.

4.5 Coexistence in multicultural education contexts

Coexistence among cultures is nowadays reality and participants' responses to survey's questions confirm this statement. This is particularly true in a perspective of enrichment.

An intercultural debate implies an effort of “comprehensive” views; not by chance, 79% of the respondents consider the “ability to understand the other’s viewpoint” as very useful.

It is unthinkable to have a natural transition from a *de facto* coexistence to an intercultural coexistence without having any regulative form for the exchanges, thus without a number of actions to be considered by the education communities in order to control the process. The actions carried out and investigated with the questionnaire are focused on language courses and on cultural knowledge: these are certainly useful, but are only early actions to those that should generate new forms of exchange and in which the intercultural component should play a determinant role in the learning process, by sharing one’s own experiences.

Tab. 41 – In your opinion, to what extent are the following elements more useful for living in a multicultural education context?

	Very useful	Quite useful	Little useful	Not useful at all	I don't know	Total
Ability to understand the other’s viewpoint	79.1%	18.7%	2.1%	0.0%	0.2%	100.0%
Ability to communicate appropriately and effectively	73.3%	24.7%	1.1%	0.6%	0.4%	100.0%
Ability to handle conflicts	68.6%	25.6%	3.7%	0.9%	1.1%	100.0%
Knowledge of the language	68.4%	28.0%	3.2%	0.2%	0.2%	100.0%
Knowledge of one’s own culture	66.5%	28.2%	4.5%	0.6%	0.2%	100.0%
Awareness that every culture is dynamic and plural	65.0%	29.9%	3.7%	0.4%	0.9%	100.0%
Ability to handle stereotypes and prejudices	61.7%	27.1%	6.0%	3.0%	2.2%	100.0%
Ability to decentralise and empathize	61.1%	29.0%	6.0%	0.9%	3.0%	100.0%
Ability to suspend judgment	57.9%	28.8%	7.7%	2.8%	2.8%	100.0%
Ability to find shared horizons	57.0%	36.1%	5.6%	0.4%	0.9%	100.0%
Willingness to tell your story	53.1%	40.0%	4.9%	1.7%	0.4%	100.0%
Knowledge of historical, political, religious backgrounds	40.4%	48.2%	9.5%	1.1%	0.7%	100.0%

The education experience in a multicultural context is an additional educational element and allows one to acquire the ability to view and read the world from different perspectives, enriching the own cultural identity and facilitating the learning of new languages, as well as enhancing the soft skills, extremely useful for future educators or trainers of current modern societies.

Tab. 42 – Living in a multicultural formative context is giving you:

	Very much agree	Quite agree	Little agree	Don't agree at all	Not responding	Total
The ability to see the world from different viewpoints	73.3%	23.0%	2.4%	0.9%	0.4%	100.0%
A plural and multicultural world view	61.5%	30.8%	5.2%	0.9%	1.5%	100.0%
An enrichment of my cultural identity	58.1%	33.3%	6.0%	2.1%	0.6%	100.0%
Knowledge of a language other than my own	46.9%	30.7%	12.3%	7.7%	2.4%	100.0%
The ability to empathise	43.0%	40.0%	10.5%	2.8%	3.7%	100.0%
The rediscovery of some aspects of my cultural tradition	40.7%	45.0%	10.1%	2.6%	1.5%	100.0%
The belief that it is better to be formed in a homogeneous cultural context	16.3%	24.5%	25.4%	27.9%	6.0%	100.0%
An impoverishment of my cultural identity	12.7%	13.1%	17.2%	52.0%	5.0%	100.0%
Stress/anxiety	8.4%	21.7%	32.3%	32.7%	4.9%	100.0%
Feeling often confused	4.3%	17.2%	32.5%	40.6%	5.4%	100.0%
Loneliness / Isolation	3.7%	11.8%	29.5%	48.0%	6.9%	100.0%

5

Conclusions

In summary, the most relevant dimension in order to live in multicultural contexts with an intercultural approach is «[...] to be ready to change; we cannot communicate and relate to each other's differences while remaining ourselves. The possibility of living together requires certain skills and willingness of encountering the other and has a profound moral implication: the necessity of maintaining and losing, of facing fears and resistances, but also of going beyond our given identities»¹³.

This research has offered multiple clues that allow us to explain the circularity between multicultural contexts and the acquisition of intercultural competences, as well as revealing a weak action from institutions to manage intercultural processes. Such explicative elements should further guide institutions to implement formative actions to enhance intercultural competences that may accompany the academic and religious education, in order to avoid relying on single individuals only when managing their interpersonal dynamics in strongly multicultural environments.

The intercultural element should have a central role in the education path in order to prepare the ability of students and consecrated men and women to interpret and understand with a greater depth of analysis themselves as well as the contexts they will have to deal after their formative path, being thus able to take actions openly, with dialogue and cooperation



Endnotes

1. UNESCO, *Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue*. UNESCO World Report; Executive summary, UNESCO, Paris 2009, 11.
2. J. GALTUNG, *Theory and Methods of Social Research*, George Allen and Unwin, London 1967, 49.
3. Cf. E. OTTONE – L. PANDOLFI, *Interculturality in Multicultural Education and Formation Communities: An Action-Research-Training Project in Italy*, in I.D. (eds.), *Education in Multiculturalism, Education to Interculturality in Ecclesiastical Institutions of Higher Education and in Formation Communities for Catholic Consecrated Life in Italy*, Urbaniana University Press, Città del Vaticano 2023, 33-68.
4. Cf. *ibid.*, 62.
5. Cf. P.E. BALBONI – F. CAON, *La comunicazione interculturale*, Marsilio, Venezia 2015.
6. Cf. J.W. CRESWELL – V.L. PLANO CLARK, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, SAGE publications, Thousand Oaks, CA 2017 e S. MAUCERI, *Qualità nella quantità. La Survey Research nell'era dei Mixed Methods*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2019.
7. Cf. D.K. DEARDORFF, *Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization*, "Journal of Studies in International Education" 10 (2006) 3, 241-266.
8. Cf. *Questionnaire*, in OTTONE – PANDOLFI (eds.), *Education*, 366-382.
9. Cf. S. MAUCERI – M.P. FAGGIANO – L. DI CENSI, *Survey 2.0. L'indagine con questionario nell'era digitale*, "Sociologia e ricerca sociale" 121 (2020) 25-48.
10. Cf. *Part V of the Volume*.
11. Cf. S. MAUCERI, *Per una survey integrata e multilivello. Le lezioni dimenticate della Columbia School*, "Sociologia e ricerca sociale" 33 (2012) 99, 22-65.
12. Cf. M. BAIUTTI, *La competenza interculturale per pensare assieme un futuro possibile*, "MeTis" 5 (2015) 1, 332.
13. A. MELUCCI, *Culture in gioco*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 2000, 51.