

## SCHOOL CLIMATE AS PREDICTOR OF TEACHERS' COMPETENCES TO RECOGNIZE THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF ADOPTED CHILDREN IN ITALY

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### ABSTRACT

The current study examines the association between different components of school climate (teacher-principal and teacher-parent relationships, parents' involvement in school activities, connection between school and the local services) and teachers' competences and knowledge regarding the adoption experience. Participants were 573 teachers (95.7% women; mean age= 47.06, SD= 8.66, ranging between 25 and 65) residing in three Italian regions characterized by rates of international adoptions that are higher than the national average. The association between school climate and teachers' knowledge and competences on adoption was evaluated via independent multiple logistic regression analyses. Findings show that three of the components of school climate under examination are associated to teachers' knowledge and competences regarding the adoption experience. Thus, interventions aimed at improving school climate hold promise for promoting teachers' capacity to handle the challenges of the adoption process.

### INTRODUCTION

In the last report of the Commission for Intercountry Adoptions (CIA 2014-2015) it reports that, while rates in other countries seem to be falling, Italy continues to rank first in Europe and second in the world after the United States for the number of foreign-born children its citizens adopt: every year between 3,000 to 4,000 new adoptions are approved by Italian courts. Of these, approximately three out of four are international adoptions. During the 2014-2015 period, 4,422 children were adopted.

In Italy, the bureaucratic path to international adoption is a long process (4-5 years) entailing an psychosocial evaluation of the would-be adoptive parents by the juvenile court. The complicated practices, unexpected setbacks, and inadequate assistance that often characterize the undertaking may lead to long delays and provoke anxiety and stress for potential parents.

The success in settling in (for both children and parents) and the goodness of the entire adoption process also depend on the reception capacity of the host country, of the local community and school (Novara et al. 2015).

As we know, adopted children can be particularly vulnerable to academic and relational problems due to neglect or past traumatic experiences (Palacios, Román, and Camacho, 2010)

but the school environment is an fundamental aspect in order to prevent these problems. Recent studies (Masten, 2008) are giving more and more relevance to the role of the school environment in influencing students' behaviour, since children and adolescents spend much of their time at school. Existing researches have indicated that several dimensions of school climate are positively associated with students' achievement as well as well-being of all school staff (Vos et al. 2012). That means that schools can contribute to the prevention and reduction of children problematic behaviours by optimising different dimensions of school climate. A promising strategy consists in promoting those characteristics of the school climate that can foster the teachers' competence to satisfy the educational and emotional needs of pupils with a familiar history of adoption.

As mentioned above, promoting the creation of a school climate improving teachers' understanding of the adoption process and the emotional complexities families face would seem to be a particularly important measure to facilitate the children's adjustment. In addition, teachers themselves should be aware of the importance of their role and be provided with classroom management competencies preparing them for the dynamics of a class with children with stories among them very different.

Teachers should be prepared to handle behavioural problems, learning difficulties and emotional reactions resulting from a past often marked by the neglect or absence of adult caregivers. As above anticipated, all adopted children have experienced some trauma linked to loss, to the broken attachment bond, and to feeling themselves in danger or not safe. The implications of these experiences are revealed in the social, emotional, cognitive and behavioural development of these children and they could represent a challenge for teachers. Even if this paper will not deal with the complex issue of trauma management, it is important to know the problems that might derive

from it and require particular educational and psychological programs in the school context. These teachers' specific competences will not enter into our dissertation but it is a well established fact that teachers who have been provided with background information about their students can better meet their particular educational needs, leading to a positive effect in academic performance. Little, however, is known about the factors that can promote teachers' competencies in meeting students' additional support needs. Teachers' knowledge about the adoption process/experience and their ability to provide sensitive responses to the adopted children in their class may be affected by some features of the school climate such as the level of connectedness between teachers, principals, parents and the community at large.

## THE RESEARCH

The study aims to investigate the relation between school climate and teachers' competences/knowledge about the legal and emotional journey that foreign-born students and their adoptive families are traveling.

About the sampling, five hundred seventy-three teachers (95.7% women; mean age= 47.06, standard deviation = 8.66, ranging between 25 and 65) with mean years of teaching experience = 20.1 years (standard deviation = 9.41) and mean years of education = 14.7 years (standard deviation= 2.89) participated in the study.

The teachers have been divided into three groups as far as the number of years they had been teaching was concerned: 0 to 10 years (10.1%), 11-20 years (43.3%), more than 20 years (46.6%).

As far their contractual status was concerned, 85.7% of the teachers had a permanent contract, the remaining (14.3%) had short-term ones.

Of the 573 teachers interviewed, 42.2% said that they have currently an adopted pupil in their classroom, and consequently to have experience in this field.

The teachers were asked to fill up a questionnaire including:

- some demographic questions (e.g. gender, age, qualifications, the subjects they taught);
- measures of school climate, measured via 4 subscales of the teachers' version of the Questionnaire of the School Situation: (1) "relationships between teachers and the principal", 2) "relationship between the teachers and the parents", 3. "parents' involvement in school activities", 4) "connection between the school and the local institutions and social services");
- teachers' knowledge about the adoption process, including legal and emotional aspects.

After controlling the effect of other variables (gender, age, length of career, adoption experience), the association between the components of school climate and teachers' knowledge about the adoption process and their perceived competence was evaluated via independent multiple logistic regression analyses (one for each dependent variable). All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS software (22.0).

Therefore in the research design, the school climate represents the independent variable, while the others are all considered as dependent variables.

## RESULTS

A relatively small percentage of the teachers interviewed claimed knowing the legislation on adoption (15.9 %). A slightly lower percentage of teachers identified parents' most stressful experience during the national adoption process (12.4%); the percentage of teachers who identified the most stressful experience during the international adoption process was even smaller (8.2%).

Four logistic regression models were run to test the association between different dimensions of school climate and teachers' knowledge and competence about the adoption process.

A positive correlation was found between the "school-local institutions/social services connection" and the likelihood of knowing the legislation about adoption. Data analysis showed that: teachers reporting higher levels of connection between the school and the local community were more likely to feel knowledgeable about the legislation on adoption. More specifically, teachers were almost twice more likely to report feeling competent on the legislation about adoption for each one-unit increase in the degree of connectedness between the school and local services. This was the only component of the school climate examined showing a significant association to the teachers' knowledge about the legislation on adoption.

Regarding the teachers' knowledge about adoptive parents' stressful experiences, two components of the school climate resulted to be positive predictors: the "connection between the school and local services" and "parental involvement in school activities". Findings showed that teachers were more than twice more likely to correctly identify the most stressful aspect of the pre-adoption national and international practices for each one-unit increase in school-local services connectedness. A correlation was also found between the "parents' involvement in school activities" and the teachers' knowledge about the adoptive parents' stressful experience during the evaluation of parental suitability (for national and international adoption). Results showed that teachers reporting parents' active participation in school activities were more likely to correctly recognize the most stressful aspects of the adoption process. That means that, for each one-unit increase in parents' involvement in school activities, teachers were

more than twice more likely to correctly identify the stressors that parents have to cope during the evaluation of parental suitability, both for national and international adoption.

Finally, the perceived competences about the adoption process were significantly predicted by two of the components of the school climate examined in the study. Higher levels of “connection between the school and the community” were positively associated with the teachers’ perception of competence regarding the adoption process, i.e., when teachers reported that their school had a strong “connection with local services”, they were more likely to feel competent on the adoption process. In short words, for each one-unit increase in the perceived connection between the school and the local services, teachers were twice as likely to report feeling competent in relation to the adoption experience. “Good relationships among teachers” were, instead, negatively associated to the teachers’ perceived competence about the adoption process. Indeed, findings show that when reporting good relationships among teachers in the school, teachers were less likely to feel competent on the adoption process (every one-unit increase in perceived cohesion among teachers corresponded to a 55% decrease in the likelihood of reporting to feel competent in the adoption domain).

The only component of the school climate examined that was not significantly associated to teachers’ knowledge and competences about adoption was the quality of the “relationships between teachers and principal”.

Overall, according to our results, the degree of “connectedness between the school and local services” was the most relevant component of the school climate in predicting the teachers’ knowledge and competences about adoption; indeed, teachers reporting high levels of connectedness were more knowledgeable about the laws on adoption, more likely to correctly identify the stressors for parents in the process of international adoption and felt more competent on the overall adoption experience. “Parental involvement in school activities” was also very important for the teachers’ knowledge about adoption, especially in relation to parents’ emotional experience, i.e., by knowing the stressors that parents have to face during the evaluation of parental suitability in national and international adoption.

## IMPLICATIONS

The principal objective of the study has been confirmed: the associations between some dimensions of school climate and teachers' knowledge and perceived competences about the national/international adoption process have emerged. The results emphasize that it is important that teachers recognize the school climate as a protective factor with regard to the efforts to meet the educational needs of these students (Novara, Lenzi, Santinello, 2018). These findings confirm that school climate dynamically interacts with educational effectiveness, in a particular way in supporting inclusive good practices. Training programs that are able to provide adoption-related information and to outline measures to improve the general school climate could help educators to meet the challenges that these students bring to their classrooms. There is a new awareness about the need to support the school programs linked in some way with adoption, but in Italy only a few efforts have been made until now to address the aspects outlined here and thus to further enhance the beneficial effects of training programs.

Private and personal networks are presently working at a grassroots level in Italy to improve the school experience of adopted children, and we are hopeful that the Ministry of Education will make its own tangible contribution in the years to come by investing in opportunely organized training programs (Novara, Garro, Serio, Vitrano, 2015; Novara, Serio, Lavanco, 2017). According to an ecological view, the beneficiaries of a positive school climate are not only the teachers but the school and local community as well as. Indeed, although the school has a central role in this process, an effective strategy to improve the overall adoption process must incorporate actions at a wider societal level and include interventions in multiple ecological settings. The teachers’ training on the adoption process should not be considered as a direct consequence deriving from governmental choices but rather the outcome of a “consultative process” having children at the center of this ecological perspective (Sempowicz 2017, 320).

In so doing, the flow of the interactions among parties is radically changed: we should start from a micro-centered level, where we find the children and their educational needs, followed by other “consultative partners” (e.g.: parents, non-school professionals and others social recourse of the local community), which in turn should guide and implement the government policy, then the school policy and finally the teachers preparation programs. Even if the interaction between the school climate components and larger societal pressures is not considered in our study, this topic could be further deepened in a future research because an ecological approach is very important to promote resilience, especially in presence of risk factors as argued above about adopted children.

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