

SCHOOL EXCHANGES AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS: OBSERVING THE TEACHER/STUDENT INTERACTION AT A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN SWEDEN

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INTRODUCTION

Recent publications by the European Union (European Union 2013; European Union 2017) have emphasised the beneficial impact of school networking and twinning links on participating learning communities in terms of pedagogy, teacher professional development and pupil learning. If we focus exclusively on the impact of these initiatives on participating pupils, we will soon realise that they may represent an opportunity for learners to develop key competences for lifelong learning such as language learning and skills building, not to mention the enhanced feeling of empowerment and the increased knowledge of Europe and the European Union alike that the learners are likely to develop (European Communities 2007). As regards the Italian school context over the last few decades, numerous primary and secondary schools have enthusiastically embraced the opportunities for teacher and pupil participation and collaboration across Europe implicit in these joint projects (Cucchi 2002).

The interaction between European institutions frequently brings to the fore some cultural differences that inevitably emerge as students and teachers interact and exchange materials, videos, and experiences. This can become most conspicuously apparent when learners with very different cultural backgrounds and accustomed to different educational systems come together in common experiences prompted by such intercultural exchanges. The implications for everyday interactions of the different “patterns of thinking, feeling and acting” (Hofstede 2010, 4) that characterise different communities have been at the core of various investigations. Despite some criticism (McSweeney 2002, Signorini *et al.* 2009), Hofstede’s approach to cultural differences has inspired a vast array of empirical studies which testify to the impact of his cultural values framework, not only in the field of cross-cultural management, but also in other disciplines (Eringa *et al.* 2015, Jackson 2020, Kirkman *et al.* 2006, Taras *et al.* 2012). In his work, the Dutch scholar relied on six cultural dimensions that are likely to define the model of culture as it is expressed by different nationalities, namely individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, femininity/masculinity, long/short term orientation, indulgence/restraint (Hofstede *et al.* 2010). In a seminal article about the cultural differences in teaching and learning contexts, Hofstede described the asymmetrical interaction between teachers and students as the product of a society’s culture (Hofstede 1986). Indeed, these interaction differences can become more apparent in cross-cultural learning situations, which prompted Hofstede to apply his previous research on work-related values (Hofstede 1980) to teacher/student interactions in relation to four cultural dimensions, i.e. individualism versus collectivism, large versus small power distance, strong versus weak uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity versus femininity.

The present article aims to outline the experience of an intercultural school exchange between a secondary school located in Milan and a high school in Sweden, pointing out the cultural differences that the Italian students perceived, among those outlined in two surveys, during their first encounter with the Swedish educational system. Both surveys were devised by taking into account the descriptions of similar experiences provided by other Italian teachers. These questionnaires aimed to provide an answer to the following research questions:

1. What expectations do the Italian students taking part in the exchange have as regards the interaction between their Swedish peers and the teaching staff?
2. What cultural differences, among those outlined in the two surveys, do they perceive regarding the Swedish learning organization model and how do they describe them?

CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The school exchange was carried out between a Scientific Secondary School in Milan (Liceo Scientifico Statale Luigi Cremona) and a corresponding senior high school in Sweden (Gullmarsgymnasiet Campus Väst in Lysekil). It started in Spring 2019 and came to an end in Fall 2019, thus encompassing two terms in two consecutive school years, i.e. 2018-2019 and 2019-2020. The participants involved were a class of Italian eleventh graders (seventeen-year-old students) and their Swedish peers. In the first stage of the exchange, the Italian students visited their peers on a one-week school trip to Sweden that comprised several activities carried out at the senior high school and other nearby venues. Accommodation was offered by their peers' families, which ensured a week's immersion both in the Swedish educational system and in the everyday life of the local community.

The idea of setting up a cross-cultural learning experience with a Scandinavian country took shape through eTwinning, the platform that enables teachers and practitioners to interact and develop projects within the European learning community as part of Erasmus+, the EU programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport. It was thanks to this portal that the partnership between the Italian secondary school and the Swedish school was established, a cooperation that seemed all the more worthwhile considering that Sweden and Italy appear to be in many respects at opposite ends of the cultural dimensions devised by Hofstede, particularly if one considers the pattern of power distance in teaching and learning contexts (Hofstede 1986). Defined as «the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally» (Hofstede *et al.* 2010, 61), power distance allows to differentiate between large-power-distance school systems characterised by teacher/student inequality and small-power-distance educational contexts in which teachers and students treat each other as equals (Hofstede 2010).

In order to make the Italian students reflect on their expectations of their upcoming trip to Sweden, a computer-delivered questionnaire was devised on the learning environment and the teacher/student role patterns that they were about to encounter. After the school trip to Sweden, a new web-based survey was administered to the Italian participants, investigating their reactions to the Swedish educational system along with their reflections on the relationships among the members of the learning community at the Swedish school.

THE PRELIMINARY SURVEY

Some days before the departure to Sweden the twenty-one participants of the Italian secondary school were asked to answer a questionnaire in English that investigated their expectations and beliefs about the institution and the school system they were about to meet. As we can see in Appendix 1, questions ranged from the norms that they assumed would govern school life to the expected role patterns of teacher/student and student/headmistress interaction. The questionnaire comprised six questions, two of which were open-ended and required the students to provide detailed answers, whereas four multiple choice questions simply asked participants to tick their answer among different alternatives.

Google Forms was implemented at this stage of the school exchange since this tool enabled students to use their own electronic devices, thus making the survey less time-consuming and more suitable to young digital natives. Another important positive feature in the use of Google Forms is that teachers-researchers have immediate access to the responses as they are automatically collected and, when possible, organised in charts. Some of the students had already attended courses focusing on language exams like First for Schools or Ielts Academic and had, therefore, a language competence that enabled them to provide consistent and well-structured answers in English.

If we consider the expected patterns of teacher/student interaction in the Swedish school context, only one third of the respondents thought it would be formal, while two thirds of the students defined it as “easy-

going”, “cooperative”, and “less formal”. One student wrote: “I think the relationship is much more open than the one we have in Italy. Maybe students are less afraid to ask their teachers for help unlike us, because we sometimes feel more insecure”. Another student claimed: “I think it’s less formal than in Italy because it’s generally said that people in Northern Europe are more relaxed”.

The respondents’ expectations about the student/headmistress relationship tended to be more heterogeneous, with half of the students expecting it would be informal, while the rest of the responses featured a highly fragmented nature. Some students envisaged it as formal, others defined it as similar to the relationship they have with their headmistress (without providing, however, any description of this relationship), and finally two students claimed that they did not have an opinion about this topic.

As for the rules in the Swedish school context, most of the respondents (95,5%) thought that smoking was not allowed in the school premises and the same percentage also believed that students in Sweden could not leave their classroom without their teacher’s permission. More than 70% of the students (72,7%) were of the opinion that their Swedish peers were not allowed to use their smartphones for personal reasons during their classes, while a slightly higher percentage of the respondents (77,3%) considered it possible for Swedish learners to get to school late.

THE SECOND SURVEY

Contrary to initial plans, only eighteen students out of twenty-one actually took part in the one-week exchange programme set up in Sweden in April 2019. The second survey (Appendix 2) was, therefore, administered in English to these students and investigated their reaction to this experience and their perception of the Swedish school system. This questionnaire was administered through Google Forms after the week spent in the Scandinavian country, i.e. in a rather busy period for the Italian learners who had to take a series of written and oral tests in all the subjects included in the Italian curriculum. For this reason, completing the final survey was not compulsory and only eleven students took part in it.

As regards the student/teacher relationship, the respondents observed that their Swedish peers were never accompanied by their teachers to other venues outside the school premises, for example the school gym. All the respondents agreed on the fact that this was likely to promote students’ independence. One student ascribed this practice to the fact that the Swedish school was located in a small town, while another respondent made reference to “a huge cultural difference. People in Sweden have been used to having their own responsibilities since they were children. In Italy it’s the opposite. Families are really protective of children and so there is a slower maturation process”.

Eighty percent of the respondents noticed that the teachers as well as the headmistress at the Swedish school seemed interested in interacting with their students. Only one respondent deemed the student/teacher relationship as formal, while two students did not have a clear opinion about it. Most of the students used positive adjectives to describe this relationship: “peaceful”, “informal”, and “friendly”. One student wrote: “I think that in that model of education a more informal approach is fundamental. I think that a middle way between the two models, the Swedish one and the Italian one, would be ideal”.

Another feature of the Swedish school life that struck the Italian students was the flexibility granted to their peers regarding punctuality and class attendance. One student observed that their partners could leave school whenever they wanted, while another respondent maintained that “in this way students are made to bear full responsibilities. Indeed, it’s up to the students to choose whether they need to follow a class or not”. Another Italian participant, however, pointed out that “this flexibility helps students not to get punished for being late, but some students are likely to take advantage of it”.

Half of the Italian learners perceived the norms at the Swedish school as less strict than the ones that govern school life at their own secondary school: according to one Italian student, being allowed to leave the

classroom without the teacher's permission might enable learners to develop their own responsibility. Although a learner claimed that Italian students should be allowed to use their smartphones or tablets for personal use during classes, another respondent wrote: "It's very strange to see a teacher completely ignored by his students who are distracted by their phones. We're not allowed to use them for this reason".

CONCLUSIONS

Although two thirds of the Italian students envisaged the student/teacher and student/headmistress relationships at the Swedish partner school as friendly and generally non divisive, respondents to the second survey seemed to be impressed by the extent of independence enjoyed by their peers and by the set of norms that defined life at the partner school. Interestingly, not only does our research corroborate the idea whereby Sweden and Italy seem to be poles apart in terms of power distance, it also confirms that cross-cultural learning situations prompted by school exchanges enhance students' feelings of empowerment and autonomy of action.

It is worth emphasising that the literature on school partnerships in Europe focuses mainly on internet-based exchanges and teacher professional development (European Union 2013, European Union 2018), while short-term school exchanges like the one described in this paper sometimes appear to be neglected, probably owing to the fact that these experiences tend to be rather demanding, if anything in terms of planning and funding. For example, by typing the search term "student mobility" in the Adobe Acrobat Find toolbar of a publication by the European Union, we discovered that only seven out of 1,910 strategic partnership projects selected by the National Agencies in 2015 implied short-term student visits to the schools involved in the relevant projects (European Union 2017). In this respect, we are planning to design further surveys whereby learners can be guided in observing not only the interactions, but also the educational facilities and classroom settings at the Swedish school, as these learning environments may reveal much about the school culture implicit in them. A further line of research that could be implemented refers to the impact that school exchanges and short-term student mobility have on the host families involved.

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APPENDIX 1

PRELIMINARY SURVEY: SCHOOL EXCHANGE WITH GULLMARSGYMNASIET IN LYSEKIL, SWEDEN

This survey investigates your suppositions and ideas about the Swedish school you are visiting over the next few days. In answering the following questions, give your own opinion. Do not contact your Swedish partners for help.

1. In your opinion, how is the relationship between students and teachers (formal, informal, easy-going, etc.)? Give reasons for your answers.
2. What is the relationship between students and the headmistress like?
3. Do you think that smoking is allowed at Gullmarsgymnasiet?
 - Yes
 - No
4. Do you think that students are allowed to use their smartphones for personal reasons during their classes?
 - Yes
 - No
5. Do you think that students can leave their classroom without teacher's permission?
 - Yes
 - No
6. Do you think that students are allowed to get to school late?
 - Yes
 - No

APPENDIX 2

SECOND SURVEY: SCHOOL EXCHANGE BETWEEN IIS CREMONA AND GULLMARSGYMNASIET 2018-19

This survey investigates your experience at Gullmarsgymnasiet in Lysekil. In answering the following questions, feel free to give your own opinion. Support your answers by giving concrete examples from your experience.

1. Are students usually accompanied by their teachers when they need to reach other venues outside the school premises (for example, for sports classes, conferences, etc.)? What is your opinion about it?
2. Is there any flexibility as for student punctuality and class attendance? What is your opinion about it?
3. Is smoking allowed at Gullmarsgymnasiet?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Other (explain)
4. Are students allowed to use their smartphones or other devices for personal use during classes?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Other (explain)
5. Are students allowed to leave the classroom without their teacher's permission?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Other (explain)
6. How different are rules at Gullmarsgymnasiet compared to those at Liceo Scientifico Cremona? What is your opinion about it?
7. Did the teachers and the headmistress at Gullmarsgymnasiet seem interested in interacting with their students? Was the student-teacher relationship at Gullmarsgymnasiet different from the student-teacher relationship here at Liceo Scientifico Cremona?