

3rd World Conference on Learning, Teaching, and Educational Leadership

Ethnic awareness, self-identification, and attitudes toward ingroup and outgroup in Italian, Chinese and African pupils

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Abstract

This study explored ethnic awareness, self-identification, and ethnic attitudes in 104 Italian, Chinese, and African pupils aged 4–5, attending to ethnically homogeneous and heterogeneous kindergarten schools. Hypotheses: Pupils will be able to show ethnic awareness and self-identification, and pupils attending heterogeneous schools will express positive attitudes toward outgroup more than the others according to the “contact hypothesis” (Sagone, 2003). Measures: Clark & Clark’s Doll Paradigm and rewards allocation tasks were used. Results: all pupils correctly identified themselves with the ethnic group which they belong to and recognized the ethnicity of the dolls; in addition, Chinese and White Italian pupils attending to homogeneous schools showed ingroup favoritism more than the other pupils.

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Keywords: Ethnic awareness, self-identification, ethnic attitudes, contact hypothesis

1. Introduction

Scientific research on ethnic identity in early childhood (see Phinney & Rotheram, 1986) considered three relevant aspects: 1) *ethnic awareness*, the child’s understanding of his own and the other’s ethnic groups, referred to the child’s ability to understand differences among distinctive characteristics of various ethnic groups, 2) *ethnic self identification*, that is referred to the pupils’ ability to recognize which ethnic group they belong to, and 3) *ethnic attitudes* toward ingroup and outgroup, that is feelings and preferences about one’s own and other groups.

Regarding the first aspect, a study by Clark and Clark (1947) in White and Black American children demonstrated that ethnic awareness and ethnic self-identification were already present in preschoolers, and according to Aboud’s socio-cognitive model (1986), they seemed to depend on age and ethnic physical characteristics of groups. Around 3–4 years, pupils were able to recognize ethnic groups with evident perceptual characteristics as skin color or hair type and, only at 7–8 years, they became able to recognize other minorities, such Chicano and Chinese, also without clearly different physical traits. However, recently Connolly, Kelly, and Smith (2009) highlighted that preschoolers belonging to the two majority ethno-religious groups in Northern Ireland (Catholics and Protestants) were already capable of showing ethnic identity and attitudes in absence of physical cues. As for the children’s developmental understanding of ethnicity and race, Quintana (1998) proposed a model structured in 4 levels. At the first one (level 0), defined as “integration of affective and perceptual understanding of ethnicity”, children aged 3–6 develop attitudinal and affective differentiations, based on integration of pupil’s

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biological and perceptual notion of race that reflect pro-white societal views, and this level could depend on intrinsic attitudes toward light and dark (see Williams & Moorland, 1976). At the second one (level 1), named “literal understanding of ethnicity and race”, children aged 6-10 exhibit a similar to adult-like cognition of ethnicity and race characterized by a decline of racial bias and focused on non-observable features of ethnicity, e.g. the preferences for ethnic food. At the third one (level 2), called “social and non-literal perspective of ethnicity”, children aged 10-14 overcome the literal understanding of ethnicity and begin to understand social realities associated with ethnicity, e.g. differences in social class, friendship on basis of race, and social prejudice. The last one (level 3), defined as “ethnic group consciousness and ethnic identity”, adolescents start to build their own ethnic identity and usually assume the ingroup perspective.

In relation to ethnic attitudes, previous research demonstrated the evidence of ingroup preference in pupils belonging to majority group (Horowitz & Horowitz, 1939; Asher & Allen, 1969; Chiesi & Primi, 2003; De Caroli, Licciardello, & Sagone, 2005) and ethnic preferences addressed toward both ingroup and outgroup by pupils belonging to minority groups (Kelly & Duckitt, 1995; Griffith & Nesdale, 2006). In Griffith and Nesdale’ study (2006) carried out with Anglo-Australian (majority group) and Pacific Islanders children (minority group), majority group children rated ingroup more positively than outgroup (Anglo-Australians and Aboriginals for Pacific Islanders; Aboriginals and Pacific Islanders for Anglo-Australians); instead, minority group children rated ingroup and outgroup in equally positive manner. Chiesi and Primi (2003) highlighted that White Italian preschoolers (majority group) blamed negative actions as “to steal” and “to beat” on Chinese children more than Black ones (minority groups). In addition, De Caroli et al. (2005) found out that White Italian pupils aged 3-5 (majority group) exhibited outgroup rejection to Black target children (minority group).

The approach functional to reduce ethnic negative attitudes toward outgroup or minority groups is represented by the interethnic contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) that seems to play an important role both in childhood and adolescence (Volpato & Rattazzi, 2000; Sagone, 2003; McGlothlin & Killen, 2005; Licciardello et al., 2007). As reported by McGlothlin and Killen (2005), children aged 6-10 attending to elementary heterogeneous schools were more positive about friendships in general than children attending homogeneous schools, indicating that children’s intergroup contact influences their perceptions of similarity between ingroup and outgroup and reasoning about cross-race friendship. Specifically, for the interest of the current study, Sagone (2003) pointed out that Black pupils (minority group) and White Italian pupils (majority group) attending to ethnically heterogeneous schools expressed more balanced preferences both for White and Black dolls than White Italian pupils attending to ethnically homogeneous schools.

The present study constitutes not only a replication of the above mentioned research in preschoolers (using the same doll-paradigm and methodology: Sagone, 2003) but also a more deep analysis of social attitudes expressed by pupils toward other ethnic group members. This research interest was originated by considering the recent change of Italian school context characterized by the increasing amount of other ethnic groups and by new educational challenges linked to the efficacy of “contact hypothesis” already in early developmental age.

2. Methodology

The first purpose of this study was to explore ethnic awareness and self-identification in pupils belonging to different ethnic groups (Italians, Chinese, and Africans), and all attending to Italian kindergarten schools, and this issue is a fundamental condition to verify the direction of social attitudes. The second purpose was to measure the ethnic attitudes in terms of preferences and rewards allocation, revealing the differences among Italians, Chinese, and Africans. Finally, the third purpose was to confirm the impact of interethnic contact on social attitudes in ethnically heterogeneous vs. homogeneous Italian kindergarten schools. In detail, we hypothesized that:

H1: pupils will be aware that every doll belongs to its own ethnic group (ethnic awareness);

H2: pupils will be able to identify themselves with the ethnic group they belong to (ethnic self-identification);

H3: pupils attending to ethnically heterogeneous kindergarten schools will show more positive ethnic attitudes toward outgroup members than pupils attending to ethnically homogeneous kindergarten schools.

2.1. Participants

A total of 107 children (51 boys and 56 girls), aged between 4 and 5 years and recruited both from ethnically homogeneous ($n=35$) and heterogeneous ($n=72$) Public Kindergarten Schools in Catania (Sicily, Italy), were involved in this research. Three pupils were excluded because of ethnic awareness failure. So, the sample consisted of 104 subjects distributed into four groups as follows: White Italian pupils (majority group) attending to ethnically homogeneous schools (Gr-A; $n=35$); White Italian pupils (majority group) from ethnically heterogeneous schools (Gr-B; $n=34$); Chinese pupils (minority group) attending to ethnically heterogeneous schools (Gr-C; $n=17$); African pupils (minority group) attending to ethnically heterogeneous schools (Gr-D; $n=18$). Chinese pupils were members of a recently immigrated minority group while African pupils were members of a far-back immigrated minority group.

2.2. Materials and procedure

2.2.1. Clark & Clark's Doll Paradigm.

The Italian modified version of the Clark & Clark's Doll Paradigm, composed of 10 question items (see Sagone, 2003) and 6 dolls (3 male/3 female) differentiated only by physical ethnic aspects, was used to explore ethnic awareness (three items for "Which doll mostly resembles a Chinese/Italian/African pupil?"), self-identification (one item for "Which doll was mostly like you?"), and ethnic preferences (five items for "Which doll do you like the most?"; "Which doll would you play with?"; "Which doll would you take to bed with you when you go to sleep?"; "Which doll has the most beautiful color?"; "To which doll would you like to look like?"). In addition, we included one negative item for "Which doll do you dislike?", as suggested by Bukowski et al. (1993), in order to introduce questions about which group/doll children could refuse (see De Caroli et al., 2005). Three male dolls with characteristics of White, Black, and Chinese ethnic group members and with blue chequered trousers were proposed to boys, and three female dolls representing the same ethnic groups and with pink chequered dresses were shown to girls. As suggested by Guerrero et al. (2010), we used dolls consistent with sex of pupils and with the same colour of clothing to allow pupils to be focused only on ethnic aspects.

2.2.2. Rewards Allocation Task.

The Italian version of "reward allocation task" (see Yee & Brown, 1992) was administered. Specifically, three candies were used to assess the distribution of rewards applying two different conditions: the forced choice (condition 1) and the flexible choice (condition 2). In the first condition, we asked pupils to assign one candy to one of the three dolls as they preferred; in the second condition, we asked pupils to give three candies to dolls as they preferred. Pupils were individually tested at school by an expert researcher after parental consent.

2.3. Data analysis

The examination of statistical significance of results was carried out with SPSS 15 (Statistical Package for Social Science) by means of Chi Square Test and analysis of variance. The ethnic preference index consisted of the mean scores obtained by summing the choices expressed by pupils toward White (EPI-White), Black (EPI-Black), and Chinese dolls (EPI-Chinese) and dividing each sum for the five positive question items.

3. Results

3.1. Ethnic awareness and self-identification

As already indicated in description of sample, we found out that only three of all participants expressed an incorrect ethnic awareness of the three dolls' belonging. In addition, all pupils correctly identified themselves with the ethnic group they belong to.

3.2. Ethnic preferences

Comparing the four groups of pupils, the analysis of ethnic preferences pointed out that White Italian pupils attending to ethnically homogeneous schools ($F=20,24$, $p<.001$) and Chinese pupils ($F=4,58$, $p=.02$) showed high preferences toward the dolls matching with their own ethnic group. On the contrary, no significant differences emerged for White Italian pupils attending to heterogeneous schools and African pupils (Tab.1). Post hoc analyses, carried out with Scheffe's method, demonstrated significant differences in ethnic preferences for each doll among pupils: Chinese dolls obtained higher preferences by Chinese pupils than White Italian pupils attending to ethnically homogeneous schools ($p=.008$); White dolls received higher preferences by White Italian pupils attending to ethnically homogeneous schools than Chinese ($p<.001$) and African pupils ($p=.009$); Black dolls obtained higher preferences by African pupils than Italian pupils attending to ethnically homogeneous schools ($p=.013$).

Table 1 – Ethnic preference index (EPI)

Groups of participants	EPI-Chinese dolls		EPI-White dolls		EPI-Black dolls	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Gr-A: White Italians (ethnically homogeneous schools)	,20	,36	,70	,40	,10	,25
Gr-B: White Italians (ethnically heterogeneous schools)	,33	,40	,43	,42	,24	,35
Gr-C: Chinese	,61	,42	,18	,31	,21	,40
Gr-D: Africans	,27	,40	,30	,37	,43	,43
	$F(3,100)=4,27$		$F(3,100)=8,36$		$F(3,100)=3,84$	
	$p=.007$		$p<.001$		$p=.012$	

In relation to the last question item (“which doll do you not like?”), more than half of the pupils (54,8%) rejected the Black dolls, 28,9% rejected Chinese dolls, and 16,3% refused White dolls ($\chi^2=24,02$, $p<.001$). No significant differences for groups emerged.

3.3. Rewards allocation

In the first condition (forced choice), significant differences were found in relation to the ethnic groups: most of the White Italian pupils attending to ethnically homogeneous schools and Chinese pupils assigned the candy to the dolls belonging to their own ethnic group. White Italian pupils attending to ethnically heterogeneous schools and mainly African pupils attributed the candy more equally (Tab.2).

Table 2 - Rewards allocation with forced choice

Groups of participants	Chinese dolls		White dolls		Black dolls	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gr-A: White Italians (ethnically homogeneous schools)	7	6,7	25	24	3	2,9
Gr-B: White Italians (ethnically heterogeneous schools)	15	14,4	12	11,5	7	6,7
Gr-C: Chinese	11	10,6	2	1,9	4	3,8
Gr-D: Africans	6	5,8	5	4,8	7	6,7
Total	39	37,5	44	42,3	21	20,2
	$\chi^2=24,30$, $p<.001$					

In the second condition (flexible choice), most of the pupils (78,8%), without differences between groups, assigned one candy to each doll, 7,7% assigned all the candies to White dolls, 7,7% to Chinese dolls, and 5,8% distributed the candies to two dolls, predominantly White dolls. None of the pupils gave all three candies to Black dolls.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The results of this study underlined that ethnic awareness (H1) and self-identification (H2) are already present in pupils aged 4-5 without differences for Italian, Chinese, and African pupils. In relation to H3, we hypothesized that pupils attending to ethnically heterogeneous schools would show more positive ethnic attitudes toward outgroup members than those attending to ethnically homogeneous schools. Results were partially confirmed, in the sense that White Italian pupils attending to ethnically homogeneous schools showed higher preferences for dolls that evoked the ethnicity of ingroup than those attending to ethnically heterogeneous schools; the same trend was observed in Chinese pupils. In addition, without differences between different groups of pupils, Black dolls were refused more than the others.

Regarding rewards allocation, Chinese and White Italian pupils attending to ethnically homogeneous schools predominantly attributed the candy to ingroup; on the contrary, White Italian pupils attending to ethnically heterogeneous schools and African pupils more equally assigned the candy to dolls of the three ethnic groups.

Differences between ethnic attitudes expressed by African and Chinese pupils, both belonging to minority groups and attending to ethnically heterogeneous schools, could be affected by the quality of “intergroup contact” in Italian context, differentiated in relation to the immigration of Chinese people more recent than that of Africans.

Further research carried out with other ethnic groups in Italian context could deepen the understanding of the role of school in interethnic contact.

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