

Part Two

*A case study*





## Methodological aspects in Permit Project: the Italian experience

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abstract

The definition of what a good *research methodology* is varies according to initial assumptions, theories and philosophical approaches shared by researchers and based on the intended uses of the results of a research. In the Permit project the methodological approach adopted by the Italian research group has involved both quantitative and qualitative methods. More than that, studies using mixed-methods have shown that integration of these traditions within the same study can be seen as complementary<sup>1</sup>.

The present paper will examine the methodology chosen, which includes both the survey and the choices made for the design of the project. Such methodology can be regarded as an example of mixed-method approach.

La definizione di cosa può considerarsi come una buona metodologia di ricerca varia secondo le iniziali assunzioni, le teorie e gli approcci filosofici condivisi dai ricercatori e basati sulle intenzioni circa l'uso dei risultati di una ricerca. Nel progetto Permit l'approccio metodologico assunto dal gruppo di ricerca italiano ha riguardato gli aspetti metodologici sia qualitativi sia quantitativi. In particolare è stata assunta come riferimento la metodologia mista che complementa e integra i metodi dei due diversi approcci. In questo articolo, progressivamente, si esamina la metodologia scelta che comprende sia lo studio/survey sia le scelte di disegno della ricerca. Tale metodologia può considerarsi come esemplificazione della metodologia mista.

**Key Words:** Methodology, Research design, Interculture

### 1. Introduction

The definition of what a good *research methodology* is varies according to initial assumptions, theories and philosophical approaches shared by researchers and based on the intended uses of the results of a research.

One dimension that unites all researchers, however, is the particular concern regarding the *quality* of their work. Somehow, this explains why research methodology is an important topic to which Italian researchers paid such close attention and even struggled for assuring it in the PERMIT Project.

Within the so-called *quantitative methodology tradition*, quality standards have

1 See Greene and Caracelli, 1979; Caracelli and Greene, 1997.

been defined using the concept of *validity*<sup>2</sup>. This concept can be -and is- considered as a cumulative process consisting of, almost, four steps. The initial steps are: one) to assess whether two variables are related to each other (*conclusion validity*) and two) to determine if this relationship is causal (*internal validity*). The third step examines if the means through which the theoretical model was operationalised are sufficiently representative (*construct validity*). Finally, the fourth step, examines if, and to what extent, findings can be generalized to other groups, places and time (*external validity*).

This conceptualization of validity, like that of quality, has been very influential even within the so-called *qualitative methodology tradition*, wherein a solid approach to assess the quality of interpretative inquiry is the use of *truthworthiness criteria*<sup>3</sup>. Besides the critiques to the classical approach of validity, these criteria include the notions of *credibility* and *transferability* comparable with the concepts of internal validity and external validity.

These initial correspondences suggest that the Italian methodological approach has involved both quantitative and qualitative methods. More than that, studies using a mixed-method have shown that the integration of these traditions within the same study can be seen as complementary to each other (Cresswell, 2003).

Therefore, in this paper, both the study and the choices of the Permit Project research methodology will be analyzed on the light of the above mentioned mixed-methods approach.

## 2. The PERMIT survey

The first phase of the PERMIT project was devoted to study cultural values influencing the school system. The main purpose of this activity was to gain an insight into cultural identities and problems within participant schools, in order to address teachers' professional development programs and for the experimentation of intercultural education units among the several schools involved in the project. The main focus of the above mentioned research phase is a comparative analysis of the different values, opinion, and attitudes of teachers and students that influence teaching practices and learning outcomes. Special attention was paid to the spoken and learned languages and dialects, since these were thought to play a key role within the acquisition of intercultural competence. This explorative survey was clearly based on the idea of analyzing the relevant values and elements influencing the school system in partner countries and, in particular, whether intercultural values are utilized and how by research hypothesis.

The assumption lying behind these ideas is that intercultural dialogue between the partners have to be achieved through a process of knowing and sharing own and others' involved cultural values. However, this is easier said than done. PERMIT project was entirely devoted to provide the basis to achieve this complex aim.

2 See also Cook and Campbell, 1972.

3 See also Denzin and Lincoln, 1993.

After the 1st Scientific Committee was constituted, an important hypothesis considered and further explored by the research group in its 1st meeting at Istanbul was:

*“Intercultural awareness among researchers, teachers and students involved in the project is supposed to be low. The processes of building a joint research framework, as much as introducing innovations in teaching methodologies and materials, are expected to enhance all PERMIT participants’ awareness of cultural diversity and understanding”.*

Furthermore, the Scientific Committee assumed that the project’s impact should be visible on the following dimensions:

- *“The new methodology and the innovative teaching materials are expected to enhance students’ awareness of cultural diversity and understanding.”*
- *“The projects activities and research findings contribute to build bridges among nations and minorities (in Italy, Turkey, and Slovenia) and promote awareness of the intercultural reality<sup>4</sup>.”*

The Italian research team focused on these assumptions in order to define the specific methodology and to create its main tools, utilized to explore the several realities in object. The aim was to achieve a comparative picture, and consequently help teachers to generate their own teaching materials, which, hopefully, should significantly contribute to change that picture throughout time.

*“After piloting the innovative teaching materials teachers can register heightened students’ knowledge, understandings, cognitions; they are better informed on cultural variety, they can understand various beliefs and values and accept otherness, they accept differences among cultures, they can decenter, view their own attitudes towards intercultural reality.”*

Moving forward, the Italian research team explored these assumptions in order to draw conclusions on the data gathered through the several phases of the project development:

At the First Residential Workshop (Istanbul, Turkey), a research on Autonomous/relational Self was introduced. It addressed one of the main issues on cross-cultural psychology, and was built on the idea that intercultural dialogue is to be achieved on the basis of similarities rather than on differences<sup>5</sup>.

At the Second Residential Workshop (Koper, Slovenia), a new debate on the theme of intercultural communicative competence was raised by the researchers of the Universities of Primorska, based on their research background<sup>6</sup>.

At the Third Residential Workshop (Venice, Italy), the Permit model was qualified according to the several research traditions, as presented in figure 1. The structure of the model will attempt to create common foundations of an original multicultural integrated teaching and teachers’ training (see Figure 1).

- 4 Rationale: First Scientific Committee – Synthesis of the SC discussion prepared by Prof. Lucija Čok, University of Primorska – 25 November 2008.
- 5 The question asked was: How could teaching address the development of an A-R Self?
- 6 The main point was understanding to which extent the ongoing intercultural learning units taught by teachers’ experimenters were having an impact on the generation of an intercultural competence.

Below, you can find the dimensions of the integrated model considered by the Italian group and the case studies<sup>7</sup>

<b>Intercultural Communicative Competence Byram, 1997 (following Delors, 1996)</b>	<b>Prof. Cok Model - (LABICUM) Primorska University</b>	<b>Venice Research Group (2nd Scientific Committee Venice)</b>
To Know. Better information on cultural variety, better information on its own culture.	Discovery of Diversity and modulation of inputs – first level proposal –.	Cognition
Know to do. Integration of other knowledges into the use of foreign languages and intercultural interactions.	Dynamic: Attitude, Disposition to cultural diversity	Emotional
Know to be. Understanding how an identity and a culture are socially constructed; setting aside ethnocentric attitudes and perceptions, openness and interest towards the others; intercultural mediation.	Dynamic: Transfer of intercultural awareness to life. – dynamic –.	Social
Know to learn. View their own attitudes towards intercultural reality understand various beliefs and values on the own person, accept otherness, accept differences among cultures.		Metacognition <sup>8</sup>

**Table 1 – First conceptual model of the PERMIT research**

### 3. The PERMIT research methodology

In order to determine the research methodology for the PERMIT Project, two points were considered: *main purpose and issues; research design*.

#### **a) Purpose and Issues**

The Italian research team selected the purpose and issues to be addressed by the methodology. In this particular case, the main purpose of the methodology is to address the efficacy of the “Exploratory Study” in order to make decisions about its implementation.

7 In particular, the Permit project moves from an “exploratory study based on questionnaires about the several values, opinions and attitudes influencing teaching and learning” (or WP2 component), to “intercultural teachers’ training” (or WP3 component) and “creation and experimentation of intercultural learning units (or WP4 component).

8 Review of the model after the Second Venice seminar (Treviso, 4-6 June 2009).

Therefore the main issues targeted/identified by the methodology are the following:

- **Intercultural values**
  - What was/is the difference in terms of intercultural sensitivity in each partner school before and after the project started?
  - What is the difference among teachers and students in terms of changes in intercultural values since the project has started ( among the partner schools)?
- **Performance**
  - Are there differences in the intercultural teaching performances of the teachers involved at the conclusion of the project ?

### **b) Research Design**

**Research design** refers to the strategy of integrating the different components of the PERMIT research project in a cohesive and coherent way. Rather than a “cookbook” from which you choose the best recipe, it is a means to structure a research project in order to address a defined set of questions<sup>9</sup>.”

Permit project has been characterized by:

**The Cutoff Criterion.** Teachers and students were assigned to the project taking into account their scores on a defined scale (proposed by the partner researchers as element of their personal knowledge and tested research tools). Two distinct groups were created: a) teachers belonging to schools that had adhered to the Permit project; b) students belonging to teacher’s classes.

**The Pre-Postprogram Measures.** The major sources of information for both issues – teachers and students intercultural values – were school performance records. Regarding these issues, two dimensions were considered before and after the project implementation, as well as during seminars on the project.

**Statistical Issues.** We assumed that the requirements regarding the statistical model were fully met, including statistical power.

**Programme Implementation.** We assumed the project was implemented according to the Project plan and that there was no major delivery discrepancy.

This way, the Research Framework was drawn up on a number of Research Activities, Methodology, Purpose and Expected Participants, as it is illustrated in figure 2.

9 Creswell, J. (2004). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. NY: Prentice Hall.

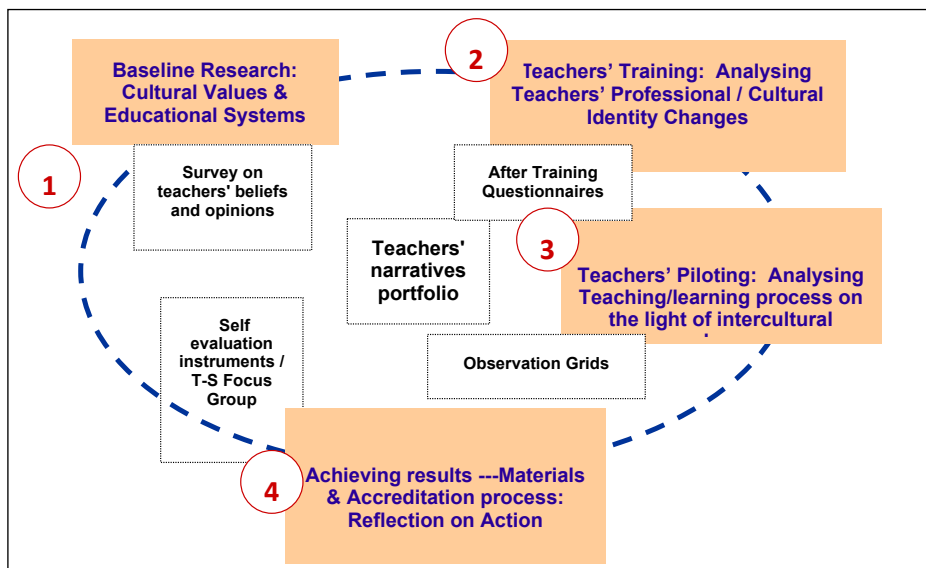


Figure 2 – Scheme on the research design

#### 4. Implemented methodology

The first operative research strategy within the PERMIT project consists of two main steps: the elaboration of the questionnaires<sup>10</sup> and the analysis of data gathered (figure 2); the agreement among research groups of Slovenia, Italy and Turkey in order to build the several categories for data interpretation, both at First and Second Level of data analysis. The final presentation took into account the data collected among the three partner countries, allowing some confrontation of data; in any case, we cannot speak about a comparative analysis, given the small number of respondents and the partial representation of the chosen schools by comparison with regional and national realities. Therefore, PERMIT findings have to be considered an initial input to reflect on inter-culture, but in no way, a definitive picture of the intercultural reality analysed.

The sampling procedures (i.e. the way in which the characteristics of participants in the groups were selected) do not allow generalizations, but they delineate a particular and situated picture of opinions, perceptions and imaginaries on intercultural dialogue among the intervening teachers and students.

The analysis of questionnaire results allow an in-depth examination of ideas and theories about how intercultural dialogue is conceived and furthermore the

<sup>10</sup> Given the theoretical assumptions introduced in the first part of this article, the questionnaires were organized according to the following conceptual categories that were explored through the survey: **Students:** Demographic Information; Intercultural Learning; Contact with other cultures; Considerations on values, beliefs, opinions about intercultural dialogue. **Teachers:** Demographic Information; Teaching Methods; Contact with other cultures; Considerations on values, beliefs, opinions about intercultural dialogue.



detailed description of teaching and learning practices present in the schools participating in the PERMIT experience.

Findings brought to a reflection on the congruence between conceptions on intercultural education in the participants' schools as well as considerations included in international literature and/or European policy documents.

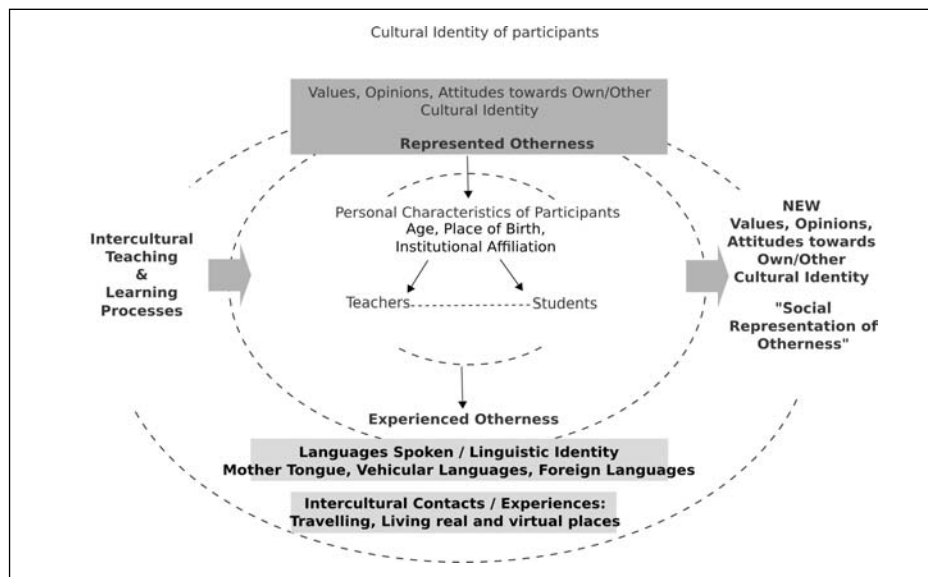


Figure 3 – Structural model of the content of the questionnaires<sup>11</sup>

## 5. General methodological findings

The methodology developed by the Italian research team in the PERMIT project must be definitely considered positive, as proved by the findings, impacts and outcomes on intercultural teaching and learning attainments. The Permit Project Programme generally allowed an improvement of teaching methodologies and management strategies, that were crucial in enabling students to achieve the expected results and maximize satisfaction regarding intercultural issues.

The results obtained through the research actions were crucial to identify the positive factors characterizing the PERMIT project and also to define the critical aspects that emerged. Both elements are reported below in order to provide “new inputs” to future European Projects about intercultural education.

<sup>11</sup> Research Report: “An exploratory Study on Cultural Values Influencing Schooling System” PERMIT Research Group. The scheme was developed by Juliana Raffaghelli and Roberto Melchiori.

### *Critical issues*

- The information and communication procedures implemented by the PERMIT project carried using technological tools, were frequent and this reduced the dissemination of intermediate results in particular.
- Relationships with the school organizations were often weak and started up only at the project-development phase. This means that during the initiative experiments did not always lead mutual strengthening and motivational processes between teachers and their host school organizations in order to assure a positive conclusion of the experience.
- The breadth and multi-sector nature of the intercultural projects led to difficulties in handling the agreements among the various partners and the workgroup network. Sometimes, the promoters, were unable to maintain solid bonds and control over other members.
- Even after the project was developed, the practices and the products were, in some way, short-lived, and this contributed to weaken the partnership and also the actions carried out without further opportunities for valorisation. Because of this, the initiative lost effectiveness.
- The understandable concern for the obtainment of a product and/or the final elaboration of research findings often led to a lack of attention to the ongoing processes.

### *Positive Issues*

- The cooperation among the PERMIT partners concerning intercultural education was designed and validated by setting up the steering committee and helped to get to know the systems of the partner schools better;
- The networks set up and consolidated through the PERMIT Project can become the context for promoting and starting many other initiatives.
- Taking part in the LdV Program was the starting point for participating in other European Intercultural programmes.
- The PERMIT Project was considered an opportunity to improve the education and training offer of the schools and an occasion for experimenting innovative teaching methods and procedures.
- The glossary definition was an opportunity to share a common terminology and to promote comprehension on language learning.
- The discussion and debate between partner researchers and teachers involved in the project about the European interest in intercultural matters was also facilitated by the seminars organized by partners between institutions and organizations belonging to the same sector (Universities).
- A increased ability in the design of teaching learning units is the result of the activities of support and assistance, led by the partner research teams, in the project drafting phase as well as in the project development phase.

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