

## **Contact with Immigrant Parents as a Predictor of Teachers' Attitudes and Acculturation Orientations toward Immigrant Children.**

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A field study was conducted to test whether contact with immigrant parents would lead Italian teachers to display more positive attitudes toward immigrant children. The participants were 128 Italian pre-school and elementary school teachers of a Northern Italian region. Analyses conducted with structural equation modeling (SEM) revealed that quality of contact increased the perceived heterogeneity of the immigrant pupils category and led to a stronger support of social policies favouring immigrant children. In addition, quality of contact also affected the rejection of negative acculturation strategies (assimilation, segregation, exclusion) and the endorsement of positive acculturation strategies (individualism). Unexpectedly, cooperative contact reduced the preference for the integration strategy. The relationship between contact quality and outcome variables was mediated by empathic feelings toward immigrant children. The effects of quantity of contact were negligible. Theoretical and practical implications of findings are discussed.

*Keywords:* intergroup contact; intergroup empathy; teachers' attitudes; immigrant parents; school context; secondary transfer effect; acculturation orientations.

In recent years there has been a great increase in the number of immigrants living in Italy. Immigrants are much more numerous in Northern regions, where there are more opportunities for work, rather than in Central or Southern regions. Importantly, this presence has far-reaching consequences in many social areas, such as education. The most recent available data show that immigrants are 13.6% of the elementary school pupils and 11.1% of the total number of pre-schoolers in Emilia-Romagna, the region where the present study was conducted. The percentages for Italy as a whole are 7.7% and 6.7%, respectively (Italian Institute of Statistics, 2010). Teachers have to deal with many problems related to the co-existence of Italians and immigrants in the same classes, due to, for instance, differences in language skills and cultural customs.

Thus, it is of primary importance for teachers to endorse and display positive attitudes toward immigrant pupils, so as to facilitate the process of their integration within the schools.

In the present paper, we examine the hypothesis that the relation between teachers and immigrant parents may help to improve relations between teachers and immigrant children. In particular, we investigate whether and how contact between teachers and immigrant parents affects attitudes, social policy support and acculturation orientations concerning immigrant pupils. We are not aware of other studies testing contact between teachers and immigrant parents as a predictor of more positive relations between teachers and immigrant children.

The present research has theoretical and practical goals. On one hand, it evaluates the contact hypothesis (Allport 1954) in a naturalistic setting by considering both attitudes and the endorsement of acculturation strategies. On the other hand, by examining the processes underlying prejudice reduction as a function of the

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type of contact between teachers and parents, it can provide important indications for practitioners interested in improving intergroup relations within the educational system.

### **Intergroup contact**

According to the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998), encounters between ingroup and outgroup members can ameliorate intergroup relations when some key conditions are met: there should be cooperation for superordinate goals, contact should be characterized by equal status of interacting group members and supported by social norms promoting equality. As suggested by some authors (see Killen, Crystal, & Ruck, 2007; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008), the school context is ideal for developing harmonious intergroup relations. Indeed, the relationship between children of different groups and that between teachers and parents are not hierarchical and thus are likely to imply equality of status, especially in non-conflictual intergroup contexts. In addition, these relations require cooperation for the attainment of social and educational goals and they take advantage by the support provided by the school institutions and by the teachers. The school is thus a privileged context for the integration of immigrants.

Despite the favorability of the school environment for the creation of positive intergroup relationships (Tropp & Prenovost, 2008), quite paradoxically, an obstacle toward integration may be represented by teachers. There is evidence that teachers can endorse biased ethnic attitudes (D'Angelo & Dixey, 2001; Farkas, 2003; Gordon, 2006; Rich-man, Bovelsky, Kroovand, Vacca, & West, 1997), although prejudice is sometimes expressed in subtle ways (see Carter & Rice, 1997; Feldman, 1985; Semons, 1991). Especially in these cases, intergroup contact can be an effective strategy for reducing negative intergroup attitudes (Allport, 1954). The contact hypothesis has been supported by an impressive number of studies over the past fifty years across a large variety of target-groups, situations and cultural contexts (for reviews, see Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). However, no study to date, to our knowledge, has examined whether contact between native teachers and immigrant parents affects the attitudes of teachers toward immigrant children. Our hypothesis is that contact with immigrant parents will provide

teachers with the opportunity to better understand the cultural and familiar environment of the children and thus to ameliorate attitudes toward them. Moreover, in line with existing evidence (see Pettigrew, 1997, 1998), we expect stronger effects for the degree of positivity of the interaction (quality of contact) rather than for the number of immigrant parents met at school (quantity of contact).

### **Intergroup emotions**

An important limitation of the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) is that it merely states when intergroup attitudes will improve (that is, when optimal conditions are met), but not how prejudice reduction will occur. In other words, it does not specify the processes leading to more positive intergroup relations. Recently, scholars devoted growing attention to the processes underlying contact effects. Although there is evidence that also cognitive factors may represent key mediating variables (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Vezzali, Capozza, & Pasin, 2009; Vezzali & Giovannini, 2011), in the present study we focused on affective mediators. Indeed, research showed that affect is more important than cognition in facilitating bias reduction (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Capozza, Vezzali, Trifiletti, Falvo, & Favara, 2010; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Specifically, we examined the role played by intergroup empathy.

Empathy was defined by Batson and colleagues (1997) as "another-oriented emotional response congruent with another's perceived welfare"

(p. 105). In general, empathy has the potential to ameliorate intergroup relations (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; see also Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002; Galinski & Moskowitz, 2000; Finlay & Stephan, 2000; Stephan & Finlay, 1999). There is now consistent evidence showing that contact increases feelings of empathy toward the outgroup which, in turn, lead to more positive intergroup attitudes (Pettigrew, 1997; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Vezzali, Giovannini, & Capozza, 2010). Our prediction is that quantity and, especially, quality of contact with immigrant parents will allow teachers to empathize more with immigrant children and, as a consequence, improve attitudes toward them.

Three types of dependent variables were examined, with the aim of capturing different aspects of attitudes potentially relevant for facilitating the inclusion of immigrants within the

schools. First, we evaluated the support for social policies favoring immigrant children. Improving the agreement with affirmative actions among teachers is crucial and can be considered a severe test of the contact hypothesis, given that the contact literature has generally obtained inconsistent findings when examining this variable (e.g., Beaton, Dovidio, & Leger, 2008; Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2007; Jackman & Crane, 1986; Pettigrew, 1997). A second variable under investigation, generally neglected by contact research, was the perceived heterogeneity of the immigrant children category (for an exception, see, e.g., Voci & Hewstone, 2003). It is possible to consider the perception of homogeneity of an outgroup category as an indirect measure of attitudes, since believing that members of a group are not different from one another can represent a subtle and socially acceptable way to assimilate them in a disliked category (see also Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995).

Finally, we tested the effects of contact between teachers and immigrant parents on acculturation orientations toward children. There is little research directly assessing the link between degree of intergroup contact and the endorsement of acculturation strategies (for an exception, see Liu, 2006). To investigate acculturation, we adopted the Interactive Acculturation Model (IAM; Bourhis, Barrette, & Moriconi, 2008; Bourhis, Moïse, Perreault, & Senécal, 1997). According to the IAM, host majority group members may endorse five acculturation strategies:

(a) assimilation, preferred by dominant group members who think that immigrants should abandon their own cultural identity for that of the majority group; (b) segregation, implying that immigrants may preserve their own culture as long as they do not adopt or change the culture of the dominant group and do not come into contact with it; (c) exclusion, endorsed by majority members thinking that immigrants should neither maintain their own customs nor adopt or transform features of the dominant group's culture; (d) individualism, according to which the endorsement or the rejection of one's cultural origins does not matter, since each person is a unique individual and should be valued for his/her personal characteristics and individual achievements; (e) integration, endorsed by members of the host majority who believe that immigrants can maintain their own culture and at the same time adopt at least some features of the dominant group culture. Assimilation, segregation,

and exclusion are generally considered negative strategies, whereas individualism and integration are positive strategies (Vezzali & Giovannini, 2010b). We believe it is of central importance to determine the factors and the processes driving the endorsement or the rejection of these strategies.

The study was performed among Italian teachers of schools of Emilia-Romagna, a region situated in the North of Italy. The teachers involved in the research taught in mixed ethnic classes where Italian and immigrant children had contact on a daily basis. The hypothesis was that contact between teachers and immigrant parents would be associated with more support for social policies, less perceived homogeneity of the immigrant children category, more endorsement of positive (individualism, integration) and rejection of negative (assimilation, segregation, exclusion) acculturation strategies in the school environment. In addition, we expected these effects to be mediated by empathy toward immigrant children.

## Method

### Participants and procedure

Participants were 128 Italian teachers from pre-schools and elementary schools (4 males, 117 females; 7 participants did not report gender). Mean age was 42.03 years old ( $SD = 9.45$ ). Seventy-nine teachers (4 males, 70 females, 5 missing data) worked in pre-schools and 49 (47 females, 2 missing data) in elementary schools. Mean age was 41.92 years ( $SD = 8.71$ ) for the teachers in pre-schools and 42.22 years ( $SD = 10.60$ ) for those in elementary schools. Teachers were selected on the basis of an agreement with the principals of the schools they worked for and that declared their interest in collaborating in the present research. Teachers were then contacted personally by the researcher; participation was voluntary and anonymous, so that the school principals did not know whether and how many teachers of their school took part in the study (so as not to influence the teachers' choice in collaborating in the research). Participants were given an anonymous questionnaire to complete.

### Measures

*Quantity of contact.* The amount of contact was assessed with the following item: 'How often do you meet immigrant parents in the school

environment?' A 7-step scale was used from *once a year* (1) to *once a day* (7).

*Quality of contact.* Quality of contact was measured by asking teachers to evaluate their relationship with immigrant parents, using eight bipolar scales (e.g., competitive/cooperative, formal/informal; see Vezzali, Capozza, Mari, & Hichy, 2007). On the 7-step scale, 1 was given to the negative and 7 to the positive pole; 4 was the neutral point. The eight items were averaged in a single measure of quality of contact ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

*Intergroup empathy.* Empathy was assessed with four items (see Vezzali, Capozza, & Falvo, 2009). Participants were asked to rate on a 7-step scale (*not at all-very much*) to what degree, when thinking to outgroup members, they: 'feel in tune with them'; 'understand their situation'; 'understand their point of view'; 'understand their feelings.' Items were combined in a reliable measure: higher scores are associated with stronger empathy felt for immigrants ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

*Perceived outgroup heterogeneity.* Two items were used: in your opinion, to what degree do immigrant pupils 'differ from each other?'; 'are similar to each other?' (reverse-scored). The 7-step scale ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Items were averaged ( $r = .24$ ,  $p < .01$ ): the higher the score, the stronger the perception that the out-group is internally heterogeneous.

*Social policies.* To investigate the support for policies concerning immigrant children, participants expressed their agreement with 10 items. Examples of items are: 'Italian and immigrant pupils should attend separate classes', reverse-scored; 'schools and associations should collaborate to promote awareness campaigns concerning immigrant pupils.' The 7-step scale was anchored by 1 (*I completely disagree*) and 7 (*I completely agree*); 4 was the neutral point. A reliable index of social policies support was obtained by aggregating the 10 items ( $\alpha = .69$ ). Higher scores reflect stronger agreement with social policies favoring immigrant children.

*Acculturation orientations.* We adapted the Italian version of the Host Community Acculturation Scale in the cultural domain (HCAS; Bourhis & Bougie, 1998), developed by Capozza and collaborators (Andrighetto, Trifiletti, Pasin, & Capozza, 2008; Barrette, Bourhis, Capozza, & Hichy, 2005; Trifiletti, Dazzi, Hichy, & Capozza, 2007). There were five items, each corresponding to one acculturation strategy and based on how these strategies are conceptualized by the IAM

(see above): assimilation, segregation, exclusion, individualism, integration. Items were: 'Immigrant students should abandon their own culture to adopt the cultural of Italian pupils' (assimilation); 'Immigrant pupils can maintain their own culture as long as it does not affect the culture of Italian pupils' (segregation); 'Italian pupils have nothing to gain from the culture of immigrant pupils' (exclusion); 'Immigrant pupils should maintain their own culture, while also adopting the Italian culture' (integration); 'Whether immigrant pupils maintain or relinquish their own culture is not important, since each individual can choose his/her favourite culture' (individualism). A 7-step scale was used, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*); 4 was the neutral point.

## Results

To test hypotheses, after providing descriptive statistics and controlling for eventual differences between elementary and pre-school teachers, by using independent sample t-test, we will conduct a path analysis with observed variables (LISREL 8.71; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2004). In particular, we will run two models: in the first, outcome measures will be perceived outgroup heterogeneity and policies support; in the second, criterion variables will be acculturation orientations. In both models, quantity and quality of contact are the independent variables, empathy is tested as a mediator.

### Introductory analyses

Means, standard deviations of measures and their correlations are presented in Table 1. As can be noted, participants met immigrant parents quite regularly and had a highly cooperative contact with them. Empathy toward immigrant children was slightly higher than the neutral point (4). Teachers moderately supported social policies favoring immigrant children, who were perceived as a quite heterogeneous category.

Concerning acculturation orientations (see Table 1), participants preferred individualism, followed by integration. Thus, they seemed to attribute more importance to individual qualities rather than to the cultural origins and to the need to adopt the Italian culture. Predictably, negative acculturation strategies were disliked. The only exception regards the segregation strategy, whose mean score is close to the neutral point of the scale. Thus, as for integration, in the case of segregation teachers did not seem to attribute

much importance to the fact that immigrant children keep their own culture without adopting

Table 1.

Means, standard deviations and correlations between variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Quantity of contact	-									
2. Quality of contact	.28**	-								
3. Intergroup empathy	.21*	.65***	-							
4. Perceived heterogeneity	.24**	.33***	.35***	-						
5. Policies support	.04	.45***	.41***	.20*	-					
6. Assimilation	-.04	-.21*	-.26**	-.08	-.25**	-				
7. Segregation	.00	-.39***	-.43***	-.32***	-.26**	.07	-			
8. Exclusion	.06	-.21*	-.26**	-.22*	-.33***	.46***	.18*	-		
9. Individualism	.09	.43***	.38***	.30***	.20*	-.30***	-.27**	-.15 <sup>†</sup>	-	
10. Integration	-.08	-.50***	-.51***	-.32***	-.33***	.08	.61***	.15 <sup>†</sup>	-	-
<i>M</i>	5.39	5.32	4.32	5.14	4.35	1.46	3.50	1.59	4.92	4.74
<i>SD</i>	1.99	0.88	1.51	1.18	0.87	1.09	2.04	1.19	2.14	2.21

*Note* Higher ratings reflect: higher quantity and quality of contact with immigrant parents, empathy toward immigrant children, perceived heterogeneity of the immigrant children category, support for policies favoring immigrant children, endorsement of acculturation orientations (assimilation, segregation, exclusion, individualism, integration) concerning immigrant children. <sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ . ( $M = 4.59$ ,  $SD = 0.86$  vs.  $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ),  $t(126) = 2.47$ ,  $p < .05$ . To the extent that the

the Italian one, probably because their focus is on personal qualities.

Correlations, as shown in Table 1, are all in the expected direction with the exception of integration, which was associated negatively to contact quality, empathy, perceived outgroup heterogeneity, social policies, individualism, and was correlated positively with segregation and exclusion (marginal effect); these unexpected findings will be addressed in the Discussion, by focusing on how teachers may have interpreted the integration strategy.

With respect to differences between pre-school and elementary school teachers, a series of t-test was run. The only reliable difference was found for the measure of social policies: the teachers of elementary schools, compared to those of pre-schools, demonstrated a slightly higher support for policies aimed at favoring immigrant children

preschool and elementary school teachers' ratings for the various measures were similar, data were collapsed for the subsequent analyses.

### Main analyses

A path analysis with observed variables was conducted to test whether quantity and quality of contact with immigrant parents predicted attitudes toward immigrant children by enhancing intergroup empathy (LISREL 8.71; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2004). We ran two models. In the first (Model 1, Figure 1), quantity and quality of contact with immigrant parents served as predictors, empathy was the mediator, perceived outgroup heterogeneity and social policies support were the dependent variables. In the second (Model 2, Figure 2), the dependent variables used in Model 1 (perceived outgroup heterogeneity,

social policies support) were replaced by the five acculturation strategies. In both models, the direct path from predictors to outcome measures was included. In the second model, correlations between acculturation orientations significantly associated (see Table 1) were set free. Analyses were performed on the covariance matrix (Cudeck, 1989).

The goodness-of-fit of the model was assessed using the chi-square test, the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA), the standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR), and the comparative fit index (CFI). An acceptable fit to the data is indicated by a  $\chi^2/df$  ratio of less than 3, an RMSEA and an SRMR equals or less than .08, and a CFI equal or greater than .95 (Bentler, 1990, 1995; Hu & Bentler, 1997, 1999).

The first model fitted data well,  $\chi^2(1) = .29$ ,  $p = .59$ ;  $\chi^2/df = .29$ ; RMSEA  $\approx .00$ ; SRMR = .0099; CFI = 1.00. As can be noted in Figure 1, quality of contact with immigrant parents was associated with higher support for social policies directed at

immigrant children. The original paths from quantity and quality of contact with immigrant parents to increased perceived outgroup heterogeneity were lowered and reduced to non-significance. Contact quality (but not quantity) also enhanced feelings of empathy toward immigrant children. In turn, intergroup empathy was associated with more positive attitudes toward social policies concerning immigrant pupils and less perceived homogeneity of the immigrant children category. Supportive of our hypotheses, the indirect effect of quality of contact on outcome variables through intergroup empathy was significant (IE = .15,  $p < .05$ , for perceived outgroup heterogeneity; IE = .13,  $p < .05$  for policies support). The portion of variance explained was high for intergroup empathy (43%); it was moderate for social policies support (24%) and perceived outgroup heterogeneity (16%).

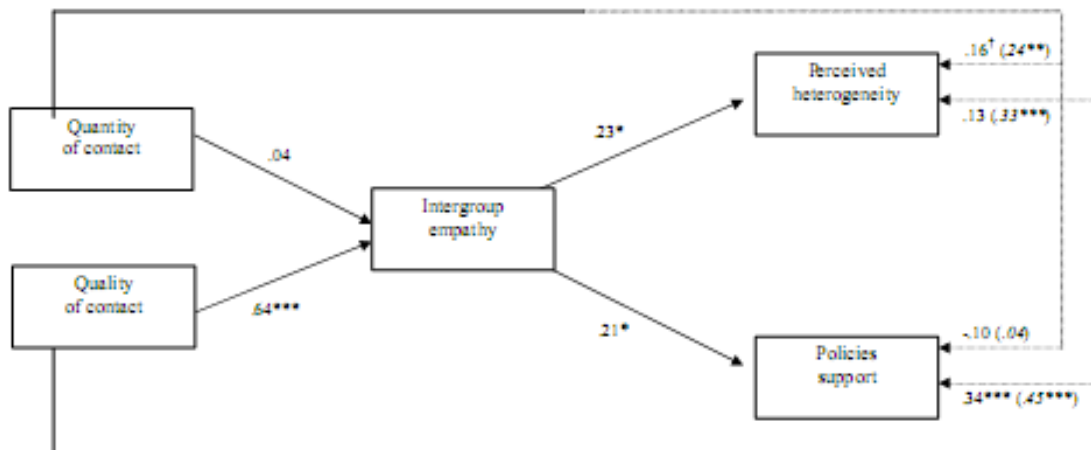


Figure 1. Path model. Model 1. Higher ratings reflect: higher quantity and quality of contact with immigrant parents, empathy toward immigrant children, perceived heterogeneity of the immigrant children category, support for policies favoring immigrant children. Correlations: quantity of contact-quality of contact,  $r = .28$ ,  $p < .01$ . In parentheses the original  $\beta$ s are represented. † $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

The second model, presented in Figure 2, showed a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(4) = 1.25$ ,  $p = .87$ ;  $\chi^2/df = .3125$ ; RMSEA  $\approx .00$ ; SRMR = .016; CFI = 1.00. As can be observed in the Figure, quantity of contact had no reliable effects; the paths from quality of contact to acculturation orientations were lowered and were reduced to non-significance in the case of assimilation and exclusion. Quality of contact was also associated

with enhanced intergroup empathy. This variable, in turn, was negatively related with the endorsement of assimilation (marginal effect), segregation, exclusion, and positively related with the acceptance of individualism (marginal effect). Surprisingly, empathy was negatively associated with the strategy of integration. Possibly, integration, as it was operationalized in this study, was considered by our participants as a negative

strategy; this possibility is addressed more extensively in the Discussion. Partially consistent with our hypotheses, quality of contact with immigrant parents had an indirect effect on assimilation ( $IE = .13, p < .08$ , marginal effect), segregation ( $IE = .20, p < .01$ ), exclusion ( $IE = .14, p < .06$ , marginal effect), individualism ( $IE = .11, p = .10$ , marginal effect), integration ( $IE =$

$.21, p < .01$ ). The model explained a high portion of variance for intergroup empathy (43%) and integration (32%); the variance explained was moderate for segregation (22%) and individualism (20%); it was low for exclusion (9%) and assimilation (7%).

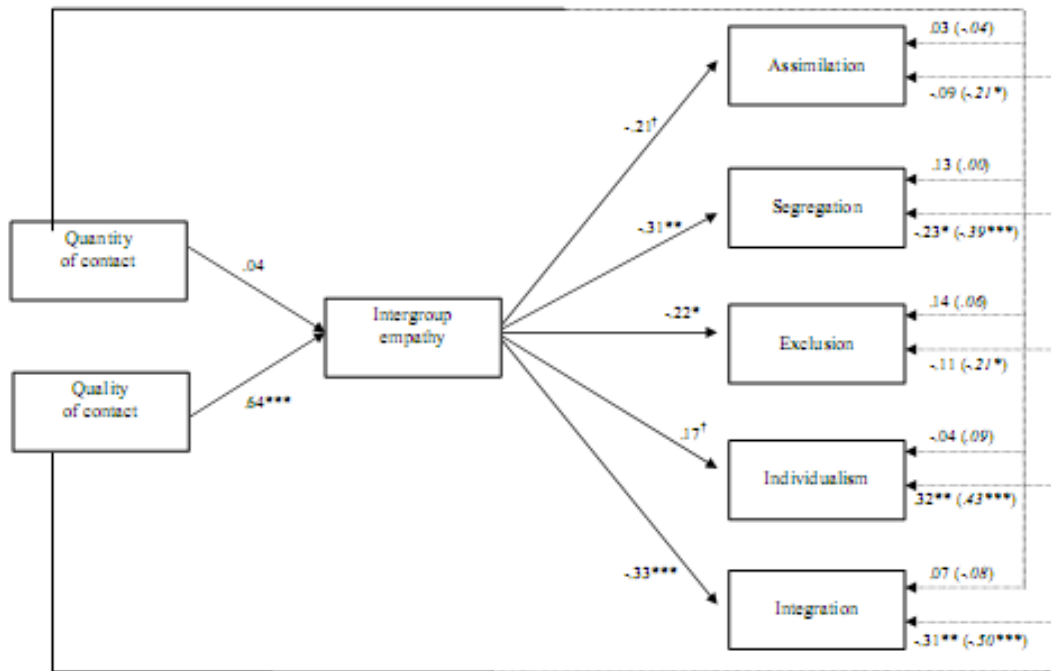


Figure 2. Path model. Model 2. Higher ratings reflect: higher quantity and quality of contact with immigrant parents, empathy toward immigrant children, endorsement of acculturation orientations (assimilation, segregation, exclusion, individualism, integration) concerning immigrant children. Correlations: quantity of contact-quality of contact,  $r = .28, p < .01$ ; assimilation-exclusion,  $r = .38, p < .001$ ; assimilation-individualism,  $r = -.19, p < .01$ ; segregation-exclusion,  $r = .06, ns$ ; segregation-individualism,  $r = -.08, ns$ ; segregation-integration,  $r = .35, p < .001$ ; individualism-integration,  $r = -.19, p < .01$ . In parentheses the original  $\beta$ s are represented. † $p \leq .10$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

There is an extensive literature supporting the effectiveness of intergroup contact in very different settings, including the school context (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). We conducted a field study to examine a special type of contact, namely the one between teachers and immigrant parents. Specifically, we examined whether contact with immigrant parents would lead Italian teachers to evaluate immigrant pupils more positively. Participants were Italian pre-school and elementary school teachers. The

effects of contact were analyzed by considering several outcome measures, ranging from

perceived outgroup heterogeneity and social policies support to acculturation orientations. We also tested whether the effects obtained were mediated by intergroup empathy.

First of all, our results show once again that contact is a powerful tool for the improvement of intergroup relations (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). In particular, contact with immigrant parents was associated with increased perceived heterogeneity and enhanced support for policies favoring immigrant pupils. Thus, the more

teachers experienced contact with immigrant parents, the more they considered immigrant children as different from one another, thus acknowledging their individual differences, and they agreed that institutions should necessarily consider the possibility of adopting *ad-hoc* actions for facilitating the inclusion of immigrant children within the Italian educational system. These results are especially noteworthy given that they were obtained on two attitude measures largely neglected by contact research, that is, perceived outgroup heterogeneity and social policies. Furthermore, findings in the literature concerning the effectiveness of contact on the agreement with social policies are mixed (e.g., Beaton et al., 2008; Dixon et al., 2007; Jackman & Crane, 1986; Pettigrew, 1997), thus providing additional value to our results. The present research shows that contact with immigrant parents has a great potential in affecting positively both perceived outgroup heterogeneity and the support of policies concerning immigration within the schools.

A second relevant finding was that contact had positive effects also on the endorsement of acculturation attitudes. Specifically, cooperative contact led teachers to reject negative strategies, such as assimilation, segregation and exclusion, and to endorse a positive strategy, that is, individualism. We also obtained an unexpected result concerning the strategy of integration: quality of contact with immigrant parents was associated to the rejection of integration. A possible explanation is that the teachers considered full integration as a means of forcing immigrant children to adopt the Italian culture. Indeed, our teachers seemed more focused on individual abilities, as indicated by the fact that the most preferred strategy was individualism, rather than on the adoption of specific cultures. Thus, integration might have been considered partly as a negative strategy, in that it requires immigrants to adjust to the dominant culture while maintaining also their original traditions.

Future research might explore this possibility more analytically. What teachers think about acculturation is crucial for facilitating immigrant children inclusion within the classes; furthermore, few studies have been conducted to verify the role of contact in improving acculturation orientations. In light of these considerations, we believe our findings should be considered with special attention. We note that caution should be used in interpreting results based on acculturation orientations assessed with a single-item measure;

however, the scale used (HCAS; Bourhis & Bougie, 1998) has received extensive validation, also when applied to the Italian context (e.g., Andrighetto et al., 2008; Trifiletti et al., 2007).

It should be noted that we obtained effects mainly for quality of contact, whereas the role of contact quantity was negligible. This finding is consistent with the literature suggesting that quality, rather than quantity, of contact has a major role in the improvement of intergroup relations (Capozza et al., 2010; Pettigrew, 1997, 1998), especially when majority group members are considered (Vezzali et al., 2010). In other words, what is important is not the frequency of encounters with immigrant parents; rather, prejudice reduction is more likely when intergroup relations are friendly and cooperative.

Another major finding of the present study is that intergroup empathy was a mediator of the effects obtained. In particular, cooperative contact with immigrant parents was associated with an increased tendency for teachers to empathize with their immigrant pupils. Increased empathy, in turn, was important for explaining prejudice reduction. Notably, the indirect effect of contact quality through empathy was reliable for all the variables considered. This demonstrates that empathy is pivotal for ameliorating relationships between groups. These results add to the extensive literature showing beneficial effects of empathy on intergroup relations (Batson et al., 1997; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Stephan & Finlay, 1999) and support its mediational role in the relationship between contact and intergroup attitudes (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). We note, however, that some of the indirect effects obtained were marginal. In addition, mediation was partial in some cases. It is likely that other mediators not considered in the present research might help explain the effects of contact. For instance, contact with grandparents may reduce negative feelings, such as intergroup anxiety, experienced in the school setting (Voci & Hewstone, 2003). Alternatively, positive encounters between parents and teachers could limit the endorsement of negative stereotypes of the immigrant category, which might then be responsible for bias attenuation (Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Vezzali & Giovannini, 2011).

It is worth noting that the results obtained can be considered as an example of secondary transfer effect. According to Pettigrew (1998, 2009), the secondary transfer effect consists in the generalization of positive intergroup attitudes



developed during contact to outgroups not directly involved in the encounter situation. In our case, immigrant parents would constitute the outgroup in contact, whereas their children are the 'secondary outgroup' to which positive attitudes are generalized. In line with previous evidence, our findings show that intergroup empathy is a mediator of the secondary transfer effect (see Vezzali & Giovannini, 2010a).

This research adds to the existing literature in several ways. First, it demonstrates that contact with immigrant parents is an important factor in order to change teachers' attitudes toward immigrant pupils. This is the first time that such a connection has been found. Second, it shows that what is important for prejudice reduction is the friendliness of intergroup encounters, rather than their frequency. Third, it explores a strategy (i.e., intergroup contact) for improving the attitudes of teachers toward immigrants; surprisingly, there is a lack of studies in this direction, despite the finding that teachers' attitudes are often biased (D'Angelo & Dixey, 2001; Farkas, 2003; Gordon, 2006; Richman et al., 1997). Fourth, it reveals that cooperative contact is important also when acculturation orientations are taken into account, in that it contributes to rejecting negative strategies, such as assimilation, and to endorsing positive strategies, such as individualism. In addition, it evaluates the IAM (Bourhis et al., 1997, 2008) in the educational context and indicate that it is a reliable instrument for assessing acculturation orientations in this field. Finally, by showing that encounters with immigrant parents affect perceived out-group heterogeneity, it demonstrates that contact has positive effects also on indirect attitude measures. Thus, intergroup contact is likely to be an effective strategy also for limiting hidden bias, since stating that the outgroup is a homogeneous category can be considered a subtle way to express prejudice (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). As acknowledged by Dovidio, Kawakami and Gaertner (2000), since people are often unaware of endorsing prejudiced attitudes, changing subtle prejudice is an important step toward more positive intergroup relations.

The present research has important practical implications. Educational institutions should promote the involvement of immigrant parents within the school community so as to favor the development of harmonious relationships between teachers and immigrant children. In particular, it is not the frequency of the meetings with parents

that should be increased (at least for prejudice reduction purposes), since contact quantity is related only slightly to teachers' attitudes. On the contrary, it is important to create the opportunity for friendly and cooperative interactions, which have a great potential to enhance empathic feelings between teachers and immigrant children, thus increasing the possibility of a mutual understanding. Focusing on the development of positive emotions such as empathy will improve attitudes and the support for social policies toward immigrants, facilitating their inclusion and integration within the classes. Furthermore, it will lead to endorsing more positive acculturation orientations, such as individualism, and to rejecting that idea that immigrant pupils must renounce to their original culture. The focus on individual abilities, coupled with the refusal of forcing immigrants to abandon their customs and values, is also likely to favor the achievement of better grades among immigrant children. The positive effects of contact with immigrant parents on more positive attitudes toward immigrant pupils might also indirectly affect Italian pupils and their intergroup attitudes and behaviors. Indeed, observing that teachers have positive relationships with immigrant parents should promote social norms toward equality (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). Moreover, seeing that teachers accept immigrant children and have positive attitudes toward them can foster imitative behaviors and lead Italian pupils to reduce prejudice and behave more positively toward their immigrant peers (Bigler & Liben, 2007; Cristol & Gimbert, 2008).

We acknowledge some limitations of our study. First, data are correlational. However, we can be confident in the proposed causal sequence: it is unlikely that holding negative attitudes toward immigrant children would lead to worsened relations with their parents. In addition, there is evidence that contact has causal effects on prejudice reduction (Eller & Abrams, 2003, 2004; Stephan & Rosenfield, 1978) and that the path from contact to improved intergroup attitudes is stronger than the reverse path (Pettigrew, 1997). Second, all participants belonged to the Italian group; it would be important to test whether cooperative encounters with teachers improve attitudes also among immigrant parents. Third, we did not assess teachers' attitudes toward parents; we cannot exclude that contact with immigrant parents has positive effects only on bias toward

immigrant children, but leaves unaffected attitudes toward parents.

In conclusion, our study shows that friendly contact between teachers and immigrant parents is an effective way to improve attitudes and acculturation orientations toward immigrant children, and that intergroup empathy is pivotal in

facilitating prejudice reduction. In the light of this evidence it is of primary importance to foster more positive intergroup attitudes among teachers in order to improve intergroup relationships within the schools.

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