

## Questions of (Mis)Recognition in the Relationship Between Italian Teachers and Asylum-Seeker Students

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### Abstract

The potential of the classroom as a relational space for the development of a positive sense of self by asylum seekers has received scant attention in literature. My PhD research explores this potential using Honneth's theory of recognition. In this paper, I work on a small part of my study, involving three teachers from an adult education centre in Italy. By employing narrative inquiry, I search for clues of recognition in the teachers' narratives about their perceptions and values, relationships with learners, and understanding and concern for learners.

### Keywords

migration, asylum seeking, recognition theory, adult learning

### Introduction

In this research paper, I examine the relationship between specific groups of teachers and adult learners, namely asylum seekers from sub-Saharan Africa in northern Italy. My aim is to explore the potential of the classroom as a place where asylum seekers (just like any adult learner) can develop a more positive sense of self through the experience of intersubjective recognition, as stated by Honneth's theory of recognition (Honneth, 1995).

In this article I analyse three interviews with teachers from Centri Provinciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti (CPIA), a government-run adult education institution

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in Lombardy. This study is part of my ongoing PhD research where I employ narrative methods to investigate the perspectives of both teachers and students. Although more limited in scope and centred only on teachers' narratives, this present article nonetheless provides some insights about the teachers' perceptions and values, relationships with learners, and understanding of and concerns for learners. These factors may contribute to guarantee recognition, sustaining learners in developing a healthy sense of self.

My principal aim in this study is to explore how the classroom can be a potential space for intersubjective recognition, especially within the particular context that asylum seekers find themselves in: apart from the lucky few who are able to find jobs, most have little to no contact with members of their host society, and often the contact they do have is with social workers, camp workers, or teachers.

Few studies have focused predominantly on asylum seekers' enactment of their sense of self through positive relationships with their teachers; one notable study in this area is West (2014). Other scholars have studied adult education in the context of migration from other perspectives (Dalziel & Piazzoli, 2018; Duso & Marigo, 2018; Fejes, 2019; Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2017; Morrice et al., 2017; Souto-Otero & Villalba-Garcia, 2015). Therefore, I believe it is worthwhile to explore the relationship as experienced on both sides, and its effects on learning outcomes.

### **Migration Challenges and the Role of (Language) Learning**

The influx of refugees into Europe presents social inclusion challenges to EU member states (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2017). However, this issue is not unique to Europe, since integrating migrants into host societies is a global challenge (Brown et al., 2020). Buber-Ennser et al. (2016), drawing on an OECD study, pointed out that refugees and asylum seekers often face difficulties when entering the educational or employment system of their host country. They noted that the OECD study called for refugee integration programmes to be customised due to the diversity of the refugees' backgrounds. It is also important to understand that integrating adult immigrants into their new society is not a simple process; it has to be based on mutual respect between the immigrants and the host society (Damiani, 2019). Similarly, Caneva (2014) called for the host community and immigrants to work together in order to create a cohesive society. To achieve this, the host community should view all immigrants as people who can contribute meaningfully to society, and there should be a willingness to allow them contribute their quota to society building. Bradby et al. (2019) have suggested that social anchoring may help refugees and asylum seekers settle down in their new location.

Social anchoring refers to the provision of appropriate support to newcomers to “restore a sense of security and meaning” as “a means of re-making resilience in a new setting” (Bradby et al., 2019, p. 535). That is, social support systems should help them settle down and imbue them with the hope of leading a good life in their new society. One such form of social support is the provision of educational and learning opportunities. Indeed, the importance of migrants’ education has been reasserted over time in various conventions, recommendations, and resolutions (Brown et al., 2020). Usually, language learning is one of the first learning opportunities provided for immigrants by the host community, and is among the primary efforts undertaken by the host community to help facilitate a successful immigration process. (Burns & Roberts, 2010).

The role of language learning or the requirement of language proficiency for the inclusion or integration of migrants into their host society has been discussed by many scholars (Alhallak, 2018; Andersson & Fejes, 2010; Caneva, 2014; Dalziel & Piazzoli, 2018; Damiani, 2019; Fejes, 2019; Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2017; Morrice et al., 2017; Souto-Otero & Villalba-Garcia, 2015). Andersson & Fejes (2010) opined that language is an important tool for understanding one’s social context. Dalziel & Piazzoli (2018) asserted that language learning is part and parcel of the resettlement process for immigrants. Damiani (2019) highlighted the importance of linguistic integration of migrants into their host communities, and stated that it is crucial for fostering intercultural understanding as well as social inclusion. However, while Morrice et al. (2017) acknowledged that transnational migration presents migrants with the challenge of learning a new language, they also claimed that “state funded education for migrants has been narrowly framed and often limited to language, culture and employment training, while the education needs of the longer term settled population in relation to transnational migration have been largely ignored” (Morrice et al., 2017, p. 130).

Notwithstanding the above, it is clear that learning within these facilities goes beyond courses: the teacher-student relationship is an experience of mutual learning, and recognition is one of its effects, as I will argue.

### **Learning Provisions for Asylum Seekers in Italy**

Adult asylum seekers in Italy access formal learning mainly through CPIA, the government agency responsible for adult education in Italy and which also provides education to foreigners within each province. The centres therefore play a significant role in Italian policies to sustain adult education and lifelong learning. They were launched in the 2014/2015 school year to replace other institutions that

carried out continuing education and evening courses. They offer basic literacy courses and Italian language training to foreign adults, qualification courses for the first or second cycle of education as well as for young people aged 16 and over. The first cycle of education comprises primary and lower secondary education, whereas the second cycle offers two different pathways: upper secondary school education and vocational training (Italy, Eurydice).

### **Theory of Recognition**

Axel Honneth's theory of recognition provides a critical social framework to explain and interpret processes for healthy societal change and building solidarities (Honneth, 1995). It explains how societies develop or inhibit human flourishing. Honneth's theory is "grounded in love and processes of recognition" (Formenti & West, 2018, p. 21). Justice, based on social equality and the opportunity for everyone to form their identity, is present in society only if every member receives social recognition that makes them a full citizen (Honneth, 2004). Therefore, he advocates for equal treatment and the enablement of each person's self-realisation, since "feeling recognised and legitimate in groups and whole society" (Formenti & West, 2018, p. 18) is an essential experience for the human being. Conversely, "the experience of social injustice is always measured in terms of the withholding of some recognition held to be legitimate" (Honneth, 2004, p. 352). The struggle for recognition, which can arise from the experience of feeling disrespected, provides an explanatory model for social conflicts (Honneth, 1995). Honneth's preoccupation or focus are the patterns of intersubjective recognition at various levels, which may be expressed in three forms, i.e. love, rights, and esteem (Boston, 2018; Honneth, 1995), with the resultant effects of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. Self-confidence is enhanced when one experiences acceptance from others. Self-respect is forged when one feels accepted as being part of a community of rights. Self-esteem comes from being honoured through the acknowledgment of one's abilities (Honneth, 1995; West et al., 2013, Formenti & West, 2018). In an educational context, West et al. (2013) explain that self-confidence can be reinforced when a student experiences acceptance from lecturers and significant others. Self-respect can also be enhanced when a person is accorded the status of a student with similar capabilities as others. Self-esteem may result from the feeling of being honoured in the educational milieu. These claims are also supported by scholars (Fleming & Finnegan, 2014; Formenti & West, 2018; West, 2014; West et al., 2013).

## Methodology and Context

This study adopted a narrative method (Bochner & Herrmann, 2020). I held interviews with three teachers who teach at a local CPIA in the region of Lombardy. My initial intention was to gain an understanding of the context in which asylum seekers learn, before interviewing asylum seekers themselves, who are the main subjects of my PhD research. After communicating with the head of the centre, I was able to interview three teachers. The only criterion for selection was their ability to speak understandable English. The interviews took place on the same day in the same place, a public park, because that was the way the participants wanted it due to the difficulties of moving around as a result of restrictions put in place because of the coronavirus pandemic.

I interviewed them in turn but on many occasions, those who were not being interviewed interjected in my interview with their colleague or helped out by offering details. The downside to interviewing them together was that the first interview seemed to frame and partially shape that of the other two. I also felt awkward asking questions that I had already asked and also thinking that the participants would not want to contradict their colleague(s). After the interviews, I felt that the participants provided information that made me understand the context better, particularly about CPIA and the challenges faced by the students, but maybe information was lacking on students' motivations and interests.

Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then sent to the participants. Two of them gave feedback. The interview transcripts were first coded manually, and later using free computer software, QDA Miner Lite.

In the presentation of my analysis, I will first provide portraits of my interviewees in order to contextualise their narratives. I will then focus on three factors that emerged as being the most significant when it comes to illuminating their experience of teaching asylum seekers: their perceptions and values, their narratives about their relationship with learners, and their attitude towards understanding and concern for learners. I will discuss how these factors provide clues to the the possible experience of intersubjective recognition in CPIA.

### Participants' Portraits

As mentioned above, these portraits are a synthesis of the information I have about the three teachers and their position they took during the interview, both towards me and each other. This helps contextualise their answers during the interview

and the meaning(s) they entail. I am aware that I am interpreting and selecting information here, not least due to my relationship with them.

### **Amara – The mother-figure**

I first came in contact with Amara through an exchange of emails and, from our exchanges she appeared kind and willing to help. She contacted two other teachers and arranged the interview (time and place). She told me she contacted teachers who could speak English since I cannot speak Italian. The interviews were held during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic when most public places were closed. So, her school was closed and she did not have any reason to come to school but she ensured that the three of them came. Amara was 55 years old at the time of the interview. She came across as a self-assured woman with an air of authority. Though she kept an expressionless face most of the time, she was however inquisitive. She asked me questions about my PhD. She asked for the name of my supervisor and various other questions. During the interview, she seemed to answer the questions as best as she could. She hesitated to comment on things she was not sure about, telling me in a matter-of-fact manner that she was not sure.

She is the vice-principal of the centre. She also teaches English but at the time of the interview, she did more administrative duties than teaching. She studied foreign languages (English and German) at university. She had been at the centre for 7 years. Before coming to CPIA she had had only temporary employment but CPIA offered her permanent employment. A desire to teach adults also contributed to why she decided to work at CPIA. She has experience of teaching in Africa, specifically in Senegal, where she taught for two months. She claimed that the experience of living in Senegal, coupled with the fact that her son studied in South Africa, influenced her positive attitude towards foreigners. Amara was the oldest and the most senior, and the others deferred to her. She coordinated the others for the interview.

### **Lucia – The one who chose to teach foreigners**

I met Lucia while waiting for Amara at the CPIA. She walked up to me where I was sitting and asked if I was the one who came to interview them. She told me she been asked to come for the interview by Amara. She seemed enthusiastic about the interview. She was 32 at the time of the interview. She had been teaching at the centre for 5 years.

Lucia's boyfriend was an asylum seeker from Nigeria. She told me she was looking forward to when she would be able to travel to Nigeria because her boyfriend was yet to be granted asylum status. She said her boyfriend's family members knew her as she always spoke to them on the phone. She told me she could speak Nigerian Pidgin English. She met her boyfriend at CPIA when he was a student. She was really enthusiastic and willing to talk about her experiences as a teacher at CPIA. She held the notion that asylum seekers were not treated well by the government of Italy nor by many Italians. She came across as someone who loved her job. She claimed that it was her choice to teach asylum seekers. This interest led her to specialise in Italian language and culture in her master's degree. Before working at CPIA, she had prior experiences of teaching Italian to non-Italians in a university. She also had the experience of teaching children of foreigners. Lucia was the most vocal of the three participants. She interjected the most. She never hesitated to express her thoughts and opinions about the issues raised.

### **Chiara – The one who grew into the role**

Chiara was aged 30 and she no longer taught at CPIA at the time of the interview, but she had taught there for two years. She had a good knowledge of asylum seekers because she was working both in an asylum seekers' camp and at CPIA at the same time. She got the job at CPIA through the help of Lucia. As a worker in an asylum seekers' camp, she was involved in various aspects of their lives such as going with them for a doctor's appointment or working as an interpreter when asylum seekers went to the commission. She also slept in the camp and both worked alongside and supervised asylum seekers in maintaining the camp. She revealed that she did not find teaching asylum seekers easy at first, as her degree in arts and history did not prepare her for teaching asylum seekers but she later came to like the job. She notes that there is a difference between working in an asylum seekers' camp and at teaching asylum seekers at CPIA. According to her, teachers in CPIA are seen as institutional figures and were thus respected, while the case was different in the camp. She had previous experiences of volunteering in Kenya on two occasions where she worked with homeless kids and orphans. She also had the experience of working with prostitutes in Milan. She expressed sympathy towards the plight of asylum seekers and was of the opinion that for many Italians, contact with foreigners was a relatively new phenomenon in Italy and thus might explain the suspicion with which Blacks are viewed by many, especially the older generation.

## Factors Contributing to Intersubjective Recognition

### Teachers' Perceptions and Values

In general, teachers' perceptions and values can be revealed in the way they speak about their students. They can view students as needy, disadvantaged, persons who should be reformed or rehabilitated, or as morally responsible persons who have their own interests and desires, and possessing or deserving dignity as human beings. The teachers I interviewed emitted a positive perception of their students and did not seem to have any negative prejudice towards them. On the contrary, they enjoy teaching them and have informal relationships with them.

They are exactly as all the other people in the sense that some are very good and some are very... they really want to improve... some of them not... There is not a stereotype of refugee students. (Amara)

Amara here is trying to show that she does not paint all asylum seekers with the same brush. She presents herself as a fair person who looks at the situation objectively. Being an asylum seeker does not make you bad or good.

Lucia claims that students are able to relate with her freely without the fear of being judged.

Yeah, and I have in my class two students, women students, and I'm so happy because they say they have stopped but it's not simple to stop because they have to... Yeah, yeah, they come but it's different because the prostitution is different. In my opinion, it's not the problem of prostitution. If I want to be a prostitute, it's not a problem. The problem is that they are forced into it. (Lucia)

Here Lucia attempts to point out that she is not judgmental about her students' involvement in prostitution; she brings an explanation that justifies it: her students are victims. The fact that they came to tell her that they had stopped working as prostitutes is also a pointer to the fact that the students feel accepted by her.

From the two excerpts presented above, the teachers have striven to present themselves as devoid of bias and stereotyping. For example, Amara uses the word "stereotype," which is interesting because from my personal experience as a Black person in Italy, I have experienced discrimination due to stereotyping. I have noticed a pervading notion that Black people are either beggars or thieves. As an illustration, there were many occasions where I would approach someone to ask for directions, and they would refuse to respond or would instead increase



their pace. The teachers apparently realise the existence of stereotyping in Italian society, and they tried as much as possible to show that they are not prejudiced.

### **Teachers' Relationships with Students**

Another relevant factor in these narratives are teacher-student relationships. The teachers narrated that they had positive (and even loving) relationships with their students, which extended beyond the school.

I'm not a teacher that wants to give my personal mobile number but with some students of mine I do and they are always very polite and very, very kind to me. One of these people, for example, a Senegalese, his mother died when he was only 17. He had a very difficult life here in Lecco. For example, he told me that I will be for him his Italian mum forever. So, we have this kind of relationship. (Amara)

From Amara's statement, she appears to be someone who does not want personal relationships with students, but this stance is not always practicable and therefore she sometimes has to make exceptions. Some questions also arise from her statement: What would make a student decide that his teacher is like a mother to him? What could be the link between a Black student and an Italian woman teacher? Honneth speaks of love as the basis for self-confidence.

Today, just today, a student of mine, she is from Tunisia, she sent me a message. It was a very long time, almost one or two years that I haven't heard from her, and she told me "Where are you?" And I answered her, "I am always here in the centre." She wrote to me and I told her "Okay, give me some time, then I will be free so we can meet in the afternoon." Then she wrote to me "I'm working in Paris as a cashier in a supermarket but I will be back in the summer in Lecco so we can meet." And I was so happy to hear; she has a really complicated type of life. She has already a small son, not here. So very difficult and we got in touch quite well. And I was so happy because when she started here, she worked at night, she attended middle school, she wanted to attend university but she was not able and I was happy that she was in Paris because she can speak English, she can speak French, she is very intelligent, she can speak Italian, Arabic. So, I was very happy. Two or three days ago, another young boy, Senegalese, two of them, they called me, "Prof., where are you?" and so on. Now they are unemployed because of COVID but we want to organise to have a drink next week. When we go to Lecco, we meet students and we always... (Amara)

The participants reveal the empathetic feelings they have toward their students and also express their joy at their students' progress. There are two aspects, here. One is about the affective bond: Amara relates that her (former) students maintain contact with her; she mentions instances where they call and ask, "Where are you?," as we do with our dear ones and friends. The second aspect is their worth: she is able to tell what they have accomplished in their lives, what they are doing. This is a clue of Honneth's third level of recognition: esteem and self-esteem.

All the teachers talked about informal or social meetings with their students outside the school. These narratives of informal relationships can be seen as an attempt by the participants to show that the relationship is authentic and goes beyond the institutional role.

### **Teachers' Understanding and Concern**

The teachers' narrations also reveal a sense of understanding of the challenges that their asylum seeker students face.

Yes. It's not easy. Like she was telling before, when you teach to asylum seekers, you teach to a person that has a strange situation here in Italy because here in Italy for them is like a limbo, okay. Because you are here waiting for something, you don't know when it will arrive. If it will be positive or negative. How many months must you wait for? And after that what do I do? If it's positive, I can continue to do my project. If it's negative, I will restart again another type of life because when it's negative you must leave the camp. So, you must find an accommodation outside and if it's negative sometimes, you become a clandestino, without documents, and it's a problem because if the police... (Chiara)

It's more difficult to live in the camp because they don't have... I don't want to say that they don't feel like persons because they feel like persons but sometimes they come and say, "In my camp, I am a number and the operator calls, '1, 3 or 25 come.'" They can't cook and sometimes I think okay it's not a big problem but if I think okay, I'm in Nigeria for two years, and I want to cook pizza but it's not possible. Or they have to come at 11 but for a man or woman, it is difficult. I am 32 and I want to go to the park with my friends, but then I have to say, "Oh, it's 11, I have to go." I'm not a child. (Lucia)

The teachers' statements reveal their knowledge of some of the challenges asylum seekers face, including accommodation problems, loss of identity, and uncertainty about their asylum application outcome. They show awareness and

empathy towards their students. For example, Lucia knows the effects of being reduced to a number, or how being unsure of one's future can be disorienting and impacts negatively on many aspects of their lives, including education.

Amara also narrated extensively how some students' attendance in school is affected by the challenges they face to the extent that some eventually drop out.

Sometimes, they drop out but it's not their fault because it's not that when you live in a camp that you will be there for the rest of your time that you are waiting for document. So, we ask students... they are really moved like things. The police say, "Okay, today you have to move because there is no more camp here" or "there are too many people and you have to go there." So, for example this camp, and classes were always full even if sometimes they also stayed home and they didn't want to come but it was very easy for them because they could walk. Another fact is how they can reach school because if school is costly, and associations don't always pay for the transport and so they don't always get money for transport because transport is costly. In this situation, for example, Lecco is a small city, we have some camps in the mountains. So, it can be beautiful in the summer but then nothing else because reaching school, you have no train, so you have to catch the bus. There are not so many buses. School is always open but if you finish school at 9pm, you can only catch the train, no buses. So, it's difficult. That's one of the reasons why they drop out, not because of their fault but because they are forced to move and so they are unable to attend anymore. But it depends because some of them they don't want because they are not interested or because there are really hard times because it's always not so... They come to Italy and life is hard and so also from a psychological point of view, it's not so easy. (Amara)

The teachers have made an effort to show that they are trying to understand their students' challenges, which influences school attendance, motivation, and their relationship with them. Showing understanding and concern, not least for their rights, has the potential to make the students feel a sense of recognition at the second level of Honneth's theory: rights and self-respect, that are utterly threatened in the asylum seekers' experience.

### **Intersubjective Recognition and Classroom Relationship**

The aim of this study is to explore the potential of the classroom as a space for identity development and recognition, in other words as a transitional space (Formenti & West, 2018; Merrill & West, 2009; West, 2014; West et al., 2013). According to Formenti and West (2018, p. 95):

Transitional space can make us feel like babies and infants all over again, including in universities. We may desperately want to feel welcomed, valued and loved. For someone to come alongside and recognise us and our struggles, and emotionally encourage us to become more fully ourselves. We need significant others to welcome who we are in diverse groups, and good enough cultural spaces, to experience feelings of self-respect and self-esteem.

Intersubjective recognition can help students, asylum seekers in this case, to take the opportunity to conduct self-negotiation in a new place, whether it is Italy in general or a CPIA classroom in particular. Clues of recognition can be seen in the teachers' narrations. Amara spoke about a student who said she would be his Italian mother forever. This is an example of recognition in the sphere of love, a sphere that encapsulates familial relationship or friendship (Honneth, 1995). "Love, of a good enough kind" (Formenti and West, 2018, p. 92) or "good enough relationships" (West et al., 2013) are foundational to the development of one's sense of self and enable one to negotiate one's entry into a new space and cope with anxieties associated with such entry. Loving relationships between teachers and asylum seeker students can therefore help such students feel a sense of recognition and build a positive relationship with themselves in the school on a meso level and in society on a macro level. This kind of relationship is possible where teachers' perceptions are based on knowing their students as real persons, and not on prejudices. Students feel a sense of freedom, of "playfulness" in the words of Donald Winnicott as cited in Formenti and West (2018, p.120). True relationships can help students feel accepted and free to be themselves. Amara's narration about a student who said she would be his Italian mother forever seems to indicate that the student recognises her (recognition is thus reciprocal) as someone who accepts him and plays a significant role in his life. Lucia also narrates that her students share secrets with her:

Sometimes, in my experience, one of my students says to me, "This evening, I move." So, I say, "Okay". "I move, it's illegal, I don't want to... this and this night..." I say, "Okay, okay, my God, my God." I pray. I'm at home but I pray for this student and two days, they send me a message and they say, "Okay now I'm good" and I say, "Okay." (Lucia)

Having an understanding of their students' challenges has the potential to create a relationship of reciprocal recognition between the teachers and asylum seeker students. Whether this is the case, however, can only be confirmed through interviews with their students. The narrative below also reveals how the macro, meso and micro levels of social arrangements can be interwoven:

There's the first commission where they say "Okay, you are an asylum seeker" and you become a refugee or "You are not an asylum seeker." If they say you are not an asylum seeker, you have another possibility. You have to go to a lawyer to tell your story. This is the second possibility. If the second possibility is not good, you have the third and this is the last but this was before. Now with Decreto Salvini, you have only two possibilities. So it's impossible for me to teach to asylum seekers without this part because this part is the life of my student. So if they say, "I'm so sad because now I don't know what's up with my life," I can't teach because the mind of my student is outside the school and it's normal. So we can speak about this. We can speak about the system. We can speak about the rights. (Lucia)

Lucia stresses the necessity of considering students' emotions when she teaches. If someone shows distress, she cannot go on with the topic she has prepared to teach but will encourage the student to talk about the situation. Honneth's second level is evoked again. Being aware that that the macro level (government, laws, rules) can influence the micro (psyche, feelings and emotions of a person, behaviour, choices), and the potential of the meso level (interactions with others, in this case, classroom interactions) is a way to help asylum seekers deal with emotional tensions or crises of identity, for example in a situation where their application for asylum was rejected. They can also learn how to manage relationships, how to build self-worth, and how to interpret the structures and context where they are living, in a way that is transformative.

There are other clues of recognition in the narratives:

It's also very beautiful because I have the world in the class and I can compare the culture, the religion, the language, and the people. (Lucia)

It's a very good experience because I learnt a lot from them about culture, about religion, about other subjects that I didn't know before. (Amara)

These statements suggest that the teachers show recognition to the asylum seeker students and see them as morally responsible persons (Honneth, 1995) from whom they can learn valuable things. Besides the teacher-student relationship, there seems to also be an awareness that asylum seekers are persons who come into the learning environment with a variety of previous experiences and knowledge, and thus should not be generalised/stereotyped. Barkoglou & Gravani (2020, p. 138) found "wide heterogeneity" among migrants "in terms of skills, competences and socio-cultural capital."

The participants' narratives suggest that they try to build relationships with their asylum seeker students so that they can feel accepted and recognised in the classroom. The significance of this should not be minimised considering that the host society may be hostile. Lucia comments:

Another difficulty is when my students come and say "Prof., in the train, nobody wants to talk with me. There is a big problem of racism. I want to stay here but I feel that I can't stay here." (Lucia)

Being a Black African myself, I can relate to the foregoing statement by Lucia, and I understand what it means to feel recognised at the interpersonal level in an unwelcoming society.

By examining the biographies of these teachers, there might be pointers as to why they appear to be positive about their students. The influence of someone's biography on their attitude and actions is pointed out by Formenti and West (2018), who claim that perspectives are biographical. According to them, "previous experience structures the subject's systems of perception, classification, and management of meaning" (Formenti and West, 2018, p. 171-172). Relating this to the participants of my study, each of them has had some experiences in Africa or with Africans: Amara, for example lived and taught in Senegal for two months. According to her, this experience gave her "...the possibility to know other cultures, other ways of teaching, and also other colleagues and so on." She also narrated that she has a daughter who studied in the Caribbean and a son who studied in South Africa. Chiara had the opportunity to volunteer in Kenya on two occasions, while Lucia has a Nigerian boyfriend who lives with her. It is thus possible that these teachers' experiences have shaped their attitude towards asylum seekers. Formenti and West (2018) also point out that teachers usually have political notions or agendas which they bring to the class. This is probably the case with Lucia, who revealed: "I said, 'Okay, I want to be a teacher but not for Italians. I am interested in asylum seekers or refugees or foreigners.'" There seems to be a hint of an agenda here but what it is specifically is not clear.

## Conclusion

This is an exploratory study that I undertook to understand the context of adult asylum seekers' education and learning in Italy, which is the focus of my doctoral research. Therefore, this paper is the outcome of my early fieldwork. I am aware that the small number of participants is not enough to make general claims about the relationship between asylum seekers students and their teachers

in educational institutions. Another limitation of this study is that it does not include the views of asylum seekers, which could have corroborated or refuted the narratives of the teachers. I am aware that the teachers might have tried their best to paint a positive picture of themselves and their relationships with asylum seekers, taking into consideration the fact that I am Black, and I come from the same country as some of the asylum seekers in Italy. So, the dynamics of a Black man interviewing White teachers of asylum seekers, many of whom are Black, might have contributed in certain ways to the interview relationship. I would like to add, though, that the participants came across as sincere and open. This is just my personal opinion, and of course might not be the case. Despite the limitations of the study, the interviews have given me a glimpse into the operations of CPIA, the context of asylum seekers' education and learning in government-established adult education centres, and even into the wider context of asylum seeking in Italy. I have also learned that the classroom can be a potential space for helping asylum seekers to develop a more positive sense of self through the willing efforts of teachers.

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