

## **Interpreting social inclusion of young immigrants in Italy**

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*Abstract:* A large amount of young people coming from developing countries have arrived in Italy during the last decade. Not all these young people wish to build a future in Italy, many of them expect to move to another European nation or further abroad, to other developed countries: this means creating new relations and identities.

This paper is based on data collected during an empirical study in Lombardy – a region in the North of Italy which counts the largest number of foreign students residing in Italy (one fourth of the total number) – carried out in 2006 on a sample of young immigrants attending several types of secondary educational institutions. Our aim is to highlight the usefulness of some of theoretical categories provided by international studies within the sociology of migration for interpreting the social condition of young immigrants in Italy. The role of the family and the role of school environment, with a particular consideration of the problem of school distress, in determining these adolescents' future social inclusion are discussed. In conclusion, the need for a comparative analysis of data sets, drawing upon both native and immigrant student data is recommended in order to aid comprehension of the entire process of social inclusion.

*Keywords:* social inclusion, Italy, migrant family, young immigrants, school attainment, educational distress

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## **A strategic generation: an overview of the pathways of young immigrants in Italy**

Italy has an extremely relevant generational question: the demographic reduction in the younger population is a phenomenon that has affected the nation since the 1960s. Since then, the importance of young people in Italian social, political and economic life has seen a preoccupying decrease<sup>3</sup>. It is in this context that the presence of a new generation of young foreigners can represent an element of transformation and novelty, the study of which can help shed some light on the development of contemporary Italian society and the relationship among its generations.

Young foreigners – whether they arrived as the result of a family rejoinder or were born in the receiving country<sup>4</sup> – represent a group which has become visible and has grown rapidly since the turn of the last century. According to the Istat (the Italian national statistics agency), on Jan 1st 2009 the number of foreign minors resident in Italy amounted to 826,000. What emerges is the consolidation of a type of immigration characterized by the prevalence of families with children, who increasingly tend to come in contact with schools and educational institutions. Data from the Italian Ministry of Education reveal that the number of immigrant students enrolled in school is approximately 700,000, about 7% of total students. These students correspond to a heterogeneous universe in terms of the many different nationalities represented (almost 200), the diversified

<sup>3</sup> The disadvantaged situation of young people in Italy is evident both in comparison with previous generations and with that of young people in other developed countries. Various studies show that the present generation of young adults in Italy, compared to other nations, faces numerous disadvantages: they have less demographic weight, receive less support from the public welfare system, have lower levels of education and occupation, on average obtain lower entry-level salaries and the mean age of managers is particularly high, they tend to reach independence and form a family later in life, are faced with a larger public debt inherited from the previous generations and with an unequal and unbalanced pension system (Boeri, Galasso, 2007; Ambrosi, Rosina, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Whether or not they are born in Italy, the children of immigrants who have not themselves obtained citizenship status are giuridially considered “foreigners”. They will be unable to change their status until their 18th birthday, when they can present a formal request for Italian citizenship if they are able to demonstrate specific requirements (i.e., their parents have a residency permit, they have lived in Italy uninterruptedly since birth, etc.)

migratory experience<sup>5</sup>, level and type of school attended<sup>6</sup>, and territorial distribution<sup>7</sup>.

These various aspects are characteristic of the Italian context and present differences with other European nations or with the United States, where the presence of foreign pupils in the educational system has a more consolidated history, a lower degree of ethnic heterogeneity and a greater concentration of national groups in local contexts (Chaloff, Queirolo Palmas, 2006).

Bearing in mind these peculiarities, the present article focuses on the first generation of young immigrants, presently represented by adolescents who are enrolled in secondary school educational and professional training programmes. This generation is made up, for the most part, of “children of family rejoinders” and represents a specific group, with characteristics that differentiate them from the previous and from the next generation, who are dealing with the construction of a life project in Italy where the points of departure for social inclusion coincide with educational outcomes and inclusion in the labour market.

If migration implied, for the generation of immigrant parents, the problem of reception and acceptance in the host country, the children of these families now face several challenges related to the construction of an autonomous life project, consonant with family expectations but also in accord with a multiplicity of new values, conditions and opportunities, which may render them more similar to native youths but also different, both singularly and as groups. The condition of young foreigners, therefore, is a negotiation between a pre/past (the experience of migration, family background, personal experience) and a post/future (socio-professional integration, the individual and familial project of inclusion), which are a fundamental part of any developmental path, whose present is represented

<sup>5</sup> Approximately 35% of foreign students are born in Italy; only 8% are newcomers who have recently entered the Italian educational system (Miur, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> In 2008/09, primary schools were the educational institutions that received the greatest number of immigrant students (37,5%), followed by grade I secondary schools (22,3%), grade II secondary schools (20,3%) and nurseries and kindergartens (19,4%).

<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, the presence of immigrant students appears concentrated in certain areas, in large cities, and in Italian schools; on the other hand, the presence of foreign minors is also widespread in small and medium-sized cities and towns that make up the primary poles of attraction for immigrants in Italy (cf. also, Santagati, 2009).

by the sacrifice and commitment that characterize the pursuit of success through education.

The strategies of immigrant minors and immigrant families in Italy, moreover, intersect with the opportunities for social inclusion in local areas, via policies aimed at fostering social cohesion and working towards full citizenship for all. In Italy there is neither homogeneity nor equality in opportunities available to young people in the different areas and economic sectors of the country: for this reason, paths of integration are particularly varied and their outcomes difficult to predict. Nonetheless some consistent elements, both in terms of theory and empirical validation, are now consolidated in the literature, such as:

- the key role played by the family and schools in the paths and projects of new generations;
- the uncertainty of the transition from education or training to working life, with the relative risks of discrimination and marginalization;
- the importance of spaces for the negotiation and development of identity.

In Italy, studies on the children of immigrants are still few and far between and there is a lack of more comprehensive research (in terms of both longitudinal and/or transversal designs) to further understand the condition of adolescent foreigners. The results of the study presented in this paper – entitled *Linear and discontinuous paths of second generation youths in the transition from education and training to the labour market* – thus aims to offer an empirical contribution on the children of immigration. In this perspective they are considered:

- a “strategic generation”, whose project is developed on the basis of available resources and life conditions, but who are also challenging preordained patterns and destinies and developing unusual strategies towards inclusion, assimilation, and the multiple belongings;
- a “transitional generation”, who is facing the difficult shift from the familial immigration project to a consolidation in the country of arrival, thus challenging both parents’ aspirations and the host society’s capacity for reception. The results achieved by this generation, in terms of social inclusion, will undoubtedly determine the condition of future generations.

The research was conducted using a questionnaire measure, administered to a sample of foreign adolescents attending different types of secondary schools in Lombardy<sup>8</sup>. On the basis of some of the results collected, the present paper aims to explore some of the open questions raised by the study and offer a set of considerations, with the intent of mapping out some of the challenges to the process of social inclusion of immigrant children in Italy<sup>9</sup>.

The results reveal that young foreigners have a distinct inclination towards investment in education and training. This often includes long-term educational choices, sometimes encompassing the possibility of a university degree. Girls, in particular, are convinced of the advantages of a good education and demonstrate a more expressive orientation, a greater interest in school, and better results than boys. On the other hand, the data confirm a general orientation of young foreigners towards professionalization, primarily aimed at finding a “good job”. Work experiences are also widespread among this sample of adolescents, more than among their Italian peers. Work is given significant value: not only does it not weaken the investment in education, but is considered a positive and welcome opportunity to earn money and gain a first taste of economic independence from the family. Often working is seen as a complement to educational experiences, especially when these are not fully satisfactory.

These young people, however, appear torn between parents’ downward socio-professional mobility, which may foreshadow for them a similar confinement in unqualified professions, and the desire to realize the

<sup>8</sup> The study involved the administration of a closed questionnaire to a stratified, representative sample of 1047 foreign students, belonging to 71 different countries, distributed in 69 schools and professional training centres in Lombardy. Interviewed subjects were subdivided, proportionally, in males (549) and females (498) and differentiated by type of school attended (lyceums, technical institutes, professional institutes, professional training centres). The available data have allowed us to reconstruct participants’ personal situation and to consider the attitudes towards education/training, school results, linguistic ability, level of satisfaction and of well-being, work experiences, expectations and projects for the future. The large data set has enabled us to conduct an analysis based on bivariate and multivariate statistics (*cluster analysis* and multiple regression models).

<sup>9</sup> For a more in-depth examination of the two-year study see the following volumes: Besozzi, Colombo, 2007; Besozzi, 2008; Besozzi, Colombo, Santagati, 2009.

aspiration of a different job or career. In order to negotiate this dilemma, they may appear as actors in a process of “normalization”. The strategy of “normalization” is chosen in order to contain the risk of excessive differentiation, ethnicization and predestination of their life paths, particularly in terms of job choice.

A further element of analysis comes from a *cluster analysis* conducted on the data. The cluster analysis has enabled us to identify three typologies of foreign students (see Table 1).

Table 1 - The three student profiles

<i>Significant Dimensions</i>	<i>Cluster 1 Low Profilers</i>	<i>Cluster 2 Realistic Achievers</i>	<i>Cluster 3 Explorative Achievers</i>
<i>Available resources</i>	Scarce economic and cultural resources	Few economic resources	Many economic and cultural resources
<i>School experience</i>	Poor school results	Good school results	Good school results Investment in education as a realization of self
<i>Work experiences</i>	Many work experiences Oriented towards working-class jobs	Need for emancipation through work	Desire to go to university and to obtain high professional levels
<i>Expectations for the future</i>	Few aspirations Numerous difficulties	Investment in work and in relationships	Open to a variety of possibilities
<i>Projects</i>	Likely return to country of origin	Plan to settle in Italy	Likelihood of moving to other European countries

Source: Besozzi, 2009b.

The first group, which corresponds to the cluster of *low profilers*, is made up of 255 subjects (25.3% of the total sample), predominantly male. The group includes many young people aged 17 or above, mostly from Latin America (Peru and Ecuador), of low social economic status (SES) and with a significant number of students attending professional education institutes and vocational training centres.

The second cluster, called *realistic achievers*, is made up of 341 subjects (33.8%). This cluster is also predominantly male but with a more balanced distribution of ages and a high percentage of young persons of Asian origin (Philippines, India). There is a low percentage of lyceum students in this group, whereas students attending technical institutes and

vocational training centres are well represented. Overall levels of SES are also quite low.

The third cluster, defined *explorative achievers*, is the largest of the three groups (412 students, 40.9% of the sample). It is characterized by a greater percentage of females, students attending lyceums and technical institutes, aged predominantly 14 to 15, of medium-high and high SES. The majority of students in this group come from Eastern Europe (particularly Albania).

In terms of motivations for pursuing secondary education, the first two groups tend to privilege an instrumental attitude to learning, whereas an expressive orientation is much more common in the third group. What notably differentiates the first cluster from the other two is educational achievement, as measured by the number of school years repeated. The first cluster, on the whole, presents mostly negative school results, whereas there is no evidence of this in the second group and only marginally in the third<sup>10</sup>.

There are also differences among the three clusters in terms of representations of their future. Whereas in the first two groups the intention of entering the job market upon graduation is predominant, in the third cluster there is a high percentage of students who are planning to pursue a higher education degree after graduation. Moreover, predominant job expectations for students of the first and second group are of obtaining a more or less qualified working-class occupation, whereas the expectations found among students in the third cluster are much higher. It is also noteworthy, perhaps, that among members of the second group we found the greatest tendency to attribute success to fate, whereas the belief that key elements of success are related to either personal characteristics or cultural capital emerged mainly from the third group. The second cluster is also the group which more clearly manifests the intention to remain in Italy, in contrast with the first cluster, where the desire to return to one's country of origin is strongest, and the third group, which is the least certain about where to settle in the future and includes students who do not exclude the possibility of further migration in other developed countries.

Overall, the first cluster presents, as its definition suggests, a group of young people in a condition of hardship and deprivation, who appear

<sup>10</sup> Cf. paragraph 3.

“destined” to what Portes defines as a path of “downward assimilation”<sup>11</sup> or subordinate labour integration (Ambrosini, 2004); that is low-qualified positions, in clearly ethnicized labour niches. The second group, on the other hand, is clearly work-focused, aims for *realistic achievement* and seeks those resources and contacts that will enable the realization of a concrete life project. Finally, the third cluster, characterized by an orientation towards *explorative achievement*, is open to different possibilities and is typified by strong motivations, dreams and hopes. Its members have more available resources, and consequently more possibilities of obtaining a good-quality education. This (predominantly female) group also presents some uncertainties for the future, however, due to the fact that their life-plan is currently still under construction. The challenge for them is finding a job that is in line with their level of education, expectations and personal and family ambitions, where merit is recognized and rewarded, independently from citizenship or other discriminating factors.

Despite the persistence of a structural disadvantage which cannot be ignored or overlooked, especially in terms of policy actions, the cluster analysis confirms the importance of *agency*. These young immigrants demonstrate a remarkable ability to construct unforeseeable and dynamic life-plans, often independently from the conditions and constraints of ethnic and family background.

### **The family migration project: experience, resource, and ethos**

Let us now turn to the analysis of the role of the immigrant family in the definition of opportunities and constraints in the trajectories of immigrant adolescents, drawing upon some of the available theoretical considerations

<sup>11</sup> In a recent article by Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, Haller (2009), which offered a synthesis of the research program on second generations (the CILS project - *Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study*) that began in the early 1990s and ended in 2006, the process of downward assimilation of young immigrants in the United States – computed with specific measures (early school dropout, state of unemployment, poverty, children in adolescence, arrests and incarcerations) – appears determined by a strong influence of SES and family structure, as well as by the negative effects of intergenerational acculturation that are reflected in national origin.

and empirical evidence. The family represents a relevant object of study in migration research, despite the fact that it has often been neglected both by sociological inquiry and European policy efforts (Bailey and Boyle, 2004). Keeping the family in the picture implies an analysis of the migratory phenomenon in all its complexity, based on the understanding that it is a process that concerns both individuals and groups. Migration represents the interface of the individual and the social, bears upon labour, socio-economic and cultural issues, touches the public and the private spheres, and includes instrumental and affective elements. The family represents the point of contact of different generations, the place of continuity between the adult world of the labour market and the paths of children, where country of origin and host society intersect.

*The educational trajectories of immigrant children can thus only be understood as existing within family projects, be these supportive and enabling or limiting and constraining.* Within this perspective migration represents a significant event, with the power to redefine adolescent choices and educational paths, as well as impacting upon young people's ties with their country of origin and shaping the process of integration in the receiving society.

The following analysis draws upon the existing sociological literature to identify some of the meanings that the migratory project can take on for children of immigrants. Our hypothesis is that family migration can come to represent for adolescent immigrants or for the children of immigrants:

- an *experience* which marks and transforms their everyday life at the personal, family, and educational level;
- an *inheritance* that is transmitted from parents to children, in terms of available family resources, opportunities, belongings, and constraints;
- the source of an *ethos* or set of values oriented to sacrifice, to social emancipation and investment in children, motivated by the parental desire to offer their children those economic, educational and career opportunities that they themselves could not have<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Terms such as inheritance and family ethos are, without a doubt, borrowed from Bourdieu (1980). In the context of this discussion, however, these concepts have been revised and used in order to identify some of the meanings of the family migratory experience.

*Family, generations and school experience*

In order to qualify the concept of experience in the different generations in migration it is necessary begin with the consideration of the fact that immigrant minors have been defined in variety of different ways by sociological research, using different criteria and dimensions. Many scholars, for example, on the basis of the clarifications made by Rumbaut (1994), have given great weight to the age of arrival in the host country. These authors distinguish between the experience of those who are born in the new national context (generation 2), that of children who arrived in pre-school age (generation 1.75), those who began their educational experience in the country of origin and completed it in the receiving country (generation 1.5) and, finally, those who arrived in the host country as adolescents or pre-adolescents, with or without parents (generation 1.25)<sup>13</sup>.

This “decimal-point approach”, which has been used also in a variety of studies conducted in Italy (Ambrosini, 2004), is based on the assumption that there is a sort of *continuum* in immigration where the process of inclusion ranges from the absence of relevant educational problems to a condition that is exposed to numerous risks. The degree of risk inherent in a given condition is considered dependent upon the age of immigration and the ability of the subject to achieve integration in the receiving society. These criteria, however, fail to give sufficient weight to the quality of life experiences during migration, which are crucial aspects to consider when confronted with diversified and recent migratory processes such as those of the Italian case<sup>14</sup>.

There is no doubt that the decisions and the paths taken by migrant parents affect their children’s experiences. Generally, adults are the ones to

<sup>13</sup> Many authors have dealt with the relationship between age of immigration and trajectories of assimilation (Ravecca, 2009), supporting the so-called *vulnerable age hypothesis*, in the attempt to identify a specific life phase during which immigrants are subjected to an intense vulnerability that may have effects on educational careers. Recent research developments have highlighted, however, that age does not intervene in a linear fashion in such processes – situations in which foreign-born students outclass native-borns in term of school performance are not uncommon – and there is no one vulnerable age, but rather different phases of life and particular conditions when immigrating is more critical.

<sup>14</sup> In line with this perspective, Grillo (2008) argues in favour of the importance of investigating the complex and dynamic experiences of family members, deconstructing culturalist discourses and the widespread social representations of immigrant families.

leave and arrive first in a new context, in order to deal with the difficulties, hardships and risks that territorial mobility can entail. It is in the context of this experience that the birth of children may take place, both before and after parental immigration. The path that leads to children rejoining their parents in the immigration context is the prevalent one in the experiences of adolescents and young adults currently living in Italy<sup>15</sup>. This transition can be assumed to be fundamental in the analysis of migratory processes, as it enables researchers to compare expectations and life trajectories of different generations and marks a new beginning in the family's history in a different national context.

Over and beyond the age of arrival, there are numerous factors which ought to be monitored, which may affect children's success in the new context (conditions of the rejoining process, preparation, the juridical condition of parents and children, presence of significant adults during the first phase, reception in the host country, educational and training offers) (Lagomarsino, 2006). In order to reconstruct the paths of immigrant adolescents, the present study took into consideration the family's migratory experience, monitoring the *children's place of birth*. The majority of students in the sample are young immigrants with a direct experience of immigration, whereas the percentage of descendants of immigrants, born in Italy, is currently still low (6%). The sample included, moreover, two subpopulations which, according to immigration scholars, should have different educational experiences and results: on the one hand, those born and raised in Italy, included in the primary or pre-school cycle (approximately 40%) and, on the other hand, those who reached the Italian educational system only as adolescents or pre-adolescents (60%).

Time of immigration is connected, moreover, to nationality, as a result of the diversified migratory flows to the Italian peninsula. The migratory dynamics from North Africa and Asia are more consolidated, with a well-established presence of families – these groups count the largest number of

<sup>15</sup> In Italy, this request can be presented by foreign citizens with a residence permit lasting no less than a year and enabling their close relatives (partner, children under the age of 18, parents) to reach them if they can demonstrate adequate housing and a sufficient income to support the family. In recent years, however, there have been various ups and downs, involving extensions and restrictions to immigrants' rights to family reunification.

children born in Italy – whereas immigration from Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America is more recent.

*There is thus a strong link between the migratory experience of parents, that of children, and educational experience.* The main event – which has various implications for the whole family – is adult immigration for work purposes. The educational experience of children can be interpreted largely as a consequence of the family migratory project – usually only ever partly planned – and it unfolds in relation to the conditions in which the migratory process takes place. Only very rarely do parents emigrate with the idea of enrolling children in Italian schools at a certain age.

In terms of the relationship between migratory path and secondary school choice, what emerges is the following:

- lyceum students are predominantly those who entered the Italian education system between the ages of 0 and 10;
- students in technical and professional institutes are, for the most part, young people who arrived in Italy as pre-adolescents;
- professional training centres are made up mostly of students who arrived in Italy recently, as adolescents.

The *concentration of foreign students in certain educational streams* may be due to the well documented fact that educational choices are a realistic response to the needs of immigrant families. It is not to be excluded, however, that this may be the result of bad or inappropriate guidance in the choice of secondary schools (at the end of middle school) or due to processes of exclusion and “disincentivation” on the part of lyceums themselves.

The data analysis shows, once again, that the major influence on school choices and results is exercised by family structures (Tab. 2)<sup>16</sup>.

The presence or absence of parents, in particular, seems to affect the choice of secondary education or training: the presence of both parents appears to offer the necessary support for enrolment in secondary schools. On the other hand, there is a large number of parent-less students in

<sup>16</sup> In terms of students' families ¾ of adolescents live with both parents, 22% with one parent, and 5% without either parent (they live predominantly with other family members, with other significant adults, or in institutions).

professional training courses<sup>17</sup>.

Table 2 – Parental presence and type of school attended (percentages)

	<i>Professional Institutes</i>	<i>Technical Institutes</i>	<i>Lyceums</i>	<i>PTCs</i>	<i>Total</i>
With both parents	74.3	76.2	76.6	64.6	73
With one parent	23.8	21.2	19.3	22.8	22
Without parents	1.9	2.5	4.1	12.6	5.1
<i>Total (N cases = 1008)</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>

*Pearson Correlation: 0.130 - Signif. X<sup>2</sup> Pearson: 0.00 - Correl. signif. level: 0.01*

Educational success also appears to be correlated to family number, as the absence of brothers or sisters seems to characterize, for the most part, the group with excellent school results. Those students whose level of achievement is on the lower end of the scale, conversely, tend to come from larger families. The data thus suggests that *being an only child in Italy represents an additional resource for success in one's educational career*<sup>18</sup>.

#### *Family inheritance, resources and limitations*

In many cases, family migration can be experienced by children as a discriminating and limiting *inheritance* they wish to rid themselves of or as a resource to exploit and an identity to appeal to. As contemporary societies are only partially based on merit and inheritance continues to play an important role in social reproduction – something which is particularly true in Italy (Ballarino, 2007) – children of immigrants suffer the effect of contradictory factors that feed into a process of intergenerational transmission of social disadvantage. Numerous studies have highlighted,

<sup>17</sup> According to studies from the USA, family structure is one of those factors that impacts most on the downward assimilation of second generations (Portes, Rumbaut, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> According to Coleman (1990), the family offers young people an important form of social capital, defined in terms of a “prolonged attention”, which implies a continuity of parental care, something which particularly benefits only children. The family, moreover, can mitigate the loss of secondary social capital as a result of migration. Some studies, for example, have found that the negative effects of family migration are more significant in those families where parents are not very involved in their children's education (Hagan, MacMillan, Wheaton, 1996).

from different perspectives, the fact that international mobility is not a given outcome for the children of immigration and getting stuck in the secondary labour market is a frequent result (Zanfrini, 2006; Heath, Rothern, Kilpi, 2008).

In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century international research has also emphasized that being born in the host country is no guarantee for the positive assimilation of these children. Quite on the contrary, their paths appear riddled with difficulties and their outcomes remain uncertain. Differences don't disappear, socio-economic conditions remain unstable and, in some cases, they face a worsening of their conditions, failures and social decline (Gans, 1992)<sup>19</sup>.

The mere fact that descendants of immigrants are defined according to the ambiguous concept of "second generation" seems to indicate implicitly that the immigrant condition is inherited from one generation to the next, even if children are not in fact immigrants themselves. The "second generation" label, according to Moncusì Ferré (2007), refers to the "demographic fact" that immigrants have children and to the "sociological fact" that these children share with their parents forms of socio-professional and ethnic discrimination and, at times, a social status. The latter is the result of parents' migratory trajectory, of sharing common cultural and linguistic codes with one's family, and of the difficulty of adapting to a new society, with a biographical experience which is distinct from that of other people of one's generation due to the fact that they are descendents of migrants.

In Italy some researchers have tried to overcome the idea of heredity in migration studies by highlighting the fact that young foreigners make up a generation in itself. A study conducted in 1998/1999<sup>20</sup> on preadolescents

<sup>19</sup> It ought to be borne in mind that in Italy and in Europe the paths of integration of young immigrants have been influenced, in a relevant fashion, by National and local policies of education, training, work, and citizenship; aspects which have been, for the most part, neglected by American studies, which have focused primarily on the comparison among different ethnic groups, taking the institutional context for granted (Crul, Thomson, 2007). Evidence of a specific attention to intervention policies in the EU context emerges, for example, in the *Green Paper. Migration and mobility: challenges and opportunities for EU Education Systems* (Commission of the European Communities, 2008), but also from other documents (Eurydice, 2009; Nusche, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Giovannini, Queirolo Palmas (2002); see also paragraph 4.

reached the conclusion that migratory projects tend to construct a generation with attitudes, opinions and values that are similar across a peer group, via paths that are partly individual and partly connected to typical familial attitudes, but not necessarily linked to ethnicity or nationality as such. Later, other authors (Bosisio, Colombo, Leonini, Rebughini, 2005) identified particular characteristics of adolescents, which emphasised differences from their parents and a greater contact with differentiated models, yet also distinct from those of peers who did not take part in the migratory event. Within this broader context, Besozzi (2009a) identified in transnationality the characteristic of this young generation (both immigrant and non-immigrant), that shares a common existential condition – that of growing up in glocal contexts – in which aspirations, orientations and lifestyles increase the similarities among young people, despite differences in origins and experiences. These interpretations have put the accent on the limits of the concept of second generation, also for the Italian case, as its use risks attributing excessive significance and explanatory power to parents' place of birth.

In the effort to verify the extent to which the immigrant condition can be considered an *inheritance* for the second generation, specific attention ought to be given also to the many family resources, offered in support of children's educational paths, which make up the cultural, social and economic "baggage" students start off with. The results of the present study highlight that *it isn't possible to explain the differences in the paths of immigrant students exhaustively on the basis of national origin*. Ethnical origin can be considered an element that allows us to describe educational experience – as connected with family migration – but which does not enable us to fully understand its specificity<sup>21</sup>.

It is *socio-economic status*, more than national origin, *which acts in the transmission of a disadvantaged inheritance*, due to the subordinate role generally occupied by adult immigrants in the Italian labour market, independently from the level of educational qualification achieved<sup>22</sup>. The

<sup>21</sup> In terms of countries of origin, see the description of the clusters in paragraph 1.

<sup>22</sup> Some authors highlight that what often happens to immigrants is that the competences acquired through education and training, or in a work environment, in their countries of origin do not appear relevant in the job market of receiving societies (Chiswick e Miller, 2007).

subordinate socio-economic level of immigrants impacts on their children's choices, as well as shaping their expectations. For example, it may appear obvious that the choice of a professional training route is dependent on low SES. Adolescents coming from low SES families frequently have to contribute to family income, often through early entry in the job market, which concretely means leaving education or taking on job activities in parallel with school attendance.

On the other hand, when we turn to a consideration of the effect of family of origin on school results, there is no evidence of a significant correlation between parents' SES level and children's educational achievement. This may be due to the fact that the measure used in this index does not account for the contradictory condition of immigrants in Italy, characterized by entry in poorly qualified professional sectors, despite high educational levels<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, the causal link between the immigrant family's socioeconomic condition and children's school results ought to be used with caution

Students' paths are, on the other hand, more profitably interpreted in terms of family cultural capital (Table 3)<sup>24</sup>: in terms of educational choices, families with lower cultural capital tend to have children who are enrolled in professional training centres, whereas lyceum students tend to come from families with high cultural capital.

Moreover, *the relationship between family cultural capital, type of school and indexes of educational success and expectations is significantly correlated*, in contrast with the link between status and results<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> The PISA 2003 data also show that the family SES level contributes to explain differences in performance only partially, whereas other factors such as institutional resources or class environment (OECD, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> The data which refer to the level of education of both parents have been transformed in a condensed index of family cultural capital (FCC). Low FCC refers to parents' absence of scholarization or primary school attendance, medium-low FCC to a middle school/grade I secondary school attendance, medium-high FCC with a secondary school diploma and high FCC with a university degree.

<sup>25</sup> There is a long tradition of research that shows that family cultural capital affects children's educational paths (Feliciano, 2005). The results of the aforementioned CILS project, led by Portes, clearly highlight the importance of family cultural capital, despite the fact that its use and efficacy can be seriously limited by contextual factors. Both in the quantitative phase and in the final, qualitative phase of the research, one of the main factors that emerged, with social capital (represented by an authoritative parental structure, rigorous

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family discipline, and the presence of significant others who could orient and motivate students to education), is the role of cultural capital, understood to be both a motivational force that restores the pride and status of the family, that transmits high aspirations, and as a form of know how of immigrants with high educational levels (Portes, Fernandez Kelly, Haller, 2009).

*Table 3 – School paths and family cultural capital (percentages)*

<i>School attended</i>	<i>Family cultural capital</i>				<i>Total</i>
	<i>Low</i>	<i>Medium-low</i>	<i>Medium-high</i>	<i>High</i>	
PTC	42.6	35.3	19.6	15.5	22.2
Professional training institutes	17	25.3	27	27.4	26.4
Technical institutes	25.5	31.2	36.4	34.4	34.2
Lyceums	14.9	8.2	17	22.7	17.2
<i>Total (N cases = 952)</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>

*Pearson Correlation: 0.120 - Signif.  $X^2$  Pearson: 0.000 - Correl. signif. level: 0.01*

<i>Index of educ. success</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Medium-low</i>	<i>Medium-high</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Total</i>
Low	29.8	27.6	24.5	20.2	23.9
Medium-low	21.3	17.6	16.8	20.5	18.4
Medium-high	40.4	50	46.8	43.5	46
High	8.5	4.7	12	15.8	11.8
<i>Total (N cases = 951)</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>

*Pearson Correlation: 0.086 - Signif.  $X^2$  Pearson: 0.08 - Correl. signif. level: 0.01*

<i>Index of expectations</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Medium-low</i>	<i>Medium-high</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Total</i>
Low	19.6	15.9	13.4	13	14
Medium-low	43.5	44.1	35.6	27.2	34.7
Medium-high	19.6	22.9	30.1	28.2	27.7
High	17.4	17.1	20.8	31.6	23.6
<i>Total (N cases = 1015)</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>100</i>

*Pearson Correlation: 0.146 - Signif.  $X^2$  Pearson: 0.000 - Correl. signif. level: 0.01*

What emerges is a sort of polarization of two groups of students: one group, whose parents have high educational levels, and who seems to reach levels of educational excellence; the other group comes from families with low cultural capital, seems to achieve poor educational results and appears oriented towards unqualified professions.

*Ethos of sacrifice and investment in education for children's success*

Immigrant adolescents' opportunities of the future, as we have seen, derive from family inheritance and resources, as well as being shaped by the family's experiences and the combination of structural and cultural factors. In particular, however, migration takes on a central role in the development of a specific family *ethos*, oriented to sacrifice, social redemption and upward mobility, which is typical of a transitional generation who, often in the face of parental failure, believes in hard work and commitment in order to succeed in their personal or family project (Djouder, 2007). The significance of migration as an investment on children made by immigrant parents emerges as part of an optimistic vision of the immigrant, as someone who hopes in the improvement of life conditions and in social mobility for the whole family (Kao, Tienda, 1995; 1998)<sup>26</sup>. Aspirations are indeed a key explanatory factor of the paths of immigrant families and their children, as parents' high aspirations and their ambitions translate in support for and expectations of children's perseverance in education (Sikkink, Emerson, 2008). The lack of a complete convergence between parental expectations, children's aspirations and real educational paths, however, is evidence of the fact that transmission does not take place in an automatic fashion (Brinbaum, 2005)<sup>27</sup>. Parents' commitment to helping their children achieve those credentials that will grant them independence and make them aspire to

<sup>26</sup> A positive realization of the migratory project is made possible or limited, moreover, by so-called "ethnic social capital" – the network of relations of trust that come into being within a group or ethnic community. This aspect was not explored in the present study but represents an indispensable resource for the success of the educational paths of the children of immigrants. In the research conducted by Gilardoni (2008) and Ravecca (2009) relations with co-nationals appear ambivalent: they seem to have a positive function in the initial phases of arrival in the host country but represent a limited form of support for educational, training, or social improvement in later stages. From other research results, the value that parents give to education seems to vary not so much in terms of ethnic or national belonging but rather on the basis of SES, family cultural capital and gender. We thus favour a multidimensional explanation of educational paths which combine structural, ethnic-cultural, and personal agency factors (Crul, Vermeulen, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> Comparisons among foreign students in different European countries (based on PISA 2003 data) show that they are motivated to learn and have an optimistic attitude to study and education, despite the fact that their performances are often lower than their native peers (Oecd, 2006; Levels, Dronkers, 2008).

social-economic mobility risks, on the one hand, highlighting the failures of a first generation of migrants and, on the other, of not finding a correspondence with the real opportunities available to the children of immigrants.

In terms of empirical evidence with reference to the *ethos* of adolescent immigrants the study found that the following values are considered as relevant in the definition of their life-plan: intelligence, goodwill, independence, culture, religion; all of which are part of the set of values and norms of Western societies. Nonetheless, the data show an adherence to minority values, which are not widespread in Italian society, such as *faith in and perceived relevance of education, the strategic value of work, the central role of the family*.

The data confirm, moreover, that migration – as an event that precedes entry in education – already represents in itself an investment on the part of the family. Despite the fact that upward professional mobility for parents is minimal (present in only 9% of the sample), *children's education mobility, thanks to immigration, is a widespread fact*. Comparing parents' cultural capital and children's achieved or expected educational levels, what emerges is that children's educational mobility, as a result of immigration, has already occurred in 22.8% of cases and is hoped/expected in 39.3% of the sample.

Moreover, family projects are affected, in turn, by children's educational paths. If immigration offers children the opportunity to obtain good-quality education/training, family intentions are then re-oriented towards children's continuation on to higher education and towards permanent settlement in the host country. Conversely, the idea of a return to one's country of origin is prevalent in those students who seem to collect poor school results and educational failures.

To conclude this section on the role of the family, it's necessary to point out that our analysis of migratory projects has been carried out from *the point of view of immigrants*, while institutional contexts in which the inclusion of immigrants and their descendents takes place have not been the object of our analysis. The opportunities offered by public institutions to new generations of immigrants in terms of education and training, in the transition to the labour market and, in particular, in terms of access to citizenship remain very important. On the other hand, we believe that the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion will play themselves out, in the first

place, on the basis of the training and work opportunities offered by the Italian context. Indeed, educational and training institutions will be decisive in integrating these new generations, especially:

- if they will demonstrate an ability to support *low profile* youths, those fragile and disadvantaged adolescents with scarce resources and expectations, offering them tools to counteract the constraints put in place by the heavy *inheritances* of migration (and the coextensive discriminations), supporting and sustaining them adequately in the transition to the labour market;
- if they will be able to give value to the range of *experiences* and the ability to plan ahead, which are derived from significant family experiences of migration, of *realistic achievers*, orienting their pragmatism and their perseverance in finding a qualified and non-exploitative job;
- if they will be able to support *explorative achievers* in their dreams of success, in order to help them exploit the various possibilities and resources at their disposal in reaching professional achievements that correspond to personal expectations and ambitions, where the *ethos* of improvement can finally find real returns.

### **Educational attainment, forms of distress, achievement and underachievement**

The central role played by schools in fostering social integration is now fully recognized by several international organisations. Recently, the Oecd stated that “education plays an essential role in preparing the children of immigrants for participation in the labour market and in society” and that “giving them opportunities to fully develop their potential is vital for future economic growth and social cohesion in Oecd countries” (Nusche, 2009: 5).

Most authors in this area consider educational achievement a strong predictor of the host society’s level of integration, both in terms of professional integration and of the acquisition of citizenship rights (Berry, 1992; Glenn, de Jong, 1996; Portes, Rumbaut, 2001; Schmid, 2001). Moreover, in Italy, education represents an important opportunity for the

future of young foreigners, even if their successes ought to be understood not merely in terms of a deterministic and linear path but, rather more fruitfully, adopting a systemic and multi-dimensional approach. For example, positive school results could be the outcome either of a form of adaptation to the school culture and its specific requirements, in terms of performance, without the related element of social incorporation, or, conversely, of successful integration in the receiving society (Besozzi, 2007: 48).

Among the second generation, educational successes acquire great symbolic value as they come to represent both personal and extended (family) aspirations of upward mobility, as well as a means to avoid subordinated assimilation or exclusion in the labour market and to achieve a higher social status, compared to the first generation. Indeed, in our sample<sup>28</sup> school achievement was the most important factor discriminating different clusters of students. The clusters, as aforementioned, are as follows:

- the *first cluster* (termed “low profilers”) is made up of boys and girls (mostly males) with low scores on the *School Achievement Index (SAI)*<sup>29</sup>. 70,2% of this group (vs. 24,1% in the whole sample) is at the lower level of the Index, 24,1% at the middle level, and no one is at the high level;
- the *second cluster* (“realistic achievers”) is made up of boys and girls with good school achievement. 74,8% of this group reports medium-high scores in the SAI. They pursue the aim of integration in a pragmatic way, as a tool for emancipation, and want to obtain a long-term job, despite having few initial resources (low family background, low parental income, no aids for studying);
- the *third cluster* (“explorative achievers”) is made up of girls and boys (mostly girls) who come from families of medium SES and with

<sup>28</sup> As already noted, the survey was carried out by the Osservatorio regionale per l'integrazione e la multietnicità in Lombardy (Italy) in May 2006 and was funded by the Regional Council of Lombardy. The sample included 1047 foreign students (aged 14-19) attending a range of 69 secondary schools (lyceums, technical institutes, professional institutes and vocational training centres) that completed a questionnaire-based survey. See: Besozzi, Colombo, and Santagati 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Items of the *School Achievement Index* included: middle school exam scores, years repeated (yes/no), educational debts received (yes/no).

a good cultural background; they report high scores in the SAI (75,5% of this group is in the highest level) and invest a lot in education. Schooling and education are seen as the route to self-realization and new opportunities (including further migration to other developed countries).

All groups include young immigrants who have gradually taken part in the educational system of the host society and have defined their own, particular, modes of participation. Generally speaking, these adolescents represent a cohort which has successfully adapted to the school culture during the last decades, on the basis of consolidated principles and of “systemic rules”. The latter include, on the one hand, the issue of *equal access and participation* (independently of legal/illegal immigration status) and, on the other hand, that of *academic and social selection*, where performance evaluation leads to systematic disadvantage for those who are less acculturated.

In terms of structural inequalities within the Italian education system, the main disadvantage concerns the *school lag* (that is, attending classes lower than those corresponding to age), which affects 42,5% of the foreign student population (Miur, 2009). The school lag is sometimes due to arrival in Italy and enrolment in the Italian school system during the course of the school year. It is, however, also the effect of a deliberate precaution taken by school management with the aim of preventing educational distress or early dropout among more problematic pupils. For this reasons the lack of regularity during the course of studies is not necessarily related to social distress or to a lack of integration.

Secondly, statistics on school achievement have consistently reported an increase in the *achievement gap* between immigrant and native students (Miur, 2009: 68): in 2007/08 only 72% of the foreign secondary school student population managed to pass the academic year, as opposed to 86% of Italian students.

In particular, the PISA 2006 data, which is based on a predominantly Italian sample<sup>30</sup>, shows a systematic *gap in basic skills* (language, math and science) between native and immigrant 15 years-old students. When we

<sup>30</sup> Non-native students included in the PISA 2006 survey were only 879 (3.8% of the Italian cohort). See Mantovani (2008:163).

observe the dataset in more detail, what emerges is that: “the area of reading competences appears to be the most critical point for foreign students, as the low level in reading skills could explain a huge part of the unsatisfactory scores in the other two areas (problem solving and science)” (Fiore 2009: 144).

National and local statistics also reveal a clear tendency for immigrant students (be these first or second generation) to choose technical and professional secondary schools/training institutes when compared to native students (80% vs. 60% of the total amount of students enrolled, respectively). Few non-natives are currently attending lyceums (the most academically oriented secondary school option) compared with Italian students (20% vs. 40%, respectively). Whether immigrant students are steered in this direction by family or teachers<sup>31</sup>, they certainly seem to be *canalized in the lowest level* of the educational system, with the concomitant risk of wasting some of the talents of foreign students. These schools are often labelled “schools for immigrants” by Italians and seen as inferior in quality and status to lyceums. Moreover, in this kind of establishment foreign adolescents often experience isolation, marginalization and ethnical segregation (Van Zanten, 2001).

Processes of school segregation are only apparently spontaneous. In Italy there are no educational access restrictions: native and non-native students could, in theory, choose their school of preference. In schools where the non-Italian demand tends to increase, native families often decide to relocate their children to other, “not mixed” schools. Reputation seems to be the main force that drives this choice, connected to an anxiety among Italians concerning the possibility that their children be educated in ethnically and culturally heterogeneous environments. For this reason, head teachers at professional institutes should manage the enrolment dynamic by improving the quality of mixed schools, making them a more appealing choice for native students and consequently re-orienting immigrant students towards both professional and academic institutions.

<sup>31</sup> In Italy middle school teachers offer final year students a compulsory guidance counselling service to orient choices of secondary educational institutions. The final choice is up to students and their families, who may or may not follow the teachers’ suggestion in their choice of secondary school.

As a result of these problematic factors, the percentages of foreign students that show distress during their educational path remains high. A multiplicity of specific factors seem to be involved. On the family side factors include: parental job instability, the breakdown of the family, poor housing, and social isolation. On the personal side, acculturative stress resulting from migration may generate a loss of linguistic reference points, difficulty in overcoming the differences between the educational approaches of one's native country and those of the host country, and a refusal to assimilate the new language or culture, among others (Berry, 2006).

In brief, the most recurrent types of difficulty shown by immigrant students (including both first and second generation) are:

- *the lack of a fully acknowledged bicultural or multicultural identity.* Rather, immigrant students tend towards a form of assimilation based on a process of "normalization" to the standards of the host country (Besozzi, 2009b: 44). Immigrants employing this strategy seem to demand that they be "undistinguishable" from their native counterparts; they do not want to be seen as "Alter" (Other). The normalization process works at a dual level: the institutional-formal and the interactional-informal (these levels include: curriculum topics selection, assessment of previous competences, consideration of face-to-face relationship issues and so on). The lack of recognition of this dimension of otherness implies a poor evaluation of one's ethnical background that is crucial for the construction of self identity in all young persons (Phinney, Alipuria, 1990; Santelli, 2007).
- In terms of the teacher-student relationship, the frame is "almost positive" because teachers are gratified by the higher level of motivation and optimism of immigrant pupils (Kao, Tienda, 1995). More critical, however, are peer relations. Often minority students suffer as a result of other students' *negative racial attitudes*, especially where actions clearly aimed at contrasting racism are not undertaken under institutional responsibility (i.e., programs against discrimination, education to diversity, etc.). Reactions of native students to cultural heterogeneity in the classroom might include indifference, disinterest or outright irritation, which only lead to a decrease in minority group members' levels of self-esteem and of their positive attitude.

- Other forms of difficulties experienced by immigrant students refer to *learning techniques*, linked to low linguistic competence (for newcomers), problems in understanding the structure of educational tasks, unclear evaluation of skills, and lack of adequate support by teachers.
- Immigrant students also tend to experience *disappointment towards schooling and education* due to unsuitable school choice, unmet learning expectations, and major investment in paid work. These are personal problems that immigrants could have in common with native students.
- Immigrant youths also have *difficulties in developing a life-plan*, particularly due to the challenge of negotiating school requirements, family expectations (often seen as “demands justified by parents’ sacrifice”), personal aspirations and self-image (often threatened by a sense of perceived low self-efficacy and feelings of shame).

The cluster analysis conducted on the Lombardy sample provides evidence of three different forms of school distress, associated with the three clusters of students. Each group seems to express a typical form of educational distress. To further explore and provide a more in-depth analysis of these three conditions highlighted, future research could profitably combine qualitative and quantitative data.

Table 4 shows the distribution of students’ self-evaluated perception of problems at school across the different clusters.

Table 4 - “Do you have any problems at school?” (percentages)

	<i>Cluster 1 Low profilers</i>	<i>Cluster 2 Realistic achievers</i>	<i>Cluster 3 Explorative achievers</i>	<i>Total</i>
None	31.9	37.2	37.5	35.9
Some	51.5	50.1	48.8	49.9
Quite a few	13.7	11.4	12.0	12.2
A lot	2.9	1.3	1.7	2.0
Total	100	100	100	100
<i>N of responses</i>	<i>254</i>	<i>341</i>	<i>410</i>	<i>1005</i>

The following paragraphs aim to offer a brief description of the three different forms of distress that emerge from the data analysis.

1) *Low profilers*. Given the reduced level of expectations and resources that these students have upon entering in the educational system, poor school success is almost indistinguishable from their situation. The distress they encounter is this termed “positional”, and includes a high-risk of downward integration. These students normally attend short-term courses in professional education and vocational training and sometimes the lack of external support can make it impossible for them to reach the final qualification. Those who leave school early tend to enter the labour market at the bottom of the occupational ladder or to remain unemployed for a long time; the latter may become particularly significant hindrance in terms of their future career. Students whose long term plan includes returning to their country of origin might feel homesickness as an obstacle to their current commitment in the host country, promoting entry in a negative spiral and an inability to overturn the negative initial situation.

2) *Realistic achievers*. This group includes those students who plan to enter the job market at the end of secondary education, who come from families of low and medium-low socio-economic status. Their life projects are, for the most part, of long-term stability in Italy rather than relocation to other countries and they aspire to jobs as employers, artisans, and industrial workers, or as technicians in trade or service enterprises. Their level of school achievement is satisfactory; evidenced by above average scores on the *Well-being Index*<sup>32</sup>. For these reasons it is inappropriate to speak of “distress” in relation to their adaptation to the school environment. Rather, they are characterized by positive expectations. Nonetheless, these students may perceive a sort of “anxiety for the future”, characterized by the apprehension that the labour market may not fit their expectations and aspirations. The greater the investment on a specific type of job, the higher the risk they may feel downgraded and dissatisfied when they find a job that is below their expectations and be affected by “postponed social selection”.

<sup>32</sup> Questionnaire items included in the *Well-being Index* are: “satisfaction of school experience”, “do you have any problems at school?”, and “how well do you feel you are being treated by teachers and classmates?”.

3) *Explorative achievers*. The third group includes a large number of females who are strongly school oriented and invest in the possibility of higher education (one third of students in this cluster is attending a lyceum) with the long-term objective of achieving high level positions in the receiving society (41% is aiming for a managerial, professional, or entrepreneurial career). School success is at the base of this integration plan and their motivations are predominantly expressive rather than instrumental. The youngest students (14-15 years), those of East-European origin (from Romania, Russia, Ukraine, etc.), children of high or medium-high SES and only-children (20% of the cluster total) are overrepresented in this group. High levels of *Well-being Index* scores are correlated with strong bilingual competences and second-language skills. Their projects for the future are varied and wide-ranging and include, for many, the plan to leave Italy to emigrate in other developed countries; this latter element being the reason why they are called “explorative”.

Even if students belonging to this group enjoy high levels of school success, their condition is not free from difficulties, both objective and subjective. For instance, the survey reveals that a significant number of students (40.3%) would have preferred to attend a different secondary school institution. As we would expect, students falling within this cluster tend to have high levels of self-esteem and a positive self image, and tend to be involved in continuous self-improvement projects that, however, also involve a great amount of risk and uncertainty. On the outset they have many family resources to exploit (including a big investment of trust on their parents' part) meaning that, in all probability, they are coping with competitive and high-stress situations.

Moreover, explorative achievers tend to expect a lot from themselves, more than members of any of the other clusters, and can thus develop greater performance anxiety or fear of negative outcomes. Sometimes, they come from very demanding families with whom it is difficult to have a dialogical relationship. In terms of cultural heritage, these students are much less rigid than those falling under the other two clusters: that is, they view their own cultural roots as the basis for new, open and multiple identities. Thanks to formal education, they are aware of the fact that they are different both from their families and from native citizens, and acknowledge their right and privilege to choose new and distinctive

belongings. This sort of “multi-” or “bi-culturality”, however, can produce forms of distress during educational development.

The aforementioned forms of distress notwithstanding, a general improvement has been assessed both by national and local statistics in terms of improvement in school access and educational success of immigrant students. As a result of foreign students’ “motivation” and “optimism”, the gap in school proficiency between natives and immigrants is gradually being reduced; more immigrants or children of immigrants are attending lyceums with positive results (especially those geared towards education and language specializations); more revisions of the curriculum are being carried out, aimed at enhancing multiple forms of cultural, social, and religious expressions (especially in history, geography, the languages and literature), in accordance with international guidelines (cf., Eurydice, 2009).

Consistently with the results of research conducted in other countries with high immigration rates (i.e., France, the UK), when family SES and time of school attendance is controlled for, immigrant and native students show similar levels of school results. Thus, “ethnicity” or immigrant status is not, in itself, sufficient to predict successful or unsuccessful educational outcomes, because many variables affect school distress or well-being. We therefore need to adopt a broader definition of “educational achievement”, which takes into account:

- the acquisition of a final school-leaving certificate;
- the avoidance of early school dropout;
- the resolution of any school adaptation problems;
- the type of job found after graduation (in relation with the school attended);
- further education;
- the re-orientation of the student toward a more consonant type of educational route for him/her<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> This broader definition of educational achievement is taken from an empirical study carried out in Lombardy, funded by the Regional Council in 2007, called *PRISMA project: educational success within young immigrants and strategies for empowerment*. See the whole research report at [www.galdus.it/pubblicazioni](http://www.galdus.it/pubblicazioni) (Colombo, 2007).

In the future, what will really give evidence of success or failure among immigrant youths will be their occupational status. If they get a job shortly after completing education, if they enter the labour market under universalistic criteria (by merit as opposed to via facilitated routes; i.e., family connections or other forms of privileged job access), there is a good chance they will have good careers and we can speak of successful social integration. At present it is perhaps still too early to make predictions of this sort: the majority of immigrant students in Italy are attending the first 2-3 years of secondary school and only very few of them are currently enrolled at university.

On the basis of a recent study conducted on the employability of young immigrants in Lombardy (Besozzi, Colombo 2009), it appears that the transition from school to work for these young men and women is, for the most part, linear and positive. A good range of employers contacted say that foreign students coming from vocational training courses are generally employed directly by the same businesses where they undertook their apprenticeship training, exactly like Italian students. Entrepreneurs (in productive sectors like the mechanical sector, electronics, trade and aesthetics) particularly appreciate some personal characteristics of young immigrants, such as: the drive for achievement, adaptability, a positive representation of work, pragmatism and realism.

In sum, research data and statistics on the actual education paths of immigrant students show a complex situation. On the one hand, these young people invest strongly in education and have successful school achievements, and tend to find good reception in the educational and vocational training system. On the other hand, they run several risks and encounter various forms of distress during their educational career in Italy, even though their overall level of achievement is high. The challenge they are facing now is that of defining and carrying out a “long-term” project, particularly in terms of finding a place in the labour market. From our data it appears that only some of them – the realistic or explorative achievers – are ready to face such a challenge.

### **Negotiating the future: categories and analysis for a comprehensive approach to social inclusion**

The chances for social integration open to immigrant second generations represent a crucial aspect for the interpretation of multi-ethnic societies. Unlike the issue of integration of adult immigrants, the condition of young people presents several complexities: it represents “a turning point in inter-ethnic relations, pointing to a general acknowledgment that an irreversible change is occurring within the human and social geography of multicultural countries” (Ambrosini, 2007: 64).

Integration is not a self-evident concept; on the contrary, it requires a clear rationale and an adequate contextualization to be used as a powerful category of analysis. For instance, the issue of young immigrant’s integration is strictly linked to the problem of identity, which underscores the existing connection between the collective and the individual dimension in adolescent development: at this age, the more individuals feel at ease with their own identity, the greater their chances of exploiting all the routes to integration in society. The identity of immigrants is also a crucial issue in determining good living relations among different peoples in a multicultural society, both in the present and in the future. Peaceful cooperation among members of the same community entails the establishment of spontaneous interaction on both sides, in terms of needs and aspirations.

The term “integration” evokes a wide range of related concepts in its stride: acculturation, inclusion, embeddings, and the more consistent idea of belonging, that is, taking part in, or feeling that one is part of, a given context/environment. The issue at stake here is exactly to distinguish the different ways to construct and negotiate such a sense of belonging.

Traditionally, immigrants became full members of their receiving society as a result of assimilation. This was a process that implied the relinquishment of a part of their dimension of “otherness” and an acquiescence to acquire some of the characteristics and traits of the majority. This *assimilative model*, however, has begun to show its weaknesses, for several reasons: firstly, because it is impracticable for individuals to ignore and abandon their previous identities; secondly, because in a post-modern society individuals no longer encounter social contexts which are culturally uniform or cohesive, but rather social environments that tend to be pluralistic (Grillo, 1998). Finally, as Portes and his associates have shown for the US case, contemporary immigration is confronted with an incorporation paradox due to the fact that

“assimilating to [native] surroundings may derail successful adaptation, whereas remaining firmly attached to [one’s] parent’s immigrant community may strengthen [young immigrants’] chances” (Portes, 2006: 245).

Thus, individuals, families and ethnic groups actively cultivate *multiple belongings*, which is an alternative form of integration that entails multiple memberships (national, transnational, cultural, religious, professional, and linguistic) that do not coexist in contrast with one another but rather are partially overlapping. This vision seems to fit the pluralistic and fragmented nature of receiving societies, which offer, at one and the same time, a wealth of opportunities and pose serious threats to successful integration. It also demonstrates that there is an ample space in society where individuals can elaborate, work through and re-formulate their identities in order to choose who to be and how to participate in the social life of the host country. In other words, migrant persons (and young immigrants in particular) can be active in the construction of their group memberships (Santelli, 2003) and demonstrate agency in the process of shaping their lives.

We are not dealing here with an exasperated politics of difference, based on the relativism of each culture in relation with one another. Such a system would lead to a negative interplay between the need for distinction and the search for power, which would take place as part of the inclusion process, and produce problematic outcomes in terms of social conflicts, separations, and the relegation of minority group members into *enclaves* or ghettos. With the multiple belonging option, conversely, we are confronted with a re-balancing of the relationship between newcomers and natives, avoiding both the exasperation of the rights claim (by immigrants) and the imposition of a straight-line adaptation to the host environment (by natives). As Benhabib has pointed out we need to ensure that “democratic inclusion, on the one hand, and continuity and preservation of cultures, on the other, do not become mutually exclusive” (2002: 10)

Such a dialogical and flexible way of building social membership opens to a new era of encounters and exchanges between young participants both in the public sphere and in private interactions.

According to this perspective, *social integration is an identity issue* which puts the focus on the cultural dimension. It is only on the cultural plane that each member of a multi-ethnic society can participate, on the

basis of: more or less assimilative forms of acculturation, an essentialist or procedural understanding of social identity, different modes of treatment of ethnic difference as a factor of discontinuity in the social sphere (neglecting, claiming or exploiting diversity).

Approaching the study of cultural phenomena focusing on the subtle borders between visible and invisible, the explicit and the implicit, however, presents serious difficulties for social research. Often researchers are culturally and linguistically distant from the subjects of their enquiry and live the embarrassing situation where “epistemological principles and methodological rules are not helpful, if they are not couched in deeper dispositions, at least partially linked to personal experiences or to the social trajectories of migration” (Bourdieu, 1991: 5). Quantitative researchers, using survey and questionnaire methods to collect data, frequently meet misunderstandings and compliance problems due to critical incidents and the existence of a different frame of reference in the observed-observer relation (Colombo, 2001). On the qualitative side, the limited generalizability of the data emerging from narrative-biographic materials can be a serious limit to these approaches: often, these are individual sources of data from which the extrapolation of general observations is misleading and inappropriate.

Since the early 1990s in Italy a limited number of empirical studies have been carried out on the processes of social inclusion among immigrant youths. At the turn of millennium, however, we are still only at the very beginning. All these pioneer studies focus on the central role played by school integration as the main tool for future social inclusion and on the value of school success in determining ascending mobility for second generation immigrants, as is the case in all OECD countries (OECD, 2006). One of the most interesting findings that emerged from Italian studies comes from research on pre-school attendance among children of immigrants and the challenges of “everyday-multiculturalism” that pre-school teachers and assistants are faced with.

The most complete and organic study on immigrant adolescents in Italy to date has been conducted in 1998 by a team of 9 universities on a sample of middle school students (Giovannini, Queirolo Palmas, 2002). At the time the research was carried out the “discourse of otherness” was only just entering its initial phase and the immigrant student population was less than 2% and concentrated mostly in the Northern area. The study compared

Italian and foreign peers, their motivation for attending school, academic results, school choices and aspirations for the future, and found that the two groups shared more similarities more than differences, and that this was due to the common experience of being public school students. Currently, immigrant pupils represent 7% of the whole student population (Santagati, 2009) and are settled across the national territory. Moreover, public opinion, media and juridical discourses on immigration have increased and show a greater level of ambiguity between claims for integration and efforts towards expulsion (Grillo, Pratt, 2002).

Other surveys have also recently been carried out, focusing on a comparison between immigrant and native students in terms of academic results (Mantovani 2008; Casacchia, *et al.* 2008). Both studies noted the considerable participation of immigrant youths in school activities, but confirmed the existing gap of opportunities in education and the less favourable system of support they receive outside classroom time.

The local research carried out by the Regional Council of Lombardy, that the present paper is based on, on the other hand, aimed at offering an in-depth analysis of inclusion processes and of representations of integration expressed by 14-19 year old immigrants in a metropolitan area. School outcomes are considered the point of departure of young immigrants' social trajectories, in terms of their projects for the future – including the type of job they aspire to, the place where they wish to settle and start a family in, the acculturation model they choose to adopt – and can have significant weight in determining future paths.

Through an in-depth approach the survey shows the need for a broader exploration of the cultural world of young immigrants; the analysis cannot be limited to their educational attainment or school achievement, because good results in education may be coupled with experiences of discrimination or problematic social relations. The approach adopted in the survey, however, fails to identify similarities and differences between the condition of social inclusion of natives and foreigners.

In conclusion, the Lombardy study has enabled us to outline some basic suggestions for future research in this area. A research design which aims to develop a comprehensive view of social inclusion processes of immigrant youths must:

- adopt a broad concept of integration for the interpretation of data, which overcomes both the assimilation and the differentiation

perspective. An open view of social integration should be centred on the negotiation between immigrants and the host society, so as to preserve both cultural differences and the common set of values for peaceful coexistence. This is a point which emerged specifically from the analysis the paths of immigrant adolescents conducted in Lombardy, characterized by a generation which aims at “normalizing” its difference;

- recognize that social integration and the construction of a social identity are closely connected. This, in turn, refers to the fact that the more young immigrants will be allowed and encouraged to assemble their identity freely and not be constrained into choosing “pre-packaged” identities, the greater the levels of integration in the host society;
- analyze individual and generational pathways through a multi-dimension interpretation model, combining structural and cultural factors as well as personal agency. The latter ensures a significant degree of freedom in choosing alternative identities far from those established by either original backgrounds or dominant values of the host society;
- consider the family as the starting point for the analysis of social inclusion, also in those cases where young immigrants reach and settle in the host society on their own. Family background plays various roles during the integration process of foreign youths, such as: a) shaping significant daily experience (influenced by descending/ascending mobility tracks due to migration), b) providing the set of resources (rich or poor) which shape part of the offspring’s destiny, and c) providing the set of values oriented to sacrifice and redemption which are a great motivational support for young immigrants;
- consider the issue of citizenship, that in Italy is regulated by the *ius sanguinis* principle; further, it must be acknowledged that citizenship is the only chance for fully inclusive participation of the next generations;
- view educational achievement as an indicator of young people’s capacity to accomplish certain expected outcomes not only in the cultural domain but also in the occupational field. This approach is based on the assumption that without educational achievement

immigrants risk “positional distress” (the risk of assuming a subordinate position in society), reaching an unsatisfactory degree of integration;

- always include the native population in the data set as a comparison group, in order to verify the level of equality of the host society, which is the key principle regulating the provision of chances for young people;
- finally, analyse social inclusion pathways from the point of view of immigrant youths themselves, without neglecting local and national political orientations which strongly affect their real life chances in Italy as well as in Europe.

The universalism of social rights and equality of opportunity are systemic factors which research has shown to be very important for the assessment of integration: it reverberates directly on immigrants’ self-perception, in terms of possibility/impossibility of building “normal” (that is, equal) life-plans and ensuring upward mobility. Life paths of young immigrants will thus necessarily intersect (at some point) with the system of opportunities and the available cultural alternatives. Nonetheless, the outcome will depend on each individual’s personal agency which creates the singular alternative between the native and the receiving environment.

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