

Children of immigrants in Lower secondary education: reasons and consequences of school retardation

Eleonora Mussino^o, Salvatore Strozza*

^o Dipartimento Studi Sociali Economici Attuariali e Demografici – Sapienza Università di Roma

* Dipartimento di Scienze Statistiche – Università di Napoli Federico II

Italian Background

With over 4 million foreigners Italy is now one of Europe's main immigration countries, at the same level as France and the United Kingdom and behind Germany and Spain only. At the beginning of 2008, foreigners accounted for more than 7% of the population living on the Italian territory, showing a great variety in terms of area of origin, demographic characteristics, migration models, length of stay, degree of rootedness and inclusion in the country's social and productive texture (Rossi, Strozza, 2007).

While until a few years ago most of the attention was focused on the arrivals and presence of adult immigrants in the last few years interest in immigrants' children has grown significantly, together with the growing numbers of foreign minors arriving in Italy with relatives or for family reunion, and with the remarkable increase in births from at least one non-Italian parent.

In the short lapse of about 6 years (between 21 October 2001 and the end of 2007) the number of foreigners aged at least 18 residing in Italy has almost tripled, from 284 to 761 thousand, with an average growth of almost 80 thousand individuals per year. Today, almost one foreigner out of four is younger than 18, and the impact of foreigners on the total minor population has grown remarkably reaching 7.5% at the end of 2007.

Non-Italian students enrolled in public and private schools became more than 500 thousand in the school year 2006/07, that is 5.6% of total students. This is the result of a very fast growth occurred mainly in the last few years: ten years earlier, in the school year 1996/97, foreigners were less than 60 thousand (0.6% of total students) and five years later, although they had tripled, they were slightly more than 180 thousand (2.3% of the total). It is in the last few years that the absolute increase, with a yearly average of almost 65 thousand more enrolments, has been really remarkable, and seems to be destined to keep growing in the next few years considering the recent increase in births from foreign parents and the current number of arrivals of immigrants in school age (Dalla Zuanna, Farina, Strozza, 2009). Proof of that is the number of students enrolled in the school year 2007/08 – almost 575 thousand (6.4% of the total) with an increase of slightly less than 75 thousand enrolments compared to the previous year.

Foreign boys and girls are often enrolled in classes at a lower grade compared to their age, mainly because of language problems. In their education pathway they also encounter more difficulties than their Italian schoolmates, as the smaller number of passing students show. This brings about a widespread school retardation, which grows as the education levels increase.

The present paper aims at identifying the causes of the retardation and checking whether it affects the perception of one's performance and the level of future educational aspirations.

Work hypothesis

It is therefore interesting to understand what are the main factors involved in school retardation – in particular a retardation of more than one year – and if they can also have a negative effect on the following school pathway. Lagging behind in school usually depends on children not enrolling in school, not attending the classes, or failing one or more school years, which is often the case among the children of immigrants, due to the instability caused by the new situation and by the problems of adaptation to the new reality (the linguistic problem in the first place). Putting some of the children in lower grades than their peers at the time of their inclusion in the Italian school – a measure that is not envisaged by the Italian school system – is the same solution that was adopted in the 1960s-70s in the North of Italy with children coming from the South, who were put in one or two lower grades (Ginsborg 1989) despite they

had regularly attended school, because they spoke a dialect rather than Italian. If on one side this measure – widely adopted today – allows newcomers to acquire a linguistic knowledge that guarantees them a full and effective participation in school activities (Besozzi 2005), on the other side it can be damaging for the children, especially when they are put more than one grade lower, as it does not protect them from future failures and can cause school integration problems (Favaro 2003). The hypothesis is that school retardation (in general, not just the one deriving from putting the child in a lower grade), especially when it is of more than one year, can be one of the main factors leading pupils to drop out of school or choose less demanding and job-oriented educational pathways. This hypothesis is supported by two factors: a) having to relate to younger children, whose interests are often quite different due to the rapid changes that occur in the transition from childhood to adolescence, makes it more difficult and less stimulating for these pupils to socialize with their classmates, and this, in turn, results in a poor integration in the school context; b) lagging behind in the educational pathway can cause children to have a false perception of their study skills or of their educational possibilities, leading them (and their families) to choose options that seem to be better suited to their characteristics (i.e. less demanding educational pathways) or that can make them catch up with the time lost (shorter educational pathways).

Data & Methods

The data used here are from the survey “Children of immigrants between social inclusion and social exclusion” (ITAGEN2), which is the first quantitative survey with a statistical relevance at the national level to be carried out on immigrants’ children residing in Italy (Dalla Zuanna 2008). The survey is conducted on schoolchildren from 48 Italian provinces (out of the overall 106) enrolled in public lower secondary schools in which the share of pupils with at least one foreign parent is equal to or higher than 10% in central and northern Italy and 3% in the southern regions of the country (data collected during the school year 2004-05). The survey carried out during the school year 2005-06 (mainly during the early months of 2006) involved a quantitatively significant sample of about 20,700 preadolescents (11 to 14 years of age) attending lower secondary school, of which 10,503 with at least one of the parents born outside of Italy (hereinafter “foreigners” or “children of immigrants”) and 10,203 with both parents born in Italy (hereinafter “Italians”). The questionnaire was made up of seven sections aimed at delving into the different aspects of the human capital (linguistic skills, academic performance, future educational aspirations), of the social capital (family and friends), of the system of values, leisure activities, and the socio-economic status of the family.

The data from the ITAGEN2 survey have been used to try and identify the main factors involved in school retardation and to understand if they can affect the perception of their performance and the future educational aspirations of lower secondary school children.

In a first step we constructed indicators for *school retardation* (regular educational pathway, one or two years behind), *school performance* (very good, good and medium-low school performance), and *future educational expectations* (high, low or uncertainty about one’s future educational pathway). Then we use multinomial logistic regression models (see Hosmer, Lemeshow 1999) to verify the determining factors of school retardation (relative-risk ratio of lagging one or two years behind compared to a regular educational pathway) and to assess the role played by the educational pathway on school performance (relative-risk ratio of very good and medium-low school performance compared to a good performance) and on future educational expectations (relative-risk ratio of having high or low educational aspirations in relation to the uncertainty about one’s future educational pathway), other explanatory variables included in the pattern being equal. The first group of explanatory variables considered is the one containing *demographic characteristics*, since school performance also depends on a series of factors connected with the subject’s background (Besozzi 2002). In the second group, the group of *resources and school engagement* (Portes *et al.* 2005), the variables considered

include the knowledge of the Italian language, the school engagement measured through the number of hours spent studying every day and the help the pupil gets to do his/her homework. The third group of explanatory variables concerns the *socio-economic characteristics of the family*. This variable is measured through the highest level of education of the adult of reference, the job of the adult man of reference, the type of tenure and the level of crowding of the house. The fourth group of variables, which represents the *relationships and the social capital*, consists in the main typology of friends (more Italians or more foreigners, or both in equal number) and by the participation or not in a team sport.

Main results and Discussion

Also when other conditions are equal, the children of immigrants have greater risks compared to the Italians, and these risks are the greater the shorter is the children's period of socialisation in the country (different migrant generations). The children of immigrants born in Italy (second-generation children) show a disadvantage compared to Italian children. In the case of second-generation children, school retardation is only connected to school failure (sometimes due to poor attendance) which translates into the risk of lagging behind by one year compared to the Italian classmates, a disadvantage which seems to be especially associated with unfavourable socio-economic conditions of the family. The situation of children of immigrants arrived in Italy in their preschool age is slightly different. They show a disadvantaged situation compared to their Italian peers, and such disadvantage persists also when the socio-economic condition of the family, the study effort, relationship with peers and social capital are on the same level. This is a warning signal that cannot certainly be neglected – an unmistakable signal that should urge decision makers, school managers and teachers to look for the best solutions to reduce and possibly remove the obstacles hindering a rapid and full integration of the children of immigrants in the Italian public school. Several actions have been taken in the past 20 years, but what is needed is a reorganisation, as well as the working out of a general plan to be adapted at the local level, in compliance with the autonomy of the school that should meet the specific needs of every single reality. This is all the more necessary in the light of the findings of this study concerning the children of immigrants arrived in Italy in their school age. Especially for those who arrived at age 10 or older the risk of school retardation appears extremely higher, also when all the other explanatory variables are considered in the regression model. There is no doubt that for these pupils school retardation is not only due to school failure but also to the placement in a lower grade compared to their age at the time of inclusion in the Italian school system.

While a one-year school retardation could be useful for a fuller participation in school activities, accumulating more years of retardation produces a negative perception of one's skills and maybe even of the usefulness of school, and in any case it brings children to choose low-profile educational pathways. Also when all other conditions are considered, school retardation plays a statistically significant role in determining the perception of one's performance and the educational intentions of children. Several other factors come into play, but certainly being in a lower grade than the average age leads to the choice of dropping out of school and to opt for less demanding educational pathways. The results of the analyses proposed also confirm that when some individual and familiar characteristics are considered the disadvantage of foreign children is reduced. The choice of the future educational pathways, indeed, is no longer influenced by the migratory generation but by the perceptions of one's performance and the regularity of one's educational pathway. Especially for the children who arrived in their school age, it is of paramount importance that they are rapidly integrated in the school system, trying to avoid to put them in lower grades compared to their age.

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