

## MIGRATORY PROCESSES AND INCLUSION OF FOREIGN STUDENTS IN THE ITALIAN SCHOOL SYSTEM: INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES.

Los procesos migratorios y la inclusión de los estudiantes extranjeros en el sistema escolar italiano: perspectivas interculturales.

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### Abstract

*Recent migratory processes have brought profound social changes in most European countries; this has happened also in the Italian context. These changes concern both people and institutions, called to deal with the problems created by the globalization of markets, economic crisis, coexistence of different cultures, ethnicities, religions, languages and traditions. The multicultural society has penetrated even into classrooms where the presence of foreign students has become a constant feature in all EU school systems.*

*This paper, considering the documents of some of the most important international institutions (OECD, UNHCR, European Commission, Council and European Parliament, Cedefop, Eurydice), the Italian Ministry of Education, INVALSI, INDIRE, ISMU Foundation, and Isfol, and statistics provided by Eurostat and ISTAT, examines the level of inclusion of foreign students in Italian schools, paying attention to the demographic characteristics, difficulties of integration, and school results of non-Italian students. On the institutional side, the effectiveness of policies and measures implemented by the Italian system of education and training is investigated in the perspective of intercultural education and an inclusive, equitable and democratic school-system capable of highlighting each student's specificity and personal capacities, preventing forms of marginalization, social and professional exclusion, early school leaving, new radicalism of racial and ethnic origin.*

**Keywords:** *immigration, intercultural education, inclusive school, academic success*

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### Resumen

*La migración de los últimos años ha generado profundos cambios sociales en la mayoría de los países europeos, como también en el caso de la sociedad italiana. Estos cambios han afectado tanto a personas como a instituciones, llamados a hacer frente a los problemas creados por la globalización de los mercados, la crisis económica, la coexistencia de diferentes culturas, etnias, religiones, lenguas y tradiciones. La sociedad multicultural también ha penetrado en el interior de las aulas, donde la presencia de estudiantes foráneos se ha convertido en una constante común a todos los sistemas educativos de la UE.*

*En este trabajo, teniendo en cuenta los documentos de algunas de las instituciones internacionales más importantes (OCDE, ACNUR, Comisión Europea, Consejo y Parlamento Europeos, Cedefop, Eurydice); italianas (Ministerio de Educación, INVALSI, INDIRE, Fundación ISMU, ISFOL) y los datos estadísticos proporcionados por Eurostat e ISTAT, se examina el nivel de inclusión de estudiantes extranjeros en las escuelas italianas, prestando atención a las características demográficas, las dificultades de integración y los resultados escolares de los alumnos no italianos. En el plano institucional, se investiga la eficacia de las políticas y medidas aplicadas por el sistema de educación y formación italiano, tomando como perspectivas la educación intercultural y la construcción de una escuela inclusiva, equitativa y*

*democrática; capaz de valorar la singularidad y el potencial de cada estudiante, evitando formas de marginación, exclusión social y profesional, abandono escolar precoz y nuevos radicalismos de origen racial y étnico.*

**Palabras clave:** *inmigración, educación intercultural, escuela inclusiva, éxito académico.*

## 1 Introduction

What are the figures and characteristics of immigration in Italy? What are the consequences that the last twenty years of the migration phenomena have brought to Italian society and its education and training system? What are non-Italian students' performances and learning outcomes in schools? What are the policies and actions envisaged at the system level to ensure the right to education for all and to ensure fair and inclusive education? These are some of the questions that the present article tries to answer.

The last few decades of migration has transformed the “physiognomy” of the Italian population, posing new social and educational questions. From the emergency situation that occurred with the early clandestine disembarkments on Italian soil, in consideration of the growing importance that migration has taken on at both a national and European level, many measures that go beyond mere containment of arrivals have been put in place (Monzini, 2007). Later, forms of unsystematic and improvised reception, more appropriate national policies have been set up, inspired by those defined by the EU (European Commission, 2011; 2015), that have tried to manage a phenomenon such as immigration, which has assumed increasingly global connotations, with a strong impact on all social systems including schools (Portera, 2006). The emergency has gradually moved, not without difficulties, towards the establishment of a multiethnic and multicultural society, where various identities coexist, with respect to different cultural, ethnic and religious origins. The full realization of an intercultural society, the opposite of the one based on fundamentalism, separatism and on social exclusion, is characterized by the importance given to inclusion, equal opportunities, fairness and mutual respect. These values, in many European contexts, including Italy, still remain a goal to be achieved, even if several positive steps to the intercultural direction have already been made. Faced with these challenges, School can no longer hold back, in fact, immigration and the presence of young people of foreign origin is a problem that all institutions should take on responsibly.

The school is one of the public institutions called on to offer its contribution to the phenomenon of immigration management, by utilizing learning and education as tools of empowerment and personal success in the perspective of a planetary and global citizenship (Santerini, 2001). The school, thanks to students' need analysis, customization and

differentiation of educational courses can give voice to that pluralism of identities, values and stories, which is now present across classrooms, focusing on individuals' irreducibility and the right to be different in mutual understanding, which, in the long run, is the most effective antidote to the emergence of new and old radicalism (Bigo, Bonelli, Guittet & Ragazzi, 2014; Dandurand, 2014).

In the following pages, with reference to the research conducted at national and international levels, the statistics provided by European and Italian organizations, such as Eurostat and Istat, the varied and multifaceted profile of the migrant who landed on Italian shores in search of a better future is reconstructed. Firstly, we provide the analysis of the immigration data, then the presence of foreign students in Italian schools are presented, and we conclude with the efforts that the Ministry of Education, schools and teachers to shape education in an intercultural perspective

## **2 The impact of immigration on current Italian society: figures and characteristics**

The phenomenon of immigration in Italy has taken on a different trend since the twentieth century. Indeed, Italy has quite quickly changed from, as was the case up to the 1950s, being a place from which to migrate to other countries, to becoming one of the main destinations of migration between the countries of the Mediterranean. Immigration is in constant change; this dynamic situation is linked firstly to geopolitical transformations and conflicts taking place in regions of the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa (Toaldo, 2015; UNHCR, 2015a, 2015b); secondly, on the domestic front, to the considerable impact the economic crisis has had on the future growth prospects of the Italian labour market (Cesareo & Blangiardo, 2009). All these factors have made immigration, on the one hand, one of the main points of the government's agenda policy and, on the other, a new social problem that, in the past, never reached the current proportions. So much so, words such as "immigration", "immigrant", "non-EU citizen" have, in recent decades, become part of the common lexicon as a demonstration of the fact that immigration has become a phenomenon which characterizes Italian society in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Zanfrini, Monaci, Sarli & Mungiaridi, 2015; Boccagni & Pollini, 2012).

From the lexical point of view, since 2015 a broad debate has developed around the use of the words "refugee" and "immigrant" to define those fleeing across the Mediterranean and the Balkans. Some authors drew attention to the often negative connotations of the term "migrant", and proposed using the term "refugee" instead, as this would clear up any misunderstandings about the fact that the people arriving

on Europe's doorstep were, in most cases, fleeing wars and fundamental human rights violations. However, the term "migrant" *per se* does not carry negative connotation, as it simply denotes the act of migrating, regardless of the reasons behind it. Therefore, all those moving to a country or place different from their country of origin, whether on a temporary or a permanent basis, are migrants. Within this usage, migrants belong to a very broad category, which in turn comprises a plurality of subcategories that are mostly determined by their legal status. This is why in this paper we opted for the generic term "migrant" in reference to people passing through EU borders, regardless of their legal status.

Though the use of the Mediterranean route is widely acknowledged, what constitutes a significant break from the past is the high number of migrants and international protection seekers who arrived in Italy between 2014 and 2015. The reasons why many immigrants choose Italy as a country of destination are not currently linked to the search for a job, but to the need to escape from political instability or war situations that threaten their lives (Fargues & Bonfanti, 2014). In fact the number of entrances to Italy for work reasons is constantly declining: in 2010 the entrances of non-EU citizens with work permits were 360,000. Three years later the number dropped by 76%: only 85,000 non-EU citizens entered Italy for work reasons. This variation is mainly due to the long-term effects of the economic crisis, which no longer make Italy a top-desired destination to look for a job.

The size and intensity of these flows towards Italy are part of a wide-ranging migration phenomenon that involves the whole of Europe and originates in various regions of the world affected by deep political and economic instability (North and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent). As for the arrivals, in 2014 the number of migrants who arrived in Italy amounted to 170,000, a high record even if compared to previous peaks, such as the one of 2011 following the so-called North African Emergency. In 2014 Italy was in fact the main country of landing for those migrants who, because of the chaotic situation in Libya, decided to travel to Europe by sea. In 2015 the number of people arriving remained high: 154,000 migrants reached Italy by sea. However, because of the dangers of crossing the stretch of sea separating Libya from Italy, a growing number of migrants, in particular from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, decided to travel to Europe via the Greek islands in the Aegean sea, and then travel north across the Balkans and re-enter Europe crossing the Hungarian border. Thus, in 2015, Greece became the main landing-country with 855,000 arrivals recorded

(UNHCR, 2015b). Therefore, Italy has become the country of transit for the migration flows within the European Union.

With regard to the transformations taking place in Italy, the marked increase in arrivals recorded between 2014 and 2015 has also meant a significant change in the composition of the flows, and in particular a substantial increase in asylum seekers. In the two-year period 2008-2010 the number of international protection seekers who arrived on Italian territory reached a historical low, both in absolute terms and in terms of percentage, compared to the total number of arrivals. After the peak in applications for asylum recorded in 2011, which coincided with the protests that have become known as the “Arab Spring”, in the following two-year period the number of applications dropped again, before starting to increase exponentially in 2014, the year that saw a groundbreaking 65,000 applications (an increase of 132% compared to the 28,000 applications in 2013). During 2015, 84,000 applications for asylum were filed in Italy, ranking Italy the fifth country for the number of asylum applications in Europe (Cortinovis, 2015). The increase in migrants arriving by sea and the resulting increase in applications for international protection are the consequences of ongoing wars in Syria and Iraq (which have led to one of the worst humanitarian crises in decades), of violent conflicts in many countries of Sub-Saharan Africa (Eritrea, Somalia, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo).

Another element which must be stressed in the analysis of the changes in migration dynamics in Italy is the growing presence of migrants from new EU countries, namely citizens from countries that have recently become members of the European Union, in particular from Romania. As of January 1, 2016, 1,131,839 Romanian nationals were registered as legally residing in Italy – up 36% compared to 2011 – a figure that makes Romanians the largest foreign community in Italy: more than one fifth of the total foreign nationals living in Italy is in fact from Romania. A large 26% of the foreign population is from the three countries that have recently joined the EU: Romania, Bulgaria and Poland. To this figure, we must add the citizens from countries from which Italy no longer requires an entry visa, such as Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and Moldavia. Freedom of movement enjoyed by the citizens of the above-mentioned countries contributes to the growth of circular migration: these foreign nationals live and work in Italy for a period of time, and then return to their countries of origin. These workers gain rights in the Italian social and welfare sector, for instance in the area of healthcare and in the pension and social security area.

Having examined the reasons that determine the migration flows to Italy it is important to analyze the impact of foreigners on the Italian

population and quantitative figures that make Italy more and more a multiethnic and multicultural society.

As confirmed by the ISTAT data, in early January 2016, Italy had a population of 60,656,000 residents, and foreigners numbered 5,054,000, representing 8.3% of the total population. If we analyze these figures more carefully, we find 1,491,865 are foreigners from other EU countries, while the so-called non-EU citizens are 3,521,825 (5.8% of the entire population). Of these, 5 million are regularly domiciled in an Italian city (residents), while the rest appear equally distributed between those who are legally in Italy but not residents (not recorded in the Population Register) and irregular migrants.

The most represented foreign communities are those indicated in the Table 1.

Country of origin	Absolute value	% of total foreigners
Romania	1,131,839	22.1%
Albania	490,483	9.8%
Morocco	449,058	9.0%
China	265,820	5.3%
Ukraine	226,060	4.5%
The Philippines	168,238	3.4%
India	147,815	2.9%
Moldova	147,388	2.9%
Bangladesh	115,301	2.3%
Peru	109,668	2.2%

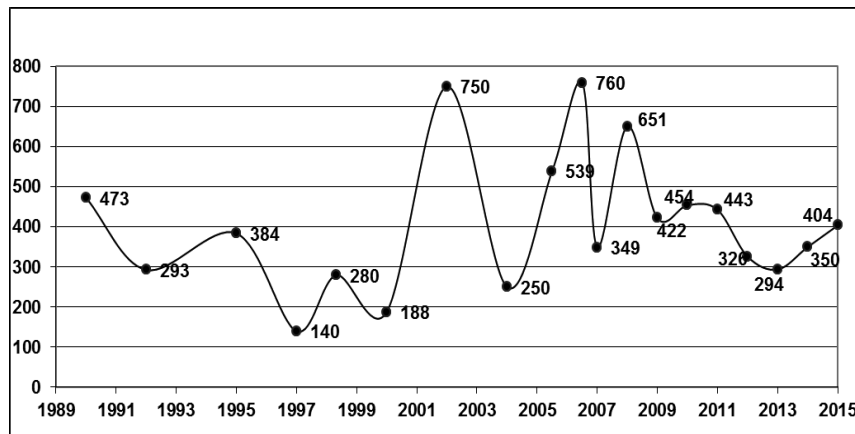
Table 1. The main foreign communities present in Italy. ISTAT (2016)

The growing foreign communities are mainly those of some Asian countries (China, India, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka), and West African countries such as Senegal, Nigeria, Gambia, and Mali, which still remain outside the top ten.

The incidence of the foreign population on the total Italian population keeps on growing: in 1990 foreigners were 0.8% of the population, in 2000 became 2.5%, and only in 2006 exceeded 5%. Overall, in 2014, the number of foreigners has increased by 150,000. This figure is made up by two-thirds of legal residents and one third irregular migrants. The latter figure may be partially due to the wide discrepancy between the 170,000 migrants who disembarked on Italian shores during the course of the year and the 65,000 asylum applications filed during that time. Irregular immigration, which previously took place mainly through the



practice of overstaying, seems therefore to have taken on channels and characteristics that are rather more striking than in the past, even while reflecting the uncertainty of migratory projects and trajectories that – as is well known – often strive for a final destination that is not necessarily Italy itself. As shown in Graph 1, the phenomenon of irregular migrants has had over the years a variable trend and is closely connected to some "critical events" related to the peaks of migration flows and illegal disembarkments.



*Graph 1. Foreign irregular residents in Italy 1990-2015 (in thousands). ISTAT (2016)*

According to the latest data validated by Eurostat, the rate of migration growth has slowed in recent years, and between January 1, 2014 and January 1, 2015 has increased by only 0.1%.

The 5,054,000 units of resident migrant population calculated by Istat as of January 1, 2016, instead, highlight the increase over the previous year of about 40 thousand units (+0.8%). An increase due entirely to the birth of foreign children on Italian soil (about 63 thousand in 2015), while new immigrants are about 200 thousand, from which about 81,000 foreigners who have left Italy, and 136 thousand persons who have obtained Italian citizenship, have to be subtracted.

As for the geographical distribution of immigrants in Italy, up to January 1, 2015, the five regions with the highest incidence of foreigners were: Emilia-Romagna (12.1%), Lombardy (11.5%), Umbria (11%), Lazio (10.9%), and Tuscany (10.7%). In Europe, countries with a greater number of foreigners are Austria (13.2%), Ireland (11.9%), Belgium (11.6%), Spain (9.6%), Germany (9.3%), England (8.4%). Some countries have much higher rates such as Luxembourg (45.9%), Cyprus (17.1%), and outside the European Union, Switzerland (24.2%). Countries that have fewer

immigrants are Greece (7.6%), Sweden (7.5%) and Denmark (7.5%). The States presenting the *jus solis*, which recognizes the nationality to those born on the soil of the country, tend to have lower numbers than those with stricter laws on citizenship. That is why, for example, France has an incidence of a lower foreign population than Italy (6.6%), given that many immigrant children have French nationality and are not covered in these statistics (Council of the European Union, 2012). Compared to the data of January 1, 2014 the most significant increase in foreigners is registered in Romania (+ 20.9%), Bulgaria (+ 20.6%), Croatia (+ 15.7%), Malta (+ 10%), Germany (+ 7.5%), the UK (+ 7.4%) and Austria (+ 7%). In Italy, the increase is 1.9% (Gilardoni, D'Odorico & Carrillo, 2015).

However, beyond the statistics, as is well known the immigration phenomenon never occurs with certain data. Too many and uncontrollable have been the migratory flows, in the last year; indeed, hundreds of thousands have crossed the Mediterranean Sea and reached the regions of Southern Italy. According to UNHCR data, between January 1 and October 31, 2016 331,016 people landed in Europe, of whom 169,641 in Greece and 158,974 in Italy. When examined in a European perspective, the countries of origin are Syria (41%), Afghanistan (21%) and Iraq (13%), while in Italy, it is especially people from African countries. The most represented countries of origin are Nigeria (21%), Eritrea (12%), Gambia, Sudan and the Ivory Coast (7%), Guinea (6%), Somalia, Senegal, Mali (5%). Most of the landings take place in Sicily (69%), but there are arrivals by sea also in Calabria (16%), Puglia (7%) and Sardinia (4%).

In terms of gender in 2015, consistently with data from previous years, women outnumbered men slightly and numbered 52.7% - with a range of variation going from 27.4% among the Senegalese to 79% among Ukrainians - while the age distribution shows a continuous, gradual trend towards middle adulthood, with the median age of 32 for males and 35 for females, up one and three years respectively compared to 2005-2015. During the same time period, however, the number of foreign minors has also increased significantly, both in absolute terms (from 503,000 to 1,085 million), and as a percentage of residents (from 20.7% in 2005 to 21.6% in 2015). This highlights the fact that there has been a progressive transformation of immigration, from labour force to an outright minority population that is increasingly composed of families (Blangiardo, 2014).

Family reunification is a relevant factor that must be taken into account. Data released by the Interior Ministry covering the period up to July 31, 2015, reveal that, out of 4,010,992 foreigners legally residing in Italy, 1,205,412 became resident as a result of family reunification, about 30% of the total number (1,410,178 with an employment contract, while



241,620 are self-employed). According to an estimate by the ISMU Foundation (2015), as of January 1, 2015 the number of families composed of 3-4 members is higher than one-person households: 674,000 against 540,000. The above-mentioned figures point to a new scenario, in fact, while, in the recent past, immigration in Italy was mainly the result of individual and short-term projects (for males), linked to both economic reasons and the search for work, immigration patterns are today reflecting the gradual change in migration projects, which, more and more, involve families, and which are consequently characterized by a growing stabilization. These social aspects of immigration have strong repercussions on education and the school in particular.

A closer look and a breakdown by nationality reveal profound differences in the ways in which the project of family settlement plays out in different communities. While 46.3% of Ukrainians and just 8.8% of Chinese migrants do not live in family units, the latter, along with Egyptians, come first in terms of couples with children (73.2% and 74.5% of residents, respectively), whereas Ukrainians come last at 24.6%. Among Peruvians, 23.2% live in female-led single-parent families, while this is rare among immigrants from Bangladesh and Egypt (0.7%). The preponderance of single-parent families clearly impacts upon the presence of minors in family units, with 10% of foreigners under the age of 18 living with one parent (which, in four out of five cases, is the mother), and here too the phenomenon is accentuated in metropolitan cities, reaching 15% in Milan and almost 20% in Rome and Naples. In the capital, one out of six minors lives with his or her mother only, while in Naples it is one in seven, and in Milan one in eight.

With regard to this family reunification process which is underway, some particularly significant indicators must be highlighted. Firstly, 56.3% of non-EU nationals legally residing in Italy hold a long-term residence permit (up 46.3% in 2011). Among the most represented nationalities, the quota of long-term residents is particularly high among minorities who have generally been present in the country for a longer period - such as Albanians, Egyptians and Moroccans - and is relatively lower among more recent minorities, such as Moldavians. A rather modest incidence (40.4%) is also recorded among the Chinese, for whom we can hypothesize trajectories of domestic and international mobility and turnover practices that are perhaps more intense compared to other nationalities. Secondly, the number of foreign nationals who acquire Italian citizenship is growing steadily. Citizen acquisitions are mostly concentrated in the age group of under-15s. The relatively little attention that is generally given to the dynamics of family reunification must not lead to presume that family reunification represents a mere bureaucratic procedure; on the contrary, it entails many negative aspects from a social perspective. The person who intends to undergo the process of

family reunification in Italy must in fact modify his or her own system of relations inside and outside the family unit, come into closer contact with Italian institutions, bureaucracy, and social services. Family reunification constitutes a significant challenge with regard to the integration of the people involved, in that it means adapting, in a short period of time, to new systems of relation within a socio-cultural context that is often very different from the context that the person experienced in his or her country of origin.

Just as the guarantees that come with long-term settlement and naturalization are determining factors for progress on the road towards the integration of foreigners in Italian society, instability and lack of security make this aim totally unfeasible. This is what happened and is still happening to the (by now) hundreds of thousands of people who have disembarked in Italy over the past few years. In the decade between 2005-2015, a little over half a million people reached our country by sea in an unauthorized way – of whom over 300,000 in the last three years; in this case it is difficult to reconstruct their migratory route and identify their ultimate destination.

Still many are those with a residency permit granted for humanitarian or international protection. More frequently, this is the case for immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa (with Eritrea, Mali, Nigeria, and Somalia in the top spots); Asian (Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and Syria); and North Africa (Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia). ORIM's 2012 report on the characteristics and living conditions of this segment of the population showed a stark prevalence of unmarried males without children, most of them with only primary education or no formal qualification. The report also found elements of precariousness in terms of social inclusion, with 40% living in reception centres, 23% in a shared rental or with friends or relatives, and 9% living in specifically allocated public buildings or finding shelter where they could. In fact, autonomous lodging is available to less than one in four "refugees".

Finding work is also noticeably more difficult: the unemployment rate is four times higher among those seeking asylum or protection than among their fellow nationals, ending an unemployment status is harder than for others, and finding a legal job is definitely more problematic. Those living in reception centres appear to be especially disadvantaged, with a 90.4% unemployment rate compared to 41.3% among those in other forms of accommodation. In addition, living in reception centres makes settling into the local territory and creating the informal ethnic network – which, to this day, remains one of the main ways to find a job – arguably more complex (MLPS, 2015).

What has been illustrated so far shows how migration in Italy is becoming a more complex and diversified phenomenon. As a consequence, it requires a broad reconsideration of the existing legal framework in Italy, which needs to be modified with regard to a series of key points: the Italian law for citizenship acquisition, access to the job market, regulations on how to apply for residence permits, especially considering the important role now played by family reunification. Before analysing the main guidelines for a reform of this kind, it is however necessary to fully grasp the growing differentiation that concerns the legal status of foreign nationals residing in Italy. Indeed, such a complex scenario has come into being not only because of the rapid change in migration patterns, but also because of the way different legislative instruments implemented at different levels of government - national and European – overlap.

It is however becoming increasingly clear that a permanent solution to the challenges posed by the trans-Mediterranean flows requires addressing the root causes of the phenomenon. In fact, migration flows are the final effect of a series of very specific causes, and efforts must be concentrated on removing them in order to obtain significant and lasting results. More concretely, everything possible must be done to end wars, to put an end to religious, political and ethnic persecutions, and to intervene in new and more effective ways to reduce poverty deriving from desertification, climate change, famines, corruption, and the indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources in the countries of origin.

### **3 Foreign students in the Italian school system**

As indicated in the document *Students with non-Italian citizenship. The difficulties and successes. National Report 2013/2014*, published on April 2015 by MIUR and the ISMU Foundation, the presence of “foreign students”, that is those “without Italian citizenship”, has increased constantly and progressively during the last decade and attendance has more than doubled, going from 307,141 students in 2003/04 (3.5% of the total school population) to 802,844 in 2013/14 (9%). The children born from migrant parents and without Italian citizenship now constitute the majority of the foreign students in Italian schools.

As regards the distribution across school levels, primary school still receives the greatest number of registrations among non-Italian students (Table 2), followed by upper and lower secondary schools and, finally, by pre-primary schools. Over the past decade, primary schools went from 40.3% of the total foreign student population in 2003/4 to 35.6% in 2013/14, while an opposite trend was recorded in upper secondary schools (the number of students increased in the same period from 17.1% to 22.7%).

School years	Absolute values			
	<i>Pre-primary</i>	<i>Primary</i>	<i>Lower Secondary</i>	<i>Upper Secondary</i>
2003/2004	59,500	123,814	71,447	52,380
2013/2014	137,650	283,233	169,780	182,181
	%			
2003/2004	19.4	40.3	23.3	17.1
2013/2014	20.9	35.3	21.1	22.7

Table 2. Absolute values and percentages of students with non-Italian citizenship by school level. 2003/04-2013/14. MIUR & ISMU (2015)

Foreign enrollments at schools between 2009/2010 and 2013/2014 grew by 19.2%, compared with a decrease of -2.0% among Italian students. The number of Italians has dropped across all grade levels, while that of foreign students has increased across all educational levels, but especially in Kindergartens and Pre-Kindergartens and in Upper Secondary schooling. The past five years have seen an increase in the attendance of foreigners in non-state schools (+16% in 2013/14 compared to 2009/2010). As for Italians, their numerical decline, for the same period, is more pronounced in non-state schools (-7.5% in five years) compared to state schools (-1.1%).

If we analyse the data in terms of students' country of origin, we can see that in 2013/14 Romanians are still the largest group (154,621), followed by Albanians (107,847) and Moroccans (101,176). With regard to gender, females are less numerous than males, making up 48% of the total (385,365). The only exception is upper secondary school, where females are more prevalent. In terms of geographic distribution, Lombardy continues to be the region with the largest number of foreign students (197,202), followed by Emilia Romagna (93,434), Veneto (92,924), Lazio (77,071) and Piedmont (75,276).

It is important to underline that children born in Italy represent the majority of these students. In fact, in 2013/14, for the first time, they represent 51.7% (415,283) of all foreign students (Table 3). Between 2007/8 and 2013/14 there was an exponential growth in native-born students of non-Italians in secondary schools, where their presence has tripled.

	A.V. (2007/08)	A.V. (2013/14)	Per 100 students (2007/08)	Per 100 students (2013/14)
<i>Pre-primary</i>	79,113	140,840	71.2	84.0
<i>Primary</i>	89,421	182,315	41.1	64.4
<i>Lower secondary</i>	22,474	64,338	17.8	37.9
<i>Upper secondary</i>	8,111	27,790	6.8	15.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>199,119</b>	<b>415,283</b>	<b>34.7</b>	<b>51.7</b>

*Table 3. Absolute values and percentages of native-born students without Italian citizenship. 2007/08-2013/14. MIUR & ISMU (2015)*

Focusing on geographical distribution shows us that the largest number of foreign students born in Italy live in the North West. In 2013/14, in this area there were 167,182 children with an immigrant background born in Italy (40.2%), followed by 123,142 in the North East (29.6%), 93,094 in the Centre (22.4%) and 31,865 in the South and the Islands (7.8 %). The region with the highest number of native-born students is Lombardy (more than 110,000).

If we consider newcomer students, between 2007/08 and 2013/14 their number dropped from 46,154 to 30,825. Between 2012/13 and 2013/14, however, there was a new surge (+7,989), which can be partly explained by the significant rise in family reunifications and an increase in the arrival of unaccompanied minors (10,536 in 2014).

Foreign students with disabilities were 11,760 in 2007/08, while in the 2013/14 school year these students rose to 26,626. This is a sharp increase that can be explained by the extension of compulsory education and the decision among this group to continue studying after the initial obligatory two-year period in lower secondary school.

As for Roma, Sinti and Caminanti students, their number decreased by 5.6% between 2007/08 and 2013/14, a reduction that is even more marked in Kindergartens/Pre-Kindergartens and primary schools.

Foreign students in the Italian educational system present some common characteristics, which in most cases are accompanied by problematic situations, created by critical economic, social and cultural conditions, that can lead to more or less severe forms of exclusion and marginalization.

Research conducted at an international level highlights the importance that preschool education has in childhood for the early development of fundamental abilities and skills that later will also be used and implemented in subsequent educational levels. In fact, it is well

acknowledged that exposure to high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) favours success in a child's future education (Mullis et al., 2012; OECD, 2012; 2015). This has been strongly emphasised by various EU initiatives. The 2011 Council Conclusions on ECEC, for example, recognized a wide range of short and longterm benefits for both individuals and society. ECEC is particularly beneficial for children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and serves as an essential starting point for the building of equitable educational systems. Participation in ECEC from a very young age can, improve the language skills of migrant children whose first language is often not the language of instruction at school. It also improves the likelihood that these children will be successful in their education, and reduces the risk of them becoming socially excluded (European Commission, 2014).

Also in Italy children with an immigrant background and from families with low Socio Economic Status (SES), aspects that are often related to each other, are less involved in social and educational preschool services. Moreover, even if they attend school, these kinds of students tend to access a lower-quality offer compared to their peers. Since ECEC participation positively influences the development of language, basic learning skills, and the literacy process, effectively laying the foundation for students' future academic success, these aspects are extremely relevant for the children of immigrant families who often face multiple linguistic and cultural difficulties to achieve good academic results. Therefore, the earlier these children are exposed to the new language, the more easily and quickly they will learn it. If they live in a difficult context, with poor family interactions, ECEC can offer an environment for socialization and learning (Vandenbroeck, Lazzari, 2013).

The access to preschool, on the other hand, is not to be understood as a simple consequence of parents' free choice, but is rather the result of an environment that limits or provides opportunities, conditioned by the training supply (availability of services, affordability, accessibility, and absence of barriers, etc.). Although the condition has improved and ECEC participation in Italy has grown since the beginning of the century, especially with the rise of the second generation, it is still necessary to reflect upon and invest in ensuring access to high-quality, multi-ethnic preschools (Crul, Schneider & Lelie, 2012). Recently, Act no. 107/2015, about "Good School", among other measures also included the innovation of ECEC services, through the definition of an integrated system 0-6 years, from birth to six, that provides: a) the generalization of kindergarten; b) teachers and educators' university qualification and continuous training; c) common quality standards for ECEC services, diversified by type and age of children; d) territorial pedagogical



coordination with tasks of monitoring the access and adequacy of the training offer for early childhood.

Another very worrying phenomenon that denotes the current status of foreign students in the Italian educational system is the rate of early school leavers (ESLs). A downward trend in ESLs has characterized Italy from 2000 to the present day. ESLs went from being 25% to 17% of young people aged 18-24 in 2013, but the proportion is still very high, far from the goal of Europe 2020 and well above the European average, similarly to other Southern European countries.

Moreover, the percentage of ESLs among young people born abroad is double that of natives. Foreign-born students face multiple risk factors - such as economic deprivation, low educational expectations, scarce support from their families, conflictual relationships with peers, misunderstandings with teachers, etc. - that lead them to leave school early (Nouwen, Clycq & Ulična, 2015). In 2013, Italian ESLs are 11%, while among non-natives the percentage rises to 22.7%.

The most recent data published by Eurostat also confirms foreigners' disadvantage when it comes to school dropout: in Europe ESLs in 2014 fell to 10.2% among natives, but were still more than double that figure (23.2%) among foreigners, and the number is even higher among non-EU nationals (25.5%). It is therefore necessary to intervene with specific measures in favour of a generation that is likely to be absent from education, training and, often, also from work - bearing in mind, in the perspective of active citizenship, that this is a group that is likely to be eclipsed also from public and institutional spaces of participation (Santagati, 2015b; Lodigiani, Santagati, 2016).

The final indicator we want to take into consideration to highlight the situation of non-wellbeing that a part of foreign students is experiencing in the Italian schools, to the point that it poses serious questions about the level of educational equity pursued at system level, is the failure to acquire basic skills.

In this case attention is given to the outcomes of the educational paths of first and second generation foreign students; these are always compared with those of Italian students in order to highlight problem areas and good results, difficulties and improvements for the new generations, looking at international (OECD PISA 2012) (OECD, 2014) and national (Invalsi results, 2013/14 s.y.) data (INVALSI, 2014).

The group of "low achievers" is identified by the OECD PISA program as that percentage of 15 year-old students who fail to reach the minimum required level of sufficiency in Reading, Maths and Science, and have

difficulty in demonstrating their knowledge and using it in different situations.

According to PISA 2012 (OECD, 2014), and considering the 27 participating EU countries, on average, Low Achievers total 17.8% in Reading, 16.6% in Science, and 22.1% in Maths. The best performing country in all three disciplines is Estonia, while the worst are Bulgaria (Math and Reading) and Romania (in Science). The goal for Europe 2020 is for Member States to have less than 15% of students who are Low Achievers (European Commission, 2011). Taking country of origin into account, many studies highlight the persistent disadvantage of students with an immigrant background (Colombo, Santagati, 2014). According to OECD PISA 2012, in European countries natives with poor reading skills were approximately 16.2%, whereas among foreign-born students the percentage rose to 30.6%. In Maths the gap is even greater, with 20.4% of Low Achievers among natives and 36.3% among those born abroad. Both Bulgaria and Romania are characterized by very high rates of Low Achievers, with more than 50% of students with an immigrant background falling into this category, for both Reading and Maths. Other countries such as Sweden (45.6%), Italy (41.2%) and France (41%), where the disadvantage gap for foreigners is still wide, have high rates of Low Achievers in Reading. In Maths too there is a high number of foreign Low Achievers in many countries: Bulgaria (53.9%), Greece (53.3%), Sweden (51.5%), France (46.4%), Italy (43, 6%), Spain (42.1%) and Slovenia (41.8%). There are four exceptions, however, where the proportion of foreigners is lower than that of natives (in 2012): this is the case of Hungary, Ireland, Poland and Romania.

In Italy, the share of Low Achievers in Reading among those born abroad exceeds that of natives by 23 percentage points; in Maths and Science this distance is reduced at around 20 points. However, the highest share of Low Achievers can be found among foreigners in Maths (43.65%), followed by Reading (41.26%) and Science (37.62%). From the analysis of the results of the PISA 2012 OECD study on 15 year-old students, Italy is among the low performer countries in Mathematics, i.e. those countries of the European Union below the OECD average (with scores below 490), along with Norway, Portugal, Spain, the Slovak Republic, Sweden, Hungary, and Greece. Italy is also included among the group of states with the worst average results both in Mathematics performance, and in terms of the gap between native and immigrant students: the school systems of Italy, Spain, Greece, Norway, and Sweden appear even less effective when it comes to foreign students.

The Italian educational system, on the basis of these data, does not seem to be very effective, on average, due to the low level achieved

both in terms of the educational integration of foreigners and poor equity (Manenti, Perillo, 2015).

With reference to the national data gathered by the National Evaluation Service tests - coordinated by Invalsi (National Institute for the Evaluation of the System of Education and Training) - in the 2013/14 school year, foreign students non-success rate was about 14.7% in primary schools (compared to 1.9% for Italians), 41.5% in Lower Secondary schools (versus 7.4% for Italians), and 65.1% in Upper Secondary schools (compared to 23.3% for Italians). Looking at data for that same school year, the rates of foreign students repeating a year confirms the gap between Italian and foreigners, especially in the earlier years. For the first time, in 2013/14, technical schools represented the secondary school option chosen by most foreign students (38.5%), a position previously held by vocational schools, which are now in second place (37.9%), followed by Lyceums (23.5%). The increase in enrollments is due to foreign students born in Italy, who tend to prefer technical institutes (41.1%) and Lyceums (29.6%).

An analysis of the data of the Invalsi tests, during the 2013/14 s.y., on results in Italian and Mathematics, confirms that native students tend to score above the national average across all sample classes, whereas foreigners are below average, although scores are higher among second generation students compared to first generations. The average score gap between native and foreign students is less evident in Mathematics tests when compared to tests of Italian. The 2013/14 data, compared to the previous school year, shows that among native students performances have not improved across any school level, while among first-generation immigrants students there is an improvement in Grades 2 and 8 and a slight deterioration in Grade 10. Among their second generation peers there is an improvement in Grade 8, but also a slight decrease in performance in all other classes (INVALSI, 2014).

With the rise in the number of Italian-born foreign students, there is an improvement in academic results and educational paths, with a reduction in educational delays and repeat years. This reduces to some extent, the difficulties faced by this cohort, which, nonetheless continue to remain high. Nonetheless, the collected data analysis highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the Italian school system, which still needs to invest in the improvement of performance for all students, increasing excellence in results, while promoting equal opportunities for both Italian and non-Italian students (Catarci & Fiorucci, 2015).

In addition to data from the Ministry of Education (MIUR), information provided by other organizations, such as ISFOL (Institute for the Development of Vocational Training of Workers) show that foreign students failure rate is 15.5% of all students in the first three years of the VET

(Vocational Education and Training) system and 15.2% in the fourth year. With reference to Higher Education, the data on university enrollments for the 2013/14 academic year indicates that nearly half of foreign males holds a Upper Secondary Technical School certificate (49.7%), and 17% have a Upper Secondary Professional School qualification (Isfol, 2015). Although technical and professional choices are often interpreted as segregating, foreign students who qualify from these institutions do not go to higher educational studies. In 2013, young people with non-Italian citizenship represented 15.8% of the total NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) population in Italy, with a greater incidence compared to Italians of the same age. An important difference is gender: Italian NEETs are predominantly male (50.3%), whereas among foreign NEETs 67.3% are young women. For some minorities in particular, however, this figure represents an inability to work or study for family reasons. Finally, analyzing vocational and educational training opportunities for adult immigrants, the latest INDIRE (National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research) report available (2012) reports that 43.9% of all adults attending public schools for adults (CPIAs) are foreigners. In the past six academic years, this group has grown significantly, with a corresponding decrease in the number of Italian adult students.

#### **4 Towards an inclusive and intercultural school system: efforts, challenges and perspectives**

To cope with the difficulties that foreign students of first and second generation immigrants meet in attending Italian schools, a wide range of programs and policies for the promotion of academic success in the most fragile groups has been provided.

In the Italian school policies a decisive turning point in the direction of an intercultural school is represented by the "Act on intercultural issues" dated 19 December 2005, by the National Council of Education, which certifies the alignment of Italy to European indicators defined in the *Handbook on Integration for Policy-makers and Practitioners*, published by the European Commission in 2004 (Niessen & Schibel, 2004). This Act states that intercultural education, which is directly linked to the processes of globalization, demands that the school make the encounter between cultures a reality so as to live and coexist peacefully, without changing the identity processes, and by ensuring the rights of citizens through the implementation of the educational rights. The appeal must therefore be towards a systemic vision that involves all institutions, together with the school, in a participatory and territorial planning for integration. The Act envisages an immediately practical

way which consists in the inclusion of intercultural education at the center of the school curricula.

This requires actions to support initial and in service teachers' training in order to operate within a logic of sharing between the different entities active in the area. The proposals for action addressed to the Ministry of Education, University and Research, and to single educational institutions highlight the need for a local-area territorial plan to support school autonomy, the relationship between networks of schools and other autonomies, creating laboratories to document intercultural practices, action-research programs and second language activities to facilitate pupils and their families' process of social and school integration. This led to the conditions for the *Guidelines for the Reception and Integration of Foreign Students*, published in March 2006 by the MIUR (Ministry of Education, University and Research, 2006; 2008), which showcases the good practices developed by Italian schools towards immigrant pupils, while stressing the fact that having overcome the emergency phase experienced by schools, the latter become simultaneously privileged observers of immigrants' social integration problems. Specific protocols for school welcoming and interscholastic and local-area networks of cultural mediation are defined.

Within this framework, in 2007, the Ministry of Education elaborated the document "*The Italian way for intercultural schooling and the integration of foreign pupils*", prepared by the National Observatory for the integration of foreign students and for intercultural education. The goal of this document is to develop an Italian model aimed to:

- Highlight the specific circumstances, the choices and actions that have characterized and characterize the Italian experience;
- identify the strong points that must become an integral part of the "system";
- consider the weaknesses to be addressed with new practices and resources and,
- give visibility to new goals and projects.

It therefore speaks of an Italian specificity, not considered as a radical difference compared to other European experiences, but as a diversity of choices and actions in relation to the composition of the structural data. This is related to three main areas:

- Actions for integration: strategies aimed at ensuring students the right to education, equality in education paths, the participation in school life;

- actions for interaction: lines of action that refer to the pedagogical and teaching management of changes taking place in the school and in
- society, by considering the process of meeting the challenges of social cohesion, the conditions of intercultural exchange and relations between similar and different subjects, and,
- actors and resources: information on the organizational aspects, forms and ways of cooperation between school and civil society, the local-area specificities, from awareness about how integration is to be co-constructed, in school and out-of-school (Favaro, 2007).

The Italian school system has adopted these requirements, encouraging the inclusion of foreign students in ordinary schools within the regular school classes, avoiding the creation of separate spaces for learning in the awareness of the positive value of a daily confrontation with diversity. It highlights, in this regard, the importance of the individual relationship with the “other” so as to encourage the construction of educational projects based on each pupil’s biographical and relational uniqueness which is to be enhanced thanks to an intercultural curriculum (Pinto Minerva, 2002).

The model generated is a dynamic model, even if the phenomenon of migration takes on aspects of stabilization due to family long-term migration projects, the increasing number of children of immigrant origin born in Italy, or, in any case, attending the entire schooling system, subjects’ age which requires compliance with non-standardized stages of growth. The adoption of an intercultural perspective does not only provide for the inclusion of compensatory measures. Indeed, teaching in an intercultural perspective means taking diversity as a paradigm for the identity of the school, a privileged opportunity to open towards all kinds of differences.

Between 2007 and 2014, several documents were published to facilitate foreign students’ inclusion at school-level, as well as the educational value of intercultural education for all students (Italian and non-Italian). This was reported in the *Guidelines for the Reception and Integration of Foreign Students* of 2014 (MIUR, 2014). In this document, some aspects that may contribute to foreign students’ academic success are identified, in order to make the school an educational learning environment, able, not only to develop knowledge and skills, but also to promote the wellbeing of young generations.

Hereafter, the measures and actions that schools are required to achieve to fully implement school inclusion and intercultural education, are briefly described.



- *Early childhood education and care*: The importance and need for high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been strongly emphasised by *Guidelines*, in accordance with various EU initiatives, such as the Council Conclusions on ECEC in 2011. It is well acknowledged that exposure to high quality ECEC favours success in a child's future education. It constitutes the first step in a long process of lifelong learning and is a key element to enable and empower all children to realise their potential (Paparella, 1996).

The ECEC allows the child to fully develop their cognitive, emotional, relational and linguistic interaction through play with peers and adults.

Experiences, for example, that children have at kindergarten serve to provide exploratory and interpretative instruments of the surrounding reality, which will also be useful in further education when the child begins to deal with the disciplinary knowledge of primary school (Grange Sergi, 2013). ECEC can also be helpful for the families of foreign students who, for the first time, come into contact with local institutions. Activities such as enrollment, health documents, residence permits, make parents aware of what their duties and their children's educational rights are, as well as the regulations of the host country. ECEC can be a way to avoid social exclusion, that often, for different reasons, is directly related to immigrant families, thus becoming a tool of inclusion and socialization for all that goes beyond school-time, and extends into informal relations lived outside the classroom.

ECEC can also represent the first moment of real welcome for the foreign child and his family, because at this stage the school can collect information on family composition, family migration project, parents' cultural and educational models, dynamics and roles of intra-family relationships. From the perspective of educational continuity all this information is invaluable, as it contributes to the construction of each child's personal biography, that the school must first respect and then try to implement through teaching.

- *Construction of the intercultural curriculum*: as stated in the *National Guidelines for the Curriculum* of 2012 (MIUR, 2012), intercultural education is not a subject in itself but an 'across-the-board' educational approach to the different teachings which contributes to the development of the key competencies of citizenship. For this reason the intercultural curriculum is part of the core school curriculum, to the extent that it develops learning, values, attitudes that should belong to every citizen. In detail the intercultural curriculum aims to:

- Enhance the sense of belonging based on the awareness of one's own cultural identity, ethnic-social roots, but also the multi-belongings of various social and cultural groups;
- develop the capacity of 'decentralization' which tends to overcome its own point of view in order to also consider that of others, as a condition for exchanges and comparisons not exclusively centered on one's own identity;
- gain awareness of how rules mutate over time and are affected by cultural and social conditions;
- identify strategies to manage, mediate and resolve conflicts, this presupposes a commitment to identify common traits and values in all mankind, establishing the elements of sharing and, thus, overcome all forms of localism, nationalism in order to open up to the global community, and,
- train to think democratically, understood as develop the ability to form students' critical thinking, encourage independent judgment, develop the ability to decode new situations and behaviors without preconceived prejudices.

Intercultural curriculum design, besides requiring a review of content based on new disciplinary and interdisciplinary topics, at the same time, demands a profound innovation of methodologies. This primarily involves the careful recognition of students' prior knowledge, as bearers of their culture. We must also define a training contract between teachers and students, and explicit content, objectives and learning results to be reached by the end of the training-paths. It is in this way that we can strengthen student motivation towards active involvement through methodologies that leverage on role-playing, simulations, case studies, project work, the use of multimedia tools, and approaches which go beyond the textbooks (Cambi, 2001).

Therefore, the teaching methodologies to be favored are those based on workshop-formats, aimed at fostering discovery, a passion for the search of new knowledge, collaborative forms of learning, awareness of one's own way of learning, paying attention to everyone's strengths and weaknesses. An intercultural curriculum also requires a redefinition of the students' role in the educational path, which must be an active role with respect to the decisions to be taken in the various phases of work, relying on peer-group internal resources, identifying links between school and the outside world, selecting experts and/or privileged witnesses present at the local level (Capperucci & Cartei, 2010).

- *Education and career guidance*: the Italian school system views the provision of education and career guidance as a primary duty, and it is one of the general objectives of the education process. Schools, in fact, are expected to create a learning environment that encourages

students to develop their aspirations, manage their choices and take decisions about their future career. It is important to specify that providing guidance, supporting students in their decision-making and preparing them to cope with the challenges of the real world are among the main tasks of all school staff (Batini, 2016). Education and career guidance is traditionally delivered through formally established school-based guidance or counselling services available to students (mainly on an individual basis). However, it is becoming increasingly popular as an area within core curricula, which includes guidance-related objectives and so provides space for it in the classroom.

In Italy 'guidance' is interpreted in two ways. It is: a) the support given to students in choosing which education or career option to take; b) the psychological counselling and provision of additional learning support that is essential, especially when dealing with students who are at-risk of leaving school early as some non-Italian students. Three main objectives are assigned for education and career guidance at school level: providing advice and support to students; developing their individual skills and competences; informing them about career choices. These objectives play a part in reducing ELET rates, for all kinds of students but for foreigners in particular, as achieving these objectives contributes to preventing student disengagement and provides the opportunity for early intervention when students show signs of the difficulties associated with leaving school early (Zanniello, 1997).

Guidance is thought to provide advice and support to students to enable them to make the right choices in relation to their educational and work opportunities, and to help them to meet the challenges they will face in their adult lives. In this case, guidance can be very useful for under-achieving foreign students, who are frequently absent from school and/or present behavioural difficulties. In such cases, guidance can help

in the early detection of learning problems or lack of motivation, as well as in providing a holistic approach to supporting individuals. The role of guidance is therefore to provide continuing and long-term support to improve students' self-confidence and motivation for learning and to help them stay in education (European Commission, 2011). Guidance can be used also to help students develop their individual skills and aptitudes and thereby enable them to manage their future educational and career choices. Skills such as developing self-knowledge, self-awareness, self-assessment, problem-solving and decision-making skills can encourage students to explore their own personality so that they begin to understand and to become aware of their own values, interests and abilities. Education and career guidance is not included in the compulsory core curriculum and is not provided in the classroom as a separate subject, but it is a cross-curricular dimension of the curriculum and all teachers must contribute to the implementation of the objectives

as defined in the curricula and they are published in general steering documents such as the Training Offer Plan.

In more than one case education and career guidance provided in the classroom may be complemented by activities outside lessons, for instance, in the form of extra-curricular activities. The ways of delivering guidance may be divided into individual and group methods. Some of the group activities are organised at school level, while others need the assistance of others such as external guidance and counselling services. Schools run projects at class or school level, and sometimes have information sessions with guest-speakers such as guidance specialists or prospective employers. They also set up workshops and seminars, during which students learn interview skills or how to write a curriculum vitae. The advantage of organising events at school level is that they take place close to students and also to their parents who may be invited. Events outside school may include career fairs and open-days in higher education institutions and workplaces. These events give students an opportunity to become acquainted with the external world of work and higher education.

Work experience, work-placements in companies or school-work alternation paths are popular practices used in general, technical and vocational secondary schools. These enable students to be introduced to the reality of the job-market, to gain personal experiences of working-life and different professions in an authentic environment. The recent reform of the secondary school (2015) in Italy has boosted the number of hours devoted to this kind of activity thanks to the positive results seen in recent years, which have enabled schools to get in touch with the world of work and vocational training. Also the European Commission highlights the fact that experience of the workplace can motivate students to continue education and training and to become more focused on their future career choices and therefore is an important measure to prevent early school leaving (European Commission, 2013). In order to ensure success in this area, the whole school community (school head and teachers) has a responsibility for providing guidance, even though, in the majority of the cases, it is school teachers who organize the entire service; the involvement of external professional specialists is less frequent, with the exception of specific projects funded by public or private institutions.

Guidance plays an important role in the academic success of foreign students. Today some prejudices seem to persist that lead to the choice of the school to continue studies which is based on students' ethnic and social belonging. This creates inequality within the school system starting from the school choice. This shows how much there is still to do to construct a correct culture of guidance. The statistics, in fact, show that

the majority of foreign students, including those who did all their studies in Italy, is directed towards technical and, even more so, vocational education. National and local studies have found a particularly high proportion of foreign students in the regional three-year courses of vocational education and training (VET). What deserves special attention is the fact that while the technical schools enroll more students born in Italy than those born abroad, instead, in vocational education the opposite happens. As for lyceums, the only one that has so far exerted a significant attraction for foreign students is that addressed to scientific studies.

- *Strengthening of VET and integrated pathways:* as already mentioned, young foreigners in Italy suffer from specific vulnerabilities with regard to education. They meet difficulties in accessing non-vocational secondary education and higher education, demonstrate lower academic performances compared to natives, a higher risk of dropout, a higher likelihood of joining the NEET group (Bertozzi, 2015; Manenti, Perillo, 2015).

Considering the double challenge faced by Italy – youth unemployment, but also the imbalance between skills young people develop in educational contexts and those required by the workplace (Cedefop, 2014) – and focusing on one of the most vulnerable groups, that of immigrants, the role of Vocational Education and Training (VET) is crucial. This is especially true if the perspective is to strengthen the VET system, definitively giving it a place within the overall educational system in order to maximise its impact in contrasting youth unemployment.

Initial VET in the Italian context, is, however, characterized by numerous paradoxes and critical aspects, despite the strong trend towards innovation, focused on the development of teaching and organizational methodologies, on learning-by-doing and on skills-based learning. This educational segment has long been considered – ideologically and incorrectly – as the receptacle for fragile and multi-problematic students. These are young people from a disadvantaged background, typically students who come from families of lower socio-economic status, but also pupils with learning and relational difficulties, those who have been kept back one or more years and risk dropping out of education altogether, those with mental health or existential/experiential issues (immigrant students and those with disabilities), and students referred by the Social Services (Allulli, Nicoli, Magatti, 2003; Perone, 2006). This problematic segment has impacted negatively on the VET system, as well as on its image and reputation; indeed, for a long time initial VET targeted mainly unqualified young people without qualifications. For this group it offered a route of re-entry in education, which has recently been compounded by the recent inclusion of young immigrants, who

have further reinforced the idea of VET as an educational option for second class citizens or “non-citizens”.

Despite this negative representation, initial VET has offered and continues to offer disadvantaged young people the chance to reaffirm the connection between training and the workplace, creating opportunities to re-ignite the motivation to learn and offering qualifications to find, maintain or change occupation (Lodigiani, 2008; 2010). VET is based on the educational method of alternating school and work, and founded on the idea that one can learn and innovate by doing (Schwartz, 1995; Luciano, 1999). It has represented a parallel route to traditional education in terms of learning objectives and of promoting new generations' entry in the labour market. Foreign-born students represent a significant component of initial VET users (Colombo, Santagati, 2013). ISFOL data for 2010/11 indicate the presence of 24,170 foreign students, concentrated especially in Lombardy, Veneto, Emilia Romagna, Piedmont and Lazio, 20% of students took part in three-year courses and, 40% of cases were enrolled in VET courses after completing lower secondary education (ISFOL, 2012a). The 2013/14 training year offers a more in-depth analysis of foreign students. The ISFOL report confirms the inclusive character of initial VET with respect to non-Italians; unique compared to other segments of the Italian educational system. The number of foreigners, in particular, continues to grow compared to previous years and includes 46,539 students in the first three years and 1,746 in the fourth year, for a total of 48,285 students (ISFOL, 2015). In the fourth year, the percentage of foreign students remains stable (16.8%), similar to the percentage of the first three years (16.9%). From a territorial point of view, the area with the highest incidence of foreigners among the VET student population is in the North East (approximately 27% in schools and over 23% in training institutions), followed by the North West (21% and 17% respectively).

The choice of initial VET among immigrants is prevalent among males – based on the offer of courses that refer to a culture of industries, trades and crafts that is connected to a male-oriented occupational demand – whereas in mainstream education there is a greater gender balance or, as in the case of upper secondary school, a prevalence of females. Female students in VET represent 43.6% among natives and only 34% among foreigners, with even lower numbers in some provinces.

In terms of training choices, in 2013/14 there were particularly high percentages of foreigners enrolled in the three-year course for Mechanical Operator (26.9%), Motor Vehicle Repair Operator (25.9%), Thermo-hydraulic Plant Operator (21.6%) among the predominantly male-oriented qualifications, but also in the predominantly female-based



Admin-secretarial Operator (21.8%) programme; similar distributions can be found also in the fourth years.

On the total number of students, the proportion of foreigners is highest in the mechanical (30.3%) and fashion and design (28.9%) areas. This over-representation in the technical-vocational chain – defined in the ISMU Foundation studies as “educational channelization” – represents a clear indicator of an educational disadvantage for foreign-born students who choose or are guided to reconsider their educational careers downwards, showing less opportunities to continue and complete their studies, as well as reduced chances of accessing higher positions in the occupational hierarchy (Canino, 2010). VET, however, is not a mere mode of accessing the labour market. According to the ISFOL report (Daniele, 2014), it appears that one fourth of the sample, both Italian and non-Italian, plans to continue studying to achieve a diploma and, perhaps, enrol in higher education. These students have positive expectations for the future and consider the educational investment – even long term – as a strategy to ensure equal opportunities, in the face of social and labour discriminations they have seen in their parents experience. Therefore, despite immigrants’ positive attitudes towards their occupational future, it appears necessary to look at the numerous risks of marginalization that can emerge with access to the labour market.

Research has also strived to analyse the strategies adopted by training institutions which face the multicultural transformations of users, highlighting critical areas or those which deserve further attention. In terms of the treatment of foreign-born students, the earliest studies suggest VET is characterized by a widespread welcoming attitude, but an approach that considers the specificities of different national origins has not been developed. The strengths of initial VET appear to be, in particular: the ability to respond to the specific needs of students, tailoring the educational relationship with specific instruments (individual guidance, tutoring, work-school alternation, personalized programmes, laboratory and workshop experiences, etc.); the presence of qualified and motivated educators which, in different roles (teachers, coordinators, tutors, guidance counsellors, project managers, etc.), obtain good results with immigrants, thanks also to the network of schools, services and the labour market (Besozzi, Colombo, 2009; Santagati, 2011).

Among the weak points of the system, on the other hand, we have: the same treatment of different difficulties among students (economic, cultural, family, migratory, etc.); the challenge of optimising resources that come from immigrant families and students; little exchange of good practices, instruments and materials among training agencies (and with

schools); limited training in teaching/learning in multicultural educational contexts.

The ISFOL report (Daniele, 2014) which drew on case studies conducted in training centres in the North and South of Italy, also identified multiple critical aspects, in part already highlighted by previous analyses:

- a trainers' training based on hands-on experience and developed in an intuitive fashion, but which does not include systematic and focused actions for managing multicultural classes;
- varied but still insufficient guidance actions, that rarely reach those minors and families most needy of support and which, conversely, should be standardized nationwide, especially when the offer is made more complex by the interactions between school and training;
- a lack of courses in Italian language and culture, not yet organized as a structured and formal offer, but still conducted by volunteer teachers in emergency conditions, and,
- many experiences aimed at fostering a positive climate within mixed classrooms, but without the clear framework of intercultural learning.

Despite the lack of clearly defined integration policies for immigrant students, however, different regional and provincial administrations, often in partnership with private organizations, have put in place specific actions for foreign-born students, which have developed along two lines (ISFOL, 2012c). The first aims at realigning core competences and in particular Italian language learning. The second aims at integrating these students in the system of services (help desks, initial interventions, guidance counselling and other actions for entry in the workplace).

This analysis of immigrants' participation in initial VET outlines a complex and contradictory picture. This is the starting point to think about and implement adequate measures and policies aimed at promoting educational success and equal opportunities for all disadvantaged students. However, initial VET represents a relevant opportunity for foreign-born adolescents, which should not be considered as a second-class or final training opportunity for subjects who are at risk of exclusion from training, employment and society. Rather, VET represents a different opportunity, not inferior but equivalent to the standard educational offer, in terms of quality of teaching, of contents and skills acquired, and of occupational prospects. VET is not only a generic receptacle for the children of immigrants, but rather becomes a concrete occasion for the integration of foreign adolescents, thanks to methodologies and offers that appear to be particularly appropriate for subjects with discontinuous and problematic biographical trajectories such as those generated by migration (Cedefop, 2011). In the process of integration,

therefore, vocational training within compulsory education performs some crucial functions such as:

- Reactivating the process of acquiring knowledge, abilities and skills interrupted by migration, demotivation, lack of guidance, etc., important in the prospective of qualifying human capital and lifelong learning;
- incrementing students' social capital, especially through relationships with educators and trainers who are able to guide them through training and work and towards educational success;
- developing students' abilities to live and collaborate in diversified contexts, via cooperative learning activities and methodologies, tutoring, conflict management, lab work, etc., and,
- promoting and protecting young people in work contexts, helping them to take responsibility and discover their rights and duties as citizens, which they can exercise in the workplace and, more generally, in the social sphere.

At the same time, the increasing presence of these students, motivated to learn and obtain good results, is an opportunity for the whole system and for training policies. It is a stimulus to direct attention to the specificities of single students, to deconstruct prejudices and stereotypes that act on guidance and counselling, to intervene on disadvantages, in order to achieve educational success for all, founded on the reciprocal connection between training and employment that contrasts discrimination and constructs spaces of participation and citizenship (Santagati, 2012).

## **5 Conclusions**

Within this slightly worrisome scenario, which is nonetheless showing some signs of improvement, there is still much that needs to be done. The recent application of Italian Law no. 107 called "Good School", published on July 13, 2015, which reforms the National System of Education and Training aims to reduce the sociocultural inequalities, found in the national and international studies mentioned above, which often penalise foreign students. The analysis of the Italian educational policies suggests investing in prevention and contrasting policies related to Early School Leaving, which continues to be significantly high especially among non-Italian students. This could be achieved through measures aimed at increasing the rate of youth employment through VET and on-the-job training, as well as by further developing an intercultural approach to education which would help foster positive school climates (Besozzi, Colombo, Santagati, 2013), as well as initiatives to support teachers and other school staff in the development of skills related to guidance and personalized educational intervention

designed within the school curriculum, defined by each student's needs and ability to capitalize the added-value that diversity can give to school and to society as a whole (Zanfrini, 2015b).

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