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Article title: **Second-generation youth in Italy and their path to adulthood. Who is supporting them?**

Abstract

In Italy, 9.2% of school students come from a migrant family. Of these, 55.3% were born in Italy itself. With the data revealing a situation in which these young, second-generation migrants face educational disadvantages that lead to structural inequality and social injustice, we ask: which adults are supporting them during their education? We present results from a qualitative study that, to date, has involved 25 young adults from migrant families. The data highlight the importance of primary and secondary agents of socialisation, though they more clearly decry the isolation that "differentness" brings. The institutional context (schools, job market, welfare/citizenship policies) generates unintentional segregation that leads to social exclusion. In Italy, two issues come to the fore: a) the inadequacies of the school system (curriculum, teacher training, support of L2 acquisition) and b) citizenship laws that penalise second-generation migrants.

Keywords
Second generation, migrant students, support, exclusion, educational and social justice.

Introduction. A world on the move

Italy's state-school population includes 193 different nationalities. 9.2% of pupils in the country: 814,851 (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca [MIUR], 2017) are of non-Italian nationality (n.I.n.), though 55.3% of these "non-Italian" students were born in Italy. Among under-18s, this statistic rises to 72.7%. Thirty years after the first measures promoting the integration of migrant pupils were announced, the data tell a story of educational disadvantage, which itself speaks of an ingrained structural inequality.

The Italian school system has taken the path of integration, and (in theory) an intercultural approach to teaching and learning (MIUR 2007; 2012; 2014). The data suggest some progress, and a "progressive capability to integrate among non-Italian children" (MIUR, 2014, p. 4). However, a number of characteristics place Italian schools at an intermediate level, with n.I.n. students still lagging academically. And though the share of students being held back a year has dropped by 10 percentage points over the most recent five-year period, recent statistics (MIUR, 2017) confirm

the impression that there are structural disadvantages attributable to the school system itself. For instance, the figures for students who are behind in relation to their direct contemporaries break down as follows (Iniziative e Studi sulla Multietnicità [ISMU] & MIUR, 2016, p. 9):

- primary level: 13.4% of n.I.n. students, compared to 1.8% of Italian nationals;
- lower-secondary level, 39.1% of n.I.n. students and 7% of Italian nationals;
- upper-secondary level, 63% of n.I.n. students, 22.4% of Italian nations.

These figures are partly attributable to the widespread practice of placing first-generation migrant children in the year below their contemporaries. However, beyond primary education, as greater demands are placed on students' abilities (especially their command of "academic" language), the disparity increases (MIUR, 2017).
We must also consider adolescents who drop out of education early. Among "native" Italians, 13.6% are "early school leavers"; this figure rises to 27.1% for other EU nationalities, and 34.4% for non-EU students.

Second-generation[1] young people in Italy are required to attend some form of upper-secondary education (education is compulsory till the age of 16). Vocational colleges, which offer a route into work but less so into university, attract a disproportionately large share of students from a migrant background (28.9% of Italian-born n.I.n. students; 38.8% of n.I.n. students born in other countries – ISMU-MIUR, 2016; MIUR, 2014).

In 2013, the level of NEET status (Not in Education, Employment or Training) among 15- to 29-year-olds in Italy broke down as follows: 24.7% of Italian nationals, 34.6% of other EU nationals, 35.9% of non-EU nationals (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2015).

These substantial figures reveal a "deep-rooted disparity" in the academic progress of students from migrant backgrounds (ISMU & MIUR, 2015, p. 9; MIUR, 2014). In short, the statistics (MIUR, 2017; Istituto Nazionale di Statistica [ISTAT], 2016; ISMU & MIUR, 2016) reveal a narrative in which educational disadvantages lead to structural inequality that in turn translates into, or reinforces, phenomena of social injustice. In this sense, one of the most significant conclusions of the theoretical review carried out is the lack of cultural recognition afforded to migrant students that is still detected in Italian schools. The majority of the didactic experiences observed either ignored or discriminated against the cultural differences of migrants, clearly fostering a model of cultural assimilation (Ambrosini & Caneva, 2009; Ambrosini & Molina, 2004, Caneva 2011; Damiano, 2008).

Against this backdrop, it seems reasonable to explore such questions as: which adults are supporting young second-generation students during their education? Where, and to which groups, do second-generation youth feel they belong? What is their identity? What models of social justice and equality inform the policies that affect them?

1. Pathways to integration

[1] The label 'second-generation' has been questioned in the literature (Ambrosini, 2009; Thomassen, 2010) insofar as it represents an attempt to define a group based solely on the immigration status of the parents and their culture of origin. Nevertheless, since it is used extensively in the literature, we have decided to retain this term of analysis, conscious of the issues it presents, and the multiplicity of factors (micro, meso and macro) that play a role in describing an individual's journey through life.

The position that second-generation young adults occupy in society is not only central to their chances of success as individuals; in terms of a genuine shift towards greater interculturalism, it is a key factor in the very process of inclusion and social cohesion. North American studies suggest that second and third generations of migrant families face a challenging – and diverse – future. From the concept of "second generation decline" (Gans, 1992 in particular) to the theory of "segmented assimilation" (Portes & Zhou, 1993), the future of these young adults appears less than rosy. Traditional, linear models of assimilation no longer fit the experiences of today's migrant families. The diversity of the ethnic groups involved, combined with the neoliberal mechanisms of our economies and individualistic models of identity, create a more complex reality.

Certain authors have identified a degree of upward mobility among second-generation migrants (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Waters & Holdaway, 2008). However, in the societies most affected by the economic crisis and the related precariousness of the job market, opportunities for second-generation youth have become scarcer. For individuals with little education, the chances of upward social mobility are slim to none. The crisis affects sectors with fewer resources more negatively. The most disadvantaged people are the weakest, those with the least qualifications, the highest poverty index, the lowest levels of social support and an irregular administrative situation, and as the data reveal, the immigrant collective and their children are among them (Pajares, 2010; Quiroga & Alonso, 2011).

To process this complex reality, European academics have turned to the theory of segmented assimilation (Crul & Vermeulen, 2003; Heckmann, Lederer & Worbs, 2001; Penn & Lambert, 2009) whereby they consider the forces affecting young people from migrant backgrounds in terms of the modes of integration proposed by Portes and Zhou (1993). European studies have identified – alongside the benefits of ethnic cohesion – an elevated risk of "downward assimilation" that correlates with low levels of education and high drop-out rates.

However, although the question of "context" was addressed in Portes' model (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, 2005) in terms of the society/community in which a migrant family lives/is received, and how it is organised (Haller & Landolt, 2005), the importance of specific local or national contexts in determining pathways to assimilation is more central to European research (Ambrosini & Caneva, 2009; Crul & Vermeulen, 2003; Doomernik, 1998; Eldering & Kloprogge, 1989; Fase, 1994; Heckmann et al., 2001). Such studies echo the position posited by Reitz (2002) who, working from a Canadian perspective, suggests that both the country where second-generation young people live and the labour market they are faced with have a significant bearing on their prospects.

Maurice Crul and his colleagues have proposed the "integration context theory": by considering the progress of individuals against a wider, systemic backdrop, and comparing the trajectories of young people from similar socio-cultural backgrounds in eight European countries, it is possible to gain a better understanding of the processes of integration experienced by second-generation youth and the forces that shape them (Crul, Schneider & Lelie, 2012). Alongside the characteristics of specific individuals and families, the theory goes, the opportunities provided by the context in which young people live are fundamentally important, as are the conditions created by institutions: school system/labour market, citizenship/welfare policies (Crul et al., 2012). Key factors for educational outcomes include the age children begin compulsory schooling, selection methods for secondary-level schools, and support in

learning the local language. In turn, education can itself be shown to be the key motor in driving successful outcomes for second generation youth (Fortuin, Van Geel, Ziberna & Vedder, 2014; Márquez-Lepe and García-Cano, 2014).

2. Voices of the second generation. The study

Our approach was essentially phenomenological (Husserl, 2002; Moustakas, 1994), the principal interest being participants' experience of phenomena: what difficulties do they encounter on their journey to adulthood? What is their sense of belonging and identity? Who is supporting them? With this in mind, we aim to involve a hundred second-generation young people.

The study comprises four phases:

- Phase 1 (completed): 15 semi-structured interviews;
- Phase 2 (ongoing): building on phase 1, participants for a new phase of interviews are asked to submit in writing, prior to the interview, a short personal history. 10 interviews have been conducted so far, with 10 accompanying narratives;
- Phase 3 (planned): focus groups involving available participants from the previous interviews;
- Phase 4 (planned): in-depth interviews based on results of phase 3.

The criteria for selection are as follows: born in Italy; migrant parents who are still resident in Italy; good standard of Italian; good academic performance; participating voluntarily. The 25 participants interviewed to date (17 female and 8 male, in fifteen phase-1 and ten phase-2 interviews) are all aged 18 to 26. Their families originate in ten different countries in Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe.

The key questions are: What does "belonging" mean to you? To what/whom do you feel/think you belong? Which difficulties have you encountered? What support have you received?

Audio recordings are made of the interviews and transcribed, with the transcripts analysed by two researchers using an open coding methodology.

2.1 The data

The interviews/narratives highlight the complexity of the challenges facing second-generation youth in finding themselves and their place in the world (an internal process as much as an external one).

2.1.1 Experiences and strategies

Under analysis, the data aggregate around certain issues about the journey to adulthood of the second generation: a) the denial of recognition; b) belonging and identity; c) isolation.

a) Denial of recognition

A common theme across the interviews is the lack/denial of recognition (Honneth, 1995) which takes various forms: humiliation, derision, invisibility (Rankine, 2014). Such experiences are either articulated directly or emerge indirectly, e.g. when an interviewee speaks of the family gaining the recognition of "native" acquaintances:

> Once people have known you for a while, they realise you're a good person, that you're not going to blow yourself up, that nothing's going to happen. I2G9/20[2]

Some accounts include experiences of humiliation:

> I went to the supermarket and bought some bananas. I was only getting bananas and a father and his son ahead of me had a full trolley so they let me go first. I said: "Thank you", and the father said: "We're letting this banana-muncher go first." I2G17/65

The hardest thing for these young people is not feeling accepted as part of the world in which they have grown up. This separation casts a shadow over their day-to-day existence. "Differentness" – the colour of their skin, their hair, their accent, the incongruity (in the mind of others) between their appearance and their command of the language – is central to perceptions of them.

> At the airport it has happened a few times that people, I suppose at the security checks, have looked at my citizenship twice to check if it is real. I2G21/53

They *are* different, and their differentness – associated with "apartness", "not belonging", "threat" – does not go unremarked. Exclusion, ambivalence and contamination seem unavoidable when growing up in two cultures and they certainly feature in the interviews.

b) The question of belonging

The questions that these young adults live with daily – and see reflected in the eyes of others – concern identity and belonging: "Who am I? Whom am I like? Where do I belong?"

Most have experienced the impossibility of settling on a single identity. They straddle the border between one world and another, yet remain marginalised. They "are already two things. Choosing would mean cutting themselves in two, or becoming half of what they are" (Pons, 1986, p. 97[3]).

As such, these young people recognise within themselves a dual belonging, which can take either a positive (I am *both* Italian *and* …) or a negative form (I am *neither* Italian *nor* ….).

It is in this separation/duality that their identity takes root. It can be fertile soil for uncertainty, conflict and fragility (Beneduce, 2007). The ambivalence of the world around them and their emotional and psychological isolation give rise to an uncertain identity that amplifies the risk of feelings of marginalisation. In the end, they learn to live with these experiences, burying them in their subconscious. Some chose to align themselves with a single culture (4 out of 25), migrating, in a sense, into the community of their ethnic similars. Here, they recognise themselves and receive recognition. The ethnic framework offers emotional and psychological validation as well as economic support and a sense of belonging, all reinforced by corresponding social structures. All they have to do is chose one camp, one identity; it is a choice that seems to be asked especially of young women, but also one that appears to appeal

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[2] All quotes have been translated into English by the authors in order to facilitate comprehension. 'I' means 'Interview'; '2G' means 'second generation'. The first number is the number assigned to the participant, the second refers to the specific contribution (question, statement, answer, etc.) in the numbered sequence of contributions from the different speakers. The names used are fictitious.

[3] Translated from the French by the authors.

to them. This may be because, in many cases, it is women who safeguard the traditions of the family and the culture of origin. In many cultures, it is in the female members that the honour of the family resides (Chowdhry, 2007). It is also women who must make the greatest effort to reconcile the values of the family's native culture with those of the host society, to act as mediators in the processes of identity (re)construction, and to oversee the participation of the family's children in schooling and education. It is a set of responsibilities that leads to overload and stress for many women, and ultimately the compulsion to choose one identity over the other.

Others opt for a purely internal process of migration. "Interior" migration, in this sense, sees a cultural and symbolic shift between west and east, from one cultural system to another (at times accompanied by new spatial behaviours). The resultant trauma can have physical manifestations:

> I had problems for years during my adolescence. I had to see a psychologist because I was having physical problems, eating disorders, depression, things like that. Dealing with it, talking about it with my parents wasn't so easy, which itself was part of the whole immigration-integration thing because in my parents' culture in Africa you don't admit to something like depression. So for them, it isn't really a thing, and when I tried to talk to them about it they would suggest praying, or say to give it time: "time passes, you're still young." But it wouldn't go away and they didn't understand that I needed help to get over it. I2G1/18

It is a form of "mental retreat" (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986, p. 129) in the face of the demands made of them at school and the contrast between two worlds that do not recognise one another. It is an "escape from the outside world into the hiding-place of the interior […] an escape from the world in times of darkness and powerlessness" (Arendt, 2006, pp. 72-73). This is the powerlessness of individuals who are still to reach adulthood, who lack the human capital and tools to negotiate the fragmentary complexity of two cultural universes, who have been left alone.

c) Isolation

The feeling of being denied recognition is accompanied by a sensation – echoed across the interviews – of always facing the world alone.

The solutions young people adopt in dealing with these emotions are varied. It depends on the social and human capital at their disposal, and the presence – or absence – of individuals who can guide them, or simply provide a fixed point of reference.

At times, the preferred strategy, often encouraged by the family, is one of minimisation: "you need to learn to act like it doesn't mean anything." *Do not react*. Act "as though the hostile (or deliberately avoided) gazes, and the muttered (or shouted) words, were not really directed at you." As though you weren't "naked and trembling at the heart of a hostile forest, with nobody to protect you from the wild beasts" (Miské, 2016, p. 9). *Learn to be resilient*.

If, for some, the temptation to seek refuge by embracing one identity over the other proves irresistible, a more common solution is to struggle to earn recognition. This takes different forms, a renewed dedication to academic success, perhaps, or joining a sports or music group. For others, it leads into groups that are defined by their marginality, their difference, their rebelliousness, groups that offer a sense of recognition, belonging and protection "against" an apparently hostile world and its rules. Becoming a bully might seem the only available way to take control of one's own existence and end the humiliation. Whichever path the individual chooses – or is

led down – a common feature in the lives of the interviewees is their sense of isolation.

These young adults, adolescents and young children who have grown up at the margins, who embody the margins, who are called to occupy the middle ground, to deal with duplicate processes of filiation and affiliation (Dusi, 2008), theirs is a special solitude, powerful, deep, insurmountable. "For them, 'to grow' means to become demiurges, forging themselves, their own destiny" (Beneduce, 2007, p. 136). As we see in the case of this young girl:

> Before I started lower-secondary I didn't have friends.
> In fact, the people around me did nothing but make fun of me.
> It made what should have been a straightforward time in my life really difficult. I cried a lot, but not in front of other people.
> I have always been a dreamer, but I've never had enough belief.
> Whenever I needed someone to lean on, to give me a push, I ended up realising that I only had myself to rely on.
> Today, though, I have ambitions, plans.
> Ambitions that I used to be too afraid of, because they were too strong to actually do anything about.
> I like being Italian and I love my culture.
> (Extract from narrative submitted prior to interview)

2.1.2 Who is supporting them?

These young people highlight, in both positive and negative terms, the central role played by primary and secondary agents of socialisation, particularly a) parents and b) teachers.

a) The family

Unsurprisingly, the family is considered the primary source of support. Even if parents do not always have the skillset to assist young people with the processes that lead to adulthood, the family is a fixed point of reference, an anchor.

> I have to say that my mum is my role model – absolutely – because she is so strong. To come here to Italy, on her own, empty-handed, with three children and bring them up, that is really difficult. And I have to say that she has done a great job because all my siblings and I have graduated from university. I2G25/4

But it is not always a solid one. Parents represent a constant adult presence, but they do not always possess adequate resources and strategies to support their children effectively through the affiliation process.

> In all societies, a critical function of parents is to act as guides for their children. Immigration hinders this function by removing the map of experience necessary to guide children competently in the new culture (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p. 157).

Migration exposes the whole family to powerful transformative forces concerning gender and family roles, and the reshaping of identities.

> If you ask me, being born to migrant parents is not easy because it depends a lot [...] on the character of the parents you have [...]. It's not that I think it's a problem if your parents are different, but it is up to them to make it easier for their children to integrate by integrating

themselves. I2G13/24-26

Dissonance between the culture of the family and that of society is intertwined with the dissonance between generational cultures. The resources and strategies available to parents in supporting their children effectively depend, primarily, on their own level of education and investment in their children. The value attributed to academic achievement can itself be significant (families from Pakistan, Ghana, Rwanda, China, Romania), whereas in other groups (Moroccan families), there is a greater emphasis on assimilating at a subordinate level.

Besides, every family and its story – the specifics of its migration and reception, its economic status, the social capital at its disposal – is unique (Carrasco, Pámies & Beltrán, 2009).

Human and family social capital can be an important resource for second generation migrants but, as the integration context theory highlights, its influence is greatest when educational policies, institutions and services are inadequate. In fact, education "is one of the most crucial indicators for assessing the overall position of the second generation" (Crul et al., 2012, p. 102).

b) The Italian school, a "mixed bag".

For these young people, school is where two worlds – that of the family, and that of the wider society – come together. Given the role assigned to schools in Italy, it is unsurprising that they tend to emphasise the importance of what differentiates the local society from the family's society of origin (Glenn, 2004, p. 170) and fail to value forms of identity or knowledge that they are unable to integrate.

> If ever there was a place where the children of immigrants might feel alienated, then it is the school, an institution designed to immerse them in the culture in which they have arrived, until it becomes native to them (Damiano, 2008 p. 108).

The school system throws up many interventions that seem designed to erase cultural differences and stem the wellspring of identity that traditionally provides succour in times of difficulty or psychological trauma (Yahyaoui, 1997). Instead, it promotes a confusion of identities and processes that lead to misrecognition and isolation (Mesmin & Nathan, 1995).

The Italian school is a "mixed bag" for the children of migrants. It is where they "discover" they are different, where they are made fun of. At school, their personal world of symbols is not recognised, it does not work.

> I think the first day of school was the first time I really realised I was different, that I wasn't a "Martina" or a "Giulia". I was a "Safia" and this was a problem. The remaining four years at primary school were very hard. The person I am today grew out of what I experienced back then. I2G4/10

At school, they are compelled to love a world that does not recognise them, that sees their differentness as inferiority (Arroyo & Berzosa, 2018; Del Olmo, 2012). But it is also the place where they can fight to earn recognition, to show that, in spite of everything, they are worth the same as the others, maybe more. It can also be the place where they find friends, and welcoming, supportive adults.

At primary school, Safia had to deal with humiliation and rage without any help from her teacher. At lower-secondary school, however, she encountered an adult figure who took her under her wing:

> There was a teacher […] who really helped me […] who found a way to mediate the suffering I had experienced in primary school and the anger I felt during my time at lower-secondary. Teenagers are always a bit angry – spots, boys – but I really had a lot of anger, and this teacher helped me a lot, because I couldn't say anything about it at home. At home I was always good, but everything I'd gone through at primary school, well, when I got to lower-secondary, I don't know why, I felt bigger, stronger, so I made sure to make everybody pay. I2G4/30

The interviews and the narratives provided by these young people – who, let us remember, have all reached upper-secondary school or university – bring to light the underdevelopment of the Italian school system when it comes to integrating students from migrant families.

3. The macro-political implications of the results. A long, uphill journey

In Italy we face two issues that correlate closely with social injustice: a) the inadequacy of the school system (curriculum, teacher training, support of L2 acquisition); b) citizenship laws that openly penalise second-generation migrants.

3.1 Educational policies and the school system

Statistics published by Italy's Ministry of Education (MIUR, 2017) suggest that the school system is not equipped to accommodate the ethno-cultural diversity that these young people bring with them or support their academic development (MIUR, 2014). Since the early 1990s, education policies in Italy have targeted the full integration of children from migrant families. This ambition, however, has not been matched by the necessary changes to the system, such as:

a) Measures to combat prejudice, discrimination and racism and promote genuine social and educational integration.
b) Greater inclusion in pre-school education (ages 3-6)[4]. The costs associated even with public provision (transport, meals) means migrant parents tend not to use these services. Some form of financial support is required.
c) In-work training for teachers, focusing particularly on intercultural education and teaching Italian as L2, which is a crucial factor for academic success.
d) Recruitment of teachers who share the same L1 as the students.

The socio-cultural and methodological immaturity of the Italian school system is rooted in its fundamentally assimilationist approach and evinced by a patchwork landscape in which cutting-edge practices can appear in one setting alongside archaic methods in another (Allemann-Ghionda, 2008). As such, it reflects the socio-cultural immaturity of the country itself.

3.2 Citizenship

Successful applications for Italian citizenship have risen from less than 50,000 in 2011 to almost 159,000 in 2015. 42% of the people granted Italian citizenship in 2015 were under 20. The number of Italian-born young people choosing to take Italian

[4] In Italy, many providers of pre-school education are operated by non-profit foundations – many of these Catholic organisations – and charge a monthly fee for attendance.

citizenship when they reach 18 has also increased (c. 10,000 in 2011 to over 66,000 in 2015 – ISTAT, 2016).

Citizenship can strengthen young people's identity, and the sense they are recognised by, and belong to, the country where they have grown up. But obtaining citizenship is not easy. Young people of foreign parentage are seeking legal recognition that they belong to (and in) the country where they were born and have lived all their lives. They want equal rights and opportunities. However, despite a lengthy battle, the law, which is based on the principle of *jus sanguinis*, has yet to change. Heavily restrictive, it allows those young people who meet the qualifying criteria only one year (between their 18th and 19th birthdays) to submit all of the necessary documentation to support their application for citizenship. If they do not complete their application within this one-year window, they are considered to be foreign citizens, whereafter the route to Italian citizenship becomes much longer.

Furthermore, as the interviewees point out, having Italian citizenship does not automatically mean they will be recognised as Italians. Here again, Italy betrays its immaturity. Romeo feels he belongs to (and in) Italy, but qualifies this assertion:

> [Anyone who meets me would] say I don't seem Albanian, that I don't even have an Albanian accent. This, itself, is an important factor, if you ask me, and the fact that everything about me is completely Italian, apart from my parents. I play sports like all the other kids, I study like all the other kids. Last but not least, I received my citizenship last year, so I don't feel at all different from the others. I2G2/28

Young people feel Italian when they feel they are the same as other young people, that they are perceived as the same, that they can blend in. But, even in these cases, the Italian Government shows them that they are not Italian with equal rights. They continue to be different. And those whose differentness is more outward (e.g. due to the colour of their skin) must contend with stereotypical ideas and conceptions.

We are reminded that in Italy, today, "educational segregation" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]-Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA], 2010; MIUR, 2017) – itself a form of social injustice – goes hand in hand with reduced social mobility. That we see disproportional academic segregation and high numbers of early leavers among students from a migrant background, and that they face such difficulties in obtaining citizenship, casts doubt over their chances of ever achieving real equality of opportunity (Eve & Perino, 2011), and undermines attempts at social cohesion.

It is also testimony to the discrimination that exists in schools and other life contexts. The young people interviewed perceive this discrimination as a barrier to exercising choice, a clear denial of their rights (Caneva, 2011). It prevents them from experiencing their multiplicious sense of belonging while still being recognised by the society around them as true "Italians". Italy's history as a multicultural country is a short one, and shifts in the mindset of a culture can take decades.

4. Conclusions

Our research with second-generation migrants – from which we present, in this paper, a first part of the results – highlights the way that the transition to adulthood is a difficult and complex process for young people from a migrant background, even those who have graduated from secondary school or university. Although the various participants focus on different aspects of their experiences, every interview reveals

episodes in which, at one time or another, the interviewee has encountered a lack of recognition and/or experienced a sense of rejection and isolation. Each individual has developed his or her own strategies to deal with such experiences: some take steps to play down such incidents; some become bullies themselves; others choose the path of assimilation. Regardless of the chosen solution, however, or the results obtained, for the young people interviewed the road to adulthood has meant suffering, loneliness and even, in some cases, genuine trauma. The data collected confirms what has emerged from previous studies in terms of the complexity of the phenomenon, and the difficulties and hardships experienced by (even 3rd-generation) students from a migrant background on the path to adulthood (Gualda, 2011; Portes & Rumbaut, 2005; Thomassen, 2010).
For these young people, the encounter with the school system has been particularly significant (both in a positive and a negative sense). It is at their school desks, more than any other situation, that they have been forced to reckon with their differentness. In their classes, they have learned which aspects of their identity are considered most important in the eyes of others (schoolmates and teachers), and which aspects are deemed to be lacking, thus preventing them from being perceived as equals. As pointed out by García, Olmos, and Bouachran (2015), immigrant students continue to be treated as though they represent a problem, as though their deficiencies must be compensated for (lack of knowledge of the vehicular language of education, low educational level, ignorance of the host country's cultural patterns, etc.). When describing their experience of school (teaching methods, communicational resources and processes), the young people interviewed highlight the processes by which, in their experience, this otherness is constructed, processes in which marginalisation and exclusion feature heavily. In many cases, the school confirms its role as a setting of assimilation and control, operating, as an institution, on behalf of society and the political sphere to stifle difference. Consequently, in many schools a compensatory approach still prevails when managing cultural diversity. In this sense, the school not only ignores difference, but also helps to reproduce inequality (Arroyo & Berzosa 2018; Del Olmo 2012).

At its heart, our analysis of the interviews reveals the role played by the school system itself, and just how fundamental an issue this is. As an institution, the school serves to promote the socialisation of its students within a single culture and to encourage them to recognise and value diversity at both an individual and cultural level. The data collected reveal the distance that the Italian school system still has to travel in this direction, and the reality of a political and social context in which access to citizenship and other rights is anything but a straightforward proposition for members of migrant families that have grown up in Italy. All the same, the school is as well placed as any institution to help tip the scales in the other direction by presenting individuals and the collective with an alternative reality founded on the values of recognition and social cohesion.

Our analysis of the interviews also reveals the fundamental role played, in the Italian context, by adults – namely teachers and parents – in overcoming the obstacles encountered by these young people in their development and education. The importance of these two actors working collaboratively to support students on their path to academic success and social inclusion is also noted in the literature (Dusi & Pati, 2014; Garreta & Llevot, 2015). In this sense, it is necessary to leverage the opportunities that the school generates as a context of coexistence in both its formal and informal spaces (Fortuin et al., 2014). The school is, or must be, the place where

an individually and socially diverse student body is offered the chance to experience forms of dialogue that are capable of generating new attitudes and ideas, as well as social cohesion. This is why it is essential that the school system be capable, in turn, of recognising, accepting and supporting all of its students, without exception. One of the first steps it needs to take is to analyse its current attitudes to cultural diversity, and measure them against the environment it wishes to provide. In this way, it can programme the transformation it needs to undertake.

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