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Can we redress the immigrant-native educational gap in Italy? Empirical evidence and policy suggestions[*]

Davide Azzolini [†]

January 2015

Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the immigrant-native educational gaps in Italy with the aim of identifying policy implications that may be considered in order to improve equity of educational opportunity in the country. (1) The empirical findings indicate that a large part of the observed gaps is accounted for by social disparities existing between native and immigrant families rather than by migration-specific factors. Hence, targeted actions aimed at promoting children of immigrants' education should be integrated in a more general and comprehensive policy framework that addresses social inequality in education. (2) Education policies targeted on children of immigrants should prioritize interventions aimed at enhancing their learning achievements starting from the early educational stages, as the levels of ability achieved in these years have consequences on future skill formation as well as on educational choices and careers. (3) Italian language acquisition programs should be introduced in order to improve the learning achievements of first-generation children. These programs should replace the actual practice of enrolling newcomers in one class behind that corresponding to their age as they enter the Italian school system. (4) Considering the relevance of family environment in the schooling of children, initiatives to boost an active involvement of immigrant parents in schools and to provide immigrant children with personalized tutoring should be promoted. (5) Finally, despite the increasing number of descriptive studies, there is still scarce knowledge on which interventions really work to improve the learning outcomes of children of immigrants in Italy. Educational research based on randomized controlled trials should become common practice in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the causes of the immigrant-native gaps and better inform policy.

Keywords: Immigrant-native gaps; Education; Education Policy

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1 Introduction

Today, children of immigrants[1] comprise 10 to 20% of the student population in many OECD countries (2010a). Although there is a significant degree of internal heterogeneity, with a minor fraction of these students outperforming their native counterparts, on average children of immigrants display lower performances and attend shorter and less demanding school careers as compared to the native student population (OECD 2006, Heath, Rothon and Kilpi 2008). Hence, the school integration of this growing segment of the student population presents a major challenge in all European countries.

Redressing this educational gap is a policy goal of the greatest relevance for two inter-connected aspects. First, ensuring that children of immigrants fully exploit their potential regardless of their—and their parents'—immigrant status would improve equality in educational opportunities. Second, the fact that children enjoy the same educational opportunities conditional on their merit and not on their ascriptive conditions would also avoid a waste of human capital as well as yield efficiency gains and economic benefits for the society as a whole. Hence, investments in children of immigrants' education are expected to have positive returns in terms of social integration.

But what policies are needed to redress this educational disadvantage? The literature on immigrant-native educational gaps is mostly convergent in asserting that a large part of the educational disadvantage of children of immigrants' is accounted for by "traditional factors" of educational inequality, like socioeconomic background, but at the same time it also points out that some migration-specific hindrances persist over and beyond socioeconomic factors (Heath, et al. 2008). A corollary of this research is that both "universalistic" and "targeted" policies are needed to effectively redress immigrant-native educational gaps (European Commission 2008, Nusche 2009, PPMI 2013). But to what extent are targeted policies preferable over universalistic ones? Which educational outcomes should be prioritized? And how can policy effectively take into account the heterogeneity in the immigrant student population?

This paper attempts to answer these questions by analyzing and reviewing recent evidence on the Italian case and by discussing the actual state of the art of public policies in the country. Italy is an interesting case study for it has recently become an immigration country and, since then, has attracted a large part of migration inflows directed to the European Union. The paper is organized as follows. In the next section, I briefly review the state of the art of policy orientations and recommendations at the European level. In the third section, I present the most recent empirical evidence on the immigrant-native gap in education in Italy. In the fourth section, I analyze the state of the art of educational policies in Italy. In the last section, I conclude by tentatively deriving some policy implications.

2 Policy orientations for the improvement of the educational outcomes of immigrant children in Europe

The increased number of school-aged immigrant children in schools is a key challenge for all education systems in Europe, because—although there are notable exceptions—

[1] I use the term "children of immigrants" to identify school-aged children, either born in Italy or in a foreign country, whose parents were both born abroad. Moreover, I label children of immigrants born in Italy as the "second generation", and those born abroad as the "first generation".

immigrant children tend to lag behind their native counterparts on a wide range of educational outcomes (OECD 2006, Heath, et al. 2008). Redressing this educational gap is an important policy goal for both equity and efficiency reasons as also acknowledged by the Green Paper of the European Commission "Migration & mobility: challenges and opportunities for EU education systems" – COM (2008) 423. According to the just mentioned EU Green Paper and to several policy reports produced on this topic by the European Commission Eurydice (2009) and the OECD (2010a, 2012), the main orientations regarding the school integration of immigrant children can be subdivided in actions to be taken at the system level and actions that have to be delivered at the school or classroom levels (Nusche 2009).

Regarding the system-level actions, the overall goal is that of ensuring that the general structure of the education system is favourable to the integration of children of immigrants, especially of first-generation immigrants who arrived at later ages to the destination country. Particularly, three elements stand out. In the first place, there is a general recommendation that countries adequately develop their capacity to deal with the increased presence of children of immigrants by setting regulations, ensuring effective funding strategies and setting standards for schools and teachers. Hence, the recommendation goes in the direction of ensuring a reasonable balance between school autonomy and centrally defined standards. A second suggestion has to do with the improvement of system management to avoid immigrant concentration into underperforming schools, this being considered as one of the reasons why children of immigrants perform, on average, worse than their native counterparts. The envisaged solution would be to adopt appropriate school-choice policies like postponing the age at which students are tracked into different schools or investing more in guidance at key transition points in order to reduce the weight of social origins on these decisions. An alternative option would be to invest more heavily in disadvantaged schools, e.g. by incentivizing the hiring of better qualified and motivated teachers in these schools, reducing classes size and providing more funds for remedial help programs. A third general recommendation requires more efforts to increase children of immigrants' access to high-quality early childhood education and care. Pre-school education is particularly important because the first stages of individuals' educational careers are critical for future accomplishments. Moreover, educational disadvantages often originate from the early years (Heckman and Masterov 2004) and there is evidence that children of immigrants would benefit more from quality childcare than non-immigrant children as their families often lack important resources like, for instance, host language skills (Biedinger, Becker and Rohling 2008).

Shifting the focus to school- and classroom-level policies, a first recommendation is to improve and strengthen programs aimed at providing low-performing children of immigrants with individualized academic support starting from an assessment of skills and needs as well as to provide adequate reception upon arrival and to monitor their performance regularly. Also, actions aimed at supporting children of immigrants' school participation and preventing early-school leaving or offering re-integration programs are strongly encouraged. Second, there is a need to systematically reinforce language-learning policies, especially through initial language support and the setting up of adequate systems of language competences assessment for late-arrived immigrants. Moreover, possibilities to learn the host language either within or outside regular school classes should be amplified and teachers should be trained in instructing the host language as a second language. Third, schools should foster school-home cooperation and incentivize immigrant

parents' engagement in school activities (e.g., taking part in teacher-parent conferences) so that so that they can keep up on their children's daily school activities. Also, immigrant parents should be sensitized to the need of providing their children with home environments that favor their schooling in the host country. This suggestion seems especially relevant within those education systems, like the Italian one, where homework is a crucial component of the learning model.

To conclude, a methodological point emphasized in all official documents and policy reports reviewed in this section has to do with the necessity of setting up adequate monitoring systems and carrying out evaluation studies in order to gather empirical evidence to permit timely interventions and to inform policy-making. As we are going to see in the next section, this is especially relevant in a country, like Italy, where empirical research on children of immigrants' schooling is still in its infancy.

3 The immigrant-native educational gap in Italy: a look at the role played by immigrant generational status and social background

In this section, I provide an overview of the immigrant-native educational gaps in Italy. Drawing on research on social mobility and immigrant adaptation, I regard educational success as a measure of children of immigrants' integration and future life chances in the host society (Alba and Nee 1997). I will investigate both the achievement and attainment components of education, thus both the cognitive dimension (i.e., what students know) and the educational vertical and horizontal stratification (i.e., what level and what type of education students attain). This distinction is important in order to understand whether children of immigrants' drawbacks are more related to learning achievements or have more to do with the quantity and quality of education they obtain.

In addition, I investigate the heterogeneity within the immigrant student population by documenting how school outcomes vary by immigrant generational status. Extant literature at the international level points to a pronounced generational progress of children of immigrants. Such a regularity is explained by the fact that second-generation children were born in the destination country and, therefore, did not have to adapt to the new context and to acquire a new language and culture from scratch. In contrast, their first-generation counterparts left their home country, their schools and their friends and had to make sense of a new context (Chiswick and DebBurman 2004). At the same time, research has also repeatedly established that this regularity does not apply everywhere and to every segment of the youth immigrant population. Sizeable variations in generational patterns of children's schooling occur between national-origin groups (Heath, et al. 2008).

Next, I assess what portion of the immigrant-native educational gaps is explained by a "traditional factor" of educational inequality (i.e., social background) rather than being specifically attributable to migration status. A great bulk of empirical studies has demonstrated that social background (usually measured by parental occupational and educational attainment) is responsible for substantial parts of the disadvantage of children of immigrants (Heath, et al. 2008, Krause, Rinne and Schüller 2014). To put it differently, a large part of the problems faced by immigrants' children at school can be attributed to the fact that they live, more often than their native classmates, in families that are exposed to socioeconomic deprivation. This does not mean, of course, that the educational setback of children of immigrants can be reduced to socioeconomic factors only. It is well known that children of immigrants encounter migration-specific hindrances, like lower mastery of the

language spoken in the host country, social and school segregation, poorer family social capital, etc. All these factors might reduce their educational outcomes independently from their actual skills and motivations and operate partly over and beyond their family economic resources. Investigating these *ad hoc* explanations is certainly a relevant research question but it is beyond the aims of this contribution. Besides, before testing these specific hypotheses, the contribution of social origins has to be precisely established and statistically controlled in order to have a correct interpretation of the observed immigrant-native differences. Moreover, the comparison of *gross* and *net* differences between natives and children of immigrants—i.e., the mean difference existing between immigrants' children and natives and the same difference net of social background, respectively—is very informative in a policy perspective for it helps understand the extent to which universalistic rather than targeted policies are needed.

Finally, I provide an overview on the phenomenon throughout the different levels of the Italian education system (see Appendix I for an organizational description of the Italian education system). Such a comprehensive approach allows drawing robust conclusions regarding the nature of the phenomenon, especially because skill formation is a process that proceeds in stages, therefore it is useful to assess immigrant-native inequality at different life and educational stages, starting from the earliest ones.

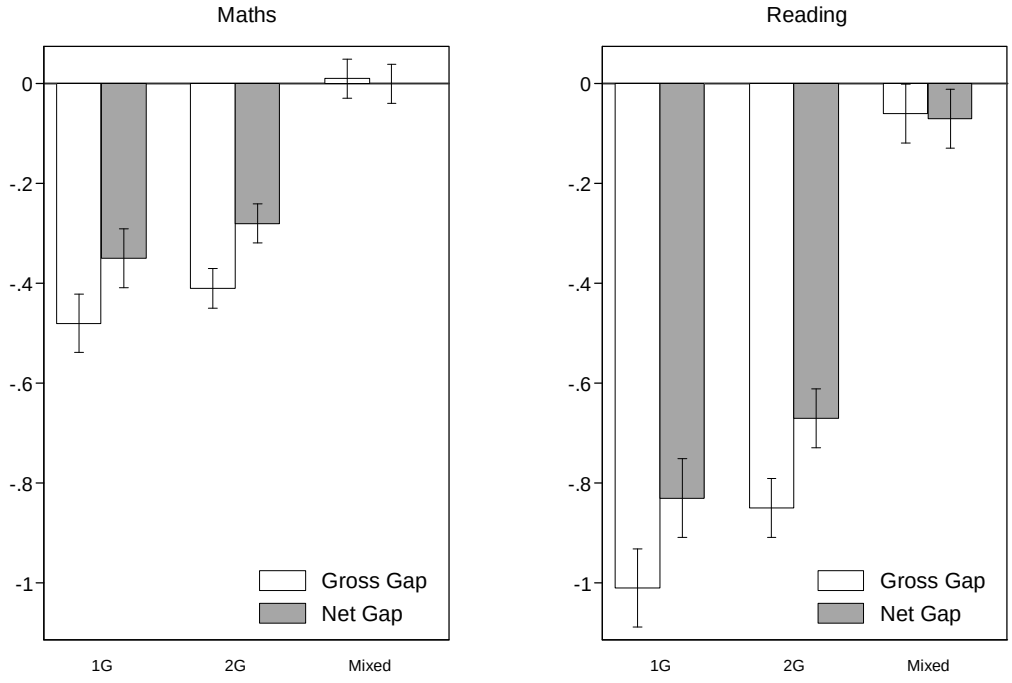

Figure 1 Immigrant-natives differentials in reading and mathematics skills among 2nd graders in Italian primary schools (INVALSI 2009-10).

Note: Estimates are obtained with linear multilevel regressions with schools and classes random effects. Lines are 95 percent confidence intervals. Gross gap estimates (white bars) control for gender and area of residence. Net gap estimates (grey bars) also control for social background (measured by parental highest educational level and occupation). Scores are presented as Rasch-score points with standard deviations set at approximately 1.0 points. "1G" indicates the first generation, "2G" the second generation, while "Mixed" are children of mixed couples. Natives are the reference category.

Figure 1 displays the gross educational gaps (white bars) estimated between second graders (aged 7) with native and immigrant backgrounds on two standardized tests on mathematics and Italian subjects. The first noteworthy result indicates that the disadvantage of both first- and second-generation children (labeled 1G and 2G in the figure) is twice as large in Italian as in mathematics, pointing to the well-known critical issue of language acquisition for children of immigrants. A less expected result is the substantial similarity in the size of gap of the first and the second generation, which contrasts the expectation of a relative advantage of children of immigrants born in the destination country. A (very weak) generational progress is detected for linguistic skills only and this is clearly explained by the fact that the second generation possesses a higher mastery of the Italian language as compared to those children of immigrants who grew up in a different country. Children of mixed couples do not differ from natives, indicating that the presence of at least one native parent is a crucial 'asset' in terms of country-specific human capital (e.g., knowledge of the host country language) employable to support children's schooling. Once we control for socioeconomic background—i.e., we compare natives and children of immigrants with the same socioeconomic resources—the gaps shrink significantly. Nonetheless, these differences persist large and significant (grey bars). This means that most part of immigrants' educational disadvantage seems to be migration-specific rather than related to their lower socioeconomic resources.

When turning the attention to the immigrant-native gaps on the lower secondary education final exam (Figure 2), a similar story comes to the fore. Gross estimates of the gap (white bars) confirm that a sizeable disadvantage for both first- and second-generation immigrants exists. The second generation performs as the first generation: no significant differences are found between the two groups. Also children of mixed couples get significantly lower marks than natives, but they fare significantly better than both first- and second-generation immigrants. Thus, as before, having only one instead of two foreign-born parents greatly reduces the learning educational disadvantage. Comparison of gross and net estimates of the gap (white versus grey bars) indicates that half of the disadvantage of both first- and second-generation children is accounted for by family socioeconomic background (48 and 46 percent, respectively). However, a largely significant gap persists, as also found in Figure 1. A third model (dark-grey bars) incorporates an index of Italian language proficiency. This additional variable does reduce the immigrant-native gap but only for the first generation. For this latter group, the reduction is substantively relevant, although it is not statistically significant, whereas the relative outcomes of the second generation and children of mixed couples are left unchanged.

Overall, Figure 2 shows that the immigrant-native gap is large and persisting even after controlling for both socioeconomic background and language proficiency. But the most striking result is that the first and the second generation are undistinguishable from one another. This finding further reinforces the idea of a weak adaptation process across generations in Italy, as found for primary school children (Figure 1). At this point, it is worth mentioning that these 'generational pattern' could partially disguise nationality patterns, as the national-origin composition differs across generational groups. While a large fraction of the second generation is made up of youths of North-African ancestry, the first generation is largely composed of individuals coming from Eastern Europe. Additional analyses (not shown here) indicate the existence of a quite pronounced heterogeneity with regard to national origins. Children originating from developed countries are faring better than all other groups. The most disadvantaged groups are sub-Saharan and Northern Africans, whose drawbacks seem to be stable across generations. In

turn, students of Asian ancestry (mainly Chinese and Indians) exhibit a much smaller gap, which is even positive when looking at the second generation (Barban and White 2011).

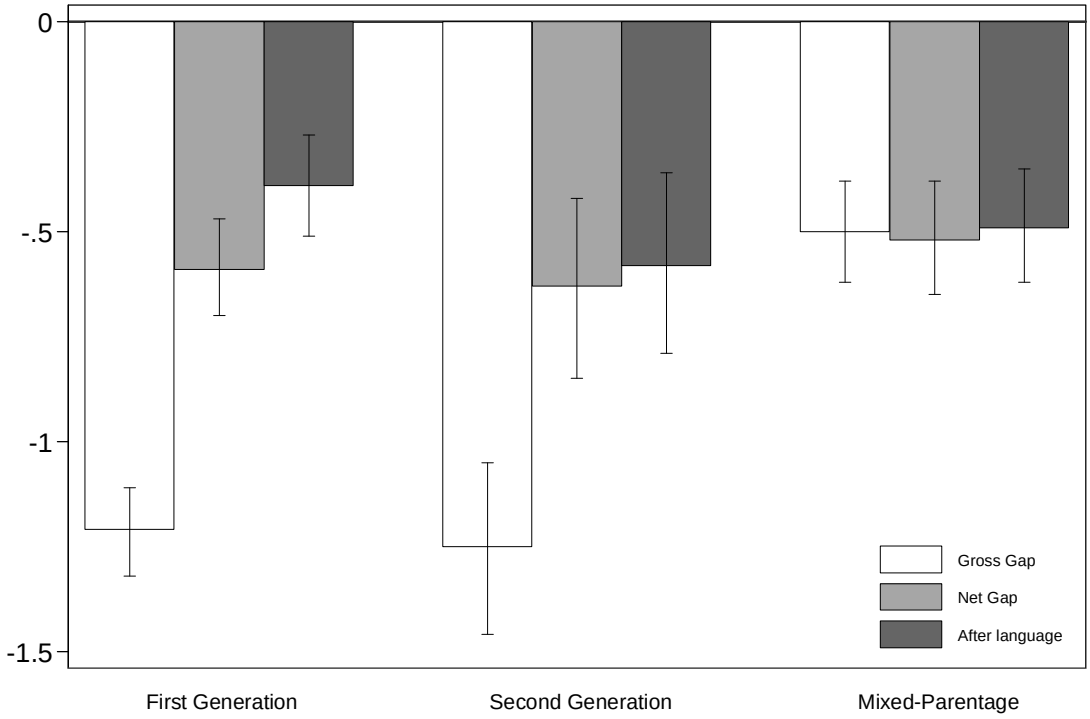

Figure 2 Immigrant-native gaps on the lower secondary school final exam (ITAGEN2 2008).

Note: Logit parameters and 95 percent confidence intervals obtained with ordered logistic regressions. Gross gap estimates (white bars) control for age, gender and area of residence. Net gap estimates (grey bars) also control for social background (measured by ISEI, number of books at home, homeownership and number of siblings). The third model (dark-grey bars) adds la self-assessed measure of Italian language proficiency. All models use sampling weights. "1G" indicates the first generation, "2G" the second generation, while "Mixed" are children of mixed couples. Natives are the reference category.

The passage between lower and upper secondary education is a key transition point in Italy. After completing lower secondary education, students are faced with a choice that has important consequences for their future educational and occupational careers (Ballarino and Checchi 2006). More precisely, students have to choose between a general track (*licei*), which gives high chances of continuing to tertiary education; a vocational track (composed of both vocational schools and regional vocational training courses, here considered jointly), which is closely related to a work-oriented training; and a technical track (see Appendix I).

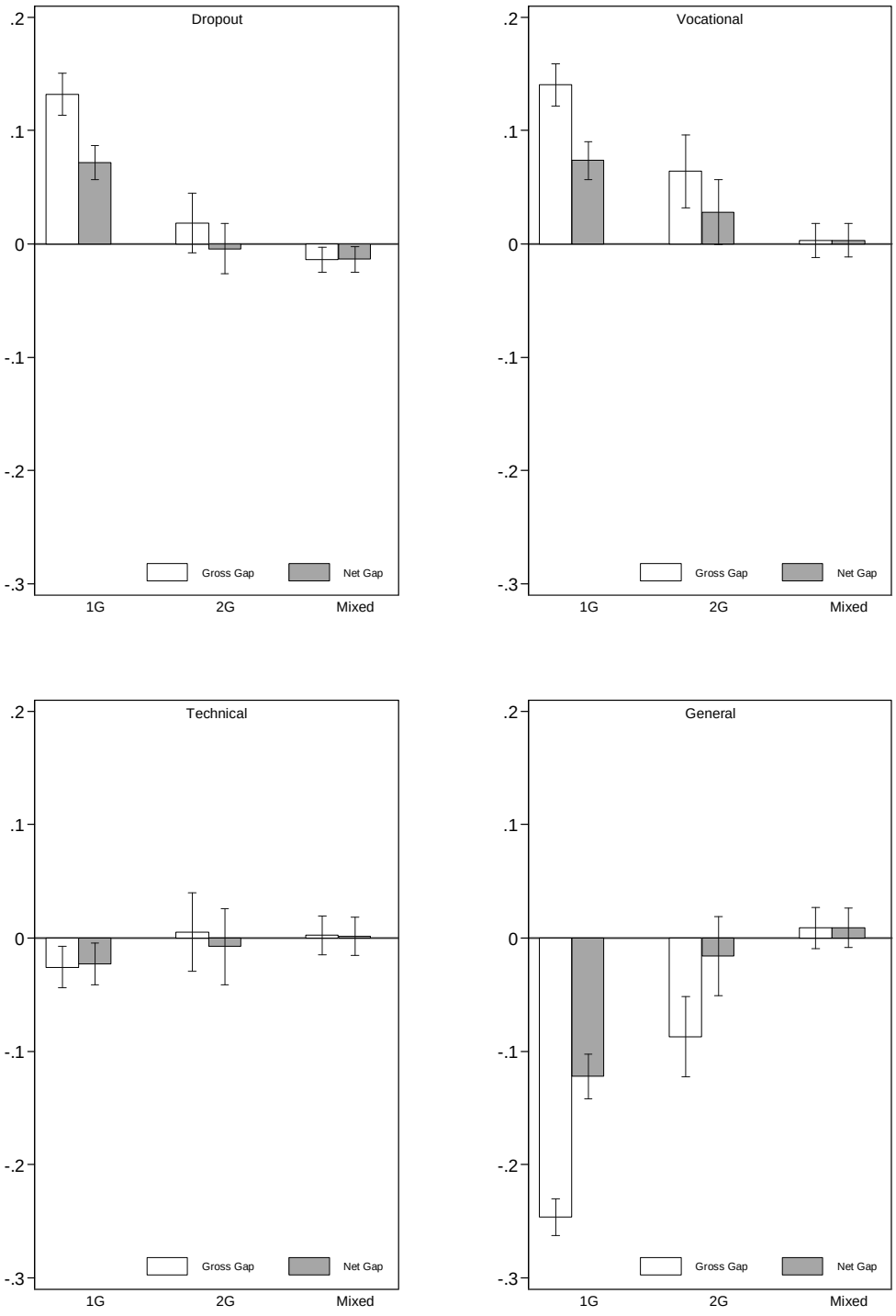

Figure 3 Immigrant-native differentials in upper secondary school participation in Italy (15–19-year-olds, Labour Force Survey 2005–2011)

Note: Estimates are differences in predicted probabilities obtained after multinomial logistic regressions. Lines are 95 per cent confidence intervals. Gross gap estimates (white bars) control for gender, region of residence, and wave dummy variables. Net gap estimates (grey bars) also control for social background measured using the ESeC social class scheme(Harrison and Rose 2009). "1G" indicates the first generation, "2G" the second generation, while "Mixed" are children of mixed couples. Natives are the reference category.

This transition is also critical because at this point dropout risks are highest (Ballarino, Bison and Schadee 2011). Figure 3 shows that this risk is much higher for first-generation immigrants than for natives (+13 percentage points), whereas the second generation does not differ from natives and children of mixed couples show an even slightly smaller risk of dropout than natives. Children of immigrants also display higher probability of enrolling in vocational schools (+14 percentage points for the first generation and +6 for the second generation) and much lower chances to enroll in a general school (-24 percentage points for the first generation and -8 for the second generation). When looking at the gap estimates net of social background (grey bars), it is evident that the gap of the first generation is greatly reduced (roughly halved) but persists largely significant. Differently from results on learning achievement (Figures 1 and 2), now there is clear evidence of a generational progress and the contribution of socioeconomic background is much more pronounced. After adjusting for social background, the second generation is undistinguishable from the native population. Also, in line with what reported above, additional findings (not shown in this contribution) point out significant national-origin variation. Some national-origin groups display pronounced negative differences relative to natives (most notably, Northern- and sub-Saharan Africans) whereas others display very similar participation patterns as natives (Westerners and East-Europeans). Once again, Eastern-Asian youths (mainly Chinese) are those experiencing the strongest positive adaptation across generations (Azzolini and Barone 2013).

The persisting immigrant-native differences in educational choices, even after controlling for socioeconomic background, can be analytically decomposed in two components: a first component arising from prior performance ("primary effects") and a second component due to the possible existence of different choice models ("secondary effects") between native and immigrant families (Boudon 1974, Cebolla-Boado 2011). In Figure 4, light-grey bars show total differences, net of social background, between natives and children of immigrants with regard to general schools' and vocational training courses' enrollment. Instead, dark-grey bars show the differences that we would observe if children of immigrants had the same prior performance as natives (here measured with the final mark obtained at the end of lower secondary education). With the exception of first generation's higher risk (+10 percentage points) of enrolling in vocational training courses, all gaps practically disappear. Hence, a substantial portion of the immigrant-native net differences with regard to the transition to upper secondary education are accounted for by previous performance. Put it differently, if immigrant children obtained the same grades in lower secondary education (and had the same social background) as natives, they would also show similar school choices as natives.[2]

[2] These results are based on a local sample, but qualitatively similar results are found by Barban and White (2011). Moreover, the key role played by prior performance is a common finding also in other countries, where it is often found that, net of performance, children of immigrants show even more ambitious choices than natives (Jackson, Jonsson and Rudolphi 2012).

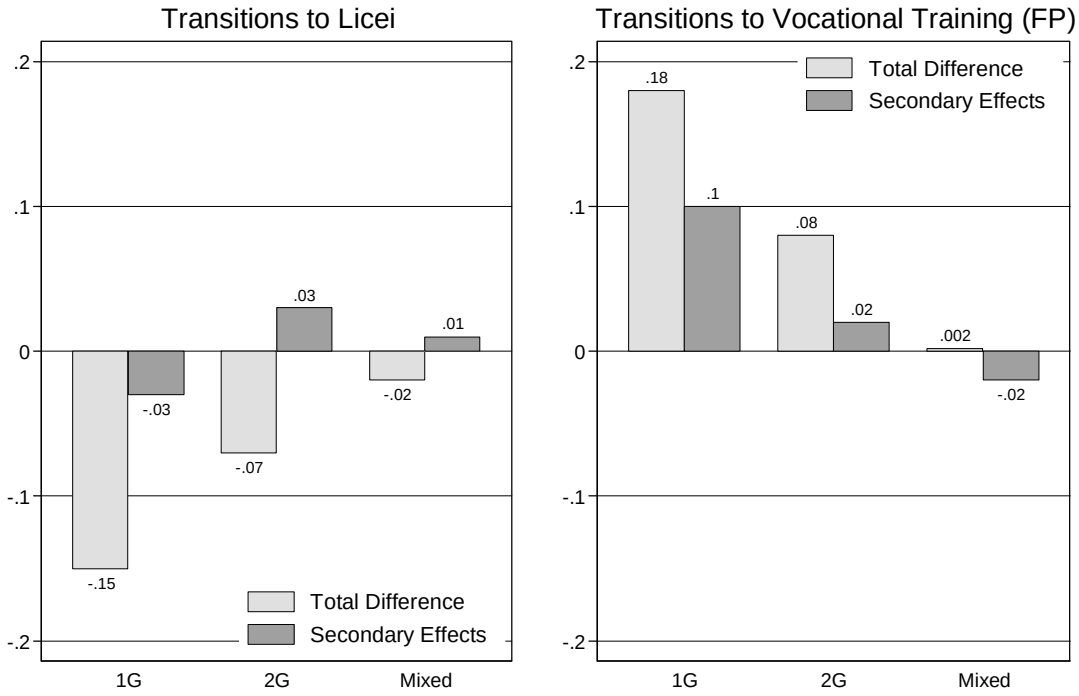

Figure 4 Secondary effects of immigrant background on transitions to general schools and vocational training courses (*Anagrafe Unica degli Studenti della Provincia di Trento*, school year 2010/11).[3]

Note: Estimates are based on the KHB technique, developed in Karlson and Holm (2011), and include social class of the parents, gender and area of residence as concomitant variables. Prior performance is measured with grades obtained on the lower secondary education final exam. "1G" indicates the first generation, "2G" the second generation, while "Mixed" are children of mixed couples. Natives are the reference category.

Figure 5 completes the picture drawn so far by highlighting that the achievement gaps persist also among 15 year-old students, thus one year before they end compulsory schooling. Also at this educational stage, generational progress in learning achievement is weak and essentially limited to reading competences. Again, social background does not fully account for immigrant children's disadvantage. Children of immigrants still fare less well than natives even after holding social background equal (light grey bars). Importantly, while parental occupation is responsible for a significant part of the observed immigrant-native differences, parental education is not even marginally contributing to the explanation of the gaps, pointing to the critical issue of the devaluation of foreign educational credentials in the country (Schnell and Azzolini 2014). Moreover, speaking the Italian language at home does not seem to make any difference for both the first and the second generation (dark-grey bars).

[3] Data from the *Anagrafe Unica degli Studenti della Provincia di Trento* were made available thanks to the support of Fondazione Caritro. I am especially grateful to Anna Ress for making the data available to me.

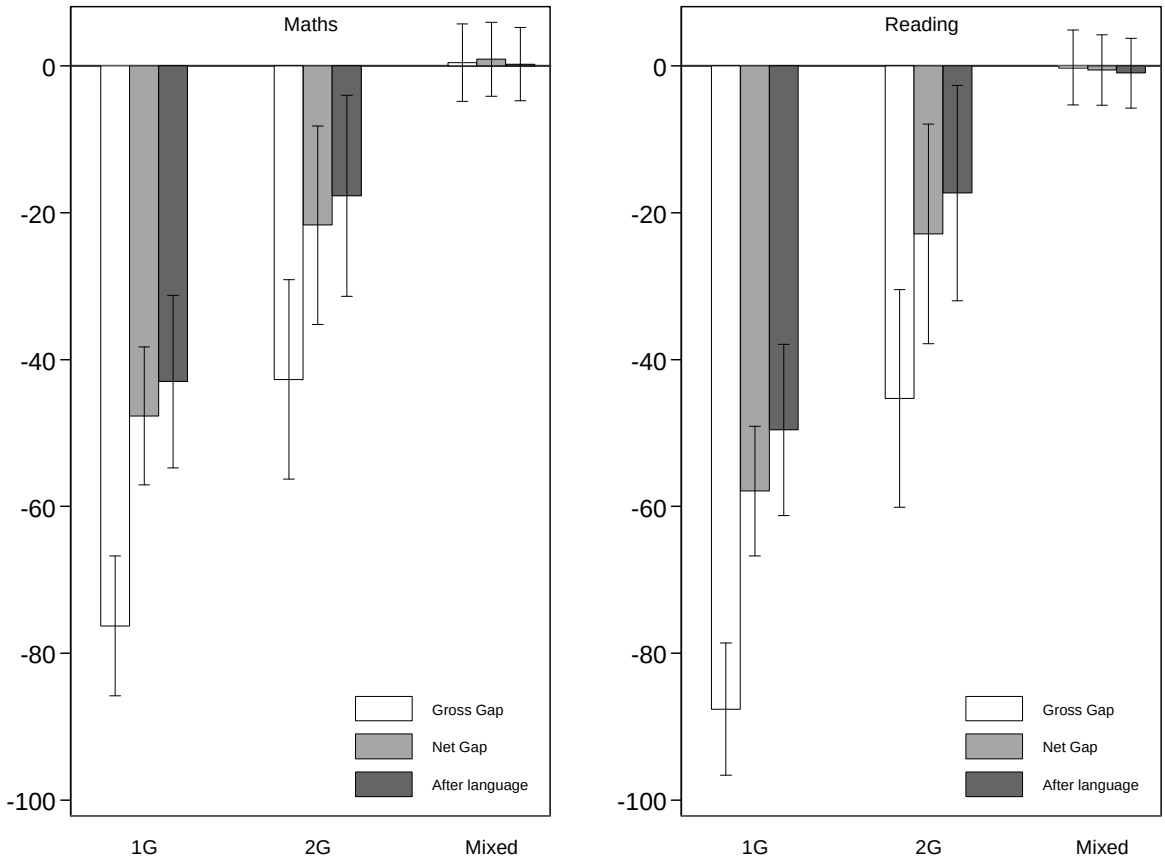

Figure 5 Achievement gaps between natives and children of immigrants in mathematics and reading competences in Italy (15 year olds, PISA 2009).

Note: Estimates are obtained with linear regressions with standard errors clustered at the school level. Lines are 95 per cent confidence intervals. Gross gap estimates (white bars) control for age, gender and region of residence. Net gap estimates (grey bars) also control for social background (measured by highest parental occupation and education, home possessions, and family structure). The third model (dark-grey bars) adds language spoken at home. All models use all five plausible values and include student and school weights. "1G" indicates the first generation, "2G" the second generation, while "Mixed" are children of mixed couples. Natives are the reference category.

To wrap up, sizeable immigrant-native gaps are detected with regard to educational achievement and attainment and across all educational levels. Children of immigrants score lower on tests (especially on reading skills), obtain lower grades, have higher risks of dropping out of school and they more often opt for vocational training and education instead of general education. Social background plays a very critical role: when we statistically control for socioeconomic disparities between native and immigrant families, the disadvantage faced at school by immigrants' children shrinks substantially and in some cases even disappears. Nonetheless, significant learning achievement gaps persist for first-generation immigrants and also, to a lesser extent, for the second generation, especially for some national groups (i.e., Northern and sub-Saharan Africans). Regarding second-generation immigrants, it is evident that their disadvantage relative to natives is limited to learning achievement. Also, second-generation children display an improvement over their first-generation counterparts only when it comes to linguistic skills, while they display the

same levels of mathematics competences. Hence, educational performance is the most problematic aspect in immigrant children's educational disadvantage in Italy. This consideration is reinforced by results showing that immigrant-native gaps in upper secondary school participation would virtually disappear if immigrants' children had the same prior performance as natives (Figure 4). As suggested in some literature (Kao 2004), this situation might be a consequence of immigrant families' lack of country-specific human capital (e.g., lack of linguistic skills and poorer parental support in homework) and poor social capital (e.g., difficult interactions between parents and schools). Because of data limitations such *ad hoc* hypotheses could not be tested adequately within this contribution and should be object of further studies.

4 State of the art of education policy aimed at promoting immigrants' schooling in Italy

According to the empirical findings presented in the previous section, both targeted and universalistic measures are needed to tackle immigrant-native educational gaps. But what is the actual state of educational policies in Italy? Unfortunately, the Italian situation is characterized by the absence of a general, coherent policy framework to promote school attainment and achievement of children of immigrants as well as to promote equal opportunities at school in general (Huddleston, Niessen, Ni Chaoimh and White 2011, PPMI 2013). In spite of formal statements and recommendations,[4] educational policies aimed at improving the school integration of children of immigrants are rather flawed.

Facing the lack of systematic efforts at the national level, the most relevant activities to support children of immigrants originate at the local level and are based on voluntary initiatives of single schools or teachers, often operating in cooperation with local authorities and NGOs (PPMI 2013, Molina 2014). Several of the initiatives carried out at the local level comprise valuable activities like welcome programs for newcomers, specific interventions to foster the involvement of immigrant parents and new forms of intercultural education.[5] Unfortunately, public expenditure in education has not been generous in Italy in the past years (European Commission, 2014) and consequently funding availability for programs aimed at contrasting inequality is scarce, if available at all, and not equally distributed across areas of the country. Hence, even though a loosely centralized approach could be valued positively for it would leave schools and communities the autonomy to elaborate interventions tailored to the specific needs of each specific context, it shall also be considered that such a situation increases the risk of a "regionalization of rights" in the country.

[4] The Italian constitutional law (article 34) states that "school is open to everyone and the first years of schooling are free and compulsory. Students who excel at school—even if they lack the economic means—are entitled to reach the highest levels of education. The Italian Republic enforces this right through the provision of scholarships, household subsidies, and other form of grants designated through public competition". Moreover, law no. 40/1998 formally recognized the value of intercultural education and some other general principles of social and school inclusion of children of immigrants. Other governmental acts have provided guidelines for schools and created a national observatory for the integration of foreign students and intercultural education.

[5] With regard to good practices implemented by schools, is worth mentioning the project "Interculture" promoted by Fondazione Cariplo. The project reviews some pilot projects implemented by schools in Lombardia and provides policy indications for future initiatives.

It is also particularly regrettable that the education system does not provide extra classes in which foreign-born students, especially if late-arrived, can learn the new language (Dalla Zuanna, Farina and Strozza 2009). Instead, one of the more widespread practices is "lower class enrolment", that is to say the schools' practice of enrolling children of immigrants in one class behind that corresponding to their age as they first enter the Italian school system. This practice is officially discouraged but it is quite widespread and it is motivated by the need of schools to deal with children of immigrants' inadequate language proficiency without counting on dedicated financial and human resources (Mantovani 2008, Molina 2014). There is no empirical evidence on the effects of this practice on children of immigrants' schooling. However, Dalla Zuanna and colleagues (2009) argue that it might represent an additional source of inequality for children of immigrants: first, because it hinders relations with classmates of the same age and, second, because it may negatively affect their self-esteem and future academic outcomes.[6]

Finally, a controversial policy aimed at establishing a 30 percent cap to foreign-born students in classes was introduced by the Italian Ministry of Education in 2010. This measure was based on the assumption that high shares of immigrant students in the class would exert detrimental effects on native students' performances. Because of lack of data on the implementation of this policy, a proper evaluation of the effects of this measure is not feasible. However, there is growing evidence indicating that the supposed negative effects of immigrants' presence in the classroom on natives' achievement are close to zero, once socioeconomic composition of the class is controlled for. Moreover, slightly weak negative effects are detected for immigrants themselves. This means that immigrant concentration in classes has very weak (if any) negative effects on immigrant students' performances and zero effects on natives' performances (Contini 2013).

5 Conclusions: What policies are needed to the redress the gap?

The empirical findings presented above indicate that a large part of the educational disadvantage faced by the children of immigrants is linked to their families' low socioeconomic resources rather than being specifically related to their own immigrant status. This finding points to the persisting relevance of social origins in determining individuals' educational careers in Italy. Policy wise, this result has a first important consequence: to effectively reducing the educational gap between natives and children of immigrants, educational policies targeted to this new segment of the student population have to be complemented and integrated with universalistic policies aimed at increasing equity of educational opportunity for all.

Keeping this in mind, what specific policies are needed to redress the residual gaps between natives and children of immigrants? The research findings presented in this contribution suggest the key importance of looking at the intersection of two aspects: immigrant generational status and the specific educational outcome considered. The first aspect has to do with the timing of children migration and is informative about the extent to which policies should focus on late-arrived immigrants rather than on immigrant families as a whole group, regardless of children's place of birth. The second aspect is

[6] Dalla Zuanna and colleagues (2009) hypothesize that this practice negatively affects future education decisions, because students with school delay mostly underestimate their skills and their future academic potentials and therefore have higher probability to choose shorter school tracks or to leave school earlier.

important to highlight whether targeted policies should address primarily learning achievements (e.g., test scores and grades) rather than school choices and participation. The empirical findings point out that significant gaps persist, net of social background, especially for fist-generation immigrants and when considering learning achievements. Evidence of generational progress is mixed. When considering school choices and participation in upper secondary education, the second generation is faring much better than the first generation and is almost undistinguishable from the native student population. In turn, when the focus is on learning achievements, evidence of generational progress is very weak and limited to linguistic skills only. Both first- and second-generation children significantly and substantially lag behind natives with respect to results on standardized tests and grades. As a consequence, targeted policies are needed to sustain the learning processes of children of immigrants. Instead, lower priority should be assigned to the development of *ad hoc* interventions to redress immigrant-native gaps in the transition from lower to upper secondary school participation, because--with the exception of the high concentration of first-generation immigrants in the vocational track--immigrant-native differences appear to be fully explained by prior performance and social background. This does not mean that universalistic interventions like guidance programs and teacher recommendations should be discouraged, but that these interventions do not need to be specifically designed for children of immigrants, because the latter would greatly benefit from interventions that alleviate social-background barriers in the participation to upper secondary education (Azzolini and Vergolini 2014).

After establishing that learning achievements should be the main object of policies targeted to the children of immigrants, what kind of specific interventions should be pursued? Although, the evidence on the causal effects of education interventions is scarce, the descriptive findings presented in this paper help identify some areas of intervention that could be object of policy experimentations and attract more investments in the future. In the first place, and in line with one of the main policy recommendations at the European level, the findings presented in this paper confirm the importance of linguistic skills, as the immigrant-native gaps are found to be more pronounced in reading rather than in mathematics. Moreover, there is some evidence supportive of the hypothesis of an improvement of linguistic skills across generations (the only relative advantage of the second generation over the first generation with regard to learning achievement is detectable on linguistic tests). Hence, the problem of language acquisition is particularly acute for first-generation immigrants. Children who enter the Italian school with poor, if any, knowledge of the Italian language (and often, after having started school in their origin country) encounter particularly high difficulties, with relevant consequences for their subsequent school careers. Hence, new language acquisition programs and extra language classes should be elaborated and made more systematic for late-arrived immigrants, especially in the very first phases upon their arrival (Versino 2014). Such programs should be preferred over the actual practice of enrolling newcomers in one class behind that corresponding to their age as they enter the Italian school system (Molina 2014).

Coherently, Italy should also consider to implement actions aimed at increasing children of immigrants' attendance of preschool education. Extant evidence indicates that first-generation immigrants and, to a lesser extent, also second-generation children display

lower preschool attendance rates than natives.[7] Participation in high-quality preschool education would not only increase linguistic skills, as suggested by some research (Biedinger, et al. 2008), but it would also probably enhance immigrant pupils' integration into the new education system and thus positively affect a variety of educational outcomes in the long run. Therefore, actions aimed at increasing immigrant families' awareness of the importance of preschool education and to incentivize children of immigrants' attendance should be encouraged.

Furthermore, the small differences existing between the educational learning achievements of first- and second-generation children point to the need of conceiving policy interventions that target not only children of immigrants but also their parents. The limited generational progress might be speculatively linked to the fact that immigrant parents lack the educationally relevant resources employable to support their children' schooling. Immigrant parents completed school in a different education system and, as a consequence, they might have difficulties in effectively helping their children navigating the Italian system, in interacting with teachers, in knowing and exploiting available educational opportunities, etc. Moreover, immigrant parents encounter language obstacles that reduce their capability of helping their children in doing homework. To redress the shortcoming of "country-specific" resources in immigrant families, schools should seek to encourage and facilitate the active involvement of immigrant parents in the schooling of their children and support their interactions with teachers (Nusche 2009). Also, personalized tutoring and other out-of-class assistance initiatives should be reinforced in order to guarantee that immigrants' children receive the support they cannot receive at home. These interventions call for a proactive role of schools and teachers in reaching out to immigrant families, considering that the latter often display different needs and difficulties relative to the native ones. Particularly, teachers' preparation to deal with an increasingly diverse student population is important and should be part of teachers' training programs (Nusche 2009, OECD 2010b).

Finally, it is necessary concluding with a 'methodological' consideration. Italy is characterized by a still underdeveloped culture of policy evaluation and evidence-based policy making. Overall, there is insufficient evidence regarding what policies actually work. The case of education policy is not an exception. Beyond being characterized by a lack of policies to redress children of immigrants' disadvantage, there is scarce knowledge on which interventions really work to promote the schooling of children of immigrants. The available evidence reviewed in this paper has allowed to narrow down a list of intervention areas that should attract more attention, but it does not say anything with respect to the actual efficacy of the envisaged policy interventions. Hence, in line with the orientations at the European level, the 'methodological' suggestion would be to invest more heavily in evaluation studies--possibly based on small-scale randomized controlled trials--aimed at informing policy-making and assessing the effectiveness of pilot interventions before their scaling-up.

[7] Here I refer to *scuole d'infanzia*. These schools are accessible to all children aged between 3 and 5 years. They are free of charge, with the exception of costs related to transportation and canteen, and are not compulsory.

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Appendix I Organization of the Italian Education System

<table>
<tr><td>Grade</td><td colspan="4" rowspan="2">Master Degree (Laurea Magistrale) ISCED 5A</td><td rowspan="4"></td><td>Age</td></tr>
<tr><td>22</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="4" rowspan="2">Bachelor degree (Laurea) ISCED 5A</td><td>21</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>20</td></tr>
<tr><td>13</td><td rowspan="2">+1 or 2 additional years of vocational training</td><td rowspan="4">Vocational schools (Istituti professionali) ISCED 3a/3b</td><td rowspan="4">Technical Schools (Istituti tecnici) ISCED 3a/3b</td><td rowspan="4">General schools (Licei) ISCED 3a/3b</td><td>19</td></tr>
<tr><td>12</td><td>18</td></tr>
<tr><td>11</td><td rowspan="3">Regional vocational training courses (Formazione professionale) ISCED 3b/3c</td><td>17</td></tr>
<tr><td>10</td><td rowspan="3">Compulsory education</td><td>16</td></tr>
<tr><td>9</td><td>15</td></tr>
<tr><td>8</td><td colspan="4" rowspan="3">Lower secondary schools (Scuola secondaria di primo grado) ISCED 2a</td><td>14</td></tr>
<tr><td>7</td><td>13</td></tr>
<tr><td>6</td><td>12</td></tr>
<tr><td>5</td><td colspan="4" rowspan="5">Primary schools (Scuola primaria) ISCED 1</td><td>11</td></tr>
<tr><td>4</td><td>10</td></tr>
<tr><td>3</td><td>9</td></tr>
<tr><td>2</td><td>8</td></tr>
<tr><td>1</td><td>7</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="4" rowspan="3">Pre-schools (Scuola d'infanzia) ISCED 0</td><td rowspan="3"></td><td>6</td></tr>
<tr><td>5</td></tr>
<tr><td>4</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>3</td></tr>
</table>