

Second generation migrants and school. From educational needs to social inclusion

Immigrati di seconda generazione e scuola. Dai bisogni educativi all'inclusione sociale

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Abstract

This article analyzes the testimonies of new generations of immigrant origin on inclusive education, gathered through three methods of research and intervention: the first is linked to the Region of Tuscany and CNR – ITTIG's #IOPARTECIPO project, funded by AMIF; the second involves interviews and focus groups conducted for research by the Italian Authority for Children and Adolescents, titled, *L'inclusione e la partecipazione delle nuove generazioni di origine immigrata. Focus sulla condizione femminile*, while the third one, *Apriti Sesamo*, funded by FAMI, is still ongoing. These projects, developed from June to 2018, witnessed the participation of over 100 second-generation children. Though not a statistically significant sample, a qualitative analysis of the interviews and discussion groups has proved itself extremely significant, offering ample points of reflection and opportunities for in-depth analysis. This article will investigate the issues raised by the children in regard to their educational paths and relationships with peers, the latter identified as instrumental to their education and an essential indicator for assessing real social integration.

Keywords: second generation migrants, intercultural education, school, educational needs, social inclusion.

Sommario

Questo articolo analizza le testimonianze delle nuove generazioni di immigrati sull'educazione inclusiva, raccolte attraverso tre modalità di ricerca e intervento: la prima è collegata alla Regione Toscana e al progetto #IOPARTECIPO del CNR - ITTIG, finanziato dall'AMIF; la seconda prevede interviste e focus group condotti per la ricerca dall'Autorità italiana per l'infanzia e l'adolescenza, dal titolo *L'inclusione e la partecipazione delle nuove generazioni di origine immigrata. Focus sulla condizione femminile*, mentre è ancora in corso il terzo, *Apriti Sesamo*, finanziato con fondi FAMI del Ministero degli Interni. Questi progetti, sviluppati a partire dal giugno al 2018, hanno visto la partecipazione di oltre 100 bambini di seconda generazione. Pur non essendo un campione statisticamente significativo, un'analisi qualitativa delle interviste e dei gruppi di discussione si è rivelata estremamente significativa, offrendo ampi spunti di riflessione e occasioni di approfondimento. Questo articolo espone le problematiche sollevate dai ragazzi in merito ai loro percorsi educativi e alle relazioni con i coetanei, queste ultime affrontate in relazione ai percorsi educativi delle seconde generazioni e quali indicatori essenziali per valutare la loro reale integrazione sociale.

Parole chiave: migranti di seconda generazione, educazione interculturale, scuola, bisogni educativi, inclusione sociale.

1. Children and new generations of immigrant origin at school: data for understanding the Italian context

Italy witnessed the first influx of migrants in the 1970s, which gradually increased over time. Reviewing Caritas XI *Dossier Dossier Statistico Immigrazione* (Caritas, 2001) estimates, a total of 648,935 immigrants were regularly present in Italy in 1991. In only 10 years that number doubled, rising to 1,334,889 and eventually climbing to the figures of the most recent file, which cites 5,144,440 regular residents (ISTAT, 2019). This continuing trend is further reflected in Italian classrooms: according to MIUR data

(MIUR, 2020), 857.729 non-Italian citizens were registered during the 2017/2018 academic year. «These are mostly second generation students, born in Italy of non-Italian parents. In particular, the share of those born in Italy out of the total of students of migratory origin rose to 64.5%, over one percentage point more than in 2017/2018 (63.1%)» (MIUR, 2020). This figure has thus continuously grown since the 1990s, eventually peaking at 670,000 students (2012/2013 academic year), to then slow its growth rate with an increase of 39,000 students in the following five years (2013-2018). Yet despite reduced growth, the percentage in respect to the population with Italian citizenship has continuously increased:

The steady decline of students with Italian citizenship, which fell by almost 241,000 in the last five years, does, however, indicate that of the total number of students, the number of students of immigrant origin has continued to increase, growing from 9.2% to 9.4%. It can therefore be deduced that students with non-Italian citizenship are still today the Italian school system's most ever-changing factor (MIUR, 2018, p. 8).

Thus, within these populations of immigrant origin – even those born in Italy – the Ministry of Education has identified an element of dynamism, an evident change within the national education system itself. According to MIUR sources (MIUR, 2019), there are a total of 200 nationalities among the students with non-Italian citizenship, though the majority stem from a prevailing group of countries: in the 2017/2018 academic year, of 560,000 students roughly 70% were citizens of only 10 countries, in particular Romania, Albania, and Morocco, now areas of stable emigration to Italy. Between 2006/2007 and 2016/2017, the presence of Romanian citizens grew significantly, namely from 13.7% to 19.2%, though this was flanked by a decrease in students from Albania (from 15.6% to 13.6%) and Morocco (from 13.6% to 12.4%). In the same period of time, Moldovan and Ukrainian students began to enter the Italian landscape (respectively 25.000 and 20.000 students), and Egypt, with 20.000 students, replaced Tunisia in tenth place. A separate consideration must be made for students of Chinese origin: from 2006/2007 to 2016/2017, the number of students more than doubled, increasing from 24.000 to 49.000, with 4.000 new students incorporated in 2017 (+9.2%). Students of Chinese origin have had the largest increase, amounting to 6% of the total number of students. Certain figures are striking for their growth rate, such as the percent increase of Filipino students, which in the ten-year period from 2006 to 2016 was 113%: from 12.000 to 27.000 students. The same applies to students from India and Pakistan, respectively amounting to 26.000 and 19.000 students; the predominant Asian nationalities, namely Chinese, Filipino, Indian, and Pakistani, now make up 14.8% of the total number of students with non-Italian citizenship.

2. The situation in the classroom: a brief overview of the literature

Starting around the year 2000, a number of reports and studies on the scholastic integration of children of immigrants began to emerge, focusing first on the situation in primary schools and lower secondary schools, followed by upper secondary schools and university selections (for example, Giovannini and Queirolo Palmas, 2002; Ambrosini and Molina, 2004; Dalla Zuanna *et al.*, 2009; Ravecca, 2009; Barbagli and Schmoll, 2011; Santagati, 2011; Besozzi and Colombo, 2012; Lagomarsino and Ravecca, 2012, 2014; Romito, 2016; Bozzetti, 2018). In the pedagogical realm, a series of essays, books, and research on cross-cultural contamination and methods of integration were produced, as well as works covering topics such as linguistic education (Italian L2), plurilingualism,

and linguistic-cultural mediation (the first works include Gobbo, 2000; Cambi, 2001; Campani, 2002; Pinto Minerva, 2002; Portera, 2003, 2006; Santerini, 2004, to name a few), resulting in significant anthologies that marked the period in two fundamental stages, and that remain emblematic of the state of affairs during these two periods: *L'intercultura dalla A alla Z* in 2004 (Favaro and Luatti, 2004) and *Gli alfabeti dell'intercultura* in 2017 (Fiorucci, Pinto Minerva and Portera, 2017). MIUR also published two significant ministry documents during this time, with organizational, pedagogical, and didactic guidelines: *Linee guida per l'accoglienza e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri* in 2006 (MIUR, 2006) and *La via italiana per la scuola interculturale e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri* (MIUR, 2007); the most recent *Linee guida per l'accoglienza e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri* (2014) appropriates and reworks the previous guidelines, documents still considered reference points for the Italian approach towards integrating foreign students today. In the following five-year period, Italy, too, began studying the process of transitioning from school to the workforce, paying attention to individual aspirations, expectations, and successes (see, for example, Zanfrini, 2018; Allasino and Perino, 2012; Ulivieri, 2018; D'Agostino *et al.*, 2017; Sirignano, 2019).

Educational guidance is a difficult topic for children with non-Italian citizenship, and unfortunately remains tricky to those that have gained Italian citizenship but continue to be perceived as *foreigners*. In general, as field research has demonstrated, immigrant children tend to be ushered towards vocational or technical schools, though fortunately this trend has subsided in recent years as academic high school classrooms gradually become more multicultural. A relevant variable is place of birth; in high school and technical institutes, the percentages of non-Italian students born in Italy versus those born abroad differ significantly. During the 2016/2017 academic year, 38.9% of non-Italian students born in Italy attended technical school, 33.5% were oriented towards high schools, while the remaining 27.5% were enrolled in vocational institutes. Of non-Italian students born abroad, 37.6% pursued a vocational trajectory, 37.0% attended technical school, and the remaining 25.4% were enrolled in high school. The evident gender gap should also be noted within these figures: female students have the highest percentage of high school enrollment (38.2% versus 27.8% of male peers).

In respect to students lagging behind their peers, data veers on the negative side: non-Italian children regularly enrolled in their first year of high school make up 54.6% of students, while 43.4% are still enrolled in lower secondary school, with 3.2% held back one year, 8.5% held back two years, and 1.6% held back three years. After 4 years, at the age of 18, grade retention rises to a problematic 67%: according to MIUR data, «the students in upper secondary school include more than 36.000 students aged 19, 20 and older, of which 36.6% is still in the first or second year of school» (MIUR, 2017, p. 54). When compared to data pertaining to students of Italian origin, these figures become even more alarming: general data demonstrates that only 10% of Italian students lag behind, while the percentage of young students of immigrant origin amounts to 31.3%. Separating the data, a large gap is noted in upper secondary school: Italians make up 20.9%, while children of other origins make up 59.1% (MIUR, 2017, p. 54). In addition to these figures, the risk of dropping out of school is extremely high: 32.8% versus the 13.8% average of Italian students, with an evident gender difference in this case as well – 35.1% male compared to 30.5% female (MIUR, 2017, table 33).

3. Field research and investigative tools: focus groups, interviews and World Café

Three main tools were implemented in order to best investigate the educational conditions of new generations:

1. focus groups aimed at second generation migrants
2. interviews for second generation associations
3. guidelines for conducting World Café.

Parallel to the development of these research tools, second-generation children were also identified in a way that ensured gender balance and and countries of origin variety. We opted for the *snowball* strategy, meaning, research began with a group of people identified via the researchers' networks, who were then asked to provide further contacts for other children and organizations to be involved and interviewed. In this phase, the support provided by students was key, as well as that of several organizations dealing with issues related to immigration, professional linguistics, and cultural mediation, not to mention the fundamental contribution of the National Coordination of the New Italian Generations (CoNNGI), which promoted the research through its own national network.

4. A summary of field research results: education as perceived by the new generation of immigrant children

The interviews, focus groups, and participatory events provided ample information and points of reflection related to schools and how inclusive practices across various sectors of social life influence one another. All of the children consulted during the field research unanimously recognized schools as the main institution for promoting the integration of children, adolescents, and even their families: «It is at school that you meet Italians, where you know them» (A., Peruvian, female, 19 years old).

Some positive initiatives were mentioned, such as the Municipality of Florence's system of literacy centers, the services provided by the Municipality of Prato, as well as Italian language learning supported through various projects, though not being implemented within the school system's stable programs renders them less effective than other methods. Today, only a fragmented patchwork covers and addresses L2 language laboratories, initial reception protocols, and the appropriate use of linguistic intervention. From the student perspective, continuous and more structured initiatives have made the processes of initial reception, integration, and inclusion more linear and less arduous, proving the positive impact of these kinds of activities because «Even if you speak Italian well and are top of the class, there are many words and cultural references that you don't know» (C., Chinese, male, 18 years old).

In addition to these initiatives, which are based on the specific needs of newly arrived children or those in need of linguistic support, research demonstrates that the reported critical issues and potential are rather broad, and thus concern all students living in Italy regardless of origin. In particular, younger generations report that the Italian school system is perceived as a rigid institution, one that does not actively involve its youth, especially new generations, and causes them to feel excluded from both their educational path and classroom time. Regarding the school's subjects, they remark: when you have «plural [= multicultural] classes, the story cannot be told in one way only, because it must be connected with the stories of the countries of the children we are talking about» (M., Egyptian, male, 17 years old) and «We should all understand the importance of being more *multiethnic*: reading books also by foreign authors at school, also knowing the parents' countries of origin, the language» (S., Albanian, female, 18 years old). Positive reports of individual lessons, select teachers, and workshops were only mentioned as rare exceptions to normal teaching methods at school. A large portion of young students provided feedback stating that the school and its professional figures do not implement strategies to listen to their students and understand them on a deeper level, thus failing to both facilitate socialization among peers and encourage social responsibility and

involvement in professional decisions. In addition to this broader criticism, various students also reported having teachers that were untrained for employing integration tools and working in a diverse classroom: from linguistic to cultural, religious, and so on. For example, if the teacher is prejudiced about the use of religious symbols such as the veil for Islamic girls: «Maybe they ask you if your parents forced you, this has happened to me, but no one at school has ever asked me why I decided to wear it [the veil]. The teachers, after the first few days, mostly ignored it. But I felt that they were different with me than before» (N., Moroccan, female, 20 years old). In various cases the children noted that it was precisely the teachers, more or less implicitly, who expressed prejudices and stereotypes that ultimately hindered the educational integration process, both among peers and at the family relationship level. Several interviewees also reported cases in which educators and teachers, especially with small children, contributed to internalizing a negative image of themselves as students, resulting in an increased risk of failing at school, dropping out of school, and/or forms of *downward* educational segregation, as an interviewed student explained:

There is no idea of knowing: why does he or she behave this way? What is she thinking? Why don't you go out with that company? [...] Teachers must try to understand students better because integration comes not only from us as a second generation but also from the community that must integrate us. If we try to integrate but we are not accepted it makes no sense (H., Ecuadorian, female, 20 years old).

5. School as the key institution for education and social inclusion

Despite this image of an educational system that is unreceptive to changes in society and new students' needs, schools are nonetheless perceived as fundamental institutions, ones potentially capable of educating all students (regardless of origin) on the topics of social inclusion and accepting differences in people, languages, and cultures.

In regards to the services offered to students of non-Italian origin, the students stated that vital initiatives included welcome activities for newcomers, as well as the L2 Italian language laboratories aimed at acquiring and strengthening curricular language, often not assimilated by first-generation children whose parents did not attend an Italian school and cannot provide support in this regard. However, students stressed that these *laboratories* were particularly valuable and useful if conducted with all their classmates (regardless of their parents' country of origin) and focused on the particular needs of immigrant children or new generations. In some interviews, students revealed that despite individual efforts, language becomes more complex and requires more attention, ultimately contributing to differences and distance between students. For this reason, the need for in-depth language study must be emphasized (not only communicative but also curricular language), as well as the study of all of its implicit cultural references.

The students also stressed the importance of extra-curricular activities, such as sports groups, organization of parties and events, school trips, and also after-school activities (for example, homework support) carried out both at school and in informal settings, especially to prevent the social isolation often linked to gender dynamics that emerge during adolescence:

I made friends with a little girl when I was at the primary schools but I no longer have many relationships with my school *friends*. I've never behaved badly and I don't know why it went like this. If I meet them on the street, every now and then, they pretend not to see me... This is all the way, primary, middle and high school. In fact,

in high school they only accepted me when I brought food! Besides that, nothing... (M., Peruvian, female, 19 years old).

I didn't feel bad, neither racism nor anything. The companions, however, have not become friends: if you try to approach and they still do not get close to you what do you have to do ... chase them? At some point you just walk away. The school, however, could help us, help families understand that we were isolated from other classmates at home (I., Venezuelan, female, 18 years old).

Another suggestion addressed organizing the reception of younger children or newly arrived pre-adolescents/adolescents through especially, a service offered in some contexts by local authorities in collaboration with associations and third-sector bodies, which can aid and support their insertion into the new context immediately, thus before the cultural impact becomes traumatic: «I remember that I did nothing but cry the first few days, then a lady who spoke my language sat by me and I felt less desperate» (A., Moroccan, female, 18 years old). Students unanimously agreed that mediators, through their awareness initiatives focused on linguistic and cultural difference, are extremely important figures for both Italian and non-Italian students.

Another mode of intervention considered strategic by the students involves the implementation of parental support; in particular, the young interviewees mentioned including families in the process of educational guidance as strategic. In choosing the high school path, they declared that they felt in difficulty, with little information, often obtained more from friends than from specific activities, and they also experienced a general disorientation from their parents. In their opinion it would have been important that their parents had been adequately provided with useful information to support them in an informed choice.

6. Linguistic, cultural difficulties and educational guidance

This kind of difficulty remains even in cases with excellent Italian language skills: according to the interviewees, in many cases students and families of immigrant origin are not in the condition to easily access services and information, as they often experience difficulties when facing bureaucratic processes. Unfortunately, these difficulties can deeply influence the choice of high schools; as the interviewees pointed out, students of non-Italian origin are almost automatically channeled towards vocational schools. According to the interviewees, it is not easy to deviate from these recommendations, especially if suggested by teachers and if the family is not well integrated in the region, thus remaining unaware of the various options within the Italian education system: «Families do not understand the Italian [school] system well. In fact, they choose what the teachers say, which is not what you can do or want to do. Teachers don't always know how to orient...and the family makes not a real choice» (A., Pakistani, male, 19 years old).

The interviewees made it clear that only certain schools have implemented systemic programs for educational guidance that are not limited to suggestions and practical information about high schools, but that instead transversally aid students over long periods of time in order to address their ambitions, aspirations, talents, and specific challenges: «How can they tell what you can or can't do just by looking at where your parents come from? That's absurd, and it's unfair» (M., Senegalese, female, 19 year old). To this end, students requested the implementation of structured paths from a young age – from even primary school – to ensure that individual children are valued and encouraged

in their studies not because of their parents' origins, but because of their character and abilities. The interviewees consider this type of engagement useful to all students; according to their experience, even children of Italian parents have faced challenges due to a superficial knowledge of the Italian educational system and precarious social positions. As for the new generations of immigrant origin, trusting teachers' indications can often weigh them down, especially when provided with «automatic encouragement» (S., Moroccan, male, 23 years old) towards vocational schools, though it is also the children's lack of self-esteem that becomes problematic, as they see themselves as «downward» (J., Tunisian, female, 17 years old) students, to use the words of a young girl who ultimately succeeded in enrolling in high school: «Most of the second-generation children are directed [automatically] to vocational and technical institutes only, because they are thought to be paths that can be spent immediately, unlike high schools or graduates» (J., Tunisian, female, 17 years old).

7. Training school professionals – educators, teachers, managers, administrators, custodians, and other professional figures

A rather sore point concerns the training of school professionals. According to the interviewees, oftentimes school staff has not been completely sensitized to linguistic diversity, as well as the difficulties and opportunities that plurilingualism can offer, a notion that also applies to cultural diversity. Furthermore, they often fail to see how nontransparent and difficult the Italian school system can be for those lacking reference points. Families are not always adequately informed and supported, thus making it difficult to make thought-out decisions or support their children's course of study in the best possible manner. Even simple bureaucratic steps can become lofty obstacles, placing both parents and children in difficult and frustrating situations: «I remember my mom: she was lost, just lost. Then a mediator helped understand the documents and when they needed to be done» (Y., Filipino, female, 19 years old).

The research participants stressed the importance of school professionals; despite negative comments, they firmly underlined that school staff remains a reference point for students and their families, and not only for curricular or school activities. If on the one hand teachers were perceived as «unprepared for change and [...] frightened by a multicultural classroom» (J., Ecuadorian, male, 21 years old), on the other hand, students stressed that educators, teachers, professors, or managers «equipped with more broad and relevant training» (J., Ecuadorian, male, 21 years old) resulted in a completely different experience of «pleasant and productive nature» (X., Albanian, female, 17 years old) and: hence the strong emphasis placed on providing teaching staff and all school professionals with the necessary skills and tools needed to manage multicultural classes, with a particular focus on conflict management and intercultural dialogue.

The greatest challenges were reported in situations where there was an evident lack of knowledge of students' cultural foundations, a situation the interviewees linked to a lack of sincere interest in the places of origin, artistic expressions, traditions, languages, and religions of *foreign peoples*. On the contrary, where teachers, or even custodians, secretaries, or other staff members showed genuine curiosity, interest, and appreciation towards the students, the situation was reversed. This demonstrates the value of targeted professional initiatives, such as those of L2 Italian teachers and linguistic and cultural mediators, who, in addition to individual duties, participate in activities geared to providing information, raising awareness, and creating a sense of openness towards plurilingualism and cultural diversity (Bolognesi and Lorenzini, 2017).

8. The school as a socialization factor: a role in profound change

All students reported extremely positive reactions to social situations that avoided dividing them into groups – for example, Italian-speaking and non-Italian speaking, based on cultural heritage or native language, and so on – in which an educator or teacher allowed the students to positively interact, ultimately offering opportunities and tools for building «the values of tolerance, sharing, and a culture of peace but everything that is different is seen as an obstacle. Only growing up you understand that it is a richness, but the school does not help much to do so» (S., Egyptian, female, 18 years old).

The interviewees expressed hope that the schools will introduce professional figures that apply their skills to support the socialization and integration processes faced by many young immigrants, not isolating them from their peers but creating continuous situations of exchange at both the recreational and curricular levels, thus establishing a *two-way process* of mutual understanding, both personal and cultural. The school's role extends far beyond the institution's hours of operation. Indeed, the school, along with its staff, can greatly encourage the formation of relationships and friendships even outside its classrooms, implementing strategies that facilitate meetings between parents, participation in community events, and the promotion of activities that bring students together not only at school, but also at sporting events, artistic activities, and so on. This initiative, to be developed perhaps in collaboration with the region and its services – from libraries and sports and recreational clubs to various types of associations – is of utmost importance to new generations of children who often feel *integrated* in the classroom but remain isolated the moment they leave school grounds. Birthday parties, local events linked to national holidays, and meetings to do homework with friends: these are only a few of the situations from which the interviewees were often excluded - «I know they got together, but I only once attended a birthday. Now it is different. I choose my friends (L., Senegalese, female, 20 years old).

The interviewees also repeatedly cited the difficulty of participating in school events – a critical moment for both parents and children – due to a series of logistical and organizational problems (for example, proposed event times are often difficult for those lacking a family or friendly network on which they can rely, as they often have inflexible working hours and little chance of negotiating potential absences), as well as issues related to language and social class, such as not feeling secure of their level of Italian, feeling ashamed of their *subordinate* occupations, living situations that are perhaps considered inadequate, and so on: «I hadn't had any problems until they asked me what work your parents do.» (A., Venezuelan, female, 17 years old); «It was a discomfort for me not to have a house to invite my friends to, you feel inferior» (M., Cape Verdean, female, 21 years old); «There are different acceptance codes: if you are African, rich and alternative then you are included. If you are Brazilian or Cuban you are cool. I say different memberships depending on the situation and what seems most accepted to me» (A., Venezuelan, female, 17 years old).

The practice of using students as mediators for their parents is still rather common, an occurrence repeatedly reported as inappropriate by various documents and guidelines (for example, *Linee guida per l'accoglienza e l'integrazione degli alunni stranieri*, 2014), which places both children and their families in difficult situations. Numerous incidents of this kind were reported in the interviews and focus groups, some even comical and paradoxical, yet all contain elements of psychological distress when facing a task that should be executed by a trained professional (a mediator), and that places parents in a fragile and often «humiliating» (Y., Filipino, female, 19 years old) position in front of their children.

9. Practices to counter the social construction of prejudice at school: change migrations' narratives and reforming school curricula

One of the interviewed students commented, «When you have ‘plural’ classes, history cannot be told in one verse, as you must connect it to the history of all the children’s countries that you’re speaking of» (S., Nigerian, female, 25 years old). The majority of the interviewed students underlined that textbooks and other educational materials present history, culture, science, and even geography from a very ethnocentric approach – «Italocentric» (L., Senegalese, female, 20 years old) – and even in cases of in-depth analyses of migration, the narrative often follows that of the media: presented as a state of emergency, it does not frame the historical processes underlying post-colonial movements, and does not delve further into social, cultural, and environmental data and situations. On the contrary, offering didactic materials that focus on the contributions of cultural pluralism would greatly benefit all students, and would contribute to rebuking many stereotypes and prejudices that remain prevalent in Italian society (Sirignano, 2019; Ulivieri, 2018). Revising school curricula in this manner would not only be advantageous, but would encourage inclusion and social cohesion, active participation and citizenship, as well as knowledge of other cultures and their accomplishments: to date, these aspects have been addressed thanks to the efforts of individual teachers or within the context of school projects. In respect to teaching and methodology, interviewees greatly appreciated the activities conducted cooperatively or within peer education and/or peer tutoring, both for the social dimension and for the challenge of implementing a critical lens when continuously working with other classmates or workgroups (Gentile and Chiappelli, 2016).

Peer socialization has emerged as a fundamental point: in general, the students spoke of welcoming, supportive, and friendly classroom environments, but many also spoke of exclusion as linked to institutional discrimination (for example, the difficulty of participating on school trips abroad without citizenship) and isolation, as well as incidents of «not necessarily racist» (A., Pakistani, male, 19 years old) bullying, connected to the perception of difference: «I have always been treated well because I spoke Italian well, I was the “diverse Chinese”, that’s what they called me. In my class, however, there was discrimination against another Chinese boy because he did not speak Italian well» (C., Chinese, male, 18 years old). Some interviewees, during activities carried out with upper and lower secondary school students thanks to their participation in local associations, declared that they had «received a cry for help due to incidents and situations of bullying towards non-Italian boys and girls» (T., Albanian, male, 26 years old), highlighting cases of discrimination and a deep relational discomfort. According to the interviewed students, these incidents were hardly registered or went unnoticed by the teachers who generally intervene on a personal level (not representative of the teaching staff and school) and address each single incident without placing it in the wider context of the school’s social dynamics. Instead of blaming the individual teachers, the students reported a dire need for the school to take responsibility as an institution, asking for the implementation of a series of preventive measures more oriented towards considering and providing solutions to the problem once it is fully concretized: again, this highlights the need for more active and participatory educational methods focused on working in groups and socialization, as well as added emphasis on extracurricular activities.

Conclusion: a few positive notes

As the MIUR data demonstrates, despite facing pervasive obstacles, children of non-Italian origin are increasingly enrolling in high schools and committing to university courses. According to the MIUR figures (MIUR 2020), even academic results are steadily improving. An interviewee proudly stated, «second-generation students have higher grades now, a high number of graduates. We are used to fighting» (X., Albanian, female, 17 years old) and another said: «We, the young people of the second generation and beyond, we have a very rich cultural and linguistic background [...] we know it and the Italian society will recognize it» (P., Peruvian, male, 19 years old). For this reason, the role of teachers and their educational and professional guidance, as underlined by scholars (see, for instance, Fiorucci, 2011; Orefice and Corbi, 2017; Loiodice and Ulivieri, 2017; Bolognesi and Lorenzini, 2017), remains a key point for helping students positively see themselves «as a student capable of making it» (P., Peruvian, male, 19 years old) – for «encouraging ambition, cultivating a dream, and daring» (L., Senegalese, female, 20 years old) students to undertake courses of study with greater determination and commitment. As the interviewees pointed out when speaking of other areas of analysis in this field of research, the double, even triple cultural affiliations, the languages spoken, and their parents' migration experiences are all factors that have oftentimes placed them in difficult situations, but which can also represent, if cherished and not stigmatized, extraordinary skills «and winning hands to play» (P., Peruvian, male, 19 years old) in school, as in the rest of the world.

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