



Inequality in Migrant Integration: Trends and Policy Interventions

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Abstract

The available evidence suggests that foreign students are likely to lag behind their Italian peers in schooling rates and educational outcomes as the level of education increases. The number of foreign pupils in the Italian school system increased immensely in the past 20 years. There is clear evidence that disparities in the so-called “educational segregation” still persist: students with foreign background are still more likely to prefer an educational path that rewards them a fast entrance into the labor market, but which will probably place them on a lower socioeconomic position. Moreover, the evidence found highlights the gap between native and migrant pupils in terms of school delay, wider as the age increases. Apparently, there is a lack of organic approach to tackle such a problem, which can constitute a real challenge in terms of social outcomes in the following years. An organic approach is mostly needed, operating at multiple levels such as schools (intensive orientation sessions) and labor market.

JEL Classification: F22

Key Words: Segregation, Migrants, Inequality, Socioeconomic, Education.

1- Introduction

The presence of foreign students in the Italian education system is already a structural phenomenon, spread at all levels of the schooling system. The years after 2000 have seen a huge surge in the number of pupils without Italian citizenship attending school in Italy, and this incidence is likely to keep rising in the future. Yet, the available evidence suggests that foreign students are likely to lag behind their Italian peers in schooling rates and educational outcomes as the level of education increases; moreover, such issues could be more or less likely to occur according to the foreign student's family background or previous migratory experiences (whether he's born in Italy, arrived at very young ages, or emigrated at a later stage of childhood or teenage). The growing incidence of foreign pupils also poses challenges regarding teaching and communication strategies which should take into account the newly multicultural features of the Italian schools. All these issues need to be properly addressed by effective government policymaking.

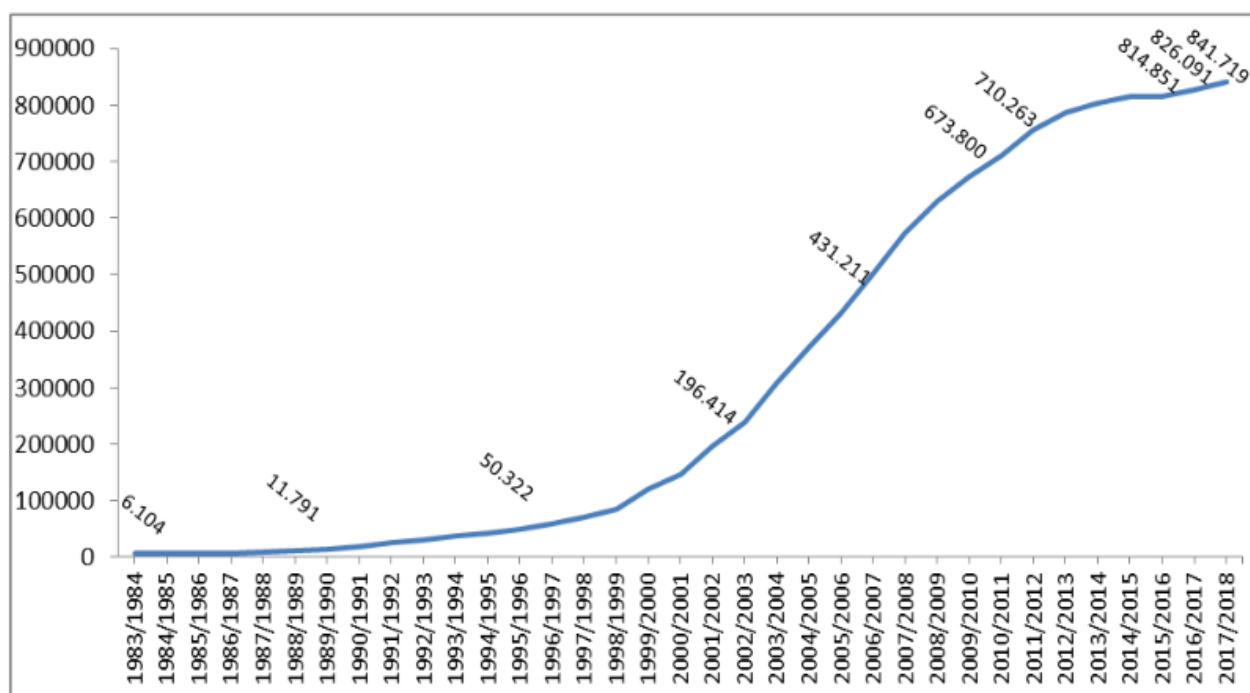
This paper is structured as follows: the first part will first provide a general historical framework of the ethnic changes in Italy's education system and quantitative evidence of significant lags in schooling outcomes of foreign pupils. The second part will then go to describe and comment the current existing (or non-existing) practices and policies implemented by the Italian ministry of education to address current and past issues. The third and final part will provide personal conclusions, followed by references.

2- Trends

The number of foreign pupils in the Italian school system increased immensely in the past 20 years. Until late '90s, Italy was a country with extremely low incidence of migration. According to a 2018 report from MIUR (the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research), foreign students in the school year 1997/1998 were 73.362; instead, they were 841.719 in 2017/2018. In percentage terms, foreign students went from 0.8% to 9.7% of the whole student population of Italy in exactly two decades (MIUR, 2018). Graph 1 below displays the evolution of the foreign student population in Italy from 1983/84 to 2017/18. The steady increase of the '90s took a steep surge around 2000. Foreign students show different educational behaviour and outcomes compared to their Italian counterparts.

Schooling rates of foreign students are similar to Italian schooling rates around primary school age, but they decrease over time as the age of the student increases (Camera dei Deputati, 2019). Moreover, foreign pupils are more likely to lag behind their native peers in reference of the regular study path; again, this difference widens as the age of the student increases (Mussino & Strozza, 2012).

Figure 2. 1: The evolution of the foreign student population in Italy from 1983/84 to 2017/18



Source: The Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR), a.s. 2017/2018.

Mussino and Strozza (2012), using data from 20.000 teenagers coming from the ITAGEN2 survey, explored the determinants of relative risk of school delay for immigrant children using different logistic regression models. Their findings indicate that 1) the single biggest determinant of school delay is the age at immigration to Italy of the child (foreign children usually are put in lower grades to help them catch up more easily, although with more required time); 2) a higher number of siblings increase the relative risk of lagging behind, probably because of less lower investment per capita within the family; 3) knowledge of Italian language lowers the relative risk of lagging; 4) parents' education have no apparent effect, but having a father who's a white collar worker decreases the relative risk in reference to blue collar, 5) having a larger number of Italian friends in one's own social circle decreases the risk of lagging.

Finally, girls have lower relative risk of lagging behind as compared to boys. The authors especially consider point 5 to be especially poignant: the practice of creating separate classes for the special integration needs of immigrant children could actually be harmful for them, as the evidence shows that socialization with native children significantly and positively impacts their educational path.

Another analysis carried out by ISTAT (the national institute of statistics of Italy) on a different set of survey data from 2011/12 restated again most of the claims of Mussino and Strozza – especially the effect of knowing Italian on lowering the probability of school dropout - but also adding the significant effect of the parental level of education (probability of dropping out is lower as the level of education of the parents increases). Moreover, the ISTAT report highlights, using census data

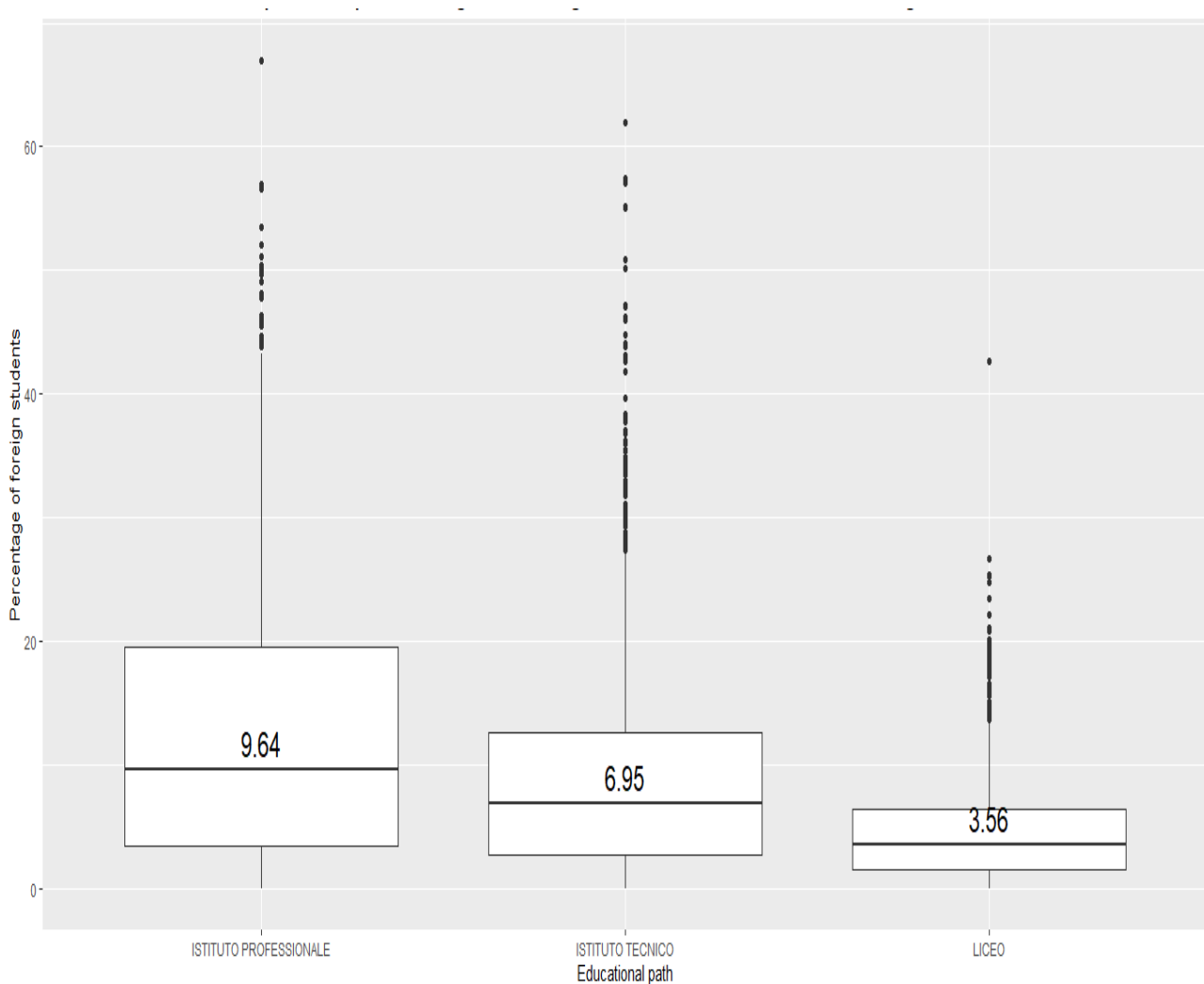
from 2011, how school attendance rates of immigrant children vary significantly based on the country and area of origin, with immigrants from Latin America and other European countries generally displaying higher attendance as compared to African students and students from Asia the Indian subcontinent. For example, Bengali male students in the age group 15-20 have an abysmally low attendance rate of 50%, meaning that 1 out of 2 Bengalis aged 15 to 20 did not attend school at the recording of the census. For all nationalities including native Italians, girls have higher attendance rates as compared to boys.

3- Educational segregation

There is a clear divergent approach between Italian and foreign students when it comes to the choice of 2nd level secondary education (this definition, in the Italian system, describes the period of high school, 5 years of schooling roughly from age 14 to age 19). 2nd level secondary education schools in Italy are composed by a broad range of different types of schools which can be grouped in 3 classes: *liceo*, technical schools and vocational schools. Liceo is considered the highest level of all the classes: it provides strong scientific and classical education and is *de facto* a gateway to university education. Hence, if a student chooses to attend *liceo*, he will probably delay his own's entrance in the labor market, due to the continuation of the educational path at the university, but will probably achieve a higher income and enjoy a higher socioeconomic status later in life. Technical schools usually provide a practically oriented scientific education that lets students enter the labor market relatively easily and without delays due to further educational investment in university (accounting schools, IT schools). Vocational schools provide technical and practical education meant to pursue an immediate entry in the labor market, usually at lower segments of the income spectrum (electrician, hairdresser etc.).

To get a view of up-to-date situation in Italian schools, I directly downloaded data from the open data online platform of MIUR. The database of MIUR does not provide a single aggregated dataset containing figures about the number of foreign pupils enrolled and the type of 2nd level secondary school; in fact, such information is found on two different datasets, which however luckily contain the unique code of the schools. This makes merging of the two datasets possible; after that, I calculated the share of foreign pupils out of the total of enrolled students. The final dataset contains data on the demographic composition and the type of school of 5.045 schools throughout Italy. The graph below shows the percentage of foreign students enrolled in 2nd level secondary schools in Italy during the year 2017/2018, by type of schools. The boxplots also display the median value of the percentage of foreign students. It must be noted that the percentage of foreign students in the whole 2nd level secondary school system at all levels is 7.41%.

Figure 3. 1: Boxplots of percentage of foreign students in 5.045 Italian schools

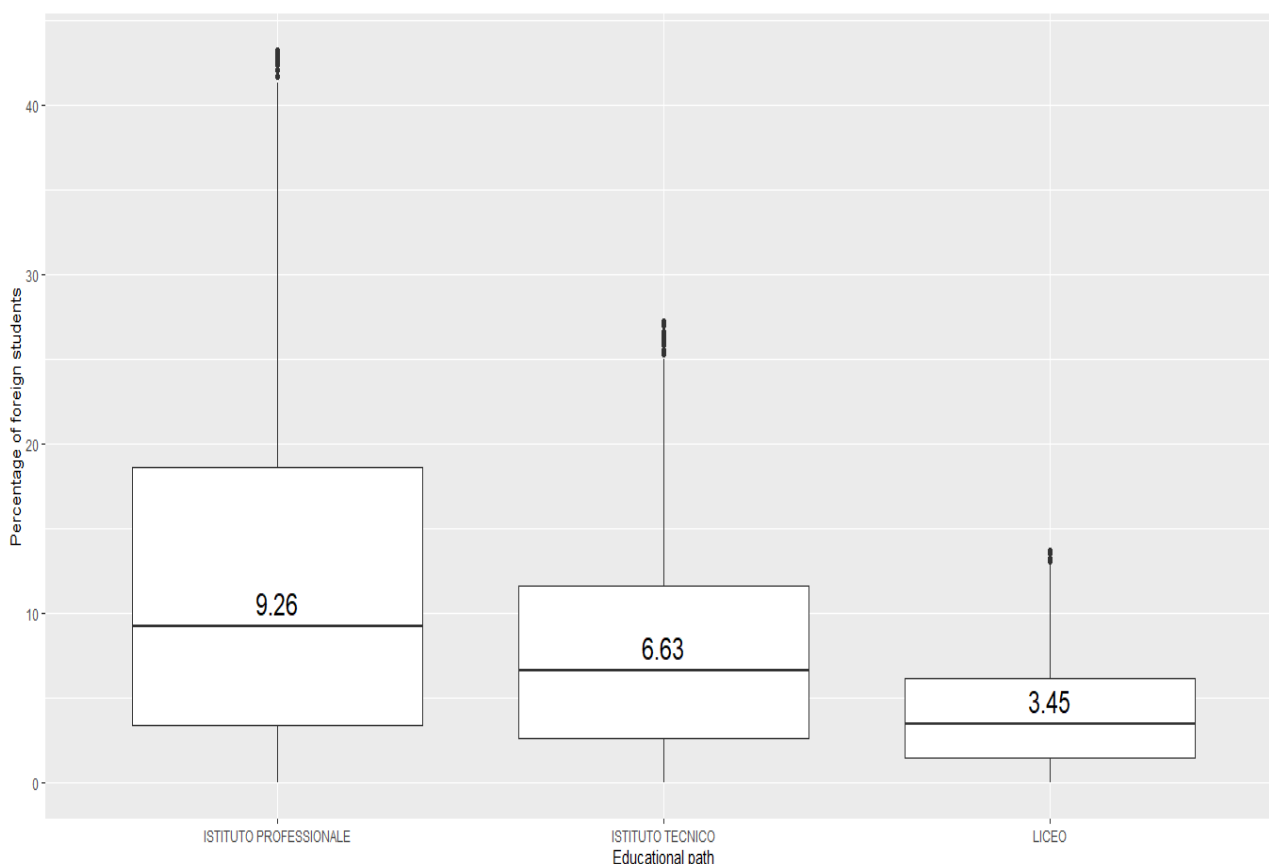


Source: own elaboration on MIUR data

Vocational schools (“Istituto professionale”) display the highest levels of foreign enrollment, with a median value of 9.64. Middle way we find technical schools (“Istituto tecnico”), with a median value of 6.95. *Licei* show the lowest value, with only 3.56 percent median of students holding a foreign nationality. Because the presence of extreme values, the boxplots look pretty flat. Therefore, I eliminated the outliers for each school type and re-plotted the data (the number of observations decreased from 5.045 to 4.888).

The graph can be seen below. However, we notice that the situation does not change much as compared to the previous plot. Because of the detection and elimination of outliers, median values are slightly lower for all school types, but in terms of plot interpretation, the situation remains the same.

Figure 3. 2: Boxplots of percentage of foreign students in 4.888 Italian high schools



Source: own elaboration on MIUR data

The recent figures from the Italian ministry of education, therefore, confirm what the available literature on the subject has claimed multiple times: a certain level of educational segregation is found within the Italian school system, with foreign students overrepresented in vocational schools – which provide fast entry in the labor market, but at a lower income level - and underrepresented in classical and scientific schools – which traditionally form the country's élite.

Since the entry in the above mentioned school is a matter of personal choice and not based on ability or cognitive tests or exam of any kind, and there is no significant different in the costs of pursuing one type of school over the other, it can be claimed that such educational segregation could be heavily influenced by the family background of the student in terms of socioeconomic status and level of education of parents, and the value that they place on education for future labor outcomes. Attending *liceo* implies continuing education (with the consequent costs of higher education) and a late entry into the labor market; without enough incentives such as family's expectations or highly educated parents, the student can be more easily pulled towards a vocational schools in light of a fast entrance in the labor market. Since immigrant families usually have a lower educational background, foreign pupils are not generally expected to pursue higher education, as an early-obtained job is apparently preferred. Such is the conclusion of Barban (2010), after applying logistic regression analysis on ITAGEN2 data from 2006. The author concluded that 2nd generation

foreigners (born in Italy) and native Italians don't display differences in choices of 2nd level secondary school after controlling for a set of indicators of family background (income, education of parents). However, foreign pupils who were not born in Italy still showed differences with Italians even after controlling for family background.

4- Analysis

We can summarize the criticalities of integration of foreign pupils into the Italian school system into two points:

- School crowding and multiculturalism. The huge increase of foreign pupils in the last 25 years posed and currently poses issues of management of diversity in an increasingly multicultural school system.
- Drop-out rates and school delays. These indicators show a widening gap between Italian and foreign pupils as the grade increases. Moreover, the age at arrival in Italy is itself a determinant of internal divergences among foreign students, mainly because of issues due to lack of linguistic skills.
- (Voluntary) segregation in the choice of educational path. Variables related to the family background of the foreign pupil such as parents' educational level of socioeconomic indicators are strong determinants of school path divergences between migrants and Italians at the 2nd level secondary education. In the case of 2nd generation students (i.e. foreign students born in Italy), family background has been shown to be the *only* determinant of such divergence (Barban, 2010).

Migrant school integration: policymaking approaches

Policies regarding migrant integration at school level have been considered a priority by the ministry of education, which produced a solid corpus of legislative actions to tackle such issues. An overview of such policies and their evolution over time is described in this chapter.

In 1998, legislative decree 286/1998 established that all school-age foreigners in Italy are subject to Italian educational system. The following year, presidential decree 394/1999 established that foreign minors have the right to attend school education in Italy regardless of their legal position. The same decree states that foreign minors should be placed to the grade corresponding to their age, unless school councils of teachers decide otherwise according to specific and individual motivations such as knowledge of Italian. Moreover, the decree allows the creation of special language programs to facilitate the integration of foreign students into the school system.

In 2010, a circular of the ministry of education highlighted challenges posed by the growing foreign population in the schooling system, and some possible solutions (MIUR, 2010). Among the challenges, the document enlisted the issue of linguistic skills, the high incidence of school drop-out

and delays, and the cohabitation between many diverse cultures. The circular established a limit to the percentage of foreign pupils in each class of every Italian school, fixed at 30%, in order to avoid in-class ethnic segregation, promote socialization and integration between foreigners and Italians, and reach more equal class outcomes. Such limit of 30% has been implemented gradually from the school year 2010/11, and it is possibly subject to specific modifications based on above-average linguistic skills of foreign pupils (in which case the percentage limit can be increased) or under-average linguistic skills (in which case the percentage limit can be decreased).

In case of poor language skills, school-time and afternoon-time language programs can be activated. Finally, the ministry circular encourages schools to actively seek collaboration with social organizations to incentivize students to pursue extra-school social activities with their Italian peers.

In 2014, the ministry of education published the new Guidelines for the Welcome and Integration of Foreign Students, which replaced a previous document published in 2006. Among other bureaucratic indications about the enrollment process, the guidelines restate the importance of the 30% limit for the composition of classes, and briefly mention the issue of educational segregation when it comes to the choice of the 2nd level secondary school, stressing the importance of the orientation sessions for foreign students at 1st level secondary school. Moreover, the guidelines suggest adding training courses aimed at improving intercultural communication skills for school staff and teachers, preparing them to handle and properly manage the emerging multicultural and plurilinguistic features of Italian schools.

The law n. 107 of 2015 placed importance on the strengthening of courses and labs aimed at improving knowledge of Italian language for foreign students. Based upon this law, the MIUR established a *National Plan for the Training of Teachers 2016/2019*. Under such plan, the ministry designed a complex project aimed at providing extensive training to school staff in regard to management of multicultural schools and Italian language teaching. According to a memo by MIUR (2017), the project was financed with 4 million euros by the Fund for Asylum, Migration and Integration of the ministry of internal affairs, and involves 1.000 school managers, 10.000 teachers and 2.000 janitors working in schools with high prevalence of migrant students.

Finally, the ministerial decree n. 643 of 2017 (MIUR) created a new National Observatory for the Integration of Foreign Pupils and for Inter-culture, which updated a previous one, established in 2014. The purpose of the Observatory is to provide suggestions and recommendations to policymakers in the field of school integration. A ministerial memo on the newly created institution (MIUR, 2017) stated that the observatory's works will include the participation and collaboration with associations of foreign students.

5- Conclusions

The rapid change of the demographic composition of Italian schools in the past 20 to 25 years posed significant challenges and pressures on the stability of the system and to policymakers, who were required to act accordingly with appropriate measures to avoid the creation of educational disparities between native students, 2nd generation immigrant students, and newly arrived ones. The paper highlighted how the legislative responses to the changes were articulated in the past twenty years, with several measures aimed at increasing the linguistic skills of children (considered as the single most important asset for the successful completion of studies), limiting the number of foreign students per class in order to avoid ghettoization and segregation, and training school staff (managers, teachers and janitors) to be better prepared in contexts of increasingly higher ethnic diversity and multiculturalism.

However, as I previously showed with the data collected from the ministry of education, there is a clear evidence that disparities in the so-called “educational segregation” still persist: students with foreign background are still more likely to prefer an educational path that rewards them a fast entrance into the labor market, but which will probably place them on a lower socioeconomic position. Although in no way I suggest that this phenomenon is harmful *per se*, as school’s choice is fundamentally a matter of personal preference in the end, I would argue that such general trend is likely to superimpose notions of nationality and ethnicity over the notion of class, ultimately fueling feelings of racial or ethnic resentment and discontent due to the different socioeconomic positioning of different ethnic or national groups. Moreover, the evidence found in the literature (Mussino & Strozza, 2015) still highlights the gap between native and migrant pupils in terms of school delay, wider as the age increases.

Although many effort have been placed on the development and the improvement of Italian linguistic skills of foreign students, and on the training of teachers and other school staff members, the issue of educational segregation at 2nd level secondary school has yet to be addressed by policymaking institutions, which only referred briefly to it in the 2014 ministerial guidelines, which only argued for better orientation sessions for students in 1st level secondary schools. Apparently, there is a lack of organic approach to tackle such a problem, which – as already stated – can constitute a real challenge in terms of social outcomes in the following years. However, as the evidence shows, the choice of educational path at 2nd level secondary school is mostly predicted by indicators pertaining to the family background sphere such as parents’ income and education. It hence becomes very difficult to design policies addressing educational segregation without operating on the within-family level, which could have disruptive or harmful consequences for the families and the people involved.

Educational segregation is the most poignant issue that the Italian school system is facing, yet it is the one which received the least attention by ministers and other policymakers. An organic approach is mostly needed, operating at multiple levels such as schools (intensive orientation sessions) and labor market: if parents' income is a positive predictor of higher level school choice for the student, better economic prospects for migrant workers could mean higher school mobility for their children.

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