

# Foreign Students in Italian School System: Challenges and Successes

by Vincenzo Cesareo



July 2015

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This fact sheet resumes the main results and reflections of the Report “*Students with non-Italian citizenship. The difficulties and successes. National Report 2013/2014*”<sup>1</sup>, published on April 2015 by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) and the ISMU Foundation, providing a picture of the foreign students among the school population in Italy during the 2013/2014 school year. The data confirm a steady and significant increase in the enrollment of foreign students in Italian schools: from the 2001/02 school year to 2013/14 one, the number of students quadrupled. The children born from migrant parents and without Italian citizenship in our country now constitute the majority of the foreign students in Italian schools. Lombardy is the first region with the bigger presence of students with non-Italian citizenship.

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## 1. The ISMU Foundation Annual Report on foreign students

For the past few years, the ISMU Foundation has been commissioned by the MIUR (Ministry of Education, University and Research) an Annual Report that offers an in-depth and detailed picture of foreign students in the Italian educational system at all levels of schooling, following the evolution of the phenomenon in Italy and in its 20 different regions. So far three annual reports have been compiled by Ismu Foundation with specific investigations and statistical analysis.

The edition 2015, which considers foreign students enrolled in the 2013/2014 school year, has continued to adopt a longitudinal approach, which has enabled us, on the one hand, to highlight continuities and discontinuities over an extended period of time, using the same indicators developed in previous editions, but, on the other hand, also introducing new data and analysis.

The multicultural reality of Italian educational system is presented through three specific perspectives. The first takes into account the *scholastic, educational and biographical trajectories* of foreign students, analyzing the pathways of inclusion and integration of second generation students, in a specific time in which Italy is characterized by the

<sup>1</sup> The Report “*Students with non-Italian citizenship. The difficulties and successes. National Report 2013/2014*”, is available on [www.ismu.org](http://www.ismu.org).

gradual stabilization of migratory flows. The second perspective focuses on the condition of students without Italian citizenship in the educational and training system with the aim of offering a *comparison between Italian and foreign students*. The argument here is that we must examine the critical issues relating to the scolarization of the latter within the general framework of education and training for all students and, in particular, of the most disadvantaged. Finally, we focus on the *difficulties* and inequalities that still characterize the educational itineraries of foreign students when compared to natives, albeit not without considering the good results and *successes* that occur in the process of learning and that lead a growing number of students with non-Italian citizenship - supported by their families - to invest in long-term vocational education trainings. These students have skills that can become resources for the development of educational and training institutions and of the territories in which they live, through positive modes of participation and active citizenship. This is connected to the recognition of the status of citizen on the basis of a *jus soli* "temperato" (means adapted) to children born in the State their parents have migrated to, a longstanding issue in the Italian debate. The proposal of binding the acquisition of citizenship to a minimum level of education, which the ISMU Foundation has long been advocating, recognizes and gives value to the educational sphere as the primary context for social, civil and political inclusion.

In order to reconstruct the broader educational trajectories of students, attention is paid to the entire educational and training system, from Kindergarten and Pre-K up to Further Education, and including public and private educational opportunities for immigrant adults. The perspective is that of polycentric education, which highlights the existence of a plurality of agencies and educational opportunities; this is due to the fact that education can not be confined into one or several spaces, given that each social space has its own educational value, an argument I put forth in my 1974 book *The school between crisis and utopia* <sup>2</sup>.

Moreover, we propose a systematic comparison of the key indicators on students' attendance and educational routes, considering the available data on foreigners and Italians and drawing upon a vast amount of statistical material from multiple sources (Ministry of Education, Invalsi, Ministry of work, Isfol, Indire, Istat, OECD PISA, etc.). This material includes the characteristics of students, their presence across different school levels, in state and non-state schools, across geographical areas, routes to university and to lifelong learning, but also the aimless paths of the so-called Neet cohort (i.e., young people *Not in Employment, Education or Training*).

Finally, attention is given to the outcomes of the educational paths of first and second generation foreign students; these are always compared with those of Italian students in order to highlight problem areas and good results, difficulties and improvements among the new generations, looking at national data (i.e., Invalsi results, 2013/14 a.y.) and international databases (i.e., OECD PISA 2012, [www.oecd.org/pisa/](http://www.oecd.org/pisa/)) . The analysis allows to situate the Italian case - which is part of the group of countries with a *Poor*

<sup>2</sup> Cesareo V. (a cura di), *La scuola tra crisi e utopia*, La Scuola ed., 1976.

*and Unequal Educational Opportunity System* – within the European context, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of our system, which still needs to invest on the improvement of performance for all students, increasing excellence in results, while promoting equal opportunities for both Italian and non-Italian students.

## 2. A picture of foreign students in the Italian educational system

The analysis conducted indicates a transition from a situation of "normal diversity" to a "different kind of normality" in multicultural schools that can, if value is given to the differences between Italians and foreigners, give a new lease of life to the day-to-day construction of an intercultural school based on dialogue and growing together.

In quantitative terms we can note an increase in the enrollment of foreign students, who have quadrupled between 2001/02 to 2013/14. We have gone from 196,414 foreign students in the 2001/02 school year (2.2% of the total population) to 802,844 in the 2013/14 school year (9% of the total). Foreign enrollments between 2009/2010 and 2013/2014 grew by 19.2%, compared with a decrease of -2.0% among Italian students. The number of Italians has gone down across all grade levels, while that of foreign students has increased across all educational levels, but especially in Kindergartens and Pre-Kindergartens and in Upper Secondary schooling. The past five years have seen an increase in the attendance of foreigners in non-state schools (+16% in 2013/14 compared to 2009/2010). As for Italians, their numerical decline, for the same period, is more pronounced in non-state schools (-7.5% in five years) compared to state schools (-1.1%).

In terms of national origin, the most numerous minority are Romanians (154,621), followed by Albanians (107,847) and Moroccans (101,176). With respect to gender, females are less prevalent than males, making up 48% of the total population (385,365), slightly less than among Italians (48.3%). The female component prevails only in Upper Secondary schools. Looking at geographical distribution, Lombardy continues to be the region with the largest number of foreign students (197,202), but also with the highest number of pupils in general (1,409,671), followed by Emilia Romagna (93,434), Veneto (92,924), Lazio (77,071) and Piedmont (75,276).

It is particularly significant to note that those born in Italy now constitute the majority of these students, for the first time reaching the record figure of 51.7% (415,283) of all enrolled foreign students. Between 2007/8 and 2013/14 there has been an exponential increase of foreign students born in Italy in secondary schools, where students have almost trebled (Lower Secondary schools) or more than trebled (Upper Secondary schools). Focusing on geographical distribution shows that the North West holds the record: there, in the 2013/14 school year, 167,182 foreign students born in Italy (40.2%) were enrolled in schools. The North East follows with 123,142 students (29.6%), then the Center (93,094 or 22.4%), and finally the South and the Islands (31,865, 7.8%). Lom-

bardy is the region with the highest number of students born in Italy (more than 110.000).

From the 2007/08 to the 2013/14 school year, foreign students entering for the first time in the Italian educational system decreased in number from 46,154 to 30,825. However, between the 2012/13 and 2013/14 s.y. this group increased once again (+7,989 persons). This increase is partially explained by the significant rise in family reunifications and unaccompanied minors (10,536 in 2014).

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

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

### 3. Educational routes of students with non-Italian citizenship

With the rise of Italian-born foreign students, there is an improvement in academic results and educational paths, with a reduction in educational delays and repeat years. This reduces to some extent, the difficulties faced by this cohort, which, nonetheless continue to remain high. In the 2013/14 school year, delayed foreign account for 14.7% in primary schools (compared to 1.9% of Italians), for 41.5% in Lower Secondary schools (versus 7.4% of Italians), and 65.1% in Upper Secondary schools (compared to 23.3% of Italians). Looking at data for this same school year, the rates of foreign students repeating a year confirms the gap between Italian and foreigners, especially in the earlier years. For the first time, in 2013/14, technical schools represent the secondary school option chosen by most foreign students (38.5%), previously held by vocational schools, which are now in second place (37.9%), followed by Lyceums (23.5%). The increase in enrollments is due to foreign students born Italy, who tend to prefer technical institutes (41.1%) and Lyceums (29.6%).

In addition to data from the Ministry of Education (MIUR), we have also considered the data provided by other organizations and institutions, in order to remain faithful to a polycentric perspective on education. ISFOL shows that foreign students account for 15.5% of all students in the first three years of the VET (Vocational Education and Training) system and for 15.2% in the fourth year. With reference to Higher Education, the data on universities enrollment for the 2013/14 academic year (National Student Registry, [www.anagrafe.miur.it](http://www.anagrafe.miur.it)) indicates that nearly half of foreign males holds a technical Upper Secondary school certificate (49.7%) and 17% of a professional Upper Secondary school qualification. Although technical and professional choices are often interpreted as segregating, foreign students who qualify from these institutions do not

forgo higher educational studies and tend to reach university qualifications to a greater extent than their Italian peers.

In 2013, young people with non-Italian citizenship represent 15.8% of the total NEET (*Not in Employment, Education and Training*) population in Italy, with a greater incidence compared to Italians of the same age. An important difference is gender: Italian NEETs are predominantly male (50.3%), whereas among foreign NEETs 67.3% are young women. For some minorities in particular, however, this figure represents an inability to work or study for family reasons.

Finally, analyzing vocational and educational training opportunities for adult immigrants, the latest INDIRE report available (2012) reports that 43.9% of all adults attending public schools for adults (CPIAs, formerly known as CTP) are foreigners. In the past six academic years, this group has grown significantly, with a correspondent decrease in the number of Italian adult students.

#### 4. The outcomes of the educational paths of first and second generation foreign students

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

I wish to conclude with a comparison between Italy and Europe with respect to schooling and the performance of non-native students. From the analysis of the results of the PISA 2012 OECD study on 15 years old students, Italy is among the *low performer* countries in Mathematics, i.e. those countries of the European Union below the OECD average (with scores below 490), along with Norway, Portugal, Spain, the Slovak Republic, Sweden, Hungary, and Greece. Italy is also included among the group of states with the worst average results both in Mathematics performance, and in terms of the gap between native and immigrant students: the school systems of Italy, Spain, Greece, Norway, and Sweden appear even less effective when it comes to foreign students.

#### Bibliografia

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The ISMU Foundation is an independent research centre funded in 1992 promoting research and training activities on migration, integration and the ever-growing ethnic and cultural diversity of contemporary societies.

As an independent scientific body, it proposes itself as a service provider open to the collaboration with national and European institutions, local administrations, welfare and health-care agencies, non-profit organisations, schooling institutions, Italian and foreign research centres, libraries and documentation centres, international agencies, diplomatic and consular representations.

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