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LENGTH OF THE STAY IN THE HOST COUNTRY AND EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS: THE ITALIAN CASE

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OBJECTIVE

The aim of the paper is to analyze the gap in reading literacy of young immigrant children in Italy. In particular, for first-generation immigrants, it investigates whether immigrant students' language skills depend on how long they have been in the host country. INVALSI data on Italian students enable to compare the results obtained by children enrolled in the fifth grade of primary school with that obtained by sixth graders in lower secondary and tenth grade students of upper secondary school. This allows to study if the educational gap narrows at a different pace early or later in students' life.

SCIENTIFIC METHODS

This study investigate how large are the differences in standardized language test scores between immigrant and Italian children conditional on personal, family and school characteristics distinguishing between first and second-generation immigrants. To this aim we estimate a standard education production function where student test performance in language is modelled as a function of the native versus immigrant first or second generation status, and a set of additional variables that control for students characteristics (gender, socio-economic background, native/I or II generation immigrants and area of origin), school characteristics (size, school type if in upper secondary school) and catchment area characteristics (macro-area dummies). Second, comparing the results on students from different grades we disentangle the effect on language performance of students' age at arrival from the effect of how long immigrant children have been in Italy.

In terms of a causal interpretation, one needs to take into account that the cross-sectional nature of these estimations allows for a descriptive interpretation only. Further analysis will focus more on endogeneity issues.

In general, these results provide very useful suggestions for the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) framework. Note that, with respect to immigrant students' area of origin, the INVALSI dataset enable only to identify if first generation students are born in one of three large geographical areas, namely, the European Community (EU27),

European country outside EU27, and non European countries. This allows some specific comparisons between EU27 and the European subset of the ENP countries.

POLICY VALUE-ADDED

Only few recent studies address the important question of whether the age at arrival and the length of stay in the host country matters for immigrants educational achievements. Within country evidence is available for Scandinavian countries (Bohlmark, 2008, for Sweden, Ohinata and Van Ours, 2012, for Denmark, and Bratsberg et al., 2011, for Norway), and for non-European countries [Cortes, 2006, and Sweetman, 2010, for USA, and Corak, 2011, for Canada), while a cross-country analysis can be found in Heath et al. (2012). All these studies confirm that test scores are typically lower for foreign students who arrive later in the host country school career and that there are late-arrival penalties for first-generation students.

This analysis is also related to the growing literature on the role that social distance and social capital play on economic outcomes (Helliwell and Putnam, 1999). In particular, Glaeser (1999) argues that together with education levels, one of the factors that appear to be crucial in creating social capital at the community level is ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity. According to linguistic scholars, social distance is one of the sociocultural factors affecting the second language acquisition by immigrants and the latter is crucial for their integration in the host country.

This study results are very much consistent with the literature. First of all, we confirm the significant gap between natives and immigrants students in school outcomes for all grades, with first generation immigrants showing the largest gap. Second, comparing the results between first and second generation immigrant students we also find that the significant gap observed on first generation is mainly due to the negative performance of newly arrived (one year of stay in the host country) immigrant children in Italy. For example, for grade 5 we observe that, controlling for other variables, the result in the language test for newly arrived foreign students is approximately 16% lower than the overall average test result. At the same time, after 2 to 4 years in the Italian school system, this gap is reduced to 5% and it is very similar to that observed for second generation immigrant students. Similar results are found for students enrolled in the 6th and 10th grade. That is, our results suggest that, for first generation students, closing the gap with second generation ones is, for a large part, a matter of time.

However, results also show that the gap between natives and immigrants remains persistent in all grades. Thus, even if results indicate that new and improved interventions for mitigating disadvantages closely related to the late-arrival problems might be particularly effective, they also confirm that they are not enough for closing the native-immigrant performance gap. It also finds a negative and significant coefficient for the number of siblings, and a positive one for the presence of books at home. This evidence suggests that policies directed towards improving schools conditions (such as providing adequate study spaces and efficient libraries) may have large returns for the more disadvantaged immigrant students.

Moreover, when we compare the results across the different grades, it turns out that interventions at younger ages are likely to be more effective. That is, results suggest

that the estimated gap between first and second generation students takes more time to close for upper secondary school students than for lower grades pupils. Note that, if foreign children late arrival is the result of national migration policies on family reunification, this result would therefore imply that the possible benefit of delaying immigrant family reunification need to be compared against the costs of students' remedial assistance.

Finally, when we control for area of origin, we observe that, compared to the first generation of EU27 origins, the school achievement gaps are larger both for the European subset of the ENP countries and for non-European first generation immigrants. This suggests that the magnitude of the first generation student penalty depends also on the combination of country-of-origin and country-of-destination. However, despite the vast literature that stress that differences in educational attainments vary significantly across ethnic communities, and the importance of integration policies, schooling data disaggregated by country of birth are still seldom available. More detailed dataset on immigrant students' flows and achievements should therefore be a priority in the policy agenda.