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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.

MAIN RESULTS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Key findings:

The integration of third-country nationals has been identified as a priority at European level and migration-related issues are a central part of the Stockholm Programme, adopted by the EU Member State governments at the December 2009 European Council.

In general, the school performance gap between native and immigrant children is well documented for a number of industrialized countries and it is a real concern for policy makers since it also predicts a gap in labor-market performance and other long-term outcomes.

Among the proposed indicators of migrant integration, language skills and educational attainments are identified as crucial.

Low skilled are more at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate and young people with a migrant background are found to be at greater risk of being drop out at school

and of exiting the education and training system without having obtained an upper secondary qualification. Regardless of gender, the share of early school leavers with a foreign background was four percentage points higher than the share of their counterparts with native-born.

According to PISA 2009 data, Italy is one of the OECD countries with the largest native-immigrant school performance gap. Its share of early leavers from education and training (persons aged 18-24) among the subgroup of foreign-born has been 46%, against the 19% observed for the total population and it has the lowest proportion of foreign citizens with tertiary education and a large one of low educational attainment level (Eurostat LFS, 2008). In sum, migrants have a lower level of income and are at increased risk of poverty and social exclusion and, with its low educational attainments of both migrants and natives, Italy is one of the countries most at risk.

This study confirms the significant gap between natives and immigrants students in Italian school outcomes for three different grades of schooling, namely fifth, sixth and tenth grade students. In all these grades, first generation immigrants show the largest gap.

However, the significant gap observed on first generation is largely due to the negative performance of newly arrived (one year of stay in the host country) immigrant children in Italy. For grade 5 students 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 just (or for a large part) a matter of time.

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. This study also finds a negative and significant coefficient for the number of siblings, and a positive one for the presence of books at home and it 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, results show that interventions at younger ages are likely to be more effective. That is, they 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. Thus, if foreign children late arrival is the result of national migration policies on family reunification, this result would therefore implies that the possible benefit of delaying immigrant family reunification need to be compared against the costs of students' remedial assistance.

Further, 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 priority in the policy agenda.