

# **A biographical evaluation of educational policies: the point of view of successful immigrant students**

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# Topic of discussion

The effects of public educational measures on the trajectories of young migrants in Italy:  
a biographical evaluation

The biographical approach is particularly suitable to study “unexpected” success stories of vulnerable students with an immigrant background:

it sheds light on structural conditions, educational measures and individual factors that facilitate to negotiate educational inequalities and promote educational success

Source of data: the **Su.Per. Project**

*(Success in educational pathways of students with an immigrant background)*

- Educational autobiographies of 65 immigrant students attending upper secondary schools in Brescia (IT)

# Theoretical framework

- Different paradigms and theories have been developed to explain the achievement gap between majority and ethnic minority students, pointing out various factors that are supposed to affect educational performance (Banks, Park, 2010)
- Migration-education studies concern **more structure than agency**, focusing on adults and not on children as actors (Stevens, Dworkin, 2014)
- Focus more on the causes of failure rather than the mechanism of educational success.
- Little attention has been paid to successful students with an immigrant/disadvantaged background and upward mobility of second-generation students (Apitzsch, 1990; Lahire, 1995; Kao, Tienda, 1995; Portes, MacLoad, 1996; Hao, Pong, 2008; Crul et al., 2017; OECD, 2018)

# Research method

- Aim: to analyse the way public educational measures are embedded in individuals' trajectories, how they affect biographies and are mediated by them in a longitudinal perspective
- Research data: **65 educational autobiographies** of students with an immigrant background attending upper secondary schools in Brescia. These autobiographies was based on a self-interview grid with 34 points (past, present, future) (Su.Per. Project)
  - *39 foreign-born and 26 native-born students*
  - *21 males and 44 females*
  - *23 citizenships (mainly Morocco, India, Albania, Pakistan, Romania)*
  - *13 attending lyceums, 20 technical institutes, 22 vocational institutes, 10 VET*
- Relevance of the biographical approach (since Thomas, Znaniecki, 1918-1920) to highlight how people 1) construct and represent themselves facing social change (migration/education, etc.), 2) reflect on their lived experience, 3) build imaginative spaces of resistance to social conditionings

# Some results

From the first step of *open coding* emerges that students' narratives point out some key areas concerning educational policies and projects, corresponding to **biographical “turning point”**

## 1. **SUPPORT FOR NEWLY-ARRIVED STUDENTS / SCHOOL INTEGRATION**

- Arrival in Italy and entrance in the educational system

## 2. **SCHOOL CHOICE**

- Transition from lower to upper secondary school

## 3. **INTERNSHIP AND WORK SOCIALIZATION**

- School-to-work transition

## 4. **INSTITUTIONAL MEASURES TO PROMOTE LEARNING SUCCESS**

- Learning process and school outcomes

## **THE SU.PER. PROJECT**

# 1) SUPPORT FOR NEWLY-ARRIVED STUDENTS

<i>Measures mentioned</i>	<i>Students evaluation</i>	<i>Impact on successful biographies</i>
<p><b>“Lower class enrolment”</b></p> <p>Enrollment in the mainstream class</p> <p>The chance of speaking English with teachers and peers</p> <p>Italian language courses and Italian language teachers</p>	<p>Negative perception of the first school days</p> <p>Negative emotions (anxiety, fear, loneliness)</p> <p>Languages studied in the country of origin</p> <p>Importance of “good teachers” support</p> <p>Relational difficulties with classmates in secondary school and welcoming attitudes of primary school classmates</p>	<p>The <b>arrival during primary school</b> guarantees a better integration</p> <p>Secondary students attended more <b>Italian courses outside the classroom</b></p> <p>The <b>knowledge of English</b> facilitate them</p> <p>More commitment and <b>good results as a compensation of the lack of good relationships</b></p> <p><b>Habit of patiently waiting</b></p> <p>The positive evaluation of <b>non-cognitive skills</b> by Italian teachers matter</p>

## 2) SCHOOL CHOICE

Evaluation of the transition from lower to upper secondary school

<i>Measures mentioned</i>	<i>Students evaluation</i>	<i>Impact on successful biographies</i>
<b>No common devices are mentioned</b>  <b>Discretionary teacher advice</b>  Few students tell about: - psychologist at school, - open day, - aptitude tests	The school choice as a jump in the future, a challenge, a balance between freedom and reality, a responsibility  Scholastic delay constraints  Feeling of disorientation  Lack of knowledges about Italian education system  Economic difficulties	<b>Strong impact of individual variables</b> (determination, autonomy, agency, reflexivity) and <b>relational ones</b> (friends and teachers advice) on the guidance process

### 3) WORK SOCIALIZATION

#### School-to-work transition

<i>Measures mentioned</i>	<i>Students evaluation</i>	<i>Impact on successful biographies</i>
School-work alternation and <b>internship</b>	Positive evaluation of internship  Positive evaluation of attending vocational institutes and VET centres	The chance to <b>demonstrate their skills</b> and to overcome stereotypes  To take responsibility and <b>to be autonomous</b>  To know the work context  To discover and test professional vocation



## 4) INSTITUTIONAL MEASURES TO PROMOTE LEARNING PROCESS

<i>Measures mentioned</i>	<i>Students evaluation</i>	<i>Impact on successful biographies</i>
<p>A well organised institute</p> <p>A multicultural and democratic school</p> <p>An institute sensitive to migrants</p> <p>International exchanges, projects for immigrant students</p>	<p><b>Success</b> is defined as an improvement process rooted in the migration process</p> <p>Positive evaluation of such schools</p>	<p>Related to the <b>specific school context</b></p> <p>Depending on <b>teachers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>“professional” relations</i>: they learn how to stay at school, to face failure, to become adult</li> <li>- <i>“affective” relations</i>: they learn “life lessons”, way of doing/thinking, affecting choices</li> </ul>

# 4.1) THE SU.PER. PROJECT EFFECT

Su.Per. Project



From a standard “definition of the situation” (Thomas, Thomas, 1928; Merton, 1971):  
*immigrant students do not well at school*

to a “new definition of the situation” elaborated by researchers and teachers during the project:

*disadvantaged / immigrant students are (defined as)  
good, excellent, successful students*

then they were selected to write their educational autobiographies

**IMPACT and unforeseen effects** of this intervention

Positive feelings

Self-esteem, resilience, determination  
and better outcomes

New definition accepted and re-interpreted by students:  
*for the first time they think they are / will be /  
could be excellent students*

*“My teachers have asked me to participate in this project, because they consider me an excellent student or a student who could be excellent” (Anuar, Morocco).*

**“I never thought of myself in these terms before this project, I thought that best students were only those who do not need help” (Tiana, Pakistan).**

*“Before this project, I was just thinking of getting by. The Su.Per. project woke me up. He made me understand that not only because you are different, you have other origins, you cannot have what they have and be good at school. Being chosen among the best students is helping me to get more and more involved, because nothing is impossible” (Aicha, Senegal).*

**“To participate to the Su.Per. project is a great honor for me, I would never have thought to look like an excellent student in the eyes of a teacher” (Lisa, China).**

# In conclusion

- From an unexpected and exceptional experience of educational success to **a possible and socially accepted biographical condition** for disadvantaged students
- **From a “new definition of the situation” to new course of “action”**: to be defined as “good students” as condition to learn how socially act as good student
- In these process of biographical evaluation of policies, students have voice and play an important social/public role, promoting new narratives on effective educational policies and on possible educational success of immigrant students
- Need of a re-definition of the situation, from a biographical and institutional point of view, for the improvement of policies effectiveness