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**Children Hybrid Integration: Learning Dialogue
as a way of Upgrading Policies of Participation**

Local report (Italy)

How do you feel about school? Local report of interviews with children, and professionals on their school experiences

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Introduction

This report is based on templates for local reports about professionals' and children's perspectives which has been delivered by UJ for use by the partners in the research activities. Each partner has prepared and delivered two local reports, about the professionals' perspectives and the children's perspectives. Draft versions of the two final reports (about the professionals' perspectives and the children's perspectives) has been prepared and circulated among the project partners by UJ for reviewing. The revisions have been introduced in the deliverable regarding local reports. This report is divided in two parts, according to the differentiation between professionals and children. The final report (D. 5.2) will include a reflection on the data presented in this report and on the most important results emerging from the local reports.

The report included a methodological overview, followed by sections for each part of the two general sections (professionals' perspectives and children's perspectives). The section on professionals is organised, for each country partner, according to the views of different professional (teachers, social workers and mediators) about professional experiences, in general and for what concerns narratives on and relationships with migrant children and their families, the experience of pandemic and finally the recommendation for good practices. The section on children is organised, for each partner, in thematic subsections about the experience of schools, intercultural relations at school, identity and belonging, and final recommendations.

CHILD-UP WP5 local professional report: ITALY

1. Methodology

The research team invited the class teachers involved in the project, as well as some educators in charge of activities within the project, to participate in interviews. Almost all the teachers/educators contacted agreed to participate, meaning that participants were almost entirely the same as those that took part in the 2019 survey (WP4, Milestone 10). In only a few cases were the teachers interviewed working in the same school but not with the same class that participated in the first phase. Some additional teachers leading activities in the classroom in WP6 were interviewed in Genoa. Mediators, community educators, and social workers also participated in the survey. Almost all the interviews with teachers/educators, as well as some interviews with mediators, were conducted during the initial phase of the COVID-19 lockdown (Spring 2020). These individuals were working from home but were willing to be interviewed. Involving social workers, community educators and some mediators was more difficult however, since they were faced with a radical reorganization of both their work schedule and workload as a result of the pandemic. Some mediators and educators working in reception centres were therefore interviewed at the end of the school year. In order to meet their needs, individual interviews were carried out with educators working in reception centres, rather than in focus groups as was foreseen.

Professionals were contacted either via email or phone to check their availability and make the necessary arrangements. Interviews were carried out remotely, either over the phone or using digital platforms such as Google Meet and Skype. Many respondents appreciated the opportunity to take the time to stop and reflect on their own educational practices and on their students/clients. This part of research involved a total of 77 professionals divided as outlined in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS

	Total	Males	females	Migrants
Teachers/educators	43	1	42	-
Educators in reception centres	6	4	2	1
Social Workers	6	-	6	-
Mediators	22	3	19	21
Total	77	8	69	22

2. Professional experiences – an overview

This section concerns the professional and educational background of teachers, educators, social workers and mediators, their experience in working with migrant children in terms of tasks and roles, as well as opportunities for the development and upgrading of skills.

Teachers

Of the teachers taking part in this survey, most had many years of experience, ranging from 10 to 41 years, except for two who had worked respectively for 2 and 5 years. The number of years of experience in their current school was more varied, ranging from 2 to 35 years. Excluding ISCED0 teachers, the majority teach the humanities, with a minority teaching scientific subjects, with a few single teachers teaching English,

French, Religious Education, and Physical Education. One was a support teacher. Four teachers have changed subject since the start of their employment in their current school: three were, or have become, support teachers, and one had been a pedagogist and a facilitator for migrant children for 6 years.

Five educators have 9 to 13 years of experience working with facilitative methods with children of all school grades, and one had 20 years of experience as a teacher. A psychologist and two Italian L2 language teachers have 15 to 17 years of experience working on integration, mediation, facilitation and wellbeing of ISCED1 and ISCED2 children.

All teachers had significant experience with migrant children: there are migrant children in all their classes, and with one exception they have always had migrant children in their classes. The number of migrant children is quite high in all classes with quite a fair gender distribution. In almost all classes, the percentage ranges from 30% to 90%, with a prevalence of children from Sub-Saharan Africa, Maghreb and Eastern Europe. In some areas (in the province of Modena and in Reggio Emilia), Chinese, Pakistani and Indian children are also numerous, while in Genoa, the Romany component is high. The highest percentages and variety of origins (up to 18 countries) can be found in ISCED0 and ISCED1 schools, as well as the schools in city centres. The lowest percentages are seen in peripheral schools, ISCED2 and some ISCED3 schools, especially the later stage classes at which point schools provide midway certificates. According to the teachers, the composition of migrant children has changed over time: while ten to twenty years ago migrant children were mainly newcomers, they now belong to the second-generation or, at least, have attended school in Italy for many years, while there are few newcomers who have come to Italy through family reunification. Mixed couples also are well represented. Finally, there is a trend for sending Chinese children in Reggio Emilia to school back in China for the first school years in order to learn Chinese, returning to Italy when they are 10-12 years old. Most of the teachers highlighted variations in the composition of migrant students in their classes depending on the position of the school (more in cities than countryside), the type of school for ISCED3 (more in vocational schools than in high schools), and time.

Respondents declared their surprise at migrant children's will, capability, determination, adaptability and personal resources, once linguistic barriers are overcome. They talked especially about seeing their positive attitude and open mindedness, "As soon as the language problem is somehow solved, these children are very resourceful, willing to learn but, above all, highly skillful. Foreign children are often the most meta-cognitive children" (IT_T13_F). Moreover, respondents stressed the satisfaction and gratitude expressed by both children and parents, including migrant parents' interest, trust and respect for their job. However, the educator with a migrant background underlined her surprise and regret that some migrant children rejected their origins and language in order to conform and be accepted by others in the classroom. Some teachers emphasized that in their experiences with migrant children the personal aspect is predominant.

Of the young people who have emigrated abroad, "emigrated" is only one of the many things which characterize them, so, as well as that, there are many others [...] just the attitude to study, the motivational drive of the family, etc. so because the factors are many, let's say I had all kinds of experiences. (IT_T24_M)

Other teachers seemed more interested in performance and evaluation, showing surprise and satisfaction at migrant children's approach to learning and achievement. The same view is even more evident in terms of the challenges that teachers face when teaching migrant children, in particular language barriers. These performance-centred teachers cite the challenges of low language ability, even for second-generation children (those born in Italy), and their slowness in learning.

In contrast, person-centred teachers stressed the challenge of language barriers only in relation to newly arrived migrants and to problems of creating dialogue and trusting relationships with them and their families. Some person-centred teachers, particularly in ISCED0 and ISCED2-3 schools, observed that, apart from



newcomers, there are no problems with migrant students as they are either too young or to have language problems or too educated.

Some teachers explicitly stressed the importance of adopting a person-oriented approach, “Ensuring these children and young people are considered as all-rounders in the eyes of other teachers, as bearers of experience therefore, bearers of languages, bearers of something, or rather a lot, that the teachers do not know and do not see.” (IT_T21_F). This approach reflects a teaching strategy which is not based on content but on competencies and on personalized evaluations:

When very traditional teaching is used, based on content and not on competence, these children are lost, not least because the content we give them is often culturally distant from their experiences. (IT_T13_F).

They have to be assessed for what they can do, you cannot ask them what they cannot do. So not in a standardized way but in a more flexible way. (IT_T21_F)

Social workers

Three groups of social workers were interviewed. A first group included social workers supporting migrant families with economic and/or accommodation challenges, adoptions or custody cases, and training for guardians. A second group included educators working within reception centres. The third group included social workers working with Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC; in the Italian system (Minori Stranieri Non Accompagnati – MSNA). UASC includes two groups of children: those who have arrived as asylum seekers and those who have arrived via networks of migrants and have autonomously self-reported to the police, declaring themselves to be minors not in the care of any adults.

Six out of twelve interviewees have at least ten years of experience in the field, one has twenty two years of experience, three started working in 2019.

Both social workers who work with UASC and social workers working with families, usually work in teams, with educators and psychologists. The main task of the social workers working with families is a relational one, thus they frequently interview families and visit their houses. They write reports for legal authorities and coordinate with other services (schools, health services). They frequently attend network meetings with educators, mental health centres, schools, public bodies dealing with drug addicts, and courts. Their main task is to monitor and support situations of parenting fragility, supporting both parents and children. They support both parents who have spontaneously sought their help and families that have been reported by the juvenile courts, the police, schools or health services. They are usually in charge of cases for at least one year. The majority of families they work with have a migrant background and most of them come from Ghana, Nigeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Georgia, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

Social workers working with UASC also have relational tasks. They deal with stories of migration and help children to reconstruct their migration stories. Most of these children are from Albania, Maghreb and Pakistan, but this changes over time. Other relevant tasks relating to UASC are administrative and legal, e.g., providing documents required for residency permits as well as interrogation and reports for juvenile courts. Schooling and health are dealt with in the reception centres, with social workers only collecting signatures from children’s tutors. Another task is organizing the coordination with reception centres.

The educator working in reception centres in Modena described her main task as being coordination: she observes the work of other educators and listens to their opinions and programme choices. One educator is usually always inside the centre managing routine processes while a second manages external tasks. These educators also keep track of the relationship with social workers to monitor children’s inclusion within their educational projects, any challenges they face and more generally, administrative tasks. Other educators who manage the centres coordinate children’s individual projects, including administrative work and



relationships with schools, volunteering, work, police stations, social services, and health services. The team organizes and manages all children's daily activities.

Social workers dealing with UASC told us that they are offered opportunities to increase their professional knowledge albeit without any economic support, so they undertake training if they have a personal interest and the economic means. Some training can be funded, however. Only one social worker dealing with families specified that both institutional training and external opportunities exist. The opportunity to have more *ad hoc* training opportunities (also with a focus on cultural aspects) is considered important by many respondents. One educator working in a reception centre in Reggio Emilia is satisfied with training and claims that the city offers several options. Many social workers and educators said that engaging in systematic dialogue is important. Educators also claimed the importance of systematic supervision and coordination between centres. In Genoa, supervision is supported by psychotherapists and the opportunities for training seem more structured than in the two cities in Emilia Romagna, although in Genoa too, social workers sometimes have to pay for training since decisions as to whether or not to fund these opportunities is taken by their cooperatives.

Mediators

Mediators are usually engaged in three areas of intervention: schools, social services and health services. Their overall goal is the promotion of the integration of migrant communities and facilitating communication between them and the host country. Four out of twelve respondents have more than 15 years of experience in the field, with three starting work in this area in the last two years.

The task of mediators is facilitating relationships between families, students and schools, "Facilitating the relationship between the pupil's family, the pupil and the school, promoting the pupil's culture but also the culture of the host country [...] valuing languages, specifically their own language, is often an important point in the work, valuing multilingualism" (IT_F7_M_2_F). One mediator defined this as an important "cultural responsibility": "it is a responsibility because you are this tool that the school can use [...] to show the positive side of a culture that is perhaps seen as inferior or in any case a culture not close to our own" (IT_F8_M_2_F).

Mediators are frequently asked to support newcomers, but also second-generation children manifesting difficulties relating to (1) prolonged language learning problems requiring evaluation to understand the underlying reasons, and (2) difficulties with relationships which require inclusion within the class to be facilitated. "They are assigned to us to see why they have not yet acquired the level of behaviour required by the school let's say, we observe and then we help them" (IT_F3_M_3_F).

In Genoa, mediators work with newcomers and in projects of intercultural and educational mediation with the whole class.

Basically, we work with so-called new arrived children on small projects of maximum ten hours, whereas intercultural educational mediation projects mainly involve workshop-type activities with larger projects in terms of hours because we may cover an entire school.
(IT_F7_M_1_F)

Currently, specific and focused projects on intercultural and educational mediation are less frequent in Modena and Reggio Emilia where mediators are usually involved in specific situations. They support the inclusion of newcomers and recently, and more frequently, undertake annual meetings with parents or meetings to discuss behavioural issues concerning the child with parents; "We are called when needed, let's say, especially during report card time or for student orientation" (IT_F4_M_1_F).

According to some mediators, there has been a reduction of activities in which they are involved, mainly the result of lack of economic resources. Some claim that they are now only involved in severe cases and frequently at a late stage when problems have already developed significantly. Sometimes, some teachers



ask for their help when they meet the families of newcomers, in order to understand their past educational experiences.

When the teacher wants to understand, she calls you in during the first interview with the family to understand the schools the child previously went to, why they came, why they left their country and came here, just some information so that the school can understand in order to move forward with the child. (IT_F4_M_2_F)

Moreover, mediators can be involved in conversations with teachers about aspects of the cultural context from which children come.

For example, I was called in for a discussion with the teaching staff to explain some things that they do not understand on a cultural level [...] All this is to avoid building prejudices that are in fact the result of misunderstanding or cultural divergence that can later turn into conflict. (IT_F5_M_3_FM)

Mediators meet teachers, discuss children with them and plan their attendance in order to support these children. They also meet parents and, for some mediators, organizing a meeting with parents at the beginning of the support process is extremely important.

So when I make plans in the diary with teachers, we put in at least one hour's meeting with the parent because, although it's true that we have a form which includes [...] the biography of that pupil, sometimes it is better to also hear certain things from the parents, (it's important also for) a parent to understand that there is also an additional individual who comes to school support his child. (IT_F2_M_2_F)

As a result of the pandemic, mediators have had to adapt their work to an online learning mode. For some, online learning has had some positive side effects such as greater communication with teachers and more indications about the work needed with children.

Now that schools are closed, we do video lessons on Whatsapp for two girls. I have already started with one and the teacher sends me the activities on Whatsapp, she says, "do this together" and I explain it first in Turkish, then in Italian. (IT_F1_M_3_F)

Some mediators said they might also be involved in observing the newcomers to evaluate whether their behaviours highlight any potential learning or cultural problems.

According to some mediators, the main goal of their support concerns enabling children's social inclusion which is important because teachers are much more concerned with the acquisition of language skills than with relational wellbeing, "The responsibility is to calm the child down [...] to help him accept others and also to help him to be accepted by others" (IT_F1_M_1_F).

For this reason, in Genoa, the mediators specified that their work focuses on the whole class and not just on the individual student. This work is supported by the observation of children, their classmates and teachers. This work with the whole class is necessary in order to construct a shared experience as a starting point to enhance relationships.

In the first few hours we observe everybody a little bit, both the school environment which the child has been placed into, as well as the child and the teacher [...] then we communicate the observations to the teacher, we talk to her and we plan how we will intervene both in terms of the child and the class, because we are not only focused on him, he has been placed within a class group, so doing one of the activities with the whole class helps more than only with the particular pupil. [...] We do bilingual readings so that the other pupils can hear the child's language right from his own mouth. Then, starting from a reading, you talk



about something else, sometimes you talk about the language, about the differences [...], sometimes we talk about the country, about cultural aspects of the pupil's country of origin, he can even present it himself, together with me in Romanian and in Italian and so on, we show pictures, we play music. (IT_F7_M_2_F)

This resonates with one of the topics that recurred most frequently during the interviews: how, on a practical level, time is managed with the child, whether inside or outside the classroom, “When I see that they have already understood how the school works, I take them in to understand the rules of the classroom” (IT_F3_M_3_F). Depending on the school grade or general context, some mediators may feel it is important that the child remain within the class rather than being taken outside for mediation, especially with children in kindergarten or in their first years of primary school. Other mediators asserted that this decision should be negotiated with the teacher. In general, this is a relevant topic because, according to some mediators, these decisions have important consequences for the extent to which children are included in a class.

We should pretty much always be in the classroom. It's obvious that sometimes being away from the classroom helps everybody. So for, example, in the first hour with a particular child, I personally prefer to be alone with him, if there is a climate in the classroom whereby I can talk to him, in an empathic way, I can also be in the classroom, for example with kindergarten children you can't go out of the classroom, it doesn't make sense at all, with first grade children it doesn't make sense for me to take them out of the classroom either, but with older pupils chatting with them for that hour of initial acquaintance outside the classroom, it helps. And so, then you go back to the classroom and obviously having explained both to the class, and to everyone, before you leave the classroom why it is you're leaving. (IT_F7_M_2_F)

Some mediators started working within their family or group of friends, thus starting to practice the profession based on their personal experience and their own family's story. Few mediators started the profession purely by chance, simply looking for a job. Other mediators were influenced by their studies or professional experiences, for instance by their past as teachers: “In Romania I worked as a primary school teacher for seven years, so my work as a teacher certainly helped me in terms of my relationship with teachers and pupils and in my approach to school” (IT_F7_M_1_F)

Only one mediator attended interpretation courses within a translators' consortium in Rome. Other mediators mentioned degrees in social work, communication management, engineering, and economics. Some have a background in language studies or have attended academic courses. Only one mediator mentioned her degree in translation and interpreting studies, reflecting on how interpreting and mediation are quite different jobs, but also admitting that her studies were useful for her profession.

My studies were related to language, so I studied translation and interpreting, which, with mediation, let's say in a certain sense, are related purely from the linguistic point of view but they are clearly different jobs [...] but, yes, my studies were certainly useful but not exhaustive. Absolutely not. (IT_F7_M_2_F)

Only one mediator had a long professional experience of working with migrants. After a degree in educational studies, he worked as an educator in a CAS (extraordinary reception centres), in a community for children and, at the time of the interview, he was also working as an educator on a MNSA project (SPRAR/Sproimi, the Italian protection system for asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors).

Only one mediator explicitly said that when she lost her previous job she started looking for another job that might connect her with her origins, finding this connection in the profession of mediator.

I used to work in a window and door import/export company [...] When I lost my job in 2011, I wanted to do something to help me get a bit closer to my culture, my roots and my



origins, so I started testing the waters through associations and acquaintances (IT_F6_M_1_FM).

Other mediators said they started attending courses and undergoing training once they had already started working. Some of them, for instance, attended a 600-hour long course over the course of 6 months, after which they were qualified as a mediator. Shorter courses do also exist, however, although this type of training is often requested by many mediators, they rely on funding and are not frequently promoted. Associations and cooperatives inform them about short courses they can attend to obtain the necessary training if they want to, as well as possibilities for gaining further qualifications and sometimes provide them some financial help too. However, it can be hard to attend certain courses because they are carried out during working hours. In one focus group, mediators highlighted the fact that they must look for vocational training individually and fund this themselves.

Overall the interviews highlighted three further main points about formation and training. First, that practice is very important in mediation. Second, shadowing is suggested by some mediators as a practice that helps when starting to approach the profession. Third, training is always needed, especially in respect of the legal field and the health service system and its rules. Attending a course after years of practice is also considered to be extremely important.

I qualified as a mediator after five years practicing as a mediator. When there was the possibility of doing the mediator course through the cooperative, as it is a course that has a cost, [...], I did it. I hadn't done it before, I worked for many years without having done it [...] But the fact that we started working beforehand allowed us to have an idea of the criticalities that could arise in this work [...] what we lacked was the ability to master our skills and to give a name to what we were already doing [...] It helped me to do this (IT_F6_M_1_FM).

Two interviewees also said that they needed greater psychological insight.

According to some mediators, the pandemic itself would require further training around how things have changed and how to approach the new needs that have arisen.

With COVID-19 everything has been reset for us mediators. When they tell you on the phone to explain how online communication works, 'what is a computer?' 'what is online?' 'what is an application?' We are also struggling, just imagine someone who has never studied, has never gone to school, has never had (contact) with these things, it's a really big and difficult challenge that has reset all our knowledge and the tools that we used (previously when we based) on the look, the verbal and non-verbal. [...] It's not an easy thing then training – [we'd need] a lot of individual training as well as individual training on the linguistic point of view of Italian, technology, the language you use when you talk to the doctor, the language of the teacher, each service has a different language and you have to update continually (IT_F5_M_2_FM).

The opportunity to share and discuss work with colleagues is also highly valued and considered to be extremely important by some mediators who said that periodical meetings with colleagues are helpful for them and their work.

3. The experience of migrant children from professionals' perspectives

Teachers

School achievement.

Almost all teachers claimed there are differences in terms of school achievement between migrant and non-migrant students. There were only two exceptions. A physical education teacher and a teacher at an ISCED3



vocational school both stated that their migrant students reach average or even above average educational goals due to their familiarity with physical activities or ability in practice. Some ISCED0 teachers claimed that, since personal competences are more relevant than having a migrant background or not, school performances only depend on individual differences.

It depends, there are two exceptional girls who are very good and have even learnt to master bilingualism completely, so they alternate Italian and Moroccan perfectly and use it in the appropriate contexts [...] it depends on the child and their personal specificity. (IT_T26_F)

Most teachers highlighted a difference between newcomers and second-generation or migrant students who had already spent several years in the Italian school system. They claimed that only newcomers show lower performances adding that, once any language problems are solved, many migrant students are brilliant and smart. On the contrary, a minority of teachers claimed that all migrant students have some problems, with only a few exceptions, in the form of language used to study, lower results, and delays in reaching school goals. Thus, migrant students require different ways of teaching and goals. Finally, one teacher stressed change in time, i.e., decreasing levels of failure at school among migrant students.

According to the teachers, there are different reasons for lower levels achievement by migrant students. The first reason is language barriers, for both newcomers and second-generation children who speak Italian only at school, while speaking their native language at home and during the holidays: "They are well looked after at school, but at home their parents don't speak a word of Italian and even if they have immense will power this compromises their results" (IT_T20_F).

The second reason concerns socio-economic problems, such as marginalization and poverty; migrant children are less well supported by their families and have fewer social opportunities.

The socio-economic condition intervenes because it is true that - there are some pupils of foreign origin who then go and work after the third year, I mean the school investment lasts up to a certain point for some because they cannot afford it. (IT_T36_F)

Moreover, migrant students and their families may not invest in education or consider it important in terms of social enhancement, for future careers and generally enhancing emancipation. For example, they may not invest in education because they plan to go back to their countries of origin or move to other countries.

The third reason is cultural background. Difficulties arise because the school system works in a way that is taken for granted by "us" but not by "them": "They have to get to know a place that is completely unfamiliar to them and therefore have to adapt to a social and cultural context that is very different from their own, not only at school but also in general" (IT_T16_F).

The final reason is children's engagement and willingness to get involved: "School results are actually in line with their level of commitment" (IT_T18_F).

Some teachers think that there is no gender difference in terms of commitment, but that there is a difference in terms of opportunities concerning both achievement and relationships.

For example, if you organize an extracurricular activity, it is generally the boys who are allowed to come and take part in all the activities, but the girls are very inconspicuous [...] girls are hardly ever allowed to come, whereas the boys take part in everything and this clearly facilitates them, but also in terms of relationships the boys have fewer difficulties in relating to friends with other nationalities, girls tend to isolate themselves more, to stay among themselves. (IT_T16_F)

A psychologist stressed that whereas girls are more discreet and careful in terms of opening up with others, boys are more energetic and willing to actively participate. Having said this, both boys and girls actively



participate if they feel they are allowed to, because they appreciate the opportunity to be understood. One Italian L2 teacher said that it is more difficult to motivate boys to study, especially when they become able to communicate in Italian. The only way to motivate them is to build a relationship within a one-to-one setting or engaging with them in a small group where a more personal relationship can be established than in the classroom with a teacher: “because there is the emotional part, I mean you get the boy involved in a much more intimate way, much more closely, and so when this relationship is created the boy is often inclined to take part” (IT_T18_F).

Only two teachers said that they had experience with non-binary children, stressing both acceptance and non-acceptance from classmates and the community. One said that a particular student was accepted by their classmates, while another was not accepted because their difference was rejected by both their classmates and the community.

Children’s needs, aspirations and expectations.

According to teachers, migrant children’s needs are both different and interrelated. The first need is the ability to speak the language. Children need to learn Italian as a means of communication and to establish social relationships: “Strengthening their language is an absolute need, language as a vehicle of coexistence, not so much to learn about literature and poetry, but precisely language as a means of establishing social relations” (IT_T7_F).

The second need is emotional. Children need to reach an emotional and psychological balance, feeling well in themselves and at ease in the school context.

Their needs are not only related to teaching, which must often be put on the back burner, but of primary importance is a sense of well-being, so creating a situation that makes them feel at ease [...] the psychological aspect, plays an important role. (IT_T16_F)

The third need is relational. Many teachers stressed that migrant students need to feel accepted and included in the classroom and that they fear being excluded because they are different or defined as not being Italian: “they aspire to be accepted by others, they invest a lot, especially at the beginning, in learning from their peers rather than from us” (IT_T11_F).

Connected to this need is the need to spend a lot of time with their peers outside school: “to be able to do many activities, for instance, they would like school time to be longer, they would like to play sport with others, they would like to spend more time with their classmates outside school” (IT_T21_F).

The fourth need is preserving and valuing cultural traditions.

At school not to be different from the others, but at home and in everyday life, to bring their culture and to have it valued a little [...] some children told me 'my classmates don't know that on Saturdays I go to the Indian temple', this is a bit regrettable, but it seems impossible to them that their Italian classmates might be interested, for example, so they don't even envisage telling them about it. (IT_T21_F)

Finally, some ISCED0 teachers stressed that migrant children have the same needs as other children, i.e., to construct and handle relationships with peers.

I see the educational needs of children of this age group being a lot about, I mean, the need for play, as well as the need for relationships with peers, the negotiation of rules, the negotiation of play, the negotiation of shared spaces and materials. (IT_T14_F)

Teachers conveyed two different narratives of aspirations and expectations, both stressing the influence of family. The first narrative concerns children’s commitment to learning; they are motivated and want to achieve and succeed in school.



Most of them care about it [about learning], they respect the school because for them it is a starting point and a way of making their parents, for example, who fled from places that were not very hospitable and where they were no longer able to continue living with their families, proud. (IT_T4_F)

Those positive expectations are related to a family valuing education highly, meaning that children want to make their families proud by attending many different extra-curricular activities, achieving social success, gaining the skills to be prepared to work professionally, living well, integrating into society and feeling Italian.

The second narrative concerns negative expectations where children do not care about learning, do not engage in studying, show no - or only superficial - goals, e.g. easy money, are passive and tend to be isolated: "There are some who have great difficulties, but they don't even try, they don't even have the goodwill [...] they are passive, they don't have any goals, at least they don't show that they do" (IT_T5_F).

In this narrative children demonstrate very low levels of self-esteem, their families do not value education, perhaps because they consider migration to Italy to be a temporary phase of life.

Both positive and negative expectations are more visible in ISCED3 vocational schools.

Some teachers in Genoa claimed that expectations changed over time, changing from migrant children's initially positive expectations and commitment to a lazy approach, one shared with many Italian children. However, migrant children show lower expectations of education than Italian students.

In the past it was absolutely [to] find a job [...] because that's what they came to us for - it's a vocational institute [...] now we also have the five-year courses, they enroll [...] I don't find these big differences anymore, talking about children who have always been here, or were even born here, or have been here since they were children, they are on an equal footing with the others who in any case have a socio-economic background that is usually rather disadvantaged, and in any case at least until fifth grade [...] they have even slightly longer expectations of studying. (IT_T36_F)

Finally, the child's individual personality is considered more relevant than her/his gender in determining needs, aspirations and expectations:

There are no differences from this point of view, we have not seen males and females having different needs. (IT_T14_F)

Int: Are there differences between males and females in this respect?

T: No, it really depends on the child, on how the child is

Int: Also, in terms of their needs, aspirations, have you seen differences?

T: No. (IT_T9_F)

Challenges

Some challenges mentioned by teachers concern migrants student's needs and aspirations, particularly language and education as well as other difficulties they have when compared to Italian students. The challenges are as follows: (1) difficulties learning Italian both for daily use and curricular studies; (2) gaps in curricular studies due to different school experiences and systems; (3) understanding and adapting to new norms, cultural and social context, in particular the school context; (4) problems for teachers and experts in diagnosing possible learning disorders in foreign speech; (5) economical, educational and emotional difficulties of families who are not supported and encouraged, or ignore local opportunities and services.



Other challenges are related to children's competences which they find hard to share and have valued at school. The first is their bilingualism.

One of the most important things we don't do is to value the fact that they are bilingual because it is very much a part of them, something that, when they enter school, they erase. Even those who, in some way, maintain a partial knowledge or relative use of their language of origin, perhaps through their grandparents, are ashamed, they don't talk about it, they don't bring it up. It is just as if the school says, "we will do our best to get your fill of English, but please get the other languages out of here" (IT_T13_F).

The second one is having a voice, being listened to and empowered as people and having the chance to make visible their competences to classmates.

They need to be heard and to be listened to, so they need someone to give them the floor. This is the most important thing, they need someone to say now you speak, I won't speak, you tell me, and to be welcomed not only by me, but also by their classmates with whom there are certainly authentic relationships. But they lack this element, that is, being the bearer of a culture that the others don't know and that can make the difference in terms of their growth and that of the others. (IT_T35_F)

According to some teachers, migrant students often feel - and are perceived by classmates - as being inadequate because they cannot communicate and actively participate. For the same reason, they therefore also lack recognition from teachers and are often placed in classes below those of their age group.

Some of them say that they were not accepted at school, that sometimes, even if they are, how can I say it? 'good' kids, aren't they? [...] maybe they are placed in a lower class because they need to learn the language and everything, but for some of them it is a moment of non-recognition. (IT_T31_F)

Connected to empowerment, recognition and positive relationships is also the challenge of creating social spaces outside school to interact and integrate with peers: "The challenge of integration, which has never evolved, has never been considered from a political point of view, I mean it is not enough to say you must speak Italian if you don't build spaces for interaction" (IT_T24_M).

Finally, an important challenge concerns multiple cultural belonging and cultural identity. Even if some teachers claimed that multiple identities are a resource and must be supported to fight stereotypes, other teachers claimed that it is very difficult for children to handle different identities within different contexts such as at school, with family, amongst peers, etc.

The problem of belonging to different cultures is a big one, I mean coming to terms with a family with a certain approach and a school with another approach is a big problem [...] they have, like all children, this enormous need to recognize themselves as being equal to others and recognizing themselves as equal to others means coming into conflict with the cultural diversity that they experience. (IT_T13_F)

Some teachers said that boys have more problems respecting rules because they tend to reproduce distinct, rigid and stereotypical male roles that they observe within their families. These teachers underlined the fact that family and cultural heritage influences boys to reproduce these roles at school, such as dominating classmates or not respecting female teachers.

Perhaps males have greater difficulty in respecting the rules, maybe it depends on the family culture or something, I don't want to stereotype, but in the end you see that the boys, as a woman, they recognize you as a teacher, but you are always a female figure, since at home you notice that maybe when they are with their mothers they have a different attitude compared to their fathers [...] they assert themselves and pose as males imitating the adult



male of the house [...]. ...] they have this tendency almost to see the female as being a little bit inferior, but then when you speak and point it out to them, for that moment they believe it. Anyway, if in their culture they find it difficult to accept new things so suddenly, then perhaps as they grow up, hanging out with older boys and girls, they will adapt to that too. (IT_T4_F)

Many teachers highlighted that fact that girls often experiment more than boys do with the challenge of reconciling the culture of family and school because they are more closely linked to their family's cultures and symbols.

Maybe you see the girls who have the veil or who come from families with a certain type of tradition, in my opinion they experience a contrast between the reality of school, the experience of their companions, and the family's teaching. (IT_T2_F)

Moreover, girls have more problems integrating because they are not allowed to do the same things as boys are, they have more duties in the home and therefore have fewer opportunities than boys do. Dropping out of school is also more frequently seen amongst female migrant students.

It turned out that once they have reached the third or fourth grade in high school, they are often withdrawn from school because they have fulfilled their minimum academic obligations. The objective of families is sometimes not to let them take the diploma in order for them not to have the possibility of independence that would allow them to leave the family if the family forced them into marriages or engagements, and unfortunately this has often happened, especially in high school and the vocational school. (IT_T16_F)

Most respondents had not come across any non-binary migrants in their classes, both because it is an issue very rarely discussed in school, and because children, especially migrants, are reluctant to talk about this issue. Teachers who stated that they had encountered non-binary migrants tended to identify them as boys with feminine attitudes or who behave like girls. There are not always problems for these children, either at school or at home, but in some cases they experience frustration since they are not accepted by classmates and therefore don't have positive relationships with peers.

I always thought that the family - moreover the mother almost wore the burqa - so you can imagine, that for the family it would have been a problem if this thing had emerged [...] and in reality he has always had quite a normal life with us, he has always participated in all the activities, I have always seen him being quite free [...] so I think that probably, in spite of the appearance of the mother, I thought that it was quite a relaxed family, quite open and therefore I have never noticed from this boy any difficulties or particular issues. (IT_T16_F)

The girls chased him away and told him to go away and he felt terrible, he started crying and hid, and it was as if at that moment he was being told that they didn't recognize him, the others didn't recognize him as a male, the females didn't want him with them as a female and he felt terrible. (IT_T13_F)

Factors influencing participation and achievement.

Teachers identified a variety of factors influencing participation and achievement at school. They considered participation as involving attendance of both school and extra-curricular activities. Few teachers considered participation as active involvement, i.e., children's personal expression of views and feelings.

The main factors highlighted by respondents as being significant were character, the family situation, socio-economic conditions, language skills, cultural and institutional aspects. For most teachers, personal character was considered important too. It is the child's personality, attitude and interest that either facilitates or



hinders - as in the case of Italian students - his/her ability to interact with classmates and teachers and to achieve good results.

Depending on each child, that is, it also depends on how they are, on their personality [...] then it also depends on their character, not only on the linguistic or cultural difficulties, but also on the character, there are children who are shy, there are children who find it more difficult to relate to others outside the family. (IT_T23_F)

A family's educational background and difficult family circumstances are also important, since they can influence a family's attitude to education. Participation and good results are hindered when children are not supported or motivated by their families or are burdened with household duties and family caregiving responsibilities.

Some of them have families that don't consider school as a priority because they consider work a priority, or a lot of girls, for example, have a lot of tasks at home, including cleaning, housework, babysitting their brothers, sisters and cousins, so school often takes a back seat. (IT_T6_F)

The extent to which socio-economic conditions influence learning and achievement is quite a controversial topic. Some respondents said that socio-economic disadvantage can lead to students dropping out of school: "We have also had cases of children who, having completed their compulsory education, have withdrawn from school because they had to go to work to help their families" (IT_T6_F). These factors hinder participation and good performances, especially regarding expensive extra-curricular activities. Other respondents said that this is a false problem because when activities are in fact free, cultural factors prevent participation: "In our area, we sometimes have proposals at no or minimal cost to facilitate the integration of these children, but they are not always taken into consideration precisely because the cultural factor comes into play" (IT_T20_F).

According to many respondents, culture has an impact on participation and positive achievement, especially when the background culture is very different from the Italian one. First, a very different cultural background can influence how much a family values education, school participation, and extra-curricular activities.

The majority of those who don't participate are Pakistani and Chinese children [...] they don't let them go out easily, this is especially true for Pakistanis, they don't have the opportunity to go out in the afternoon to participate in extra-curricular activities. (IT_T18_F)

It's cultural, because their culture doesn't care a lot - I mean it's a very free culture, so if the kid wants to study, he studies, if he doesn't want to study, he can - if he wants to come to school, he comes, if he doesn't want to come to school, he doesn't. (IT_T30_F)

Second, it can be observed that children with different cultural backgrounds are affected in terms of expressing their opinions, either because they feel very different from their classmates and teachers, or because they are not used to expressing themselves as is common in the classroom in Italy.

Judgment on the part of the class - I mean, if the whole class starts to take a certain kind of stance on certain things, you intuitively realize that that the child, who perhaps in reality has a completely different experience, a different way of managing relationships in the family, is just keeping quiet and doesn't go and say: no? (IT_T1_F)

Those who have been to school in Tunisia, Morocco, Ghana and Mauritania have a very different idea of a teacher and a school, of a school where there is no dialogue, no joking, the rules are strict, there are punishments, in short, it is different and they are surprised



when they see that the teacher comes up to them and asks how you are, thus opening up a dialogue that goes beyond. (IT_T7_F)

According to some teachers, culturally defined gender roles hinder participation of female students. One reason is that parents prevent daughters attending extra-curricular activities.

This cultural aspect has an enormous weight because males can go out, if sometimes they don't come it's because they go to pray or because they don't want to, but females are precluded from this opportunity, they don't let them go out and they find it difficult to come because they are just not used to it, it's improper, it can't be done. (IT_T18_F)

A second reason is that girls find it more difficult to express themselves in the classroom due to the presence of male classmates or to prevarication of male classmates: "Many girls, like Pakistani girls, however, even within the class, always try to stay only with the girls, even if we move them from one desk to another, they always try to return to the place where the girls are" (IT_T5_F).

Cultural norms endure and influences their way of thinking, it is quite difficult to take them out of the cultural or family context, it is difficult to take them out of it. Sometimes, one of them treats a little girl, in quotes, in a way that is not very correct. (IT_T4_F)

Language skills can both hinder and facilitate the active participation of migrant students in school activities. Children who are not yet competent in Italian tend to participate more passively and tend to have more problems expressing opinions and feelings. Language was also highlighted as a factor by teachers who considered individual differences as having primary importance.

Institutional influence is also important. It includes school organization, dialogue between school and its community, the type of education, and the teacher's approach. First, the enhancement of migrant students' participation requires additional hours of mediation, gradual inclusion in the classroom, second language learning before this inclusion, less frequent classes and design of educational extra-curricular activities that do not involve the extensive use of Italian.

The possibility of taking part in training activities that do not require an excessive use of language, at least in the first phase [...] theatre, music, poetry, drawing, photographic exhibitions, etc... then those young people find spaces in which they can play a leading role and therefore design activities of this kind that are more expressive than linguistic, is certainly a factor that is influential. (IT_T24_M)

Second, the school should implement dialogue and relationships with the external context:

It must be clear to a school working in this field, that it needs to work on an integrated educational project that can also take advantage of the possibility of dialogue with the outside world [...] I mean a school that does not shut itself away, but rather, opens itself up to the outside world. (IT_T14_F)

Third, schools should enhance a form of education based on children's know-how, competences and expressions that make them feel more involved.

Certainly, the way in which the lesson is conducted, I see that the students, if there are tools in the classroom such as a computer, an IWB, [...] the lessons are more linked to doing practical activities, such as constructing a text, doing group work, working on images, and therefore something that brings together not only intellectual work but also know-how, they are much more involved. (IT_T7_F)



Finally, teachers must be welcoming, inclusive and curious, avoiding prejudice and constructing trusting relationships with children and families: “If there is a teacher who is an inclusive teacher you work on inclusivity, if the teacher is pedantic however, it is a bit more difficult” (IT_T30_F).

Some teachers claimed that migrant children socialize with peers, spending time together both inside the classroom, during breaktimes, and outside school, on birthdays, or hanging out in the afternoon. This happens mainly when these children spend a lot of time together at school and/or in local spaces and at activities, such as sports and in the parish, and when teachers avoid the separation of cultural groups.

The recreation centre is the long hand of the parish, that is (it is also mixed). There is this place where they have a football field, where they do an after-school activity, it is very inclusive and so Italian and foreign kids become friends, then there is the town square where they meet. (IT_T30_F)

My student Y. I mean in class she's clearly seen as the best in the class. The worst in the class is another Chinese pupil, so if you put yourself at the two extremes with another four or five Chinese in the middle, you understand that there is no "group of Chinese", they don't form a group. In some classes this does happen but this depends above all on the attitude of the teachers, that is, if the teacher always puts the Chinese among them and says you do this and the others do this, then it is the teacher who marks this difference. On the other hand, as a strategy, for example among peers, when I have to arrange the desks [...] I never, or rarely, put two people with the same language or nationality together, I almost never put them together, or even when we do second language groups, [...] I never put a group of Chinese children only together, because on the one hand this becomes a constraint for them to use an intermediate language, I mean if I put a Chinese and a Pakistani child together they have to speak Italian. (IT_T24_F)

Discrimination

Most teachers identified discrimination as being present within relationships amongst peers. First, discrimination depends on context: while migrant children socialize with everyone at school, outside the school context they largely spend time with their family of origin and its friendship, parental or religious networks. Second, discrimination depends on the amount of time spent in Italy and the time of arrival. Migrant children tend to have friends beyond their linguistic and cultural context if they have been in Italy for a long time or if they were born in Italy. In secondary high school children can come to have difficulties making friends outside their linguistic and cultural circle, especially if they are newcomers.

Those who come from secondary school upwards, as far as I've seen, find it very difficult to establish friendly relationships with children who don't speak their language, so after school it's much more difficult for them to see each other outside or at each other's homes, for birthdays and so on. (IT_T21_F)

Discrimination also depends on gender differences. Some teachers said that boys and girls, both migrants and non-migrants, talk and play together, divided only by different interests, but others said that boys and girls talk and play separately, especially from pre-adolescence onwards, whether they are migrants or non-migrants. Some argued that girls from some cultures have more trouble talking and playing with peers who do not share their language and culture.

I often see that the girls in the Chinese community have very few relationships with classmates outside school, very few. They are a very closed community, they don't participate in trips, parties, projects of various kinds. Instead, the other girls they also meet outside school (IT_T6_F).



Finally, some teachers maintained that usually migrant children have friends mainly among peers who share their language and culture and find difficulties integrating because of cultural background, character, and their family's lack of integration, resulting in marginalization in the classroom.

Usually they are always with the foreign kids then, again, it's the case that they are usually always on the sidelines, they struggle to integrate and to be with their peers, to collaborate and everything, also when we do group work they often don't participate, even if the group is formed by the teacher [...] above all the Pakistani and the Chinese children are the ones who don't succeed in being part of the class group. Instead, the kids from the eastern [European] countries integrate better, they have less difficulties, but also the character is different, they are more open, they are more spontaneous. (IT_T5_F)

In some classes [...] where there is not this interaction there can be some discrimination, I know some classes where there are perhaps some people who probably live at home with certain kind of parents who have some discriminatory attitudes or mistrust towards foreigners, and so you see that in some classes there is a difference, but it also depends on the social class not necessarily on the origin of the child, so there are the rich, the well-off, and those who are maybe considered- that maybe they dress in a poorer way, that don't have branded clothes, and this creates tensions (IT_T2_F).

Function of peer networks.

According to teachers, peer networks play a key function and have an important impact on children, both migrant and non-migrant. First, students are often promoters of peer participation, inclusion, and well-being. This function can be based on autonomous initiative or prompted by teachers.

They have this extraordinary gift of knowing how to welcome and support each other, of immediately identifying the difficulties that a classmate is experiencing and acting in this sense. We have seen it not only with the classmates who perhaps don't understand much Italian, but for example with the classmates who have disabilities, the whole group all the children of any origin activate behaviours of care and activate behaviours of welcoming the other, that is to say, noticing that a child is on the sidelines and going to call him. (IT_T14_F)

Second, peer networks can have an important impact on educational opportunities, for example, through peer mediation of the native language, and on the inclusion and well-being of migrants.

I've also noticed that in certain situations now, with children who are smarter or more empathetic, they even manage to simplify their language in order to relate to children who speak another language, they are fantastic. (IT_T12_F)

The Italian children, as you say in quotes, have helped the others to fit in because they have really encouraged them and made them feel at ease, they have helped them a lot. I'll tell you, however, among this little group that helped the others there were also two or three of these foreign children. (IT_T27_F)

Third, peer support may occur when skills are not shared. In these cases, support may also be offered by migrants to non-migrants or by migrants to newcomers

They manage to help each other, as I was saying before, because someone might translate for someone else, but they manage to help each other when they have a common origin, so they manage to help each other, but due to coming from a similar group of origin. (IT_T22_F)

Social Workers

Problems of unaccompanied children

According to the educators in reception centres, working with UASC is to work as if blind-folded because it is up to the users of this service to share their stories with the educator. The most important need for UASC is to have a system of regularization when migrants reach the age of 18. Before that age they need to have documents that show they are in Italy regularly. Their path of integration is extremely important in order to successfully obtain regularization, i.e., if they learned the second language, participated in several activities, learned a vocation. Another important need is finding a job in order to be able to stay in Italy. This is very hard to achieve before the age of 18 since many children have not completed their education, something that requires at least 10 years spent in the education and must be documented. Moreover, documentation must be translated and validated by the juvenile court. Compulsory schooling and education represent the main reason for difficulties in finding a job before the age of eighteen. It is possible to be involved in training only when promoted by a professional institution although they cannot have a proper employment contract.

So, in the end, what comes out is that we get to the age of eighteen and we discharge the boys and girls and for those who have done the course well we succeed, we try to extend the course beyond the age of adulthood for the necessary time, but we tend to discharge the boys and girls without a work contract and then out of there, without a job, and then automatically without a place to live, it becomes really complex. (IT_SW2_F)

While language is certainly a barrier, important vulnerabilities include health, cognitive troubles and falling into criminal networks. Criminal networks are linked to economical fragility, amplified by the travel debts accrued to enable the initial journey to Italy as well as the pressure of having to support a family back home and to gain social prestige, which often pushes them to show that “success in Western life” has been achieved. Therefore, their high expectations, having arrived in Italy, are also a source of vulnerability.

You put him on a school path, so what you offer him is, “ok now you go to school” and he has the family on his back pressing him to send the money, the debt of the trip, the urgency to assert himself here in the country, the fear of the little time available until the age of eighteen has been reached. All that, the deviant networks present in this country, which place pressure and completely suck these boys in when they have the possibility of earning and instead the other party offers you school, unfortunately, what we see is that the boys tend to yield more to this (IT_SW2_F).

Resources

When children are minors, it is a resource since it implies protection. Other important resources are family or friends in Italy who can help them to find a job, as well as the existence of the family back home. On the other hand, lack of parents was described by some respondents as being a significant vulnerability, something which requires some intervention.

The fact of not having parents in the area is the first characteristic that in some way affects their developmental path, because although there is the presence of the educator who in some way tries not to replace, but to be the ‘reference person’ for the child, it is not always easy to think that the child recognizes you as a contact person. (IT_SW2_F)

A third type of important, albeit controversial, resource is building good relationships on a national level. For some social workers this type of network provides support when looking for a job at the age of 18. Other social workers describe themselves as having unclear roles in children’s lives, since they are responsible for their migration journey and push children to declare themselves as UASC in order to take advantage of some of the opportunities offered by the reception system, even though some family members – and sometimes



even parents themselves –in fact live in the same area as the child. One educator claimed that these national networks sometimes push such children towards dangerous lifestyles thereby damaging the individual projects established within the reception system. However, the systematic connection between children and people from their national communities is an important resource, even though it is also a source of separation based on national origins.

An ability to build relationships, to be resilient, and to face frustrations were also all considered to be an important resource for unaccompanied children.

Finally, while one educator claimed the importance of being aware of the choice to migrate as being a resource, a social worker expressed the fear that unaccompanied minors do not really have the possibility of choosing to leave.

I happened to have worked with young people who arrived when they were young, but basically what they said was that it was their choice, I mean, they had difficulty in accepting the idea of abandonment, maybe even a bit as a defense mechanism in the sense that it's easier to think that 'I chose to go' rather than that 'my parents put me on a boat and told me to go' [...] they are generally shared projects, and then it's difficult for a fourteen year old kid to really realize the choice he's going to take. (IT_SW1_F)

Some social workers also said that several children claim that they arrived in Italy in order to remain with their friends, thus reconstructing the same group they had in their country of origin in Italy.

Families

Social workers mainly highlight families' economic and accommodation difficulties or challenging circumstances for single mothers. They also stressed cultural differences related to different origins. The social and geographical isolation of families living outside cities, far from all services, is another problem. According to social workers, the most important need for children within these families is receiving support by being educated and supported in the cultural shift together with their families.

But I see that, for example, I don't know how to say, that Nigerian mothers are very anchored in certain ways of doing things rather than having a mentality and culture around education - I mean, they are very much about "letting them do", so few rules, so we also need very much work on these aspects, so I think that children, and especially parents, must be supported in this respect, this does not mean to cancel - absolutely always respecting their cultures, but they need support from this point of view. (IT_SW4_F)

Most of the social workers talked of "double belonging": cultural shift determines the risk of conflict with parents who represent the link to the original culture. It enhances different expectations: while parents sometimes have rigid plans for their children (e.g. to find a job soon), children have different desires, like continuing to study or nurturing other interests.

At a certain point, especially towards the middle of adolescence, it sometimes becomes a little bit more difficult because of the discrepancy between one's own culture of origin and perhaps with what the parents have considered correct in terms of their values up to that moment. At a certain point, young people start to become more integrated, to want to live in a different way and there are often very strong clashes with parents, who have remained somewhat stuck within a different value system. (IT_SW5_F)

Gender

Reception centres which participated in the research consisted only of boys. Only one social worker had worked with a gender fluid boy in the past, saying that the process of transition experienced by them, their



lack of understanding, their difficulty in talking about it, and in being accepted within their family, generated their deep unease.

The experience of experiencing an identity undergoing transformation can be a very complex one, of not fully understanding various aspects of it and of the difficulty in that situation for both the family in accepting a support pathway for him psychologically and other support pathways and to be able to talk openly about it and to be able to confront and understand, resulted in very significant discomfort. (IT_SW5_F)

Two educators believed that migrant children might sometimes define themselves as having a non-binary gender, but that their context inhibited the expression of this condition. Given the short amount of time many migrant children stay, as well as the low level of confidence and trust established during this period, they fear being stigmatized and insulted by other children.

It is possible that some of them might have the need to do so, but our context does not allow it. Even if this information is handled confidentially, there is so much fear of stigma or even of verbal or non-verbal abuse, that a boy who may have an opposite-sex oriented sexual identity is not willing to discuss the matter. (IT_SW8_M)

The majority of the social workers surveyed, who work with both migrant boys and girls, did not refer to any expression of different needs. However, some respondents, in line with some teachers, suggested that girls need more freedom (i.e., to dress how they wish, to get out with friends, to do sport or other activities, to date Italian boys) and this depends on gender socialization within their families, which intersects cultural orientations.

They may be treated differently within their own family depending on where they come from, in the sense that, depending on the culture, the male may have more freedom or be able to count on greater benefits than his sisters. This yes, but no differences in terms of needs. At least I think so. (IT_SW3_F)

According to one social worker, gender difference negatively affects girls' feelings of acceptance and inclusion within their peer groups: "A lot of girls have told me 'I always feel different because I can't do all these things, and because I can't do them I can never fit into a group, I can never experience what girls my age experience'" (IT_SW5_F).

Another social worker argued that migrant boys and girls have both different and similar needs. Different needs depend on expectations about gender held and expressed by parents; but at the same time, boys and girls can express common needs (to be loved, to be understood, etc.) in different ways.

Expectation is the investment you make, which is different from the cultural point of view. [...] I mean, especially with African families, where the expectation for the girl is always to find a man, a partner, whereas for the boy it is to study, to come back home and prove that he has become someone. In my opinion they are consistent with cultural (legends) [...].

Maybe their needs are different but also similar. Little boys and girls need to feel safe and secure and to feel welcomed and wanted [...] in my opinion their needs from the point of view of socialization are the same. The girls also stay together, they exchange their first lipsticks, their diaries. Whereas boys might gravitate much more towards misbehaving, in this generational clash with the parents, so he commits little thefts (?)¹, he goes to a

¹ This sign will be used when the audio is not clear enough to report the right words said by the interviewee



shopping centre and steals a T-shirt, instead girls are more on the (victimized) end of the scale, because perhaps they have suffered violence at home and might write a letter or tell the teacher "daddy beat me" rather than "mummy forced me to cook and do housework". In my opinion, they have different ways of expressing themselves often in ways that are coherent with the cultural role that exists in that culture, in that ethnic group. (IT_SW6_F)

Talking of the most significant challenges or vulnerabilities migrant children often experience, one social worker mentioned gender relations within the culture of origin, with another referring to such relations within the family. On the one hand, it is possible to see a stereotypical representation of marital relations in Albania and Italy. Thus, an essentialist representation of gender stereotypes produces an ethnocentric approach to cultural difference.

Being part of a second-generation migrant family already helps children in their developmental process and belonging to certain nationalities certainly has its influence. That is, the Albanian community has a strong connotation linked to the "kanun", the law followed in practice in Albania, which is not an official law, but rather a law of tradition, one which also regulates the relationship between men and women, between husband and wife. Therefore, these young people have to deal with living in a country that is strangely open to the situation of women and, at the same time, within a family where this does not happen and is not recognized. [...] The theme of double belonging is, in my opinion, still a very hot topic. (IT_SW3_F)

On the other hand, with reference to gender relations within a specific Tunisian family, the social worker apparently observes a more fluid representation of gender, observing the mother as living between two "cultures", while the father is "totally anchored to the culture of origin". However, in this case an essentialist and ethnocentric approach to cultural difference also seems to emerge when the social worker associates the Tunisian culture to forced weddings for children:

Once it happened to me, for example, to have two separated parents, where there is maybe the mother... I don't know, it comes to my mind a family of Tunisian origin where there is just the mother who is separated, so it is her who made the choice to separate, so also, how to say, she works, she is very Westernized, but she also retains some cultural aspects of her country of origin, a sense of belonging, with the father instead being totally anchored to the culture of origin. (IT_SW4_F)

According to one educator most of the migrant children hosted within the service interpreted and spoke of gender roles in a traditional way, by representing and reproducing the power hierarchy between men (dominant) and women (subordinate). In this view, gendered expectations, especially about female obedience to men, come from migrant children's experience, knowledge, and habits. This probably depends on their family socialization, but it is independent from their culture.

The female has a very precise role consisting of subordination, of obedience, because they have no power. These terms came up in various circumstances, themes that we then also explored in depth [...] we did some group work where we talked about the roles between men and women in Italian society, even doing a bit of recent history with respect to voting rights, emancipation with respect to the theme of work, because working here, in this structure, the theme was very evident. When we did this we also asked the young people to tell us what their experience, knowledge or habits were, and they all said that women must obey men. (IT_SW8_M)

Mediators

The majority of mediators reported that migrant children's most important expectations is to be equal to their Italian classmates: "kids want to feel similar to Italian kids" (R1, IT_F6_M_3_FM). Expectations of support given by mediators' depends on this desire; they wish to get closer to their classmates: "I think they want to feel they are part of the group and they want you as a mediator to help reduce these distances [...] in my opinion they expect us to create this relationship between them and the rest of the class" (IT_F6_M_1_FM). Accordingly, mediators recognize and try to repair children's feelings of being different from their classmates, which is considered as an important vulnerability: "work in such a way that the pupil is able to understand why his task is different from others, I mean, this point is a very sensitive one and should be treated with caution" (IT_F6_M_2_FM). These mediators stress that children's most significant vulnerability is relationships with their classmates. Consequently, mediators perceive their role to be facilitators of children's social inclusion: "we are not teachers, we don't have a degree in that field, so we don't have the possibility of doing that. Mediation, in my opinion, helps the child morally and also helps him to fit into that school" (IT_F1_M_1_F).

Some other mediators claimed that migrant children aim to know what to expect from school: "children don't usually have expectations, the child says "but when do I learn Italian?", this is their main question "when do I learn Italian?" (IT_F3_M_1_F). Accordingly, mediators cited learning a second language as the most significant vulnerability for children, which lead them to look for a mediator's support: "when they see a fellow countrywoman, one who speaks their language, they see a mum, they see her- I don't know, a person they know like a saviour, I don't know, just talking they feel very good" (IT_F1_M_1_F).

Finally, in contrast to social workers, only one mediator cited different views between parents and children as presenting a vulnerability for children. According to this mediator, Chinese parents in particular give less relevance to Italian education than Chinese children because their aim is ultimately to go back to China.

I always speak for my community, even now parents want their children to learn Chinese because in their minds they always think they will return to China to live forever. But that's not really the case for young people, so there is a wall of communication between the kids now and their parents. (IT_F4_M_1_F)

Some mediators claimed that children's needs are based on their personal story, especially whether they were born in Italy or abroad, when they started school and what their mother tongue was.

Almost all mediators claimed that needs are different for migrant boys and girls. According to two respondents, migrant boys' and girls' different needs depend on their different natures and characters. Displaying an essentialist perspective, these mediators expressed a stereotyped representation of gender differences in the school context and argued that girls are calmer, sweeter, more focussed, keen to learn and competitive, while boys are more rebellious, distracted and less willing to learn.

This is natural [...] it's normal, the whole world is a country, boys and girls are different. So, females have an extra gear, they have a desire and a charisma to learn that is out of the ordinary. Males are always the lazy ones (?) males can be a bit of a rebel sometimes, although I have come across some males who have this desire to learn more than women, more than girls. But yes, often it is more the girls than the boys. Because the male is the male, he feels strong, he feels... then it depends on the age, eh? In primary schools, in front of an adult they surrender (?) It depends, that's it. It depends on the situation, on the school level, but girls are often calmer, they have more desire to work [...] [boys] are proud and don't really want to share their experiences [...] And so boys are more restricted, less expansive, so, yes, you must work more with boys. (IT_F3_M_1_F)



In other cases, mediators underlined the influence of culture and family on different needs expressed by migrant boys and girls. One respondent talked of different attitudes: given that girls usually socialize at home with their mothers, they find it easier to be part of a group; boys are considered more instinctive and introverted, and this can problematize their relationships and inclusion in peer groups.

So, for us, since the mother has more contact with her daughter, she is at home, she does things at home with her, she is, in quotes, apart from sporadic cases, more... she tries to place herself more in this view. The boy, in my opinion, if he is well supported, that is, above all, at school, not only at home, because he lives at home, therefore he knows how to live in that house, he knows, more or less, how to live. When, however, he is at school [...] if his difference, if the difference in the contribution he makes is underlined in a bad way, he feels inferior and therefore this anger is carried inside him and he brings it home. Because he starts to point the finger in a way that says, "it's your fault that at school they tell me that... it's your fault if [...]" and, on the other hand, he needs to fit in and to feel part of something, to feel valid, to share something with the others. And so, this is surely different because boys tend more to act from the belly, from the chest. Because they aren't able, they don't externalize it, they don't say it. And so, they tend to be a bit more difficult to deal with. (IT_F4_M_3_F)

Two other respondents highlighted the role of culture: girls are expected to do a lot of work both at home and at school, but at the same time they are limited in their freedom and opportunities, an aspect mentioned by teachers and social workers too.

Sometimes difficulties have arisen when the school or after-school club asks us to convince the family to sign a consent form for a one-day trip. So, this is a very cultural issue because, even in Morocco, concessions are given to males but not to females. (IT_F4_M_2_F)

4. Working with children and their families

Teachers

Parents' involvement

According to some teachers, collaboration, participation and respect are equally distributed between migrant and non-migrant parents. Moreover, migrant parents' respect for school, teachers and their work, is often even greater than that of non-migrant parents: "the thing my colleagues say most often is, "if only they were all like that", meaning that foreign parents often have an attitude of respect towards the school and teachers which is acknowledged" (IT_T13_F).

However, many respondents argued that collaboration and participation with migrant parents is not always ideal for several reasons. The first being the language barrier: parents feel embarrassed or inadequate during conversations with teachers. The second reason is a socio-economic one: parents tend to give more attention to economic or family difficulties than to their children's schooling: If I'm struggling to feed my daughter, it's clear that school will take a backseat, but if I come from a family where I have a certain social and economic standing, it's easier to think about school issues (IT_T6_F).

The third reason is the way in which education is considered from a cultural point of view. In many cultures, trust and respect for the school system has led parents to rely on it completely, but without participating.

Sometimes it can be perceived as a lack of interest rather than a complete trust [in school] because often they don't ask anything- once they feel included they participate though, but at the beginning this absence is just complete delegation of responsibility, I mean we have seen over the years that many come and say "this is my child and I trust you" and therefore



many are afraid, especially at the beginning, to interfere thinking they are not allowed to do anything. (IT_T11_F)

The fourth reason why participation and collaboration with migrant parents can be challenging is related to gender and age. Although mothers are more likely to participate in school activities, they find the language more challenging, since they are often at home. Moreover, sometimes younger mothers participate less actively because they fear being judged, they are modest, and they find it difficult to interact with men. However, several teachers stressed that if the school is willing to establish a trusting relationship and to make even a small effort in the use of their language, parental involvement and participation increases and there are no problems: “as soon as you show your willingness, you show that you care about the relationship with them and you make a very small linguistic effort, they are always very willing” (IT_T21_F). Teachers said that communication channels that work better are informal one (phone, Whatsapp), which allows for more direct, simple, and interpersonal communication.

I thought "are these parents really disinterested or is it that parents don't know how the school operates, they don't understand it, maybe they don't even know about it and nobody explained to them that there is an electronic register, that there are circulars?", and so I called everybody one by one and I saw that by calling them they registered my number, and through Whatsapp they called me back, or they wrote to me, so I understood that it's not true that there is a lack of interest, it's that often they don't [...] they don't know the procedures in Italian school well. (IT_T7_F)

Teachers also meet parents outside official reception hours in order to accommodate their work schedules: it is the school that has to meet them in certain cases, for example I meet them at any time of the day, even outside of my office hours, I mean, I do everything I can to meet their needs and work schedule (IT_T6_F).

Mediation is frequently used, however mediators are not always available, or teachers aim to create a more direct relationship either using their own language skills or the mediation of a relative, a friend, or children.

I'm lucky enough to be able to say a few words in English as well as in French and also in Chinese, very few in Chinese, so I have the advantage of having some additional languages [...] as a school we do it a lot [using mediators], in primary school we do it a lot, there are a lot of interventions every month, they are frequent, but if I can do it myself I prefer to speak to them directly because although mediation is very good, it's a translation that might get the message misconstrued as well as translating and so in some way it's better if things are communicated directly. (IT_T24_M)

Parents' expectations.

Most of the teachers agree that parents consider school to be an important opportunity for the future of their children, to learn the language, to integrate into Italian society, and to access the roles to which their children aspire: “study is a key to success, a key to having a better future” (IT_T7_F).

According to many teachers, family support of children's learning and participation in school and extracurricular activities can be more difficult. This is especially related to parents' low level of competence in the Italian language and culture, to their economic and socio-cultural conditions and to cultural factors.

They are the same as the Italians, it depends on the work they do, because if they are busy all day they are exhausted by the time it is evening and they have to think about paying the bills, cooking and cleaning [...] then it also depends on the cultural context and it is the same with Italians [...] then there are some cultures that are in my opinion less interested



in the educational aspect and more in the element of the obligation to go to school. (IT_T35_F)

Only one teacher claimed that migrant families can offer even greater opportunities than non-migrant families.

In most cases they don't have substantial resources to support their children, and in most cases not all. However there are families who do support them a lot and thereby extend the education of their children in a positive way to other agencies, also to agencies related to their place of origin. I had children that attended Moroccan schools out of school time but not only for religious reasons, but also to continue learning French because it was the language of origin. (IT_T29_F)

Finally, family support seems to vary in relation to both gender and age. Teachers working in the lower grades claimed that support is similar for boys and girls. On the contrary, those who teach in secondary schools claimed that some girls are more controlled and less encouraged to continue their studies due to the role that females traditionally play in their cultures of origin, as mothers and wives. This impacts girls negatively, increases low self-esteem and levels of dropping out of school as well as increasing the chance of them taking on unqualified jobs.

The fathers of the girls of the Maghreb area already have an idea of their daughters as mothers, at home, who may gain a school diploma but not for the reason of increased job opportunities. The same thing, not for religious ideological reasons, but the same thing applies to the fathers of Ghanaian and Nigerian girls, a little education, yes, whatever is compulsory, it has to be done or social services might come to your home, but they tend not to have high expectations for their daughters. A little bit better, a lot better in fact, are the parents of boys from Eastern Europe [...] or the boys' fathers expect their sons to do something better than their own job. (IT_T6_F)

The educator with migrant origins emphasized that females are expected to study more and longer, for them to be able to have jobs which would allow them to preserve traditional values such as wearing the veil, but also because study is used as a tool to control potential bad behaviour.

Social workers

Some social workers described the challenge for migrant children in retaining both cultures in their lives. This need is shared and understood by parents, although they are generally more closely linked to their original culture.

So, there is a cultural aspect, but there is also an objective aspect of difficulty, including the difficulty of keeping two cultures together, because clearly the parents are the bearers of a different culture that they want to pass on to their children, and sometimes this is very different from the cultural model of their peers or the way their peers have grown up in their own families. (IT_SW3_F)

One social worker mentioned the need to "reconcile our parental model with the family model" as a huge challenge (IT_SW3_F). Another social worker talked of the disparity between children who know Italian better than their parents, and parents who struggle to have a direct relationship with the school. In this situation, the child is often used as a mediator.

You see children at the age of six who speak Italian better than their mothers and therefore act as little mediators, who become smart about an assignment that has to be done in class, because they know their mothers can't read, children who are smart about notes or notices



or deliveries, depending on the age group, in short, when the child knows his mother can't check because she can't read. (IT_SW6_F)

Another challenge for children, shared with teachers, is that they do not have anyone who can help them with homework.

The feeling of being accepted by the host society (and by their classmates) is an important resource for these children because it gives them a sense of belonging to something. Sport and recreative activities are important for this reason. In general, however, economic and socio-cultural, as well as age and nationality, were mentioned as elements which may negatively impact children's inclusion in these things. Only one educator underlined the risk of creating prejudices as the result of grounding the evaluation of children's experiences on their nationality. Moreover, only one social worker mentioned children's personal resources as motivations, strengths and resilience, as well as family support and ability to consider external support.

According to social workers, a positive strategy that can be used to help children is understanding their culture of belonging alongside the important support of mediators. One social worker mentioned trust, empathy and collaboration as the main elements involved in her work with families. Another social worker also mentioned the importance of empathy in building relationships and enhancing the participation of both families and children in the "personalized life projects"- projects coordinated by the protection service.

A little bit is in the construction of the relationship, I mean to try as much as possible to build a relationship of trust that inevitably comes only with time, and to try as much as possible to welcome without judging, to welcome and to try to understand what is brought up by the other side, and to understand that if he doesn't have enough to eat in this moment "I can't manage it, I am not available to meet any other needs", that is to say that first this problem must be solved and then maybe we talk about the rest. And therefore, to try to understand the priorities of the others and to understand that I can't read an entirely different life and a culture with my references [...] the activation of cultural mediators in some situations was very, very useful, I think, to be able to better understand the underlying reason and the reciprocal dynamics. (IT_SW5_F)

Social workers working with UASC stressed several challenges in their profession. One of them mentioned the creation of trusting relationships with children, convincing them that social workers can help and that they are not policemen or lawyers. Some social workers spoke of the difficulty of communicating with children only through a mediator's help, something which makes it harder to build a trusting relationship. On the other hand, mediators' support is extremely important both as a resource for children and as a means of facilitation for social workers. One educator stressed the challenge of being recognized as having a valid role by children. Children's ability to negotiate roles was also defined as being hard: "asking them to act as adults when they are actually teenagers" (IT_SW11_F), is described as a difficult aspect by one community educator.

Only one educator told of the challenge in supporting children's self-confidence and belief in autonomy. He explained that children already experience emotional disappointments with parents, therefore creating a new relationship may generate further frustration and harm.

The biggest challenge is to ensure that these young people have confidence in themselves, that they understand that they can emancipate themselves [...] without having to go through a relationship. It sounds like an aberration when you say it like that because, as educators, relationships are obviously at the heart of everything, but it is true because these young people who came to Italy from a family that told them, at best, "please go away from us to help us" [...] they arrive here and find themselves facing other adults who tell them "look, believe us because we will tell you what is the right approach". And what guarantees do these adults give the children that they will not disappear from their lives afterwards as



their parents did? Why should these children invest in a relationship, an emotional relationship, knowing that this relationship will be cut short anyway? (IT_SW8_M)

Another challenge mentioned by social workers working with UASC is that of bureaucracy: “you do something according to a certain procedure one day and the next day the procedure has changed so you have to figure out again which office, who to contact, how to do it, what document is needed” (IT_SW1_F). Another challenge is providing activities that are more attractive to children than the illegal networks, to keep them safe from illegal networks. Social workers also struggle to ensure mental health. The majority of the children arrive in Italy around the age of seventeen, meaning that there is not sufficient time to create a plan with them; when they are aged eighteen, they are expected to be entirely independent and to have found a job in order to stay in Italy on a permanent basis. One educator specified that the label of unaccompanied minor is relatively new to the Italian system (it was introduced in 2017), thus the recognition of this condition has challenges.

Such challenges are faced through coordinated teamwork, including schools, local police, and educators. Coordination is considered to be being extremely positive, because it allows systematic updates to be made. In Modena especially, educators stressed that several training opportunities, language courses, and sporting activities have been organized by the local councils to increase the opportunities available to children and to motivate them.

Useful strategies include listening to children and being curious, giving them the space to express themselves, as well as seeking support from external projects which enables economic sustainability. Educators working with UASC also mentioned the importance of honesty and lack of judgment, patience, being systematic, clear and coherent in addressing the needs of children.

Mediators

Family expectations

Mediators are frequently involved in interactions with families, to deal with children’s behavioural issues as well as having periodical meetings with teachers. The role of mediator is essential in facilitating communication between a school and family. Families, especially families of newcomers, often do not speak fluent Italian and they are given no help in learning it. These communication difficulties might affect the child’s attitude toward the school in a negative way: “Sometimes it is a language problem and at other times it is the fact that the parents do not understand the school’s requirements very well and therefore the child sometimes arrives at school without materials.” (IT_F3_M_3_F). Some mediators said this fragility on the part of the parents can drive children to take advantage of the situation (see p. 26): “The child is clever and doesn’t do his homework because his parents don’t know the school rules so we help them understand how Italian schools work.” (IT_F3_M_3_F)

According to some mediators, as well as many teachers, lack of parents’ involvement in children’s school activities depends on language barriers rather than on lack of motivation. One mediator said that she always tries to explain this to teachers. One mediator also highlighted that some parents do not participate because they trust the school as an institution entirely, and they do not think their participation can make any difference.

A parent takes a sort of backseat in terms of the participation he/she has in the child’s school career, however the expectations he/she has about the child’s school career are still very high because the tendency of most parents is to say “develop yourself, study, so that tomorrow you don’t have to do the humble work I’m doing, so that tomorrow you can go on”, therefore he/she realizes the gaps he/she has, also the linguistic one, and therefore he/she cannot participate actively, sometimes he/she is almost ashamed. (IT_F4_M_3_F)



According to some other mediators, however, parents' expectations vary in different communities. For example, high expectations about schools were mentioned in relation to the Moroccan community, but not for the Chinese one, although the mediators did recognize differences within the Chinese community.

For those parents who grew up in China, who have lived in Italy for only a short time, expectations for their children are different from those parents who were born and raised here and who are more involved in their child's school life [...] Their expectation is that their children learn Italian well, enough Italian to start a business, if you know what I mean. They don't care that much, seven times out of ten I would say eh- they don't care whether or not their children get a degree or a diploma in a particular field or whether they get high or low grades, as long as they learn Italian to be able go to an accountant or a lawyer or- just that little bit of Italian that is enough to live on. (IT_F4_M_1_F)

Regarding the mediation services, several mediators highlighted how the highest expectations usually come from teachers, because parents are not very involved. Parents, however, do seek the help of mediators once a trustful relationship has been established. One mediator claimed that parents do not have high expectations. According to other mediators however, the issue of high expectations is linked to a widespread misunderstanding about the mediator's role as being there to support children's learning, which was frequently mentioned as a challenge in the relation to teachers and schools.

Teachers don't really know what our role as mediator is, each teacher asks us for different things, they really have no idea, this is because so many people still use us as an interpreter and not as a mediator. (IT_F4_M_1_F)

Parents may expect us to help their children learn Italian, but there is something else more important, that they need to feel – when a child feels good, he feels at ease, he learns more quickly. (IT_F1_M_1_F).

Challenges and strategies

As mentioned above, some mediators consider their role as being an important factor in children's wellbeing and inclusion, while others describe the challenge of gaining parents' trust. This is also explained as being due to their unclear role in terms of collaborating with teachers and schools: "So one problem is building trust with parents. Because the role of the mediator is not clarified. The issue is that the school does not clarify the role – what the mediator is." (IT_F8_M_2_F).

Another aspect considered a challenge was the lack of hours assigned with children was also evaluated as a challenge: "sometimes yes the time is very limited to be able to achieve more concrete results" (IT_F3_M_2_F). Mediators also stressed difficulties in establishing trust when working with social workers, who tend to view mediators as gatekeepers of the social service. For this reason, mediators are sent to work in different areas so that those they are working with can be sure they do not belong to their social environment: "but people haven't understood yet, they are afraid that I will end up going around telling their story to other families" (IT_F1_M_3_F).

Several mediators talked of communication strategies to create empathetic relationships such as smiling or making small gestures that make children aware that they are not alone. Several mediators also described the use of narratives about their personal experience to motivate students who find it difficult to engage in the educational experience: "sometimes you find a child who doesn't want to work and so I often have to talk about my experience and make him/her understand the opportunity he/she has to improve" (IT_F3_M_3_F).

Empathy was described by mediators as reflecting on their own personal migration experience to understand the needs of children and parents.



I always try to put myself in other people's shoes – that's the best way to understand and find the right tools. (IT_F3_M_1_F)

My experience at school, my migratory journey here in Italy, are two fundamental elements in understanding the child and give him/her help to learn Italian, to say if you want to get there it is not difficult. (IT_F3_M_1_F).

Some mediators said that children need to understand that education can be the key for change in their life: "You're always trying to give them that dream of changing their life and having better opportunities, and that's all linked to better education, isn't it? If you do well at school, your opportunities change" (IT_F3_M_2_F).

One mediator cited another important communication strategy: creating moments of dialogue with migrant students beyond schoolwork. Once dialogue with children has been established, the second step is to initiate dialogue with teachers and classmates. This process is important in giving children the opportunity to provide narratives which help them value their diversity.

Usually, when we meet with secondary school pupils, we don't only talk about what is happening at school or about subjects, [...] sometimes we also talk a bit about their difficulties, also, since coming to Italy, what they see, what they feel at school, their emotions, their experiences. I think that by doing this with them I can help them to understand how it works, how it can be done and sometimes I find some teachers who also [...] care about this [...] I had a boy who felt excluded in his class. The teacher had seen something, and she also said to me "can you talk to him to see what's going on?". The boy spoke about it and together with that teacher we did a small project in class to talk about problems, we didn't talk about him but the problem in general [...] We talked about my country, the good things about my country. The school system and this approach helped the boy very much because the class understood that he had something that the others didn't have. A small thing, in my country there is cocoa and many children in the school had never seen cocoa and did not even know that chocolate came from this fruit. In the end he teased them "but didn't you know that you always eat chocolate and that it comes from my country?" (IT_F2_M_2_F)

Other strategies include offering support to other children within the class, thereby trying to avoid the child being supported feeling too different or problematic. Listening to children and establishing equal roles and not making the child feel inferior to the adult is involved.

I adopt a symmetrical approach from the beginning, I mean, I do not put myself in the position of an adult because I am talking to a child, I try to have an equal relationship. This allows me to connect with the child (IT_F5_M_3_FM).

What works is listening a lot, I listen a lot and then, by listening carefully, you can understand them and do what is best in that situation. Each case is different, so you must listen and then choose the right strategy for that situation and that child. (IT_F3_M_2_F)

Mediators said they do not use specific materials in their work. They use books used in the school (in Italian) and provide support through the use of the child's native tongue. It is up to mediators to provide materials to help migrant children. This means that there is no uniformity in terms of the tools and materials used by mediators. Some mediators said they would prefer having more tools and materials specifically designed for migrant children.

Most mediators appreciated the fact that they are able help people. One mediator specified that he feels like a bridge between two cultures: "For me, every mediation is a challenge because I see myself as a bridge



between two parties, between two cultures” (IT_F5_M_3_FM). Two mediators emphasized the opportunity of giving value to children’s cultures and languages.

Because let’s not forget that all foreigners (have a feeling) that their culture is the inferior culture, their language is the inferior language [...] It’s up to the mediator to emphasize that, on the contrary, having a different culture and a different language is an advantage. (IT_F5_M_2_FM)

Finally, according to some mediators their strength is to be able to adapt to different contexts and situations: “a not insignificant characteristic to consider is that we are very adaptable, flexible and can adapt to many situations” (IT_F3_M_2_F).

5. Framing integration and evaluating policies

Teachers

Representations of integration.

Teachers provided five definitions of integration. The first definition is being open to engaging in dialogue with others, empowering and manifesting diversity as an opportunity rather than a threat.

It means having the possibility of having a dialogue with the other and it means having the possibility of accepting the diversity of others and to express one’s own diversity freely, i.e., integration is a dialogue and a recognition of the other, certainly not an obstacle nor an enemy, but a stimulus for social novelty and for a new dialogue. (IT_T7_F)

Dialogue should be free of fear and rigidity. It can lead to collaboration and growth and to sharing points of view: “my idea of integration is [...] to find commonalities” (IT_T19_F).

The second definition of integration is giving the same opportunities to all children: “all children feel and perceive that they are able to have the same opportunities as everyone else and enjoy them like everyone else, that they can make the same choices as others do” (IT_T29_F). This means welcoming all children in the same way, making them feel at ease and equal to the other children, giving them the tools to deal with social context and supporting those who have more difficulties.

Allowing children from foreign countries to be able to work, to be put in a position where they can learn like everyone else, and therefore to fill all the gaps, all the linguistic difficulties as well as other difficulties, starting from, as I said, personalized plans or workshops where they can improve their knowledge of Italian. (IT_T16_F)

The third definition of integration is enhancing children’s ability to create a community, by offering them the opportunity to participate in mediated workshops and practicing teaching methods which give opportunities and the chance to be valued.

The fourth definition of integration is avoiding stressing the problem of integration.

We have moved beyond this concept of integration because, in my opinion, it is an multicultural school and it works very well from this point of view, the children don’t ask themselves “where do you come from” or “what are your origins”, because a true multiculturalism exists, there are many origins. (IT_T6_F)

By taking for granted the presence of migrant students and multiple different backgrounds, children are considered not as problems, but as people, “I’m getting there because after many years, I no longer ask myself about the problems of either the migrant or non-migrant child, I mean, I simply have twenty-four children to work with.” (IT_T11_F).



Real integration is when you are aware of the fact that this is a child who, just like many other children, has his/her own specificities and he/she is him/her, he/she is a particular person more than they are a migrant. In my opinion, that is real integration, when a child is really him/her and when you can have relationships on that basis in the class, so it is not “the Moroccan child”, and “the immigrant child” is not “the African child” but it is him/her, Mohamed or whoever, then there is the real integration. (IT_T13_F)

This means acknowledging their differences and resources: “the fact that one feels that one’s diversity is fully appreciated until it is no longer even considered to be diversity, that is the diversity we all have because we are all different.” (IT_T1_F).

Thus, many respondents highlighted the necessity to overcome the concept of integration itself as it implies the idea of becoming similar or adapting to others: “The word integration is controversial because very often integration is seen as a one-way street, I mean the foreign kid has to integrate into our customs” (IT_T36_F). These respondents suggest that “integration” could be replaced by terms like “inclusion” and “positive contamination”, which emphasize cultural differences, values and talents positively.

I much prefer the word “inclusion” in the sense of the idea that differences are values for everyone [...] inclusion is to use the fact that I am different from you means it is true that I have difficulties that are different from yours but I also have advantages, I can do things that you cannot do [...] to include one’s own values, one’s own things that I can do, therefore to put them together in a puzzle. (IT_T3_F)

The term “interaction” is also suggested, as it conveys the importance of intercultural education against stereotypes and in favour of similarities in feelings and experiences.

Talking about interaction in the sense that I don’t believe that there is a reality of ours in which the others have to be inserted, let’s say, tout court, I believe that in our schools it is really important to adopt a teaching method that is widely intercultural [...] fighting against racism and so on, we always work in an indirect way, starting from activities to understand which are the prejudices that we all have, we also talk a lot about narratives, so we give concrete examples linked to life stories, [...] in order to make people understand what common values we share [...] I don’t believe in theoretical statements of principle, rather in creating the conditions that enable us to get to know each other and to be able to tell each other things, to share the emotions, dreams and needs that all people have in common, and perhaps find common challenges or goals. (IT_T2_F)

Finally, several respondents stressed the importance of hybridization and the need for change in the school system.

The prevailing approach of the teaching staff towards foreign pupils is that the pupil who is given all the help, and that it is the pupil who must get used to our system, which is certainly true in part because that is the system, isn’t it? But I would say that from the point of view of changes, for example in the programme, changes in the system, structures, timetables, for example of school programmes and so on, the school is stuck from that point of view [...] for me integration means integration of everybody towards everybody, of the pupil towards the teacher, of the teacher towards the pupil. (IT_T36_F)

Support of integration

Different actions are implemented to support migrant children, at a national, regional, local and school level.

At a national level, all schools have staff, protocols or work groups addressing the issue of inclusion, welcoming students and families through meetings and facilitating the sharing of information.



We have a reception protocol that envisages an initial phase in which the contact person talks to the families together with a cultural mediator. Then there is a transfer of information to the class teachers. We are quite strict about putting children in the same class as their age group and we try to do this as much as possible. (IT_T13_F)

Moreover, schools arrange specific personalized programmes and types of evaluation, and provide a counselling function when problems arise.

There are measures that all schools implement, such as, for example, a personalized teaching plan for people who have language difficulties, a personalized teaching plan for newly arrived foreigners, to enable them to attend and receive a grade in some subjects not all. This is a novelty that did not exist some years ago. (IT_T8_F)

We have people who are part of an inclusion group [...] who we can ask to come and make observations in the classroom, if necessary, they give you advice, so people who are a little bit more, let's say, trained. (IT_T27_F)

Actions aimed at migrant students and their parents, such as mediation and Italian L2 courses, are widespread and can be implemented on a national, local or school level. As described by mediators too, language mediation is used with newcomers to help collect information, to help them understand the new context and facilitate communication with parents. Schools can use national or local funds to employ mediators. L2 courses may be held by CPIA (Centri Provinciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti), by specialized teachers, but more often by internal teachers, using national funds. According to teachers, internal courses work better for bringing children into the school context and are also useful in creating more personal relationships between teachers and students. L2 courses can take place either during or outside school lessons. However, during the time interviews were being carried out (during the pandemic) no native language classes were taking place in any of the schools. One school was planning a workshop about Chinese culture, open to all students, funded by the CHILD-UP project.

Workshops intended for all students take place either during school time or outside of school. Schools often participate in national, regional or local projects. Moreover, schools collaborate with cooperatives, organizations, local networks, sports clubs and parents' groups. Finally, teachers themselves can organize workshops which are sometimes included in school networks.

We also started a training course, let's say that there were already trained people, I am doing training in the methodology of narration and reflection (MNR) [...] I must say that this methodology [...] is popular because they manage to bring out [...] what they have inside, their problems. (IT_T27_F)

Workshops can address specific intercultural issues, aiming to raise awareness of cultural differences, promoting dialogue and overcoming prejudice and stereotypes as well incorporating other activities such as going to the theatre, visiting places, taking part to events and festivals, doing cookery, sports, orienteering, promoting participation and socialization of migrant children and overcoming language barriers.

On a school level, teachers adapt their teaching methods to include everyone, for example using workshops, enhancing group work, highlighting competences and raising cultural awareness during normal classroom activities.

We try to incorporate a pedagogy that is also a kind of laboratory in order to help integrate everyone so we have, for example, [...] study work groups [...] both peer-to-peer activities, or groups in the morning. (IT_T7_F)

I know of many colleagues who use texts, or the work being done in the classroom, or take advantage of questions asked by pupils to talk about these issues. (IT_T18_F)



All activities that raise cultural awareness have a positive impact on children because migrant students see that they can participate on a personal level and are appreciated and valued for their participation, experiences, identity and story.

This is an opportunity to talk about, for example, the places they come from, or we do life stories in biographies and in biographies of course everyone can bring their experience to the table. (IT_T36_F)

It gives children the opportunity to express their own experiences, giving value to these experiences more so than during normal school time. It has a positive impact on all Italians and non-Italians, especially on non-Italians, because they see attention focused in the right way on characteristics that are perhaps more typically theirs. (IT_T29_F)

Italian students also appreciate these activities since they can experience a more person-centred educational approach. They are curious about classmates and this kind of approach can change their view about migrants: “sometimes Italians like them more than the foreigners do, they become more useful for Italians, but they also become useful to get out of this mentality of hatred and mistrust towards others” (IT_T30_F).

Many teachers also find activities and programmes of integration helpful and valuable. Teachers respond to them positively because children participate with enthusiasm, they help them to achieve good levels of integration, they enhance children’s education as well as new and more personal forms of interaction with teachers. From the point of view of classroom relationships, these activities enhance mutual knowledge between children and different personal aspects that are usually not evidenced in classroom interactions.

They learnt to get to know their classmates through a different activity and they learnt to look at their classmates through different eyes because they saw that they had characteristics that they had never noticed in class and so they were pleasantly surprised, so much so that I also saw them on the way out and then groups were created to go and eat ice cream, to go and eat pizza, to go and eat kebabs. (IT_T7_F)

Moreover, these activities help migrant students feel less alone and more part of the school. Finally, they improve relationships and collaboration between teachers and between teachers, children and their families, thus creating a virtuous circle.

There is also a better relationship between colleagues involved in literacy, those colleagues involved in the various intercultural projects, and colleagues in the class council, and therefore also the children and their families because, in my opinion, a very virtuous network has been created. (IT_T6_F)

However, teachers did highlight that these actions are insufficient, because funds are insufficient and bureaucracy too is an obstacle to realizing appropriate actions; migrant families are not sufficiently involved, hours of mediation are insufficient both with parents and in the classroom in order to observe and interact with children, helping them to express their needs. Time for L2 leaning should also be increased, above all for newcomers at the beginning of the school year especially concerning academic language, which is difficult even when children have obtained a good level Italian.

The aspect of language for study should be implemented and increased much more [...] because often both the pupil and we teachers take it for granted that if the pupil reaches a good level of communication, a good level of literacy, then he or she fully and thoroughly understands the vocabulary of the discipline, which is a specific vocabulary and, in my opinion, requires greater reinforcement. (IT_T6_F)

Finally, it would be useful to increase the number of workshops taking place on intercultural education, intercultural mediation and gender differences in order to create opportunities for children to socialize. A



teacher also highlighted the importance of coordination among teachers and the application of new methodologies, exchanging materials, competences and good practices.

They are sufficient when the class council carries on this common thread, because if the project [that we have done], if these three interventions are left to themselves, and within the class council no teacher carries on the discussion, things don't change [...] I'm speaking about my own group, so for the teachers of literature there has been a lot of collaboration over the years, we have learned to share materials and to share good practices, so all this puts in place the conditions that enable even those [teachers] arriving for the first time to be able to draw not only on others' experiences but also on a lot of material. (IT_T16_F)

Collaboration.

During interviews teachers spoke of collaboration with different institutions and actors. Collaboration was assessed positively, but many teachers mentioned the need for more systematic and regular partnership for mediation.

What I think is missing [...] is a more structured and more structural discourse, that is to say, we often relate to each other more for matters of urgency, I don't know, when an unaccompanied child arrives, obviously we, as a school, and they get in touch, we try to talk to each other, but this doesn't always happen in a continuous and constant way. (IT_T6_F)

They also requested the presence of a long-term mediator being present in the school, which was also suggested by most mediators.

The most frequent collaboration is with local administrations, which implements several actions concerning education and psychological support. These actions involve all students, but they are particularly important for migrant students' access to services and opportunities, for example for their socialization in the classroom: "We brought together all the bilingual children at the Institute and did educational and play activities, but above all it was a space where the children were together, so it was very important for them to be able to meet each other" (IT_T13_F).

Other actions are specifically addressed to migrant students and their families: mediation, meetings with migrant parents and language courses with children and/or their families.

There are also Italian language school projects for mothers, I mean there is a great tendency to try and include mothers in projects involving meetings between mothers in order to deal with certain issues that undoubtedly concern children, but which can also concern women alone. Meetings with gynecologists have also been organized. (IT_T23_F)

An important institution is CPIA (Centro provinciale per l'istruzione degli adulti), where newcomers can attend L2 courses, as seen above. However, according to teachers this type of course sometimes prevents students from being included in schools early and successfully.

A third type of collaboration concerns local associations, cooperatives, parishes, neighbourhood associations and foreign community associations. These local organizations provide activities which are not only addressed to migrant students, but often also involve fragile and problematic students. These activities include workshops during or outside the school hours and after-school clubs for children who need help with homework.

We have an after-school club run by the parish and attended only by foreign pupils, practically run by the parish with funds from the parish itself and this is very important because they are really supported in their homework. (IT_T16_F)



There are activities that also involve the school and that are intercultural [...] there is an activity with the Latin American community. Two years ago, for example, there was an association for the recovery of young people who had taken wrong, dysfunctional paths, and it was a religious association. (IT_T34_F)

The fourth type of collaboration is with local services, such as neuropsychiatry and social services, which collaborate with schools when migrant children have difficulties, e.g., family problems or cognitive challenges.

Some teachers also mentioned collaboration within networks of schools, particularly in kindergartens, working on intercultural issues and child poverty. Others mentioned collaboration with national or international institutions, e.g., the Ministry of Education and the European Union, to work on intercultural issues within specific projects.

Social workers

Representations of integration.

One social worker working with UASC preferred to talk of “inclusion” rather than “integration”, although in her opinion Italy is not moving forward fast enough on this issue. According to one educator, integration concerns the opportunity to co-construct individual projects with children, giving them the feeling of being authors of their own lives and identities. For two educators, integration involves curiosity, the desire to know and understand children and their stories. For one social worker, integration means the opportunity to gain access to equal rights and services, but also of having duties towards society.

In general, it (integration) is the possibility of fully entering as a citizen within the new context. The ideal is that young people leave here knowing how the country and culture works and how to operate in freedom and in the freedom of others. (IT_SW9_M)

Other definitions of integration included the recognition of cultural issues and the need for the mixing of different cultural groups, “general wellbeing to all”, “dialogue”, “respect for and knowledge of each other”, “the need to create social networks” and thus the feeling of “being part of a community” which nurtures “the perception of oneself as being an active participant, and not feeling judged or isolated”. Finally, one definition was the recognition and protection of belonging.

I integrate when I know that my belonging is safeguarded and that it is recognized by others. (IT_SW6_F)

Matching different trajectories – and not having to choose between the origin culture and the new one – was another a description of integration: “you as a minor are the linking arm, you have this ability”. (IT_SW11_F)

Actions

According to social workers, integration programmes, professional courses, short-term training and internship opportunities work well. However, some respondents highlighted that these initiatives are insufficient for creating integration because they are not included within a system of contexts and needs.

Volunteering and afternoon, post-school education were also considered a good way of supporting the inclusion of migrant families. The “Welcome” project in Modena, which UASC allows to include families, was cited by one social worker as being important because not only does it provide children with a family, but also a network of social contacts and opportunities. Moreover, this project allows the reception system to take care of people until they are 21 years old. One educator in Genoa talked of several activities in which children are included: movies followed by debates, horse riding therapy, canoeing, cookery lessons,



discussion groups about challenges and issues, summer holiday camps, and gardening. These activities were judged positively because they are personalized.

Interventions are effective when they are gauged in the most suitable way to a particular person, because an intervention that may be positive for one person might not be for another. In my opinion, the right relationship and the right level of trust, the ability to feel the other person can be relied on goes to the heart of the success of any project. (IT_SW10_M)

Some social workers mentioned L2 courses, cooking and sewing courses for mothers and basic L2 courses for newcomers as other actions positively enhancing integration. Courses for mothers also provide a baby-sitting service.

Collaboration

According to one social worker, collaboration with health services presents several weak points concerning language and models of intervention. For instance, neuropsychiatric interventions fail due to language barriers as well as time limitations since children aged 17 can receive help only until they are 18, after which they must access the adult mental health services which has a very high threshold enabling access resulting in treatment being interrupted for many of them. However, in work with UASC, collaboration with health services is deemed very important. Social workers also collaborate with schools, professional institutions and the local police, although concerning the latter, communication with central police stations is considered difficult.

Social workers and educators also collaborate with schools, associations/cooperatives involved in post-school activities or managing services for migrants, sport associations, and migrant communities' religious institutions. Educators also collaborate with the courts and this is considered to work well by most of the interviewees. However, changes within institutions are frequent, meaning that every time further efforts are needed in order to initiate relationships; one possible strategy is to rely on interpersonal relationships within these institutions. Bureaucracy, such as health practices and documentation, were mentioned as a weak point.

It can be just one glitch, just one wrong name in a document from the Police Headquarters, and everything is blocked for months. It is not an issue that can be resolved in an instant because everything must be sent back to the Ministry, and so the smallest thing is enough to block a project for months. (IT_SW12_M)

Keep in mind that we work with unaccompanied minors, unlike Italian minors, it is not that – I mean they arrive and there is no family anamnesis, they arrive, and we work in the dark. Therefore, there is an observation phase that takes place in the community and if doubts emerge regarding cognitive problems or something else, a proposal is made to social services and a referral is suggested [to the social services]. (IT_SW7_F)

According to educators, some challenges concerning collaboration do exist, especially with the health services. Difficulties concern health providers' understanding of UASC's aims and, within neuropsychiatry, generalizations based on national and cultural belonging and social conditions, reduce the possibility of reaching a proper and useful diagnosis. One educator recounted being asked about a child by the health provider without involving the child at all during that conversation. Collaboration with CPIA (Provincial Centres for Adult Education) and vocational schools was also positively valued.

Compared to schools with a specific subject, we work mainly with vocational training institutes, [...] and we work very well. Let's say that with the smart kids, vocational training



tends to be [...] a really good experience, you work very well, you do projects, you have a very good relationship with the social services. (IT_SW7_F)

An educator described the Italian language courses (SPAC) provided by Caleidos – a cooperative in Modena – and CPIA language courses for those children who already have some Italian knowledge. In contrast to teachers, educators assessed these courses very positively because they involve people from different nationalities.

The SPAC, although it has a lot of merits, is not good for all students, in particular those who are very able, so our second option is the CPIA, which offers eighth grade courses, which for many students is a very high goal to reach. The CPIA Italian courses are better in other ways too because they are structured in a different way, because the classes are also composed of other people, even adults, I don't know, Filipinos, Italians, women who come from abroad to learn Italian, so this variety softens the nationality factor. (IT_SW8_M)

Another educator was critical about collaborations, for instance about the educational possibilities provided by UASC which are very limited for systemic restrictions.

From the point of view of the people we meet, it is an excellent collaboration and I have always found people who are available, prepared, and extremely competent, aware of the problems of the constraints and willing to solve them. From the point of view of the institutional machine, the problems are many and they are often beyond the capacity of individuals to solve. So there are difficulties in obtaining documents rather than in enrolling at school, but I repeat, regardless of the will of the individuals and of the individuals we meet [...] the system does not help because the system says in compulsory education – in compulsory education, excuse me, therefore sixteen-eighteen, which is the range we deal with – the kids must be enrolled in an institutionally recognized school, I mean middle school, high school, vocational training or do an apprenticeship. Unfortunately in Emilia Romagna unaccompanied foreign minors cannot do these things and this is a huge problem that we have noticed, that is the lack of access to the world of work that a sixteen year old kid has, Italian I mean. The secondary schools are out of their age range because even there, by law, they have to be enrolled in one school per year of age. Therefore there is still high school and vocational training, but they do not know the language needed to do high school, they would find it hard to sit and do law, English or geography for five hours. And vocational training has a limited number of students, and they cannot access it at any time of the year. (IT_SW9_M)

Most of the social workers mentioned L2, cooking, and sewing courses, sometimes with baby-sitting facilities provided too, as we have seen above. These initiatives usually target mothers in order to enhance their skills, relationships and inclusion. The few activities targeted at fathers seem to concern job searching more directly:

The courses we were talking about are obviously much more targeted at women, they tend to be very focused on women. Then for fathers there are different ways of finding a job, but they do not have that aspect of aggregation. That tends to be more linked to women because the need is normally much higher. For fathers there is often the job and sometimes there is also a social aspect linked to the community they belong to that women do not have, but it depends on the cultures. (IT_SW5_F)

The differentiation of activities targeted at mothers and fathers risks reiterating and reproducing both stereotypes and bias associated with the traditional gender roles.

Mediators

Representations of integration.

Some mediators claim that a successful process of integration originates in the family. Parents are responsible for providing children with an adequate approach to their integration. In this view, a successful process of integration combines resources in the country of origin and in the country of migration. Thus, it is important the children do not forget their country of departure or their parents' origins. However, for some mediators, personality has also an important influence.

What the children have as a cultural model at home is very influential [...] they also have a character that they can easily adapt to, or they can bond a little bit with their colleagues, and then maybe living the school better. (IT_F3_M_2_F)

Only two mediators (in Genoa) openly express disagreement about the concept of integration:

I don't like to use the word integration, because I think integration is a very violent word as it has the sense of forcing someone- I like to use the interaction between [...] It's not that I have to integrate- to become like you. (IT_F8_M_1_F)

Actions

Mediators highlighted the lack of tools and materials they can use to support migrant children and the absence of national guidelines for the inclusion of migrant children, which also impacts on a newcomer is included in a specific class. Some mediators claimed that they were asked to suggest which class a child should be included in, but they complained that they are not trained to make this decision and that specific guidelines should be provided by the government. In this situation, mediators look at the educational history of children to evaluate what the best thing to do for them is.

Two mediators (in Genoa) described a more complex procedure in some schools: a reception committee includes mediators to discuss newcomers' level of education, which class they should go into and what educational programme should be designed for them. However, these committees are not implemented in all schools and sometimes mediators are asked to intervene when decisions concerning the child have already been made.

These commissions work very well in some schools, but in others they do not exist and most of the time we are allocated children where decisions have already been taken [...] The law is very ambiguous, [...] it is interpreted differently from school to school. (IT_F8_M_1_F)

Collaboration

Mediators mentioned collaborating with several other professionals: child neuropsychiatrists, educators in schools, psychologists, pedagogists, social workers. In general, collaboration with neuropsychiatrists was assessed positively even though some mediators said they had witnessed racist behaviour within the health services.

Mediators spoke of the absence of systematic and established support of migrant children's inclusion due to lack of funding and time. They reported that implementing a procedure is time consuming and teachers often do not have enough time to do it. This resonates with what teachers claimed about bureaucracy as presenting an obstacle for realizing appropriate actions. Absence of funds also affects mediators' effective action within schools and in collaborating with teachers to enhance better practices around the inclusion of children.

We also did training when there was money, when there were funds, [...] we did training for teachers. The role of the mediator – I do not say that it has become less important now



– but it was more relevant then. Now, due to lack of funds, even the services consider us to be interpreters. (IT_F4_M_3_F)

Moreover, according to the interviewees, mediators are frequently considered to be language teachers and this is problematic for most of them as the number of hours assigned to them is not enough to help children to learn L2. One mediator claimed that sometimes mediators are given responsibilities which are too burdensome. During two focus groups, the mediators agreed that they are perceived by teachers – and in the host country generally – to be a tool and not as part of the system. They reported being involved in emergency situations but not for ongoing support or prevention.

The problem is that they call you only in times of need and instead, I believe, that you should make full use of the mediators [...] not only when they need to deliver report cards or maybe to communicate something, but also to participate in meetings to understand a bit how to operate [...] we are professionals but we are not seen as professionals. (IT_F5_M_1_FM)

All mediators reported a significant reduction of resources to be able to carry out their interventions in the last ten years. They observed a general criticality in terms of policies to help and sustain their work as they feel invisible in politics and public debate.

6. School during the pandemic

The pandemic has worsened the conditions of students due to online teaching and isolation from peers. During the first months of pandemic, badly equipped schools, especially lower grade schools, experienced practical problems that go with delivering online teaching. Teachers considered the 2019/20 school year to be half lost. During the first part of 2020/21 school year, schools were open for most of the time, with some variations depending on the regional restrictions, and with the exception of quarantined classes and ISCED3 schools, where teaching was carried out remotely at least 50% of the time. Now that schools are well-equipped and better organized, so online teaching functions, even where students are quarantined at home.

The primary concern of both teachers and headteachers during online learning has been to preserve the relationship with students without hindering learning and socialization. The interviewees assessed telephone relationships to be positive, especially in the first phase of online learning when several schools were not yet well-equipped. They also mentioned the importance of psychological support and mediation, which almost always continued remotely during the period when schools were closed.

Mediators have conducted online meetings with parents even when schools were back open. However, several problems regarding parents' access, due to lack of equipment and skills, were reported. L2 classes were often postponed or cancelled because the children who needed them were unreachable and when they did connect, priority was given to relations within class and with teachers: "Literacy was suspended because who those needed it most were not easily reachable, you could not plan, he/she connected perhaps once or occasionally and that time it was more important to establish and maintain the relationships" (IT_T41_F).

Sometimes after plenary sessions multiple connections were made in the same classroom, each supervised by a teacher, to give more opportunities for children to participate, as happens in class when working in small groups.

Recreate online what you do in a class, I mean, create groups, each one supervised by a teacher a bit as if you were in the classroom when perhaps a teacher goes out with a group or another teacher approaches two children in the classroom and supports them here at a distance. This type of more personalized coaching is not possible because if we have only one connection and we are all in the same room, but if there are two or three teachers we



create more links, so we welcome everyone in the meantime because we have to give the class a sense of unity, then after the greetings and so on we can separate, so a group follows a teacher into another room. (IT_T41_F)

Interviewees highlighted several different ways in which teaching was impacted. The first thing that was impacted, especially in the lower grades of school, was the need for non-verbal communication, physical and visual contact with teachers and classmates. Children have experienced struggled with the stints of online teaching: “As children in kindergarten they need physical contact [...] what was missing is precisely this contact. Children need this, not only a hug but also a look” (IT_T42_F).

On the other hand, more distanced relationships resulted in fewer arguments and disciplinary sanctions, especially in ISCED3 schools.

A second way teaching was impacted concerned a slower pace of learning, above all because initially a number of children did not follow lessons systematically due to problems with access and connection as well as due to families’ work or economic problems. For instance, sometimes there was only a cell phone in the house which was used by the father when he went to work.

If a child is young, he doesn’t have a mobile phone and if there is only one mobile phone in the family, it is taken by the father when he goes to work. So last year I remember some situations in which teachers told me about children doing their homework in the evening with their father’s mobile phone. (IT_T41_F)

A migration background played a particularly significant role on the impact of education during the pandemic. Some children went back to their country of origin and disappeared from the education system altogether, to then either come back during the following school year or not having yet reappeared at the time the interviews were conducted. Moreover, migrant children with language impairments had greater problems communicating remotely since non-verbal communication was reduced.

A third way teaching was impacted was an increased detachment between schools and families, especially families in conditions of social and cultural disadvantage, including migrant families. Even in cases where the school was equipped to provide the possibility of online learning, this distance undermined trusting relationships with parents. For example, some Chinese parents refused to send their children to school for many months, in some cases until now, because they have considered it too risky for their children’s health or because they were busy dealing with other more pressing family issues. Only after lengthy negotiations, have schools often succeeded in bringing children back to school.

Online learning has also had an impact on the opportunities being offered to children, particularly migrant ones, e.g., regarding information about choosing a secondary school for those who do not know about the options and opportunities offered by different schools.

To sum up, these conditions have significantly affected students’ self-confidence and the recognition of their talents.

There have been fewer opportunities to deal with knowledge, with the subjects being studied, to test, so in my opinion they have had fewer elements and then, in my opinion, a little bit less self-confidence in the ability to develop their talents, less recognition of the potential talents of pupils who have recently immigrated, all these steps, in my opinion, are more difficult or incomplete. (IT_T41_F)

7. Recommendations

Teachers

Many teachers mentioned five actions required to foster migrant children's integration. The first action being mediation which is important, not only between languages, but also between cultures. Mediation services should be expanded to include more time, more work with children (where only parents are involved), permanent mediators in classrooms, in schools or in the country.

Systemic actions, therefore. To think that these migratory phenomena have existed, will exist, in different forms, take on different forms perhaps, over the years, but there must be, first and foremost, territorial centres to help families, both Italian and with cultural mediators employed on a permanent basis in every area of the territory in order to provide this type of service. (IT_T36_F)

The second action is the implementation of L2 classes for children, which should be done early in the year or upon the child's arrival, to act as bridge classes to provide tools for children to then successfully fit into the classroom but above all as language support for studying.

Spaces where recently arrived – and the older they are the more sense this makes – classes where we teach them to communicate and say the first important phrases in order not to feel completely lost, in my opinion those spaces are fundamental, they are not ghettos, they are bridge classes [...] we teach Italian to children, we help them to have more tools to hand before putting them in the classes. (IT_T21_F)

The third action is improving communication with parents, in particular through L2 workshops with mothers to bridge the gap between them and their children, supporting families from both an economic and social perspective, involving parents in school activities, including cultural workshops and activities that enhance cultural heritage to promote the idea of difference as a resource.

We need to start from women's literacy, that is, of mothers. In my opinion, this would be a fundamental starting point that would have repercussions on many other things, because a mother who does not speak the language, who does not know the culture at all, is a mother who is always more distant from her children, always more the bearer of something too distant in time [...] cultural workshops where mothers could bring their own food and do their own thing, this would become a resource. (IT_T22_F)

The fourth action is teacher training, which should be continuous, provided by experts or universities and aimed at teaching in multilingual and multicultural contexts, reception and inclusion, and conflict management.

A training also of oneself, something that can educate us in a way that, how can I say, it becomes a part of us no? so maybe, yes, a training but in the long term [...] dedicated to this different vision, for example, the management of conflict in a peaceful way, facing diversity but in a way that does not tire, no? "who knows what I have to do now?" but that makes you happier at that point because you know different things. (IT_T31_F)

The fifth action includes activities with young people to enhance socialization, intercultural education, the management of emotions and conflict, dialogue as enrichment and the valorisation of diversity.

These young people must be listened to because it is good for them but, above all, for others, and I say above all because the difference they make to others is fundamental for them in the sense that when their experience is socialized, I think, through dialogic practices [...] this comparison is already useful, in my opinion these young people need to



be listened to because they have a richness that others do not possess at that time.
(IT_T35_F)

Other proposals include the reduction of pupil numbers in classes, more personalized evaluation adapted to the objectives formed by migrant children themselves, economic support for extracurricular planning, the implementation of policies that avoid marginalization of migrant children, and the improvement of stable communication between institutions thereby fighting stereotypes.

Social workers

Suggestions by social workers and mediators were rather fragmented. First, one social worker focussed on internal organization, suggesting an increase of the number of people working with migrant children to provide more time for each individual child.

A second suggestion concerned implementing plans for children. Building programmes of integration focused more on the external world and children's needs, creating higher synergy regarding jobs was suggested. An important suggestion coming from an educator was grounding projects on personal need and stories, going beyond cultural belonging and nationality. According to two educators, children showing commitment in their individual projects should have the opportunity to continue these projects even after they turn 18.

A third type of suggestion concerns work with families. One social worker felt communication with migrant families could be enhanced in order to promote knowledge of migrant people; this would also help families to gain trust in Italian institutions. Another social worker suggested adjusting guidelines for the evaluation of certain aspects of migrants' lives such as parenting practices or approaches to maternity, as she said that these are too grounded in a national (Italian) perspective. Another social worker suggested increasing the involvement of mothers in activities in order to empower them and give them L2 knowledge.

A fourth type of suggestion concerns improvement of institutional collaboration, particularly with law enforcement, central police station and court.

Sometimes you have the feeling that they don't read the reports or that institutions don't talk with one another, and this means that afterwards, not only can you not follow a positive trajectory, because you don't have time, but the negative trajectories become so complicated that they take up seventy per cent of your work. (IT_SW2_F)

One educator highlighted the need for stronger action from the police in dealing with criminal networks that try to involve unaccompanied minors.

Moreover, several social workers highlighted the importance of increasing levels of collaboration with mediators, to learn more about families' cultures. One educator also stressed the importance of mediators as positive role models for children. Although most interviewees based their evaluations and narratives on children's national and cultural belonging, one educator suggested going beyond these labels and focusing more on personal aspects and elaborating cultural aspects.

Finally, one educator highlighted the need to have a system of evaluation of the impact of actions to understand whether children's integration was succeeding, with another educator highlighting the fact that changes in integration procedures rely solely on changes in Italian and European policies.

Mediators

Mediators provided several suggestions, also shared by teachers, to improve their own work and thus its effect on children's education. First, they suggested a more structured and long-term collaboration to support children: "increase the number of hours we do with the children, because the hours are minimal and we are rarely able to complete our work" (IT_F3_M_1_F). Second, they suggested more involvement to

transform children's diversity into a source of richness from which everyone could learn something new. Third, they suggested shared training with teachers to create more cohesion and better organize their way of collaborating. Some also suggested the need for more tools and materials specifically addressed to migrant children and as well as systematic exchanges between mediators in order to understand each other's work practices.

Second, mediators suggested changes in approaches by schools'. They suggested that teachers should attend more training and courses to learn about the situations of migrant children and migration in general. One mediator claimed that schools need to understand that its users are different now, and that knowledge should conform to this change. Mediators also suggested a change in teachers' approach to communication with families, in particular suggesting meetings to get to know the family and to allow the family to understand the school system.

Some mediators highlighted the importance of children to be included in kindergarten or sport activities.

Another suggestion, also shared with teachers, was to support mothers' attendance of Italian school, so that they could support their children's learning.

8. Conclusions

Some teachers, social workers and mediators stressed that a focus on children's personal stories can help their work with migrant children. However, especially among teachers, some interviewees seem more oriented towards stressing achievements and evaluation, showing surprise and satisfaction when migrant children learn successfully. The difference between teachers' and mediators' priorities concerns children's needs: while for most of the teachers the main need is learning L2, many mediators claim that children's relational wellbeing comes first.

Lack of time and funding represent a significant problem for all respondents. Both teachers and mediators emphasize that structured programmes for newcomers are rare, especially within schools, and that mediators are only called in emergency situations or to interact with parents (Genoa is an exception to this). Both teachers and mediators, as well as social workers working in this area, highlight the need for the systematic presence of mediators to provide important support in communication with migrant children and their families.

All respondents argue that strategies to create trusting relationships with parents are required. Some teachers and mediators in particular highlight the relevance of creating communication channels which facilitate parent's participation both in terms of time and language support.

An important difference between the respondents concerns the theme of multiple or double belonging, which is considered a challenge by most of the teachers and social workers, but a richness by mediators. Bilingualism is mainly considered to be a challenge rather than a resource except for some mediators who explicitly stress it as being a resource.

Children are generally represented passively in terms of dealing with cultural influences and this shows that children's agency is generally ignored by all respondents, except for some teachers who recognize children's ability to manage different languages and social environments. Children's participation is mainly conceived of as alignment with educational requests by most of the teachers, while among social workers and mediators children's agency is only considered when the child is described as looking for strategies to deceive parents and skipping school duties.

Concerning gender issues, overall non-binary children are only identified as males who have feminine attitudes or behave like females. Most respondents frequently refer to cultural factors to explain gender inequalities between males and females. Cultural factors also seem to impact the evaluation of children's



behaviours, participation, school performances, parents' expectations and life experience in general, especially when the culture of origin is very different from the Italian one, or where it implies religious differences. This highlights a tendency towards an essentialist understanding of cultural differences.

Nevertheless, systemic aspects are also mentioned several times as elements that affect children's lives: lack of national guidelines, tools, funding and training for professionals; scarce and inadequate activities and programmes, tortuous and excessive bureaucracy. The recommendations proposed by the interviewees mainly concern these aspects, especially the provision of more, and ad hoc, training opportunities. Mediators also stress the importance of learning the profession in practice, for example through job shadowing.

Finally, all respondents mentioned how the pandemic has increased pre-existing problems. However, one positive aspect was also highlighted: that more opportunities for communication between mediators and teachers regarding tasks for migrant children was possible.

CHILD-UP WP5 local report - children's perspectives. Italy

1. Methodology

Focus groups (FGs) with students were conducted from May 2020 until June 2021 in the three areas involved in the project: Modena, Genova and Reggio Emilia. Due to the pandemic, researchers agreed with teachers about how to conduct the FGs during the periods in which schools were closed, as well as navigating the different regulations in place in the various schools. For this reason, 6 FGs were conducted face-to-face, with both researcher and recorder in the classroom, 27 FGs were conducted remotely in two ways: (1) with the researcher on a digital platform and students in the classroom; (2) with all participants on a digital platform in different virtual locations. When the FGs were conducted with the researcher connected remotely and children in the classroom, children were asked to get closer to the computer when they had something to say in order to avoid any audio difficulties as the result of poor connection or due to children wearing the masks. In some cases, the teacher repeated the students' contributions for the researchers.

The schools and classes that took part in the FGs were the same ones that participated in the activities, pre post-test, and FGs in WP6 of the project, with the exception of five classes involved during the lockdown (March-May 2020) which were not able to implement the activities in the 2020/2021 school year. Teachers, students, and parents were happy with the FGs. Children especially repeatedly said that they appreciated the FGs since they could express their opinions. However, it was very difficult to obtain parental consent remotely for the five classes involved during the lockdown in Spring 2020, both due to forgetfulness and technical problems. With this background in mind, hard copies of parental consent were collected during the 2020/2021 school year.

A total of 24 schools/educational centres and 33 classes/groups were involved in the FGs. The children involved ranged from ISCED0 to ISCED3: 6 groups were in ISCED0, 9 in ISCED1, 11 belonged to ISCED2 and 7 to ISCED 3. The FGs mixed groups of males and females, except for 5 classes/groups: three classes in a technical institute were made up of girls only; two classes of another technical institute included only boys; a group of unaccompanied foreign minors taking a literacy course were also just boys. Except for the group of unaccompanied foreign minors composed exclusively of migrant children, children's nationalities were very heterogeneous in all classes. The schools/educational institutions that participated are located partly in 3 towns in Northern Italy and partly in three surrounding villages.

The FGs were conducted in Italian, given the participants' proficiency in the language. The atmosphere was relaxed and informal and there were no questions that the participants found difficult or disturbing.

2. School as a lived space

Ideal school

Concerning what their ideal school should look like, children provided answers that can be grouped around five basic factors.

The first factor is in line with what the teachers said, i.e., being in favour of an increased number of extracurricular activities within the school. ISCED 2 and 3 students in particular demonstrated a certain idealized image of American schools, taking that model as an example to argue that it would be nice to have more extracurricular activities such as sports and music.

I like American schools because there is a day in the American school where all the school's students can bring their instruments and let the others hear them playing” (IT_F8_CH_B).



Child-Up

M1: Like some more activities, like in American schools there is the option of doing activities after the lessons like music, dance, etc.

M2: exactly

[...]

M1: things like theatre music and dance, for me, I would do them instantly [...] because they are things that attract me

(IT_F5_CH_B)

M1: there are so many extracurricular activities, so much more

Int: so you think you would like to do things outside the regular subjects?

Some: yes [...] they have a basketball team, they have more sports classes. (IT_F9_CH_G)

Children also mentioned other activities help with socialization, such as eating in a cafeteria and having dances: “then you eat at school” “the dances” (IT_F9_CH_G). These activities can also be done outside school but they are more highly valued if they take place in school: “obviously after school if we want to go and do sports we can, but I think they mean that it would be nice at school to have a school team, for example, basketball, soccer” (IT_F9_CH_B).

The second factor is radical change in the way lessons are carried out: “schools have been at a standstill for one hundred years, he said, and therefore it must be revolutionized in the way that carriages developed into machines, the school should be revolutionized” (IT_F8_CH_B).

In particular, children asked for more computers and new technologies such as tablets to be used, replacing books, and video games or applications to support learning. Many children also mentioned wanting to have more computers at school or laptops to carry around with them. These tools would also relieve the weight of books they carry on their shoulders and would have positive effects on both education and the environment. They claimed that this idea has been around for years, it is not something that has been caused by the pandemic.

Another way to describe this change is “to learn while having fun”: “I believe that in school you have to learn while having fun because if it’s too serious, ultimately it’s hard to learn” (IT_F21_CH_G). For children in an lower class of primary school the ideal school is one where you can “only play”, “only write” and paint, but also study numbers. Playing for a long time outside in the garden was also mentioned. A girl described her ideal school as one where you “always play outside with unicorns and do pretend cooking” (IT_F15_CH_G). However, one student in ISCED 2 highlighted that school shouldn’t be too much fun either: “if we always have a laugh and joke around, I feel it is not good, it’s too much even” (IT_F21_CH_G).

Children also argued that it would be necessary to increase the number of workshops, subjects and activities, tailored towards the labour market, “that the school would address the labour market, to do a little more practice, to prepare you for what it will be used for” (IT_F8_CH_B) and learning in a new relaxing way.

In my opinion another thing they should do in school is to invent a new subject, that is art and music put together so we can relax during art time by listening to music while drawing. [...] You could schedule it on a Friday so that when we are more tired, at least we could do this hour so we can relax. (IT_F27_CH_B)

Several children also suggested meeting more experts from certain sporting fields, especially related to physical education. This was common among ISCED 2 and 3 children, who expressed the idea that school can offer more opportunities based on children’s interests.



In general, this new school is a school “which understands students’ needs better, which not only focusses on teaching, but also on spending time together [...] teachers and students should help each other more and talk”. (IT_F10_CH_G)

Some children claimed there should be more lessons but also narratives and experiences told by experts with other native languages: “T1: he [the student who has just spoken] would like some subjects in a foreign language, as happens already in high schools” (IT_F8_CH_B); “doing more workshops and also meeting new people to tell us their stories would be very nice” (IT_F29_CH_G). Moreover, more time should be devoted to personal narratives and feelings “and then have half an hour to talk about feelings, about how you feel” (IT_F28_CH_G)

Every day we would change professors in order to get to know more people and to become more adaptable. This is something that makes you better anyway, and maybe every now and we could then have foreigners come and tell their stories or something like that. (IT_F29_CH_G)

The third factor is an approach that increases students’ personal autonomy and responsibility, more like the university model, allowing more freedom of choice regarding attendance, and following only a few subjects at a time as well as having less homework in order to have more free time.

As I think they have done in Sweden, they dedicate a day to a subject, for example they dedicate a single day to mathematics [...] even the homework maybe done with a teacher [...] this study has shown that family conflicts have been greatly reduced and in school because the children were more relaxed, they had more free time, and above all they did better in school. (IT_F8_CH_B)

I found out that in college you study and then at the end you have to submit what you studied, and they give you a grade. And just so you don’t have to have the anxiety of handing in the homework, but you have to study and then just through oral or written tests they question you on certain things that you studied. (IT_F29_CH_B).

Interestingly, a student proposed a reduction in student autonomy, with the adoption of guards or surveillance cameras to increase children’s participation:

M1: Some guards watching who goes out and who comes in, or surveillance cameras, at least to watch over pupils

Int: Would you participate more if you were being watched?

M1: Maybe. (IT_F29_CH_B)

Connected to this, less pressure regarding assessments was also suggested, something highlighted especially by ISCED2 and ISCED3 students.

No tests, no homework. (IT_F6_CH_B)

Less stress regarding tests and homework [...] maybe a bit of evaluation but not an excessive amount (IT_F6_CH_B) less stress, because it happens that on some days we have a lot of tests in one day and that is a bit tiring. Evaluations, yes, but moderate ones, not so that you might have three tests in one day. (IT_F6_CH_G)

For me the ideal school would be one hour, without questions, only explanations. (IT_F7_CH_B)

Not having tests and maybe watching more videos on YouTube or even seeing more movies, and never scoring less than a six in tests. (IT_F7_CH_B).

The fourth factor is improvement of school spaces and school architecture, such as bigger, safer, more colourful, original schools, with lockers to leave books in, newer gyms, a bigger library and a bigger computer room, as well as blackboards with squares in the classrooms.



Child-Up

M1: Like decorating more the classrooms because they are all white and grey.

Int: But to do it yourselves or to have someone do it for you?

M1: No even us I mean it would be nice. (IT_F23_CH_B)

I would like it to be like American schools, separate desks, [...] soccer field, basketball court, swimming pool, large gym, lockers, [...] also the design. I would fix the gymnasium a bit by exchanging old for new equipment, and by fixing the roof and the floor, because it always floods when it rains. In the space in front where there is a car park, I would enlarge the space for the children and that small square of land is where I would plant some plants, and I would not have the car park or, if I had to put it somewhere, I would put it in a place a bit further away from the place where the children play. (IT_F33_CH_B)

Children also suggested changes in school organization, i.e., the kind of school subjects and the number of hours dedicate to each subject, (less Italian literature and more physical education such as swimming lessons). Children also described their desired changes in terms of school hours, i.e., starting later and in short fewer hours and days, a longer breaktime, more use of outdoor spaces and trips.

School shouldn't start so early in the morning so you don't have to wake up super early, but just be a little bit later and finish in the afternoon. (IT_F22_CH_G)

To have a longer breaktime so as not to accumulate all this stress. (IT_F7_CH_B)

Having trips that is a more relaxing and more interesting way to learn because, for example, when you are in class you have to stay focused and sit still. (IT_F29_CH_G)

It would be nice if there were more practical lessons, not only in science but also in other things such as, even in other subjects, and going on more trips, always educational ones, but going on more trips. (IT_F22_CH_G)

Remove a few hours of Italian, but maybe add an hour of physical education with a specific coach or a month with a volleyball coach, another with soccer, another with basketball. [...] the lessons must be both educational and involve teaching but should also be light. Then, after that, maybe a few classes could be done outside when spring comes. Like, once a week, maths and Italian could all be done with music playing, and art could involve making drawings outside of the things we observe. (IT_F22_CH_B)

It was felt that this would also help them in their learning activities: "I would like to do the classes outdoors because I think you can relax more, and you can understand things better". (IT_F29_CH_G)

Then I would like to have lessons outdoors, for example even when we do science [...] if for example we go to the courtyard if there were plants in the courtyard, we could take them and I don't know, analyse them [...] my ideal school would be outdoors. (IT_F31_CH_B)

The fifth factor is better relationships: "that people do not judge others and that they are kind" (IT_F18_CH_G). Several ISCED2 students spoke of the absence of dialogue between students and teachers.

I believe that in the end an ideal school is one in which there is also dialogue between the teachers and students so that if there are problems one can talk without fear, because there shouldn't be a barrier. It should be possible in these three years to have respect for the teachers but to still have a dialogue. (IT_F21_CH_B)

Real school

Some respondents claimed that they like their school, mostly because they get along well with their classmates and teachers: "I genuinely like my school a lot and I got on very well with my classmates and teachers" (IT_F9_CH_G). ISCED2 children (in three schools) also said that they like the subjects, how subjects are taught, and the communal spaces in school.



Child-Up

I like the building, I get along well with all the teachers, some more and some less, but I always get along very well, and I like the subjects, I don't have any problems with any subject, (?) and I get on well with my classmates. (IT_F2_CH_G)

M1: It's nice, also with the teachers, I'm happy, [...] yes, I enjoy the education.

Int: So the subjects are taught well.

M1: Yes.

Int: Do you get on well with your classmates?

M1: Yes. (IT_F23_CH_B)

Children find some subjects interesting because of personal tastes or experiences.

I like science, mathematics, but not that much, and art, too, not that much, because I love to draw, but then I hate painting, and I love to do things like having breaktime and gym. (IT_F33_CH_G)

At school I usually like breaktime, I also like science as a subject because I really like to discover new things about how the universe works, then for the rest, I also quite like when we go to the canteen because I can talk with my friends. (IT_F33_CH_B)

My favourite subjects are science and religion. Science because I'm interested in it and religion because, since my mom is a catechist, she talks to me about everything because she has to teach it, so while she studies it, I listen to it too and I'm interested in it, and what I also like to do is breaktime and reading. (IT_F33_CH_G)

Children especially appreciate all the school activities that enable personal expression.

I enjoy writing essays so much, when you present something personal [...] yes I like more the personal things, when one can express oneself. (IT_F29_CH_B)

The activities that I like most in school are the art activities when we make free drawings, or a drawing about how we experienced a certain situation, because they are drawings in which we can really express ourselves. (IT_F29_CH_G)

ISCED0 children appreciate activities that allow personal expression, socialization and creativity, like drawing, playing with friends, making buildings with blocks and singing.

M1: I like to paint and draw.

Int: Do you G also like to draw and paint?

F1: Yes.

M2: I like to paint.

T1: J likes to paint too.

M1: I like to sing. (IT_F16_CH_GB)

Children also enjoy the opportunity of being physical, like going into the garden or playing in the gym.

Int: When you are in kindergarten, is there a place you like best? [...]

M: Going outside into the garden. (IT_F16_CH_B)

M2: I like to play gym.

M3: I also like to play gym.

F1: I also like to play gym, being a ballet dancer. (IT_F16_CH_GB)

Other children stressed that they like everything about school.

M1: I like going to school.



T1: You like everything about school.

F1: Me too.

M1: Yes. (IT_F16_CH_GB)

Several children greatly appreciated activities that are creative, such as creating short movies, things that are new and different from the educational routine, such as swapping books g, when teachers give students the opportunity and time to explore topics they are interested in. One child in Genova expressed how much he appreciated the school library since it is not very common to have such a good library in primary schools: “I like everything about the school but the thing I really like the most is the library because not all schools have a library” (IT_F31_CH_B). Group collaboration was also considered interesting and helpful by most interviewees.

I think one of the coolest activities we’ve done was the short movie, when we made the short movie and we won too. For me personally it was a lot of fun to do that because we would meet in the afternoon and maybe someone would give up something to be with the whole class to make up new stories or shoot parts. So, for me personally it was also very nice to experience the feeling of winning. (IT_F21_CH_G)

Group collaboration was considered to be important, both because it reinforces relationships among peers, and because it permits students to help each other, limiting the pressure of performance at the level of the individual.

My favourite activities involved working in groups because it helps you approach your classmates, to make friends, maybe we fought with a classmate and the teachers would then try and put us with this classmate to strengthen the relationship. Also, because with group work when you find something difficult you can ask your classmates for help or even the teacher supervising us. (IT_F21_CH_B)

In general, children really enjoy those activities that allow them to socialize with each other, such as eating in the canteen, taking part in extracurricular workshops and going on school trips. Several children said that their favourite moment at school is the breaktime, during which they can chat and get to know each other better. One girl in a primary school mentioned the interaction she had with her classmates in the first year as being a very positive memory.

For me the best thing, as my companion has already said, is breaktime, when I was in the first class and I didn’t know anyone yet, it was talking with the others to get to know each other better. (IT_F31_CH_G)

Also relating to changes caused by the pandemic, children talked of the importance of class trips because they allow them to learn in a fun and interactive way, “I like the educational trips so much, I wish there were more [...] not because it is a way to skip school, but a way to learn more” (IT_F29_CH_B).

School trips have always been a way of comparing what we have done in class and, in addition to being a way of comparing with school subjects, it is also a method of making comparisons between us students. And, in fact, this year I think there should have been a trip that was supposed to be the best but it couldn’t happen, but I believe that trips are the best way to compare things (IT_F21_CH_G).

I don’t feel very good at school [...] it’s not so much the lessons, it’s the fact that I feel trapped inside the structure of it, that is, I don’t feel very free to learn inside the various structures, whether they are beautiful or not, I like to learn outdoors and I love trips for this reason. I like to learn by visiting places, but from what I can see, even without the Covid factor, there aren’t many trips [...] if I have to learn the history of the Romans, why don’t you take me to Rome? I think I learn more if I can see the actual places than if I see things in a book. (IT_F5_CH_B)



Many children also identified several negative aspects of their school, however. First, “real school” is frequently described as being boring and repetitive, particularly for some subjects.

F1: The lessons are almost always the same in the sense that the way of doing them never changes, I don't know how to explain it.

F2: The method.

F1: The method, yes, and then you get bored using the same method, I think that if a better way of teaching or different methods were found it would be more interesting. (IT_F22_CH_G)

Some children suggested, and wished, that their teachers would make more effort to help them appreciate subjects: “there are some subjects that are quite boring for many of us and so maybe it would be good if those teachers found a way of helping us like it” (IT_F22_CH_G). This strategy would require more games, interactive activities, more use of the interactive whiteboard, and a greater level of involvement from the teacher.

Often the lessons are boring for us because we already don't like the subject. And then, if the teachers just follow the book, we get even more bored. If they said it in their own words instead it would be easier for us to understand. (IT_F22_CH_G)

Second, “real school” is considered by some children as being too theoretical, whereas, as emerged during conversations about the “ideal school”, they would prefer experimenting with knowledge on a more practical level: “I agree with [a classmate who suggested more practice], in our school we do more theory than practical hours” (IT_F22_CH_G).

Mainly ISCED1 and ISCED2 students criticized the spaces both inside and outside the school, pointing out the lack of a garden and therefore the lack of opportunity to access outdoor spaces during the breaktime, as well as pointing out the degradation or poor maintenance of outdoor spaces.

In front, where there is just the slide and the parking lots, there is an area that is always muddy, and that area of land, in my opinion, should also be changed because it is land that, with water, becomes pure mud, mud, mud. (IT_F33_CH_G)

The other areas mentioned were indoor spaces such as classrooms, the entrance of the school, gym, bathrooms and canteen, that are often considered hard to use or unsafe: “maybe just from the point of view of space, maybe a little bigger classrooms because we are a little cramped” (IT_F23_CH_B), “the bathrooms are really disgusting, then the walls, they are all full of cracks and there is a risk of them collapsing” (IT_F23_CH_B).

I don't like the canteen because there's too much noise and sometimes it's a bit dirty [...] then another thing I don't like is the locker rooms and maybe the layout of the gym because it's close to the cafeteria and maybe when you come out of the canteen, and someone is doing gymnastics, you smell the sweat a bit. (IT_F33_G)

In an ISCED2 FG, a child mentioned teachers' preferences about students as a negative element: “the negative things are teacher preferences, although not all teachers have preferences” (IT_F23_CH_B). Finally, ISCED3 children and unaccompanied migrant minors pointed out problems in terms of timetables and organization, such as turning off the WIFI at a certain time, and the reduced number of activities available due to the pandemic: “organization could be improved a bit, maybe even the structure of school hours, to be honest some things are a bit inconvenient so the organization could be improved” (IT_F2_CH_G).

The main activities about which children expressed dissatisfaction are homework and the anxiety connected to it.

I can't say that the activities I like the most are written tests, but they are doing some homework about our opinions about personal things [...] because you don't always have to



be anxious about homework, but you have to study, understand, and then at the end you have to see if you really have understood. (IT_F29_CH_G)

Another aspect bothering students and creating anxiety is the lack of freedom to express their needs to teachers.

One thing that I would happily change at school is the ability of students to always be free to disagree with teachers and that they are not afraid to tell them perhaps, “I don’t agree with the amount of homework you give us or when you give us a test” or anything else, because in my opinion students feel intimidated in doing this and this is not right [...] in my opinion every now and then someone has avoided saying what he/she thought for fear of punishment. (IT_F11_CH_G)

Waking up early is an aspect of “real school” that is widely considered to be especially stressful. This will also be highlighted below, when considering the effects of online learning during the pandemic.

Finally, specific school subjects cause anxiety and frustration.

I don’t like geography and geometry at all because I can’t understand them. (IT_F33_CH_B)

In terms of subjects, I didn’t like geometry very much especially because you have to remember everything, I’m not very good at it, and then, more or less, gymnastics, because I’m terrible at it. (IT_F33_CH_B)

After 30 minutes of explanation, you don’t understand anything anymore. (IT_F9_CH_B)

F1: Our maths teacher is very good, she explains things very well, only we struggle.

F2: We can’t understand her [...]

F1: If you can’t understand one thing then you go on to another thing and then you add things and you end up not understanding anything anymore. (IT_F9_CH_G)

Lessons are too long, an explanation of more than an hour kills me, and I can’t follow anymore. (IT_F5_CH_B)

Affective aspects and relationships within schools

Particularly respondents in the lower school grades claimed that support for those with problems in the classroom is widespread: “there is always someone to help if someone needs it” (IT_F33_CH_G), “I help when a person can’t draw a dancer as I can draw a dancer [...] and I also help them write words if they can’t write” (IT_F15_CH_G).

Overall children spoke of having good experiences with helping each other and that school taught them to work on relationships.

We have had many arguments about certain topics, but we have also always helped each other for lots and lots of tasks such as when some people were not able to enter a site because you have to log in with a password to gain access to the tasks or something else, like Calendar, where we tried to help them gain access. (IT_F22_CH_G)

Help is primarily based on the personal bond that children have built over time, one that will last for several years.

In our class most of us have already known each other since kindergarten, so we were already very close, and since we will be together for two more years, I already feel that we have a bond and that we can help each other. (IT_F29_CH_G)

Asking for, and providing, help is related both to school and personal problems and can be given individually or collectively, sometimes with teachers’ support.



Maybe when someone has finished doing what the teachers set us in class, then we ask if we can help others to finish it. (IT_F33_CH_G)

I, for example, have A.'s number and both of us often can't understand things so we call each other and try to get them done. (IT_F33_CH_B)

There is a girl in our class who is not present today who has (?) and when she is not well there are some girls in the class, including myself, who take her to another classroom and we stay with her to give her comfort. We help her get through this difficult time also with the help of other teachers. (IT_F8_CH_G)

In contrast, older students point to divisions in the classroom due to the existence of separate groups of friends.

In our class there are many small groups, that is, the class is divided into many small groups, I am not saying that some groups do not help others, but there are some groups that close themselves off and do not want to be helped, and then maybe they complain. If no one opens up, they cannot expect others to open up to them. (IT_F2_CH_G)

Some children also claimed that helping classmates is only done for the benefit of the helpers: "there is little cooperation [...] they help only when they need it" (IT_F1_CH_G). Some children with a migrant background not only observed being helped, but sometimes also being judged by their peers.

M1: If someone makes a mistake, they all insult him or make fun of him.

T1: There are some moments in which you have helped each other but lots of them think that if they make fun of him they'll make the others laugh.

M1: But maybe they do it just to joke. But it also depends on the person because someone could understand the situation. (IT_F8_CH_B)

In one ISCED2 FG, one student with a migration background (M2) said he was unhappy with the relationships with his classmates. He explicitly said that he often does not receive any help from them and that if he needs something, he goes straight to teachers to ask for help. During this event, the teacher intervened to bring the other pupils into the discussion. During this discussion, it became clear that the child had previously felt isolated and one of his classmates admitted that no one had helped him at the beginning. However, this classmate said that they had recently started being more considerate about his wellbeing. One girl highlighted how, not only had they helped M2, but he had also helped them on several occasions.

Let's say that we are a class that doesn't fight very much [...] but we always suggest helping people when needed. For example, also with M2, we helped him, but M2 helped us too [...] for me this is nice because we all need each other, we can't do everything alone. (IT_F22_CH_G)

In another ISCED3 FG, a student spoke of a there being a lack of equality among classmates, since some feel superior to others. He added that a change is needed: "someone may feel superior to someone else. In my opinion this should be eliminated let's say" (IT_F4_CH_B).

According to several children, participation depends primarily on their own will and/or interest.

Because maybe they are more willing to learn and to follow [...] maybe I would like to participate more but the idea of my brain being fixed on one thing the whole time bothers me. (IT_F29_CH_G)

It varies because everyone responds more frequently when there are certain subjects.

Int: ah, I understand, so you are quite divided because you have preferences and you succeed [to participate more] in those [subjects].

F: Yes. (IT_F33_CH_G)



However, children with migrant backgrounds spoke of the fear of making mistakes and of being judged by their peers and teachers therefore also influencing their participation.

Some classmates participate more either because they are less shy, or simply because maybe by being less shy they are not ashamed to make mistakes and maybe instead other people are ashamed to make mistakes and so they think that if they make mistakes other people will target them so those who are less shy have their say. (IT_F29_CH_G)

That is, I would like to participate more, but I am afraid of making mistakes, and I'm also afraid (?) in front of other people, also because I am another colour and so I am afraid that someone might start targeting me. (IT_F29_CH_G)

Some students confirmed that non-Italian children are less active because they fear being wrong more than the other students.

In my opinion, let's say foreign people, participate (less) or someone who has greater difficulties in a subject avoids asking questions. For example, maybe when someone hasn't understood something he remains silent and then afterwards when he has to do homework, he can't do anything [...] almost everybody speaks quite good Italian. But I've noticed that some foreigners, especially when they first arrive, greet the teacher and then don't say anything during the lesson [...] they are either ashamed or afraid of making mistakes. (IT_F21_CH_B)

Some students claimed that it was not possible for everyone to participate in school. For example, those who fear most to be judged are usually less participative: "In my opinion, there are some children who do not participate because either, as my partner said, they feel insecure or ashamed" (IT_F31_CH_G). For other students this depends on the subjects and topics, for others it depends on individuals: I can listen more than I can speak [...] because I'm shy and I'm afraid that I might make a mistake" (IT_F31_CH_G).

Conflict at school

Disagreements seem to be quite frequent, especially for ISCED1 children. In ISCED0 FGs, arguments were considered to be negative.

Int: What is it that you don't like at school?

F1: I [don't like it] when someone disagrees with me [...]

M1: When someone makes me angry. (IT_F13_CH_GB)

In other ISCED FGs, some said that conflicts are positive and normal even within good relationships: "I mean, I often quarrel with A, even now, and we have known each other since the first grade, but we are friends, that is [...] quarrels are normal between friends" (IT_F9_CH_G). Moreover, conflicts provide good opportunities to get to know classmates better and consolidate relationships with them: "in these three years there have been so many negative things, but at the same time fun things, it's something that has also helped us to make our relationships closer" (IT_F21_CH_G).

Other students think that getting to know each other decreases the number of arguments that occur because you know how to deal with others.

In the first grade we were always fighting because we didn't know each other" (IT_F2_CH_G).

If we know each other, we know what others don't like and what we don't like, for example, I don't like to be criticized. If you get along with someone it is much easier to tell him what you think. (IT_F9_CH_B)

Conflict management can be based on avoidance strategies, which also stem from the knowledge of others.



I think that everyone has to deal with these things, in fact, I have a slightly “aggressive” character, I defend my opinions, but there are people more stubborn than me so then I let it go and I avoid being this way. (IT_F29_CH_G)

On the other hand, we have conflict management strategies that consist of the use of irony “sometimes I make people laugh after I have a fight and then I ask if we can play together, and we can make up and she laughs and then she says yes” (IT_F30_CH_G).

When C and I were not friends, we had a fight, when we were fighting, first we didn’t talk to each other, then I would go to C and C would talk to her friends and she would make me laugh, so I said C let’s make up and she said yes, so we played together all day. (IT_F30_CH_G)

The use of dialogue or asking teachers’ help are recurrent themes when children are not able to fix a situation by themselves.

If it becomes too much of a problem, we can ask the teacher or our parents, otherwise we can do it ourselves. (IT_F31_CH_B)

I often joke about it, but when it is a quarrel about something serious then I either tell the teachers about it, because I don’t want to make trouble, or I talk about it normally, but if it’s a quarrel, for example, when we play cards and someone cheats, then I joke about it. (IT_F33_CH_G)

M1: When I quarrel with D, as D said, we come to you (i.e., the teacher) and then you tell us that quarrelling is good.

M2: It’s good.

M1: It’s good, yes, but we must quarrel without insulting each other. (IT_F28_CH_B)

Interestingly, irony is used by children only in low-intensity conflicts, while it is likely to cause problems when used by teachers in high-intensity conflicts.

M1: We used to usually talk to the teacher too, we used to talk to you about fights, and I remember a particular fight when D and I had an argument because D said that I was trampling on M’s books and then you were joking, that is, you were making us laugh, and I said “I don’t want to joke when I am talking about these things” and you were very angry.

T1: Me?

M1: Yes, because I made you angry, I was mortified because you wanted a written apology. [...] We consult with the teacher, we talk to her, we try to understand the situation, we try to make up, I often didn’t make up but sometimes I did. (IT_F28_CH_B)

In situations of conflict, teachers are considered an important reference point if they do their best to find the time, outside school hours, to give space to dialogue on topics related to interpersonal relationships. This is especially a widespread opinion among ISCED2 children: “compared to other professor who think more maybe about the theory of a subject, she also has the time to confront for these things and let’s say that’s a huge help” (IT_F11_CH_G).

A minority of students however, also referred to conflicts which involve students and teachers.

In my class, there weren’t that many arguments between students but, more than anything else, there were often arguments between the student and the teacher [...] in these instances classmates were a bit worried about getting in the middle of the argument because it was with a teacher, so they are a bit more afraid of arguments between students and a teacher [...] the teacher talked about it alone with the student and in the end it was resolved. (IT_F10_CH_G)



Social trust

When challenging situations arise, most children felt able to seek support or help from people they trust, such as classmates, class representative, or teachers.

I personally like to speak about it, or I talk about it with my teachers or with my classmates. (IT_F8_CH_B)

I don't talk about it with anyone, but perhaps we make the corrections and the teachers advise us what to study more and what to study less. (IT_F23_CH_B)

Friends are also frequently mentioned as providing support during challenging situations: "I also trust a friend of mine, who doesn't live here in G but in V, so when I have problems I call her and tell her about it" (IT_F33_CH_G) "with my best friend" (IT_F2_CH_G).

Parents are also mentioned as providing support.

I talk to my parents if something isn't working for me, if it doesn't seem right to me. (IT_F8_CH_G)

F1: With parents it depends on what kind of relationship you have.

F2: Exactly, mainly with the parents. (IT_F2_CH_G)

I tell my mum or C because I really trust them and I tell them about it. (IT_F33_CH_G)

If there is something I don't like, I talk about it with the teachers, with my classmates, and with my parents. (IT_F8_CH_G)

M: I got a bad grade today, and I'm going to talk to my parents about it.

Int: And they will help you?

M: Yes of course. (IT_F23_CH_B)

Finally, children consider the support siblings and wider family members can provide.

I also often tell my sister because she gives me advice anyway; I mean I get on well with her. (IT_F33_CH_G)

M1: If it's at school - to my friend A. who was my first friend, and outside school to my aunt who is in Tunis.

T1: And so, you talk to her anyway, you can talk to her and tell her despite the distance?

M1: I talk to her every day. (IT_F33_CH_B)

This last example, that of a child with a migrant background, shows that many children differentiate between contexts of problems and the interlocutors they turn to for help. If they know that one parent is particularly skilled in that topic, they ask that parent; otherwise, they ask their teacher(s). Unaccompanied minors claimed that they relied on educators regarding problems concerning the community, whereas if problems concern personal relationships with other they would solve these by themselves. One child, on the other hand, talked about school problems at home and vice versa.

F1: More than my relatives, my friends, also because if there are family problems, I don't talk to them, I talk to my friends.

Int: And if they are school problems?

F1: [...] if they are school problems, I usually talk about them, I don't know, if I'm angry with one of my friends I try to talk to this friend of mine, otherwise with my other friends or with my parents. (IT_F23_CH_G)

We can also observe that parents and teachers, the latter especially among the ISCED0 children, are turned to for important issues, those which might make the child very uncomfortable.



Child-Up

If I have a problem, I try to solve it myself, but if the problem worsens, I ask the teachers for help because they are adults and they know how to solve the situation. (IT_F24_CH_B)

It depends on what problem I have; it is not the case that if I dislike the teacher I go to my mother, it depends on the seriousness of the problem that you have. (IT_F6_CH_G)

It depends, if the quarrel carries on for a long time maybe I talk about it a little bit because if that person starts to become heavy, if he/she insults you, if he/she always goes against you, of course I tell my parents. If not, if they are normal things, just among children, I probably won't. (IT_F33_CH_G)

Some children highlighted their autonomy regarding making choices and taking action in dealing with problematic situations: they say they prefer to resolve difficult situations on their own, either by talking to those involved or by keeping it to themselves. These children feel that peers, parents or teachers are not always able to help them to deal with problematic situations. They also pointed out that they are responsible for these situations and are the main agents of change in such cases.

I would usually tell some of my friends, always them, I am not one who tells so much. (IT_F33_CH_B)

Yes, but if you don't manage to feel better even if they help you, you can sort things out alone, that is, in the sense you help yourself one your own. (IT_F2_CH_G)

If there is something that I don't like, I either go to the people concerned and tell them face to face, or I keep it to myself, because it doesn't make sense to go and talk to other people without asking them to stop. (IT_F8_CH_B)

F1: I think that even if you get a bad grade, you can't make a big deal out of it so you have to do everything yourself, you can't ask others for help.

F2: Exactly, if you get a bad grade, you can't go to the teacher and ask him/her to change the grade, that's the grade you've got now and you have to accept it, so you have to make an effort and make up for it, maybe a friend or a parent can help you study and so on, but you have to do it on your own, so it's not useful to count on parents or friends. Then outside of school, if you have problems they can help you, but at school I don't think there is much point. (IT_F1_CH_G)

Some children, including a child with a migrant background, underlined their concern about not being able to open up to other people, either because they do not dare to do so, or because they are not able to find teachers who are interested in their problems. They recount that although teachers do take care of them, they often do not communicate effectively with them, saying they want to help only in order to make a good impression without actually doing anything.

I don't have the courage to tell anyone, I keep it inside. (IT_F8_CH_B)

Sometimes there is this friend of mine who isn't doing well, and the teacher doesn't help him, and she [the teacher] doesn't care about it. (IT_F8_CH_B)

It depends on who you find because a lot of people say yes, yes, I'll help you, or perhaps even the teachers say yes, I'll give you support, I'm here, and then maybe nothing changes, so it always depends on who you find, maybe you find a teacher who takes action and really helps you, but if you find one who doesn't care and says those things just to make a good impression, it's no good. (IT_F2_CH_G)

M1: You have to find the right ones, those who understand you, that is, they know how to speak to you, they are good.

F1: Exactly, maybe we have something, I don't know, that's wrong.

M1: They are interested.



F1: Exactly, and so we can talk to them easily and they won't take it out on us afterwards.
(IT_F6_CH_GB)

The role of parents

The role of parents relates to trust and personal autonomy. As we have seen on page 14 many children rely on parents and other family members who can help and give advice when there are serious problems and they cannot cope them alone. However, other children, mainly in ISCED2 and ICSED3 FGs, pointed out that parental support is sometimes ineffective, unnecessary, or even counterproductive.

Int: Are parents able to help you if you have a problem at school, if you talk to them about it?

F1: Yes.

F2: But no!

F3: But it depends (??)

F2: But they don't care! (IT_F6_CH_G)

For most children, challenges are personal matters that concern only them, and their choices as well as knowing how to manage these situations, is something they must learn by themselves.

I almost never do, because if I get into heated arguments, I don't tell my parents because I think it must be a personal thing that one has with the person, if they give me advice not to stay with this person, which I think is wrong, you have to decide. I can fight even with a close friend. (IT_F33_CH_B)

I almost never find myself in this situation because I always try to do it by myself, and I almost always succeed, because I want to learn to cope (?) so that I know how to manage situations. (IT_F33_CH_G)

I never tell my parents when I quarrel because I'm afraid that they might take action, maybe by calling the parents of these people, or maybe these people start making fun of me even more, or to make the situation worse so I prefer to fix things by myself instead of asking someone for help. (IT_F29_CH_G)

Peer relationships

Classroom friendships are highly differentiated. Those in male-only classes and the group of unaccompanied minors complained about a lack of females, and female-only classes claimed to have more arguments than either male-only or mixed classes.

In one ISCED0 FG, the idea of not having a friend to play or hold hands with was viewed as a sad situation: "[I don't like it] when no one plays with me" (IT_F13_CH_G) and "I don't agree when no one holds hands with me" (IT_F13_CH_G).

Some children claimed that they are friends with all their classmates, although that trust is greater with some of them: "I have friends in the whole class, the whole class is my friend, but there are people I trust more, they give me this sense that when I am in trouble they will always be there to help me" (IT_F29_CH_G). Other children claimed that many classmates are only superficial acquaintances with only a few being true friends with whom they can open up:

Int: Do you feel you have many friends in the class?

M1: 50/50.

F1: It depends in what sense you mean "friends" because maybe you mean friends in a certain way or you mean people I get along with that I can just have a conversation with.
(IT_F6_CH_GB)



Other children believe that there are mainly very closed groups in their class, from which, as we have seen in page 10, there is a tendency to be excluded and they find it hard to ask for help.

According to other children, groups can be divided by gender, although personal preferences, interests and knowledge can mitigate this division.

F1: There are two groups, males and females [...]

F1: Actually, if you look at me, I'm great with the males.

T1: She said she prefers to stay with the boys, she feels better being with a group of the boys, but compared to the sixth grade two years ago, their way of being together in the class has changed a lot and there are no more groups as clearly divided as there were in previous years. (IT_F9_CH_G)

M1: I believe it is not that there are groups, but males obviously prefer to be with other males because perhaps they talk about subjects that the females don't care about, but maybe if a female comes to speak with the males she is often singled out. (laughter)

T1: Because she is a tomboy yes (noise)

F1: Yes, it's true.

M1: It's not that we reject her but (?) people prefer to be with those who have the same interests and who like to talk about the same things, which are often different between males and females. (IT_F9_CH_GB)

Interests and getting to know each other also mitigate group divisions, although during the breaktime, when there is often little time, people prefer to talk about their interests in small groups.

Having only those ten minutes in which you can speak, maybe you use those ten minutes to talk to someone to whom you have to say something that you can't during the lesson (IT_F9_CH_G)

In many classes there are children who are considered to be popular because many like or admire them: "T1: for most of the girls, S if I understand correctly" (IT_F9_CH_B). In some cases, it was pointed out no one is liked by everyone: "In my opinion there is no one who is liked by everyone," (IT_F6_CH_G). Popularity is not always considered positive because sometimes it also can be gained for negative aspects.

There is a difference between being popular and being the soul of the party (?) (you are flashier) in that case not always being popular is a positive thing. (IT_F9_CH_G)

I think popularity also comes from negative things, for example most popular people are not popular for positive things, that is, most people are not known for positive things, so in my opinion if you have to be known for bad things you might as well not be known. (IT_F9_CH_G)

The activities that respondents like doing with their peers are mainly talking and thinking about things together, expressing their ideas, engaging with each other, collaborating and interacting with their peers.

F1: Communicate.

F2: Talk.

F3: I personally like to do this activity where we all talk and nobody (?)

F4: This [activity].

F5: This [activity]. (IT_F3_CH_G)

F1: It's fun not only when we go out, but also when we are in class because we are able to express our own ideas, we try to confront each other.

M1: To interact.



F1: That's right to interact and do something together [...] both outside and inside school, not only during breaktime because even during lessons we try to talk to each other to do something together not only among ourselves but also with the teachers, or when we do activities outside in the school courtyard we try to collaborate when we do group work. (IT_F23_CH_GB)

In some classes children also see each other outside school, sometimes altogether but more often in small groups to play together, "it is not only males who go out but also females, or all together, everyone together is almost impossible, but most of them still manage to see each other or just go out together". (IT_F23_CH_G)

M1: As a class we are very close, I mean we all go out [...] yes, yes also outside school, it happened for a school project that we went out, also with the teachers.

Int: But beyond the school project, what do you do together in the afternoon or when you see each other?

M1: We don't go out all together, but sometimes we go and play football.

Int: But only among boys?

M1: Sometimes also between females, also with females. (IT_F23_CH_B)

Some children in other classes only see each other outside school and others only with one or two classmates, "with one or two people at the most". (IT_F6_CH_G)

Int: Do you ever see each other to go out together outside the school?

F1: No.

M1: Yes, I do go out with someone.

Int: But not with others? Do you only see each other in class?

F1: Yes, but if I see them somewhere, I go to them and exchange a few. (IT_F6_CH_GB)

Regarding decision-making, respondents often differentiated between undertaking instructional activities given by teachers and activities undertaken when they are alone, such as during breaktime. In the case of the former, most children reported that decisions are only taken by teachers while others said that it depends on the topic: "in some situations that concern us or some projects we can decide, in other situations maybe not, because they are matters concerning the teachers" (IT_F32_CH_G). Some children claimed that they should be more involved in decision-making: "these are things that concern us too, so we should decide too" (IT_F32_CH_G). However, some also reported exercising their agency by trusting teachers, coming to them with problems or deciding on the arrangement of desks. Interestingly, most of these students' actions are accompanied or supported by teachers, who grant requests or promote children's choices.

Because often when a teacher says "let's do this topic", I trust her because she makes us do things with a certain level of precision, she makes us do them in the right order and maybe even at the right level of difficulty so I think it's better to listen to what the teacher decides to do" (IT_F1_CH_G).

During this last period, especially because we are very close the exams, and there may be lots of tests and tasks, then we try and talk about it with one of the teachers and they take our proposals into consideration. (IT_F23_CH_G)

M1: For example, we chose the arrangement of the desks, that is, we made the arrangement by trying to satisfy everyone and we succeeded.

Int: But from whom did the idea come?

M1: From the teacher, from the coordinator.

Int: And are you satisfied?

M1: Yes, we were all satisfied, some more, some less, but...



Int: But did you come to a decision purely by yourselves or together with the teachers?

M1: No, just us. (IT_F23_CH_B)

In the second case, children claimed that they exercise agency more systematically. Some said that they all decide together following a discussion. It might be the case that teachers are also involved in these discussions.

Most of the time we try to find something that can suit everyone, or at least almost everyone, then there are those who are satisfied and those who are less satisfied but, yes, that is, we help if there is an opportunity to do so. (IT_F23_CH_G)

Sometimes when we have to make important decisions first, we consult with the class or even the teachers who are there at the time, and usually we all choose together, there is not one person who decides for everyone. (IT_F22_CH_G)

In other FGs, children said that there is a leader who usually corresponds to the “strongest” person in the group. Being “strong” is associated with being able to take decisions for the whole group: “whoever is “strongest” decides” (IT_F22_CH_B).

M1: the one who dominates nearly all the situations in the classroom in my opinion is A (migrant) [...] possibly B (representative).

M2: in my opinion it isn't anyone”. (IT_F6_CH_B)

Other children clarified that leadership is not about imposing decisions, but being able to propose and offer more ideas and solutions: “maybe, as M2 said, there is someone who makes more decisions, but he/she doesn't say “I said this, so now do this”, he/she proposes the idea and then the others either say they agree or we don't agree” (IT_F22_CH_G).

For some children, both collective decisions and leadership may be achieved depending on the choice they need to make: “well, it depends on the situation, I mean there are situations in which decisions are made by groups and perhaps other situations in which there are one or more leaders” (IT_F26_CH_G). Some children also specified that the person in the role of leader changes depending on the topic or situation.

If a classmate gets picked on, an important factor is proximity to the classmate: “it depends on the classmate (IT_F9_CH_G) “if she is my best friend then I'll tell him/her (tell something to the offender), if she is M then no” (IT_F9_CH_G) “if I don't know the person well, I won't tell him/her”. The main strategies used are to stay close to the classmate try to relativize the problem, or to use irony and downplay the problem.

I didn't have time to do anything, but as soon as they were done talking, I went to the person who had been offended and I told her not to worry about it. (IT_F9_CH_G)

When these things happen, I usually tend to go there (?) I try and change the subject or take it as a joke so it doesn't get worse. (IT_F9_CH_B)

I was with a friend of mine, another person he knew arrives, he slaps him on the cheek and then the other person who was my friend tries to defend himself and starts - I didn't know whether it was a joke or not, but he slapped him back when an adult passed by. I don't remember whether it was a parent or not. He sees only my friend and gets angry the with my friend and so I also would get angry but I tried to let it go [...] that is, I told the adult that other boy started the fight, but he had seen my friend and so... (IT_F9_CH_B)

Educational aspirations

School achievements

Differences between an ideal school and the real school concerned elements relating to assessments. For example, some students claimed that there would be less strict, kinder teachers in their ideal school,



especially in ISCED1 and ISCED2 FGs: “the teachers, a little gentler, I mean they don’t have to be so rigid (they could listen to us a bit more and have more moments of dialogue with us)” (IT_F11_CH_B).

When talking about the real school, some ISCED3 students highlighted that fear surrounding evaluation compromises their entire relationship with school: “For example, also from the point of view of the oral tests, one enters the classroom terrified of being interrogated, and so the desire to go to school disappears” (IT_F4_CH_B).

More generally, however, children are divided about assessment. On the one hand, many claimed that grades are useful because they allow children to understand the level of knowledge they have acquired, acting as a reward where, on the one hand, enough effort has been made to acquire the required skills and as an encouragement and, on the other, where more effort is needed to acquire them.

F1: Grades are very important to me, because if I see that they are a bit low for a subject is, I know that I need to work harder in that subject.

M1: In my opinion they are important because they help determine when a person is doing well in some things and in what they need to improve. (IT_F33_CH_GB)

Conversely, several others claimed that the system of grades is a bad one since, due to the way it is standardized, it does not correspond to the complexity of individual competence.

[evaluations] serve to establish the idea of a standard, so obviously the standards are all different and clearly the importance of grades changes from person to person. (IT_F29_CH_G)

In my opinion, grades are not necessary because they do not express what a person can do, someone can get bad grades in school but outside of school he/she can do many things. (IT_F9_CH_B)

I don’t think you should link grades with someone’s intelligence because you can study as much as you want but it’s possible, for example, not be intelligent at school but you can perhaps be so in other areas or it can be the opposite, but maybe you don’t want to study at school. (IT_F6_CH_G)

The system of evaluation is also described as being inadequate because it doesn’t take into account children’s predispositions: “it also bothers me a little that the practical grade also exists because it is a matter of predisposition if you know how to do drawings well no?” (IT_F9_CH_B) “we should look at other things besides the grades” (IT_F5_CH_B). Some children also perceive the risk of those children who have more communication problems being more disadvantaged.

T1: If I understand correctly, she is saying that grades can also be useless in certain contexts when it is not possible to express yourself and you cannot make yourself understood. (IT_F9_CH_G)

Grades are not that important because they don’t represent your knowledge because although you might have understood something, when you are there you might not remember it because you became anxious. It should be enough that you have really understood, the grade doesn’t count for anything maybe for the teachers it is useful to evaluate whether you have understood something but it is not necessarily the case that you deserve that grade. (IT_F29_CH_B)

A number of ISCED2 students in particular said that marks are useless, and that their only effect is to change a student’s mood, either by making them very happy or very sad. Nevertheless, the system of evaluation also raised contrasting opinions among ISCED2 students.

It is important but has no purpose (IT_F22_CH_B).



Commitment should not be evaluated through a grade, I mean [...] it should not be the most important judgment (IT_F22_CH_B).

In my opinion it is useful, it is true that it is not us, but it helps us to understand how much we have studied, if the way we have studied is good. But I don't think it's that useful for the ISCED2 third year exam because ultimately I can leave with a 5 but I know that I've been committed for all the 3 years (IT_F22_CH_G).

Some students mention how this ambivalence has emerged particularly in the last months, since the pandemic has affected the way school is experienced.

Opinions about the system of evaluation were more polarized amongst ISCED3 students: some expressed entirely negative opinions, while others said that it is a good system since you are evaluated for your engagement. According to this last perspective, what is relevant is not the evaluation itself, but the student having the possibility of feeling that he/she has learned something. An interesting discussion was carried out by students in a class in a professional school about their life experiences, what they saw among friends, and what they aspire to.

It's not important to me whether I get a seven or an eight, what matters to me is that I learn things. (IT_F4_CH_B)

You don't need grades to be able to work, grades don't earn you money, what matters is that you know how to work, you know how to use machines, the grade doesn't count, it has nothing to do with it. (IT_F4_CH_B)

You can't evaluate a person with a number, I am not a number. How do you evaluate a person with a number? It's almost like Auschwitz in that you have to remember your number, you have to evaluate a person according to his skills and if a person is not good in that field it is because you have decided that he has to learn that field, if you gave him the opportunity to measure himself in what he considers his field, something in which he considers himself good, everything would change [...] I would give them the opportunity of showing their skills, but not with the lessons I decide, but with what they decide. (IT_F4_CH_B)

Because of the school's professional background, students were particularly focussed on integrating school expectations and labour market requirements in terms of developing manual capabilities, developing an educational pathway and harnessing evaluation acquired within school.

One student also highlighted the differences existing between Italian and non-Italian students regarding evaluation. Differences of evaluation can involve either the language skills of newly arrived children or the possible bias in the evaluation of those with a migrant background in general.

Because M2 is also a foreigner, so he has more difficulty in speaking or understanding certain difficult topics, he is therefore evaluated in a different way, because M2's seven is our nine and F3's seven means you did a good job, but you could have done much better (IT_F22_CH_G).

M1: even if I got a nine I am not that happy because I always think that the teachers have preferences because I am a foreigner, so I always doubt [...]

T1: because he is a foreigner, he always doubts whether the teachers will treat him like the others. So an Italian gets a ten, but because he is a foreigner he gets a 9 even though he may have made some mistake. (IT_F8_CH_B)

In general, children feel extremely judged by both teachers and parents.

The teachers say that they are only grades, but if they were really only grades, they wouldn't give them. (IT_F8_CH_B)

If I try hard and get, like, just a six, it's okay with me, but my parents don't like it. (IT_F8_CH_G)



Grades are very important for my parents. If I get less than an eight they get angry, but for me grades are both important yet not very important, I mean, if I try hard and get a seven it's okay with me. (IT_F8_CH_G)

In my opinion, grades are of no use at all during this last period, especially because if you get a bad grade, in addition to the disappointment, you also have the fact that when you get home, you can hear your mother screaming in an incredible way. (IT_F7_CH_B)

Grades also create distorted expectations in teachers, something also related to trust.

In my opinion it is necessary to give the right weight to the grades because in the world of work we are not evaluated with a four or a five, or even with a ten, but there might be some teachers who see a student always getting good grades and expects him to continue getting good grades, if he gets some insufficient grades he might think that, I don't know, that he is no longer any good, (?) that the student is good and smart and maybe the other who gets fives and fours is not smart. (IT_F9_CH_G)

In my opinion, in general, some professors should believe in us a bit more, not expect much or little, I mean, to believe in us anyway. Perhaps if you answer a question incorrectly, instead of giving us a four or five immediately, they could give us another chance. (IT_F7_CH_G)

Students in several primary schools prefer being evaluated in a more descriptive way rather than numerically, since it allows what was done well and what needs to be improved to be analysed more easily: "numerical grades don't assess how you worked [...] I like more detailed grades, in the sense of how you worked, whether you worked well or badly" (IT_F31_CH_G). Some children also suggested the possibility of spending more time with teachers to overcome problems.

I think it would be better to give grades not as a number, but through the teacher explaining what you did wrong and what you did well [...] for the whole class to have some time with the teacher based on what is statistically considered difficult overall, to have time to improve a certain thing the students get wrong. (IT_F29_CH_B)

Some children, however, expressed a preference for being evaluated numerically. In primary schools, where the grade system has recently been replaced with a more descriptive evaluation system, some children seemed to regret numeric or alphabetic evaluation, while others were satisfied with the new type of evaluation.

I find myself sometimes doing even better because, for example, there is no correspondence between the grades "ten" and "advanced", but I feel that at least "advanced" explains the method behind how you did it, instead if you get an "intermediate" or a "basic", it explains the mistakes you made and the steps you have to do to improve. (IT_F24_CH_B)

In any case, most children claimed that they are satisfied with their evaluations, either because they have made an effort and got good results, or because they have acknowledged that they did not make enough effort and have therefore got poor results.

M: I am very satisfied with my grades, I put effort into the various subjects but especially my favourite ones

Int: Which are?

M: English, mathematics, and art. (IT_F19_CH_B)

Sometimes I feel like doing it and sometimes I don't, when I don't feel like doing it, I do it just to do it, and I receive the grade I deserve so I don't complain either. (IT_F1_CH_B)

However, several children admitted some disappointment at not seeing their efforts being recognized.



Child-Up

F1: I worked very hard on something in a certain subject, and there were people who had maybe worked less but got a better result than me [...] I was disappointed, I didn't expect it

Int: Has this happened to any of you?

F2: Yes, a bit to everyone. (IT_F1_CH_G)

Some children said that they see some differences in grades particularly between boys and girls.

M1: I think some of the teachers are prejudiced, for example some students are (?) and instead others [teachers are] a bit less [prejudiced], I mean, they think that one student doesn't study therefore he doesn't study [...] sometimes also because he/she is male or female.

T1: According to you, do the teachers see females or males as being better?

M1: Sometimes the males.

T1: Sometimes the males? Do they see them as being better?

M1: Yes. (IT_F8_CH_B)

M1: Especially the teachers [...] because sometimes they always think they are right, and a bit of feminism [...] the teacher, if we males talk, they immediately give us a written report [as a punishment], if females do the same they can talk as much as they want and they don't punish them, and if I can say one thing, one of our classmates once threw a pencil eraser out of the classroom, she slapped me and one of my classmates and kicked another someone else, and the teacher didn't say anything to them. M2: she gave her a round of applause M1: yes, exactly, and instead to us males, if we'd also throw a pen, it's all hell is let loose immediately. (IT_F25_CH_B)

Some also speak of the existence of a kind of stigma being attached to certain students: on the one hand, students being judged to be doing or performing well and, on the other, those being judged to be doing less well. According to some, these are labels that also tend to affect future evaluations: "I feel more favouritism is shown towards those who do better in school, because the other day I said everything and I got one lower grade than the best student in the class but he did not say anything" (IT_F25_CH_B)

I once copied a test from a classmate of mine, it was the same, she did the test, she made a screen shot and sent it to me, I got seven and a half and she got eight [...] maybe because I get mixed up and she doesn't. (IT_F6_CH_B)

Some children also mentioned that evaluations are affected by teachers who feel sympathy towards certain children and that it can affect evaluations, meaning that certain children whose teachers have high expectations of them in school, in turn lead to positive outcomes for those children (the so-called Pygmalion effect).

Like last year, there was a teacher who didn't like some of us but did like others. (IT_F6_CH_B)

In my opinion, teachers have preferences, they have a lot of preferences due to behaviour, I mean everyone is different, but there are certain teachers who prefer a certain person to another. (IT_F6_CH_G)

Education and professional plans

According to children, the primary purpose of school is to provide opportunities for their future, particularly job opportunities.

By learning in school you can surely get a better job than a part time job at McDonald's? (IT_F19_CH_B)



F1: in the end, if we must be realistic, I mean, without school, you won't find a job that pays well, you go to school and then you create your own future, what you want to do when you grow up.

M1: It's to give you a base. (IT_F6_CH_G)

The second most often cited purpose of school by children is that of enabling them to make friends, learning how to relate to people they do not know, including adults, learning respect, education, and how to be part of society.

M1: Also, to learn how to be part of society.

F1: [...] to learn how to relate to people, perhaps people you don't know. (IT_F9_CH_GB)

Firstly to learn, then to have a good job in life, to socialize, and live independently of one's parents, to know how to behave and face the world and maybe, if you are facing danger in life, never to give up. (IT_F25_CH_G)

In my opinion, school is not only to learn subjects such as mathematics, Italian and all that, it's also to educate, to teach respect, and to find a future place in the world and a well-paid job. (IT_F19_CH_G)

The third purpose is seen to be gaining the ability to think independently.

To arrive at an independence in the sense that, through school, you can have your own views, you know how to express yourself in a convincing way, you know how to articulate your thoughts. (IT_F8_CH_B)

To learn in order to make new friends, and to develop your own opinions because if you are aware of what you know, you can develop your own opinion. (IT_F9_CH_G)

The school is an important base because it matures us and helps us to become adults, it teaches us many things that maybe we did not know. (IT_F8_CH_B)

Several children, however, underlined a certain mistrust about the usefulness of certain subjects.

M1: According to me, some subjects at school are useless, for example, music and history and history of art, epics.

F1: Because if you have to work when you grow up, what good is music for working?

M1: To answer my mates there is a job that is called being a musician. (IT_F25_CH_GB)

In my opinion school is important because it teaches us how to live, it teaches us many useful things, but then some things are not useful, for example, I don't know, knowing how a plant cell is made, for a person who doesn't want to practise medicine, what's the use? [...] for example, studying Greek and Latin, what's the use to me? They are dead languages that nobody speaks. (IT_F8_CH_G)

Some children also believe that school is not necessary for finding employment, to guarantee an income, or to solve daily problems in the short term: "school is important, for example, to learn how to write, speak and read, but in my opinion in life you can find a job without school" (IT_F8_CH_B).

School is important for learning the basics but going forward school doesn't help you to save money, to take out a mortgage, to be able to pay the rent (?) it doesn't help you to open a bank account, it's important only up to a certain point. But it is always thanks to the school that you can find a job, for example, I want to do medicine. (IT_F8_CH_B)

Some children suggested variation in terms of curriculum, one developed according to interests and what the children want to do in the future.



Child-Up

M1: Maybe if the school changed from the sixth grade onwards, you would say what you want to do when you grow up, and the things that don't fit become useless, maybe if you want to be a doctor you can study medicine a little bit.

T1: According to you, you have to choose before the eighth grade.

M1: Eh

T1: Already in the sixth grade you have to make choices. (IT_F8_CH_B)

Gender

Various views exist regarding the issue of gender and respondents took two different and opposite positions. For some children, gender affects individual approaches to school and relationships, determining predisposition to certain subjects. According to this view, boys and girls differ in terms of commitment, inclinations, preferences, and physique.

In my opinion no one is more gifted than anyone else, but preferences do exist, perhaps males like to do one type of work more than another, and the same goes for females. (IT_F23_CH_B)

M1: In my opinion males are better at doing manual things.

Some students: No.

F1: Yes, and we are better at studying. (IT_F3_CH_B)

In subjects like art, females are better. (IT_F9_CH_B)

In different subjects it depends on who is studying, but in physical education males maybe have a bit more of an advantage. (IT_F25_CH_B)

Some boys said that girls are better at art and physical education, while boys were considered to be better at mathematics. The idea is that one can be predisposed to some fields more positively than to others according to gender.

Males can be especially good at science, because I have often seen more male scientists, there are few females [...] He was talking about physical education, it depends, because in dance they [females] are a bit more flexible, but in soccer they wouldn't even know how to catch a ball [...] they should also be more self-confident and have the courage to speak during the oral tests because some of them are good. They have to find the confidence because, in my opinion, they know things, but they are afraid of saying them and of making mistakes. (IT_F7_CH_B)

In general, boys were described as being lazier, of joking around more, while girls are braver and more inclined to help classmates.

Yes, we males are lazier [...] females are less lazy than we are. (IT_F22_CH_B)

Perhaps there are no differences between boys and girls, but maybe when there is a need to help someone, girls are more likely to be the ones to help others because they are braver. (IT_F22_CH_G)

Interestingly, whenever a position of rigid difference between boys and girls was advocated in FGs, it was often mitigated or relativized by peers through giving examples demonstrating the opposite. The discussion was relevant almost in all classes.

M1: males are better at motor skills [...]

F1: I know a person who can do the splits and he is a male but I can't do the splits. (IT_F25_CH_GB)

F1: Maybe the only thing is gymnastics, because usually- I mean there can also be males who are very good, they [females] are more agile but then there can also be males.



Child-Up

F2: I am part of the group of males in gymnastics because they [teachers] make you do very difficult things, and I can't do them.

Int: So, you feel more male from this point of view? (IT_F33_CH_G)

F1: One thing that is different between boys and girls is that they know how to play soccer although there are some girls who can play. And the other thing is that they don't like the things we play.

T1: What do you play that the boys don't like?

F1: Sometimes in class we play with dolls.

M1: Teacher.

T1: Let's hear M1.

M1: For example, I know a boy who is a male and he likes dolls, it doesn't change anything if a boy likes dolls and a girl likes soccer [...]

F2: In my opinion there is no difference because females sometimes like male things, even females beat other up, it's not that they are saints either. (IT_F28_CH_GB)

F1: According to me, objectively speaking, females are equal to males, what a male can do, a female can do easily, but according to me there are things that females or males are better at doing compared to the other sex.

Int: Like?

M1: Like drawing, the percentage of females who draw better than males [is higher].

Int: The girls who are present find themselves.

M1: Then there are also good males but...

Int: Ok or not good females, girls, do you find yourselves or not?

F2: Personally, I don't know how to draw, I know how to do something else [...]

F3: Genuinely, not because I am not good at drawing, I think I am like other people at drawing, I mean I am not good at it, it's not that I am not able to, but I am not good at it [...]

F1: I think that all males think that females are very good at drawing but in my opinion it's not true because it's not that females only know how to draw, they also know how to do many other things, for example, I'm good at physical education but not at art really, art, I can't do it, I can't draw well [...]

Int: F4 do you like to draw?

F4: no, I'm really bad at it. (IT_F29_CH_GB)

Views about gender difference were not shared by all children. Many, especially in ISCED2 FGs, said that things are much more mixed and complicated.

In my opinion it is a little bit mixed, I mean there girls are not better in one subject or some subjects and boys in others. In my opinion it's a bit mixed. (IT_F21_CH_G)

It doesn't change anything [...] to be good or not good doesn't depend on one's gender but on one's attitude. That is, if one studies, listens in class, then everything is good. (IT_F10_CH_B)

We are different, but in the end how one does at school depends on whether one studies or not. (IT_F7_CH_B)

In my opinion, the fact that girls intervene more in certain subjects is simply prejudiced because each person can get to where they want to get. So if, for example, I study geography and I know my geography that day and maybe I intervene more, maybe a girl



has studied more maths and knows more maths, but it doesn't mean that girls are always good at geography or Italian and that boys are always good at maths. Everyone gets where they want to get based on what they do and what they study, or if they do their homework, or if they pay attention in class, they'll get their results. (IT_F21_CH_B)

According to these children, differences depend on the individual and everyone is equal contributing an equal amount of effort, experience, interest, and personal skills.

Everything depends on the person. (IT_F33_CH_G)

This thing between boys and girls should not be there, I mean it is obvious that some people are better suited to doing a certain subject [...] between males and females we are all equal. (IT_F29_CH_G)

In my opinion it is not a matter of sex, if you put your mind to it everyone can do things well. (IT_F23_CH_B)

Int: So, if I understand correctly, it depends more on the person.

M1: Yes, then also on his/her abilities, but also on whether he/she likes the subject or not.

F1: I think that everyone can make it, as M1 said, it is based on the subjects and on the type of person. (IT_F1_CH_GB)

I don't think anything changes because if I try hard it doesn't change anything, if I try hard I get a good grade and if I don't try hard I get a bad grade, I mean it's not that if I'm a girl I don't do well in gymnastics but I do well in art it depends on the person. (IT_F9_CH_G)

In my opinion there is no difference between males and females in terms of subjects because it is only a matter of experience. I could be very good at running but it has nothing to do with the fact that I am a female, it has to do with the fact that I have had experience. (IT_F25_CH_F)

Future of (migrant) children

Concerning the future, many students would like to go abroad although many also expressed the desire to stay in Italy.

A preference for living outside Italy is explained as desire to explore the world or new things. Many children chose places that, in their imagination, are linked to a passion they have or a sport they like: "I would like to live either in Ireland or in New Zealand because I do horseback riding and it is full of pastures there so I like it a lot" (IT_F22_CH_G). A large majority would like to go to the USA (New York, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Chicago) and some linked this choice to their desire to become athletes (football or basketball) or to become famous in the world of film or other fields. Barcelona was also mentioned as a place where they would like to move, especially for those who wish to become football players. Albania was mentioned by one student without Albanian origin, since "many people criticize it, but I think it's beautiful" (IT_F8_CH_G). Other places that children mentioned include England, Denmark, Ireland, New Zealand, Canada, Japan, Hawaii, Brazil and South America in general, Dubai, Indonesia, Australia, Russia, Morocco, Germania, Messico, China.

For one student, experiencing difference and new habits were also a good reason for choosing another country, in her case the USA: "I would like to live in America because it is very different from Italy, and I would like to try new things and a new lifestyle" (IT_F22_CH_G). Several students expressed their wish to keep travelling without choosing a specific place to stay: "so if I had to decide where to go and live, I wouldn't know where because I like to move around a bit everywhere" (IT_F11_CH_B). Others expressed a preference without any reason: "I would like to live in Australia. Actually, I don't even have a precise reason, I simply like Australia" (IT_F22_CH_B).



However, many children would like to stay in Italy, perhaps moving to a city where there are more job-related opportunities. Others, however, do not feel the need to move anywhere: “I honestly don’t know. Right now, I like it here. If I had to choose, I’d like to live in France” (IT_F22_CH_B).

No direct link was shown between children’s future aspirations and having a migration background. Some children with a migration background in two primary schools expressed multiple preferences or indecision in relation to where they would like to live.

I [would like to live] in Pakistan (..), and also in England [...] because my uncle lives in England with his little girl. (IT_F15_CH_G)

F1: I would like to be a doctor because I don’t like leaving sick people in that way and then I would like to be an English teacher because (?)

T1: Because in Nigeria they speak English, don’t they?

F1: Yes.

Int: And so would you like to stay in Italy or go somewhere else?

F1: To stay in Italy.

Int: To stay in Italy.

F1: But I’m not really sure.

Int: You’re not really sure.

F1: No. (IT_F28_CH_G)

All children expressed a variety of desires motivated by personal reasons. The majority dream of a college education followed by a career. However, in some cases, among both migrant and non-migrant children, jobs such as being a truck driver, mechanic and cleaner were also mentioned: in a few cases children specified that this was the job of a single parent.

Professions that are popular with children are doctor, politician, lawyer, businessman, historian, journalist, actress, dancer, designer, singer, writer, truck driver, piano player, judge, paleontologist, reporter, YouTuber, mechanic, firefighter, songwriter, cartoonist, architect, interior designer, video-game creator/designer. One student would like to be a peacekeeper with the United Nations: “I’d like to live anywhere as long as it’s something military because my dream has always been to be in the military when I grow up” (IT_F22_CH_B). Others said they would like to study to become teachers, while one girl said she would like to move to Spain and be a beautician.

In ISCED2 FGs, children demonstrated a more transitory condition and changing desires.

I currently have two great passions: music and show business. Up to now, I mean, because I study theatre, but I like those things and until a few months ago I would have said that I wanted to make music professionally and I didn’t have any other alternatives. But now I’m starting to be a bit more open to other things. Let’s say that I’d like to leave music, I mean I’ll keep the option open, but I don’t want to give myself just one option because if it goes wrong, I’ve wasted my life. So right now, I would say that I would like to be involved in shows and entertainment in my life. I want to leave something behind; I want to have a lifestyle that leaves something great for people. When I’m gone, I want to be remembered, for example, I’d like to do voluntary work, things like that [...] I don’t have an idea where I’m going. (IT_F21_CH_G)

As a result of this question several stereotypical expectations towards gender roles were left behind and called into question. While several girls have high professional expectations (to become astrophysicists, scientists, criminologists), the boys said more often that they saw themselves having a family in the future,



“I would like to go to a science high school and become a doctor, then I don’t want to have a family, but I would like to go to Japan” (IT_F31_CH_G).

F1: I want to have [adopted] children because I really don’t want to have husbands.

F2: I would like three of my own but not in ten years.

Int: And would you like a husband or not?

F2: Yes [...]

F3: I would like to have children but without a husband I think, although I’m not sure if I won’t change my mind, but I would like to have two children, maybe girls because I’m more used to them but boys would also be.

Int: Can I ask you why you don’t see yourself with a husband now?

F3: I don’t like the idea because I imagine that for certain things we won’t get along so we’ll start fighting.

Int: So you prefer to have children because you know that with them you would get along without problems.

F3: Yes. (IT_F33_CH_G)

The youngest, above all, showed precise ideas about their future family, with very different potential structures, i.e., being a single parent, being a single parent of adopted children, as a couple with children: “when I grow up I would like to adopt a child from Philippines because I like them, they are very cute” (IT_F33_CH_B). However, in some FGs, gender differences emerged with regard to future employment.

F1: There are jobs that are mostly done by males, for example being a truck driver, and if a female is one she is criticized because people say she goes in the middle of a road on the motorway with a huge truck which she doesn’t have the strength to drive, but it’s not said that this is also our problem.

M1: I don’t agree because in my opinion there are things that only males can do.

Some students: But what are you saying?

M1: In my opinion, at school there is no difference in terms of gender, but in the job market gender makes a big difference. There are many differences between the sexes, for example a male may not be accepted to do a job even if he has more skills than a woman, an office job, perhaps in a company, there are more women but who have fewer skills than a man would. (IT_F25_CH_GB)

In particular, children highlighted the fact that jobs are sometimes differentiated as a result of cultural construction.

I think that perhaps some jobs are done more often by females and others more by males, but not because females are better at some things and males at others, but because we are used to this way of thinking. (IT_F23_CH_G)

Some jobs are perhaps more suited to men and others to women, but then it depends on whether you enjoy doing that job or not, you can also go and do it, for example, earlier we were talking with my classmate and we were thinking of the dock worker, perhaps women don’t have the physique to do that job, but then again everyone can do what they like if they enjoy doing it. (IT_F23_CH_G)

Some students stressed that females are treated differently at work because of motherhood.

In my opinion, it’s not so much in school, but in the workplace, that is, for example, how often do some people make female workers sign a contract illegally saying that if they get pregnant they will lose their job, which in my opinion is not right, or even jobs as



caretakers, or in any case jobs that because (?) are considered to be for females, these jobs are passed on to them. (IT_F8_CH_G)

School during the pandemic

When asked about the consequences of the pandemic, children talked about two different aspects of its impact on schooling. The first was online learning and the second was school attendance during the pandemic.

Online learning

The negative aspects of online learning which emerged from the FGs are a lack of freedom and absence of social and emotional relationships during the lockdown periods (the impossibility of getting out, meeting friends, working together). Some children described how they missed their classmates.

It was bad because I didn't talk to anyone, that is, only with my family, but it's bad to be separated from your friends. (IT_F25_CH_B)

It was bad to be away from your classmates because at home you don't do anything but at school you have fun with your classmates. (IT_F25_CH_B)

ISCED3 children emphasized that engaging with friends remotely was very different from having face-to-face interaction, and that even when they were able to see each other physically, it is more challenging because of the restrictions:

F1: Since Covid started, it's been really bad.

Int: But do you keep in touch with your friends remotely?

F1: But it's not the same thing.

F2: I do genuinely, both remotely and at home, I struggle a bit more though. (IT_F2_CH_G)

Some ISCED1 children emphasized a greater need for closeness with close family members only, as well as the need to spend time outside. Contact via mobile phone with friends were frequently described as being sufficient, while those with grandparents were considered sufficient if they live far away, however they were a source of anxiety when children were used to meeting them frequently. This highlights some important ambivalent feelings toward the pandemic which will be discussed further below.

Quarantine has not demoralized me because as I have a big terrace I was able to play football with my friends. I kept in touch with my grandparents the same amount, it has not changed much because, even now, they live very far away so I speak to them only on the phone and in the summer, I was able to go and see them for three months. So the quarantine was not that hard for me, but doing online learning was difficult. (IT_F25_CH_B)

For me Covid did not change that much on the one hand, but on the other hand it did because with Covid when I was in quarantine last year, I always saw my paternal grandmother because she looked after me at home as my parents were not able to be at home when I was doing online learning. Instead, the other side, my maternal grandparents, and also the other part of the family, I could not see them because they were older, and therefore there was more danger that they would catch Covid and die. (IT_F25_CH_B)

Some children felt that the number of conflicts decreased during the pandemic, while others felt that a lack of dialogue led to more arguments: "F1: when we were doing online learning, we argued more often because there was no face-to-face dialogue [...] F2: for everything, questions, homework, but also for our own behaviours" (IT_F3_CH_G).

Online learning was described by the majority of children as being more boring.



Child-Up

I liked my school because you could see your friends and teachers there every day and you didn't have to wait long to see them. (IT_F30_CH_G)

Int: Were you taking classes from home?

M: Eh unfortunately.

Int: Why do you say unfortunately?

M: It bored me. (IT_F25_CH_M).

It's boring to stay home. (IT_F19_CH_B)

It was also harder because of frequent technical issues.

I like the other school because that way we can talk to each other easily, like every time C and I want to talk but every time we struggle to connect. (IT_F28_CH_G)

Int: What was it about online learning that you didn't like?

F: Putting everything you did, your homework on classroom [the software], and because I missed the physical contact. (IT_F19_CH_G)

I like the other school because when we do an online lesson, when the teacher shares the screen she sometimes doesn't see us when we want to speak. (IT_F28_CH_G)

For me the other school was better because here you have to charge your mobile phone and after a while it switches and you have to wait an hour and then when you turn it back on the lesson has ended. (IT_F28_CH_B)

You struggle a bit more in these classes because sometimes you don't hear, with the connection, you struggle a little more. (IT_F19_CH_G)

Online learning was also negatively evaluated because children in lower grade classes lost their autonomy when having the lessons, since they often needed the presence of their parents to assist them in managing the computer due to technical reasons. Furthermore, if parents were out of the house, it could be even more challenging to resolve technical problems.

The fact that some children are not able to access a computer and need the help of a parent is a mess. (IT_F2_CH_G)

I didn't like doing the lessons online either because I was annoyed when my parents weren't home and the connection was down and I didn't know what to do, and because it was a bit harder and there are older kids who are there [online] for longer. (IT_F19_CH_G)

However, these views were not shared by all children, since one ISCED2 FGs highlighted how online learning gave children greater autonomy and sense of responsibility.

M1: In my opinion the biggest difference between digital school and face-to-face school is that the digital school, in my opinion, makes you grow, for example it makes you mature in certain areas, for example in certain lessons that are done in class, the teachers can see if you are concentrating, but at home you can switch off in different ways and relax, or you can become more mature and recognize when you should do something or not.

Int: So you're saying you're more empowered because it's up to you to decide if you're paying attention or not?

M1: Yes.

Int: You can get out of control somehow so if you're paying attention, it's because you know it's important to pay attention.

M1: Understand when you have to pay attention and when maybe you can relax a little bit [...].

Int: So in your opinion even regular school should give you that option?



M1: Yes, I'd say so, allowing you to be more free. (IT_F29_CH_B)

Finally, children did not like being at the computer for a long time in order to attend lessons, finding it very tiring.

We only have an hour and we can get tired of being in front of the computer all the time. (IT_F28_CH_G)

I like the older school more because here we have to be in front of the computer for a long time. (IT_F28_CH_G)

In my opinion, being in front of a screen for five hours every day is not very good for our health in the sense that, both for our eyes and also psychologically, because it is also stressful to sit there and do nothing other than to look there and stay there all day, and then anyway getting up and going to school was part of the routine that we've now become used to. (IT_F11_CH_G)

An important aspect, as highlighted above, is that a high number of children expressed a great deal of ambivalence about the school experience during the lockdown. These children frequently expressed both positive and negative aspects in relation to online learning.

During online learning I didn't like it much but I also liked it a bit. A didn't like it a bit because I only saw my friends virtually yet I liked it because I was in my own home. (IT_F17_CH_B)

In my opinion online learning was both a positive and a negative thing. Positive because I was able to wake up much later, and negative because I couldn't see what was really going on in reality, and I wanted to be with my friends, chatting during the breaktime and playing outside without this online learning. (IT_F26_CH_B)

In my opinion it was great on the one hand, and awful on the other because, I mean, on the one hand it was great because once with the T1 teacher we were there in the online lesson and we talked during the breaktime, we talked, we played we did a lot of things. (IT_F17_CH_G)

ISCED2 students highlighted several positive aspects of online learning, such as the possibility of being more comfortable while participating (getting up later, having breakfast slowly and wearing whatever they wanted). Some children claimed that online learning helped them to manage stress better.

Online learning helped me to manage my stress, I was no longer anxious, which was incredible, but otherwise I was a bit sad, but I was much more relaxed during online learning. (IT_F10_CH_G)

F1: Concerning online learning, when there were questions, I had less anxiety because I was at home and not at school.

Int: Listen but when you got back to school, did the anxiety come back or had you learned to manage it at that point?

F1: No I had learned to manage it. (IT_F10_CH_G)

Some children also mentioned they adopted strategies to have more time for themselves: "I also wanted to tell you that during online learning, you might as well wake up twenty minutes later and say that the computer was (logged in) but that you couldn't get in" (IT_F11_CH_B). Another strategy was exchanging texts on social media while following the lessons. In general, however, children said that they managed to keep in touch during online learning through video-calls (sometimes three-four hours long) or texts. After the first lockdown, some children said that they had stronger relationships with their friends.

After quarantine we had a closer bond because [...] I could finally see my friends again. (IT_F10_CH_B)



I didn't like this Covid situation at all, for example when we were taught online, but I think that thanks to the online learning we had much more desire to see each other, and when we returned to school, we were closer. (IT_F19_CH_G)

Some children described these stronger relationships as being a positive aspect of school during the pandemic. ISCED3 children especially, said that this situation helped them to discover which relationships were genuine and which were more superficial.

F1: Even with false friendships, I mean, in a moment of need, even during this pandemic, I happened to test positive for Covid in November, and as a result I really found out who was there for me, I often received messages like "how are you feeling?", "how do you feel?" "when are you taking the second swab?", there were people who were worried, and others who didn't care at all.

F2: That's right, I had Covid in November, and as a result I understood many people, I understood the people I had by my side, and I also understood the people I didn't consider to be close friends, but now I consider them to be close because they were there for me at a time that was very difficult for me. (IT_F2_CH_G)

Int: What would have been different if there had been no Covid?

F1: The relationships between people, so even friends etc. would have been different, then in the first quarantine I came to understand many things about my friendships, I mean, I found out what the real friendships were, the people who were there and the people who didn't care. (IT_F1_CH_G)

Among the positive things to come out of lockdown, in one ISCED2 FG, some students described how new activities were organized by teachers specifically to support and guide the students during the first lockdown. Some children highlighted how these activities were unexpected, and that they would appreciate it if they were to continue beyond the emergency situation.

For example, from five to six in the afternoon we do a workshop with a teacher that involves all the third year students, but unfortunately only a few of them participate, and we read the newspapers about this period and how children of our age or a little older are experiencing life during this difficult time. Because, you know, to distance yourself a bit from your friends at this age and at this time is quite difficult, I mean you need the moral support of your friends because being with them makes you a little bit stronger in your yourself. (IT_F22_CH_B)

Other activities that took place before the pandemic were forced to change their format because of the lockdown.

For example, before this situation I used to take a computer class in the afternoon. It was a lot of fun because we practically had to build a robot ourselves and we had to create all the movements. But unfortunately, we had to stop, so we could not continue our project and now we are doing it remotely by creating presentations to explain the history of this robot. But anyway, even though we are far away it's still fun because we can express what we are thinking.

(IT_F22_CH_G)

One child said that one positive aspect of the pandemic was that global lockdowns had reduced gas emissions.

Attending school during a pandemic

A second, important aspect affecting the children that were interviewed was related to attending school during the pandemic. Most children said that the pandemic had had a negative impact on school activities. The initial reaction was to describe the current school as being a sadder place than before the pandemic.



Child-Up

So, the school as I see it, with Covid, really is much sadder, there is a lack of contact with people, I mean, you are always spaced out and close in your desk, and I can't think of many positive aspects [...] it's a bit sad and that's it. (IT_F10_CH_G)

It wasn't nice because you couldn't get close to anyone, for example, we can go at the blackboard to write down a calculation only if we have our own chalk, we have to sanitize ourselves, well it's not nice to be at a distance. (IT_F32_CH_G)

When there was no Coronavirus, I was always much happier, but now I'm always at home and I'm bored. (IT_F13_CH_G)

In one ISCED1 FG, some students openly claimed that they preferred online learning instead of being at school with social distancing. The first reason is the physical separation from peers, more specifically, the personal distance reflected in the way the classroom is organized. Moreover, some ISCED2 children said how difficult it was to get used to this new situation, such as wearing masks and maintaining physical distance: "now I don't like it [...] previously you had a desk mate, you copied in the tests [...] we exchanged snacks this was an important part of things" (IT_F11_CH_G).

Children's difficulties with this new condition are associated with three factors. First, during lessons the fact that desks are separated from each other.

Having the desks spaced out gives me more anxiety [...] because during the lesson you can't talk as much with your classmates and maybe you have less fun too. (IT_F19_CH_G)

In the meantime, the desks are spaced a meter apart my God! (IT_F19_CH_G)

We have desks spaced apart and I used to like being close to others. (IT_F19_CH_B)

Second, during the breaktime, which is done separately by each class: "a school where you can have breaktime all together [...] T1: since we are in a Covid period they can't even meet the kids from the other classes" (IT_F8_CH_B).

Third, when playing, children aren't able to get too close and touch each other.

Int: Does the fact that you can't touch people bother you?

M: Yes, it bothers me. (IT_F19_CH_B)

I also miss physical contact a bit. (IT_F19_CH_G)

If we want to see each other we're still not allowed to hug. (IT_F19_CH_G)

F1: Covid bothers me because we can't be close to each other, and we can't hold hands and we can't even hug.

Int: So you miss the physical contact a bit.

F1: Yes, and because we can't get close to each other to talk. (IT_F19_CH_G)

In one ISCED1 FG, children highlighted how the pandemic meant they were not able to invite their friends home like they used to: "I don't like being away from my friends because they can't come to my place, because they usually come to my place" (IT_F15_CH_G). They also had to change some of their habits such as exchanging picture cards.

The second negative aspect highlighted by children is the use of masks, which is considered very annoying and an impediment to seeing their classmates' faces, above all by the younger students (ISCED0 and ISCED1).

Covid bothers me a lot because you have to wear a mask and it bothers me a lot. (IT_F19_CH_B)

M1: The thing that bothers me the most is the mask, I can never keep it on [...]

Int: But is it the mask that bothers you or is it because you can't see your companions' faces anymore?



M1: Both. (IT_F19_CH_B)

M1: You have to wear a mask or you could get sick.

M2: When there was no [coronavirus], we didn't wear a mask [...]

F1: I don't like masks. (IT_F16_CH_GB)

The third negative aspect, emphasized by the unaccompanied foreign minors, is that they were not able to participate in any activities outside the community, something that is useful for entering the labour market.

3. Intercultural relations at school

The children described their classes as varied from the point of view of national origins. A significant number of children had a migration background in all schools. For the most part, children with a migration background were born in Italy of parents themselves born outside the country. However, there are also several cases of children who have come to Italy at various ages, even very recently. Most frequent countries of origin are Pakistan, Egypt, China, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Kosovo, Moldova, Albania, India, Morocco, Santo Domingo, Russia, Albania, Romania, Ecuador. It was also common to encounter children with families from Southern Italy, who had undertaken internal migration.

In all classes, the different origin is considered a positive element in that it enriches everyone to be in contact with different languages and cultures.

F1: In my opinion, it's the same, I mean, there are no differences.

M1: For me, if there are people from other places, it's nice because you either learn other languages or you learn different customs. (IT_F25_CH_GB)

In my opinion having foreign people in the class, or even in the school, is very nice and useful from my point of view because talking to them you learn a new culture about which you didn't know anything [...] in my class there are many people of this kind and I don't see any differences, I mean maybe the colour of the skin but that's not the problem [...] so in my opinion we are all the same. (IT_F8_CH_B)

At the same time it is considered to be just one element amongst many that characterizes personal diversity, "we are all equal" (IT_F25_CH_B), "I am one of those people who has a foreign parent and an Italian parent, but I don't feel judged if I make a mistake, I feel the same as the others" (IT_F29_CH_G), "In my opinion, it is good to have foreign partners, for example, we know we have them, but I don't pay attention to them because anyway we are all (.) people" (IT_F27_CH_G).

We are fourteen-year-old children who are together in a class and we have different origins but we are still people, so we don't notice this difference. I might like an Albanian boy more than an Italian one, I mean, I don't see any differences between my two best friends who are Greek and Albanian, I don't see any differences. (IT_F9_CH_G)

This view highlights that some children value personal differences more than cultural or national belonging, thus avoiding positioning friends as members of cultural groups. Only in one FG, did some students with a migrant background claim that there were some difficulties because they were teased due to their different origins. According to some children in another FG, having a different background or speaking different languages can be a source of prejudice on the part of teachers.

In my opinion they are not important because we are all equal, but widespread prejudices exist, also in terms of skin colour, or language, simply because you were born in another place in the world, these are not important things, but they can cause a lot of problems in life. Maybe a foreigner will never be able to integrate and, in fact, even at school, it's something that everyone knows about, there are racist teachers, teachers who, despite



having a job as a public official, maintain their prejudices although, thank God, at ((name of school)) there are not that many of them. (IT_F8_CH_B)

The question of language at school is controversial. Children claimed that they speak mainly Italian at school.

Int: So you speak Italian and also Arabic?

M1: Yes.

Int: And do you sometimes manage to use Arabic at school, maybe with some of your classmates who also speak Arabic, or do you always speak Italian?

M1: No Tunisian, for example I don't understand Moroccan, I only understand Tunisian.

Int: OK, so at school you always speak Italian.

M1: Yes. (IT_F33_CH_B)

Those with direct experience of migration to Italy emphasized discomfort at not being able to communicate at school, their ability to learn the language quickly and the rejection of their native language.

F1: I was born in Ghana.

Int: OK, how old were you when you came to Italy?

F1: I was seven.

Int: Do you remember that?

F1: Yes.

Int: And how did you experience it?

F1: Bad.

Int: How come?

F: Since I didn't understand the language, and I was also small and I was the only black child in the class, so since we were all small we all had the mentality of children, so every child was kind of afraid basically since they had never seen a girl in the class like me and I didn't even know how to talk to them and say, like, "can we play together?", those things, so I was always just saying "yes" and "no" so when someone said something to me I just said "yes" or "no" [...]

Int: And did you ever tell any of your classmates about this experience?

F1: I told the people who treated me like that how I felt.

Int: Ah did you tell your classmates then?

F1: Yes.

Int: And how did it go?

F1: Normal, I mean, I talked more with my best friend who was my best friend at that time, so I told her the bad things she did to me at that time and she apologized. (IT_F2_CH_G)

M1: For example, I am Italian Tunisian [...] I've lived half here, a little in France and a little in Italy.

Int: So did you arrive in Italy or were you born in Italy?

M1: No, I arrived in Italy.

Int: OK, so you learned Italian. You didn't know it before?

M1: Yes I learned it in a month.

Int: OK, and so you were able to communicate immediately with your friends?

M1: I was small enough. (IT_F33_CH_B)



Child-Up

M1: I was born in Brazil, but I was adopted when I was seven and I came to Italy.

Int: OK, and have you been back to Brazil?

M1: No.

Int: OK, but do you remember Brazilian? I mean you speak it right?

M1: No.

Int: Ah you don't remember.

M1: No at all.

Int: OK, so you only speak Italian and you don't have the opportunity to read.

M1: Because my parents are Italian.

Int: Yes, yes but I was also saying in class.

M1: I have a brother who was also adopted but we speak Italian.(IT_F23_CH_B)

Only few children described they are able to speak their native language, or other languages which are not Italian or English, in the classroom. Only in one FG, children said that they try to speak Chinese and Spanish sometimes.

M1: I was born in Ecuador.

Int: OK, how old were you when you came to Italy?

M1: Ten I think so yes, yes.

Int: Ah OK, that's not so long, and what language do you speak with your parents?

M1: Spanish.

Int: OK, so you speak Spanish at home and do you speak it at school?

M1: Yes sometimes yes.

Int: With whom?

M1: With a classmate.

Int: OK and with the other classmates you speak Italian right?

M1: Yes. (IT_F23_CH_B)

Some children spoke about some mutual help being given amongst those who speak the same language, and also between children who speak Italian and others whose Italian is not yet fluent.

In my opinion it's right to speak more languages in class because there are some who have more difficulties and those who have fewer difficulties, obviously, for example if M10 says it's clear that for him it's better to speak Italian, maybe it's more practical, so it's also easier for him to understand everything for example, but there is, for example, M11 who knows very little Italian and so they gave him photocopies in Chinese. However, when I was with him, I tried to encourage him to speak Italian, not Chinese, when he didn't understand, but all the guys who knew Chinese helped him by explaining it in Chinese. But I think the concept of speaking more than one language in class is right. (IT_F21_CH_B)

In many FGs, children said that the only other language they speak within school is English. One child with a migrant background claimed that he enjoys knowing a language that his classmates do not know: "I like the fact that I know a language that other people don't know and other people always ask me how to say a word in that language and I enjoy explaining it" (IT_F7_CH_B).



Children' perceptions are very different from those of their teachers for what concerns the language spoken at home. Many children said that they speak Italian or a mixture of Italian and their native language at home. However, books, music and television are enjoyed primarily in Italian.

Int: What language do you speak at home with your parents?

M: A mixture.

Int: And between which languages?

M: Tunisian and Italian. (IT_F33_CH_B)

F1: I was born in Moldova.

Int: And how old were you when you came to Italy?

F1: Almost six years old [...]

Int: What language do you speak at home?

F1: I speak Italian because I came here, I learned Italian immediately, then after a while I went to school, so I started speaking Italian immediately, until now.

Int: So you speak Italian with your parents?

F1: Yes, they do too.

Int: Ah, but what about books, TV, what do you listen to, watch, in what language at home?

F1: Always Italian, although I was born there, but I don't know anything, I don't know the language, I don't know the traditions, I don't know anything. (IT_F2_CH_G).

F1: My father was born in Morocco and my mother in France.

Int: What about you?

F1: I was born here.

Int: So how many languages do you speak?

F1: Italian and Moroccan.

Int: And what do you speak at home?

F1: A mixture.

Int: But television, films, books are in what language?

F1: Italian. (IT_F1_CH_G)

Some children have a limited level of competence in their native language meaning that they are helped by their parents when they visit their country of origin.

F1: My father was also born in Italy, but my mother was born in Peru and therefore sometimes we speak in Italian and sometimes Spanish [...]

Int: And when you go there you speak Spanish, so you can understand well what they are saying?

F1: Yes, but I don't understand some very difficult words and then I ask my mother, but the rest I know by myself. (IT_F28_CH_G)

Some other children have only a passive competence in their native language.

F1: I have Albanian parents, but I was born in Naples [...]

Int: And do you sometimes speak Albanian at school or do you only speak Italian?

F1: I don't speak much, but I understand it better than I speak it.

Int: Do you sometimes speak it at home?



Child-Up

F1: No. (IT_F33_CH_G)

F1: I don't speak Filipino very well.

Int: OK, so when you talk to them [parents], how do you do it? Do you manage or do your parents help you?

F1: My parents help me, but I understand what they say, I just can't speak it. (IT_F1_CH_G)

Children with a migrant background are often bilingual and sometimes trilingual.

F1: My father was born in Morocco and my mother in France.

Int: What about you?

F1: I was born here.

Int: So how many languages do you speak?

F1: Italian and Moroccan. (IT_F1_CH_F)

M1: my father is Argentinian, so he speaks Spanish.

Int: So you understand Spanish too?

M1: Yes, yes, the whole of my father's family speaks Spanish, I understand it well. (IT_F22_CH_B)

I was born here in Italy, but my parents are Nigerian and we sometimes speak English but not English English, it's a bit broken let's say so, and we also speak our language that is from Benin. (IT_F2_CH_G)

F1: I'm one of those people who has a foreign parent and the other one is Italian, but I don't feel judged if I make a mistake, I feel the same as the others.

Int: Can I ask you what language you speak at home?

F1: We usually speak Italian, but with my mother we also speak English.

Int: OK, so you know two languages.

F1: Yes.

Int: Or more?

F1: Three, including my grandmother's German.

Int: I see, so you speak three languages. (IT_F29_CH_G)

During one FG, the children were asked by one classmate in what language they think and dream, and in this context multilingualism emerged as being relevant.

So, when I dream at night, I speak in Italian, and when there are parents in my dreams, or I get angry with my parents, I tell them to get lost in Indian [...] but in my mind. (IT_F11_CH_B)

I think in English, and in Italian, for swear words I prefer Italian, it is much more extensive, and then at night when sometimes I speak, I believe [I speak in] Urdu, when I speak in my sleep I believe [I speak in] Urdu [...] and then I dream in Italian. (IT_F11_CH_B)

Not only were children with an international migration background either bilingual or multilingual, children with a background of migration within Italy, from south to north, were too.

So, when I get angry, I always speak Neapolitan, I mean, when I get angry, I always think in Neapolitan or - but when I'm normal it's in Italian, and when I dream, then, if I dream about my relatives, it's in Neapolitan, but if I dream about my friends here instead, it's in Italian. (IT_F11_CH_G)



M2: So sometimes when I think, I think in dialect [of Reggio Emilia] but I speak Italian and [...] sometimes some words in Venetian dialect or suzzerese [a dialect of a place near Reggio Emilia] because my mother comes from S. and my grandmother from Veneto.

T1: So they mix it up a bit?

M2: Yes, I'm a bit of a hybrid, and then when I get angry I sometimes speak Italian but often also Pakistani or Moroccan because in primary school our currency (of exchange) were Pringles crisps, and a friend of mine asked me if I could give him a few coins and then he would give me a course in Pakistani. (IT_F11_CH_B)

The research demonstrated a sense of richness for those who speak more than one language and feel an affection for multiple places, also inviting the Italian students to stress their multiple spoken languages.

4. Identity and belonging

Children often stated that they either follow the religion of their relatives or that of their country of origin.

Int: What religion do you have in the Philippines?

F1: Catholic.

Int: Is any other religion here in the class that I don't know about? Are you all Catholic?

F2: No I'm Muslim [...]

F3: I'm a Jehovah's Witness. (IT_F1_CH_G)

F1: There are also other religions at school [...]

M1: I don't know if there are other religions, only Christian and Muslim. (IT_F33_CH_GB).

The existence of different religions, and different approaches to religion, emerged during the FGs.

My mother is Christian and my father is Sikh, which is an Indian religion. Previously, perhaps influenced a lot by my mother, I thought I was Christian. But now I prefer to call myself an atheist. [...] I went to both the Christian Church when I was in Ecuador with my grandparents and to Sikh temples. (IT_F22_CH_G)

Traditions of children's country of origin does not seem to be particularly cultivated in Italy however, "Int: at home, do you keep traditions, I don't know, do you celebrate the festivities of your country of origin? M1: no no no" (IT_F23_CH_B).

F1: I came here, I learned Italian right away, then after a while I went to school, so I started speaking Italian right away, until now.

Int: So you speak Italian with your parents?

F1: Yes, they do too.

Int: Ah OK,,but what about books, TV, what do you listen to, watch, in what language at home?

F1: Always Italian, I was actually born there, but I don't know anything, I don't know the language, I don't know the traditions, I don't know anything. (IT_F2_CH_G)

Int: What holidays are there in your family?

F1: I don't know because I don't know much about the Philippines since I was born here in Italy and I don't ask my parents much about the Philippines.

Int: But have you ever been there?

F1: I have, but when I was three years old, so I don't remember it very well. (IT_F1_CH_G)



Several children experienced temporary return trips to their countries of origin. Some also experienced schooling in their parents' country of origin, either because they arrived in Italy after having spent some years in the country where they were born or because they were born in Italy, but they went back to the parents' country to study there for some years. This is very common among students with a Chinese background. Some of them talked about the changes they had undergone.

I used to live in Maputo, the capital of Mozambique, near South Africa, and then we moved here to Italy and I changed primary school, but I don't remember what the school was like there. [...] I was young and we left more or less within a week. I don't remember it being that difficult. (IT_F22_CH_B)

Most children with a migration background were born in Italy, however some of them, both those who were born in Italy and those who were born abroad, experienced journeys of returning temporarily to their families' countries or to other European countries to meet relatives or friends who had migrated there (for example the UK). Children expressed very different feelings towards these trips:

When I went to India, I really missed the whole class and also my friends, I used to cry and say "mum can we go to school?" and she said "no we have to stay inside the room [because of the quarantine due to Covid]. (IT_F15_CH_B)

Int: And do you know Albanian language?

F1: I have all my relatives there.

Int: So you go there often.

F1: Every summer. (IT_F3_CH_G)

M1: I was born in Italy, but my parents are both Moroccan.

Int: But do you go there sometimes?

M1: Of course, every year. (IT_F23_CH_B)

F1: I go there once a year, I'm there for two months during the summer, I like it because every year I meet new people, just a few, but I do meet some, and it's always nice to be remembered, for example I have some friends I haven't seen for a long time, I haven't seen them for a long time because they moved away, but it makes me very happy that, despite everything, we stay in touch

Int: But do you have relatives there?

F1: Yes, in Moldova there's my grandmother, my father's mother and her two sisters, my father's sisters, so yes, with her children and then there are also other uncles and cousins. (IT_F1_CH_G)

Int: So you go to Albania every now and then?

F1: Yes, yes.

Int: And how is it when you come back? Do you tell your friends about Albania or not?

F1: Not always, but mostly what I've seen.

Int: Mh, OK, you, have you ever gone back to Tunisia?

M1: I go there every year. (IT_F33_CH_GB)

F1: I once went to Ecuador for three months to see my family and I loved it because it was the first time I had seen my grandmother, my grandparents and it was my family, so I had a great time.

Int: And when you came back here, did you miss being there, or was it normal to go back and forth?

F1: I missed it, but not that much. (IT_F22_CH_G)



In one case, a child spoke of having travelled to the UK to meet his uncle. This is an example of Italians migrating abroad. In general, however, the majority of children talked about feeling affection for several places. Several children mentioned, not only their country of origin or their parents' country, but also other places in Italy where they have grandparents, friends or where they simply had a nice time in the past.

However, some children said that they never, or almost never, returned to their family's country, either because it is too far or for socio-political reasons.

Int: Do you have relatives there?

F1: Yes, grandparents and uncles.

Int: OK and do you go there sometimes?

F1: No, I haven't gone there yet. (IT_F3_CH_G).

F1: I was born in the Philippines.

Int: OK and do you go back sometimes?

F1: Um no.

Int: You never went back?

F1: I haven't been back for a long time. (IT_F1_CH_G).

I was very young when I went there, I was only one and a half years old so I don't remember anything, and I wanted to go there for my communion but my dad said no because at that time, and now, there is a war so I can't go there. (IT_F29_CH_G)

Sometimes relatives no longer reside in the country of origin or children just do not really like the idea of going back there.

M1: I've been to Russia, more than once [...]

Int: You've been more than once, so...

M1: Yes, yes.

Int: OK, did you like it?

M1: Yes, it's not the best, but yes (IT_F29_CH_B).

F1: I was born in Moldova.

Int: OK and how old were you when you came to Italy?

F1: Almost six years.

Int: But every now and then you go back?

F1: No I went back, but a few years ago, so I don't even have a reason anymore, because there's nobody there anymore anyway.

Int: Ah, OK, are all your relatives here?

F1: They've mostly all gone to other countries. (IT_F2_CH_G)

One student, who had never visited his parent's country, admitted that this fact affects his sense of identity and belonging: "I was born here, my parents were born in Pakistan and I feel more Italian than Pakistani because I have never been there [and so I] feel more Italian" (IT_F11_CH_B).

One thing that almost all children share is that they share very little about their trips to their country of origin in the classroom. This is either due to shyness or because they think that their classmates are not interested.

Int: And when you go there do you tell your classmates about it?

M1: No, very little.



Child-Up

Int: Why is that?

M1: Because I'm a bit shy. (IT_F23_CH_B)

Int: And when you come back, for example, do you tell your friends about your experiences in Albania? [...]

F1: If they ask me yes, if they don't ask [no]. (IT_F3_CH_G)

Int: And when you come back from your trips, do you tell anyone about it?

F1: No.

Int: How come?

F1: I don't know.

Int: Do you think your classmates would like to know these things about you?

F1: I think so, I don't know, it depends on them.

Int: Meaning?

F1: I wouldn't have any problem telling them, it depends on whether they're interested or not. (IT_F1_CH_G)

Another reason is that some children still do not speak Italian fluently enough to be able to tell.

Int: Have you told anyone about China, when you lived there? Any of your classmates [...]?

F1: No.

Teach: she had difficulty with the language then, isn't that right? I think she can tell us now. (IT_F1_CH_G)

In one case, the teacher encouraged these stories as a source of enrichment for all, "when anyone goes on a trip, the teacher tells us to tell them, so we kind of understand" (IT_F28_CH_G). As explained above, Chinese children who were born in Italy often return to China to undertake the first part of their school career and then return to Italy around the age of 10-13.

F1: My parents were born in China.

Int: Ah and you?

F1: I was born in Italy but I went to China and then I came back.

Int: How old were you when you came back?

F1: 3 [they will understand later that she means three years ago]

Teac: G, how old were you when you went back to school in Italy? Because you have just started to speak Italian, only since last year, haven't you been to school here in Italy? G [...] did you always go to school in Italy?

F1: Yes.

Teac: How come you didn't know Italian? Did you go back to China afterwards?

F1: I was born in Italy and then I went back to China.

Teac: Ah, you came back three years ago, not when you were three years old, is that right?

F1: I first went to school in China.

Teac: I didn't understand why it is that you speak well now, but that last year you started not understanding Italian. (IT_F1_CH_G)

When it comes to choosing a country to live in when they grow up, perspectives are very varied: factors such as having relatives still living there, having a house, being born or having lived for a long time in that country, all come into play.



Child-Up

F1: I was born in Moldova, but I have to say that even though I was born there, and it's a place I like, it's just that it's undergone a lot of changes, like the way people behave, and they're all leaving, they're coming here to Italy, or they're going to, I don't know, England or Germany or something, and it's become a bit empty, so I think that as I grow up, I don't know what will be left, but if there's a chance, I'd like to go there. (IT_F1_CH_G)

Int: Have you ever been back – maybe on holiday to Nigeria, after coming here?

F1: No.

Int: Would you like to go back?

F1: Yes.

Int: Do you still have many relatives there?

F1: No but we have a house there so.

Int: OK, but do your parents dream of going back there one day or would they like to stay here?

F1: My mother, because I live with my mother, my father is not with us, (I try to tell him to do something) but it's not possible because I'm still a minor so she can't leave me alone, my sister is in London now so she's waiting until I turn 18 to go there.

Int: OK, and if she goes there, when you come of age, would you like to go back there or stay here in Italy?

F: No, I'll try to go to another country to continue my life, things, to work.

Int: Do you already know in which country?

F: An English-speaking country. (IT_F2_CH_G).

If children have been born or have lived in Italy for a long time, their desire is to remain in Italy, where they have built their relationships:

Int: Do you like it there?

F1: Yes.

Int: Would you like to go back there?

F1: Yes.

Int: But to live there or just for a holiday?

F1: Holiday. (IT_F1_CH_G)

Int: Have you been to Morocco?

F1: I've been every year.

Int: And do you like it?

F1: Yes.

Int: Do you like it better there or here?

F1: Here, that is, I wouldn't go to live there.

Int: OK, how come?

F1: I don't know, I think it's habit.

Int: Why, do you have your friends here and your life here?

F1: Exactly. (IT_F1_CH_G)

Finally, some children spoke of sometimes having the possibility of discussing their different origins with their teachers and classmates.



In second or third grade we talked with the maths teacher about the typical foods we ate and if our relatives came from Italy or from other places. (IT_F31_CH_B)

I'm not really Italian, I'm Moroccan but I was born in Italy and almost every week we talk about it a little bit (..) often [...] like yesterday when we talked, since here there are churches while in Morocco we have something else - I forgot. (IT_F27_CH_B).

5. Conclusions

The FGs with children highlighted that they would like several changes to be made in school in order to feel more involved and increase their interest in learning. These changes include the use of new technologies, devices, video games and applications to support their learning. They would also like to put what they learn into practice more often, also through experiences outside school such as going on trips and general extracurricular activities.

This is linked to their desire to have more autonomy and responsibility. If schools were to provide a wider range of both activities and content, they would be able to both make more choices based on their interests, and study certain topics in greater depth with the help of teachers.

Children also proposed several structural changes on an architectural and organizational level. These changes concern the possibility of experiencing school with more ease and comfort. From the structure of the timetable, the colour of the walls, to the ways and places in which they can spend their breaktimes, these suggestions express the need to be in an environment in which they feel comfortable and where they do not feel too controlled by adults.

Dialogue was mentioned several times and on several occasions. It is not just something that children wished to have more of in their school days, but also an aspect by which they assess teaching: teachers who are more willing to create spaces of dialogue among students, and between students and teachers, are recognized by children as being important for their school experience.

For the majority of children assessments highly compromise their experience of school: written and oral tests create anxiety and fear, indeed one of the positive aspects generated by online learning was the reduction of pressure on expected levels of performance and, in turn, their levels of anxiety. This is also one of the reasons why children appreciate group collaboration, something which permits them to help each other and share the weight of being evaluated.

Those children who claimed that assessments are not useful argued that evaluation does not correspond to the complexity of personal competence and neither does it consider children's individual predispositions or communication difficulties. While opinions about assessment are more polarized among ISCED3 children, they tend to be more ambivalent among ISCED1 and ISCED2 children. Moreover, some children highlighted how it becomes hard for those who have been categorized as not being "good students", to change this label.

Being assessed is something which is experienced negatively, both when being assessed by teachers and classmates. This is one aspect that, according to both children with a migration background and those without, prevents the former from participating properly. Since some children with a migrant background are not fluent in Italian, they fear making mistakes and they thus tend to avoid speaking. However, most of the children said that students help each other, and that students who are not fluent in Italian can rely on children who speak Italian fluently to get support.

Arguments and disagreements are frequent for most of the children, especially ISCED0 and ISCED1 children. However, arguing is also evaluated positively because, according to some children, it represents an opportunity to get to know their classmates better and to intensify relationships with them. In resolving arguments, irony is considered a good strategy, but when the emotional burden is too heavy, children ask

for the help of adults (parents or teachers) who are usually excluded from less serious arguments, especially among ISCED3 students who prefer to be autonomous and take on this responsibility by themselves. Similarly, unaccompanied minors claim that they rely on educators when problems occur concerning the community, whereas they tend to solve problems by themselves if they concern personal issues with other children.

Most children reported that decisions are always taken by teachers, while others said that it depends on the topic. Some children said that they should be more involved in decision-making, while others claimed that they can take decisions when choosing whether to trust teachers or not, to decide whether to go to them with problems or when arranging desks in the classroom. In these situations, students' actions are supported by some teachers, those who promote children's choices. It is, however, during breaktime that children feel more able to fully exercise their agency, either by taking decisions together or identifying a leader.

According to a high number of children, school is important for learning how to relate to people, to learn respect, be educated, and how to be part of society. School should also provide future job opportunities and teach children how to think independently.

Regarding their future, some children would like to stay in Italy, while many others would prefer to go to other countries. The FGs did not highlight any connection between having a migration background and future job aspirations. However, some children with a migration background expressed multiple preferences or indecision about where to live in the future, having to choose between Italy, their parents' country, or other European countries where relatives might live.

The FGs gave voice to a wide range of opinions about gender. On the one hand, some children reproduced stereotypical views of gender roles. From this perspective, gender affects individual approaches to school and relationships, as well as a predisposition to certain subjects. Males and females were also considered to differ in terms of commitment, inclinations, preferences, and physique; males are described as being lazier and joking around more; females as being braver and more inclined to help classmates. These views, however, were not shared by all children. Many highlighted the complexity of gender definitions, recognizing the social construction of expectations related to gender roles. For these children, differences depend on personal views. Moreover, several girls demonstrated high professional expectations while boys were the ones who spoke more frequently about seeing themselves with a family in the future. However, in some FGs the difference between males and females emerged much more clearly in relation to the issue of work, and some students stressed that females are treated differently at work because of motherhood.

Turning to children's experiences of school during the pandemic, two different aspects were highlighted: online learning during periods of lockdown when schools were closed and attending schools with restrictions being in place to mitigate Covid.

In the first case, lack of freedom and absence of social relationships were mentioned as being significant aspects. However, the need to see friends was more common in ISCED2 and ISCED3 students rather than ISCED1 students. Another negative aspect concerned connection difficulties which made lessons both more boring and harder. Opinions regarding online learning which were characterized by ambivalence concerned autonomy and responsibilities. While some children in ISCED1 FGs felt less autonomous because they needed the intervention of parents to be able to follow lessons, some ISCED2 children felt they had more responsibility when undertaking online learning, because it was easier to skip lessons or to get distracted during them, thus not doing so was very much their choice. Answers revealing ambivalence also concerned arguments: for some, the number of arguments decreased during the pandemic, while others observed an increase in the number of arguments that occurred since there was no face-to-face dialogue.



According to children, online learning also had some positive aspects such as allowing them to be more comfortable while participating in the lessons, managing their time better, learning to manage stress and anxiety better, and discovering things about their interpersonal relationships.

Attending school with pandemic restrictions in place was evaluated by the majority of children as being both a sad state of affairs and being hard, even more so than online learning. Unaccompanied minors especially, reported that they had had to interrupt some important activities which could help them to search for a job.

Finally, children demonstrated different positions regarding cultural differences. While some children noticed classmates with a migration background as having different cultures, traditions and languages, most noticed personal differences and personal stories more, in some cases denying the importance of national origins altogether. In all FGs, a relevant number of participating children had a migration background themselves. Many children with a migration background were born in Italy of parents who were born abroad; these children all speak at least two languages. Most of them said that they frequently watch Italian television and speak in Italian with parents or siblings at home. Some children, however, reported some racist behaviour from classmates or teachers.