CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS IN THE ITALIAN SCHOOL SYSTEM: WHAT KIND OF ASSIMILATION?

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Abstract. *Our paper aims at identifying the kind of assimilation experienced by children of immigrants who arrived in Italy during the first decade of the 21st century, a time of great immigrant expansion. We aim at discerning to what extent children of immigrants within the Italian education system identify with or distance themselves from natives depending on the length of their stay in their new country. We use ITAGEN2 data, the first national survey on first and second generation immigrants, focusing on children attending their third year of middle school. Our results demonstrate evident signs of downward assimilation, especially for newcomers. Moreover, first generation immigrants, more so than second generations, tend to be similar to children of the Italian working class in terms of educational expectations, individual economic resources, and social relations.*

Keywords: *Immigrant assimilation, Educational expectations, Economic resources, Social relations, ITAGEN2.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The mechanisms and dynamics of children of immigrants' integration in Italy are relatively few explored for two main reasons. The first is related to the relative novelty of this phenomenon. The second, closely correlated to the first, concerns the shortage of rigorous national surveys. Yet a growing presence of immigrants' children in the Italian education system reached its peak during the 2000s. More specifically, in 2012 immigrant children made up 9% of the total school population, and were to be found mainly in the centre-north of the country. Most of them –

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mainly in kindergartens and primary schools – were second generation immigrants, born in Italy from foreign parents. This strong and increasing presence has attracted the attention of a number of scholars, mainly interested in this group's educational performance (see Azzolini, 2011, for an extensive review).

Our paper concerns the assimilation of the children on three distinct indicators on different socio-economic aspects, using recent, extensive survey data on first and second generations and natives attending Italian middle schools during the 2000s.

In a recent paper, Gabrielli *et al.* (2013), have studied similarities between children of immigrants and those of Italian parents using data from the Itagen2, a survey of a large sample of students aged 11-13 (10 thousand Italians and 10 thousand children of immigrants) enrolled in Italian junior high schools in 2006. They investigated the determinants of similarity using multivariate techniques.

In this paper, we deepen the results of Gabrielli and colleagues, using the same data-set. We investigate the differences between the children of Italians and foreigners for three aspects that are relevant in the life of any adolescent, and in determining their future: high school choice, social interactions, and economic resources. We consider the length of the stay in the new country as the main explanatory variable. Moreover, in order to test the kind of assimilation, we highlight the social conditions of the immigrants' children and their native peers, and the country of origin of their parents.

The paper is organised as follows. We begin with a review of the literature and a definition of our research questions. We then briefly present the Italian education system and the Italian context. After reviewing the data and methods, we turn to our results. We conclude with a discussion of our main results.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Alba and Nee (1997, p.863) define assimilation as the "decline, and at its endpoint the disappearance, of an ethnic/racial distinction and the cultural and social differences that express it". The old, traditional pattern of individual assimilation into the majority middle class still exists. It is thought nowadays to be only viable for those immigrants who arrive with more than average human capital and who are, partly as a result of the latter, received positively by the local government and the society at large. Their children tend to be successful and move easily into the middle class.

This pattern assimilation occurred thanks to a tendency to become culturally and linguistically more similar to the [American] middle class than to their family of origin (Rumbaut, 1997; Zhou, 1997). In 1997, Rumbaut suggested that "upward

mobility" might not, however, be the only means of assimilation, especially with regard to new U.S. immigrants.

As early as 1992, Gans had in fact already proposed a dualism between upward and downward assimilation as possible patterns characterising new second generations arriving in the U.S. mainly in the second half of 20th century. One year later, Portes and Zhou (1993) presented their theory of "segmented assimilation" for the first time. This theory is based on the idea that, being a multi-stratus and unequal society, the U.S. sees multiple patterns of assimilation. The authors theorise three such patterns: the first is classical, where immigrants assimilate to the U.S. middle class; the second predicts downward mobility, with assimilation into the urban underclass; the last one foresees "selective acculturation" (Portes and Rumbaut 2001) where immigrants preserve their own culture and values accompanied by economic integration (Rumbaut, 1997; Portes and Zhou, 1993; Zhou, 1997).

While the theory of assimilation was conceptualised with the United States in mind, several scholars have tried to apply it to European society. While some have argued that downward assimilation cannot exist in Europe given the lack of a native black underclass in European inner cities – the presence of such an underclass being basic to the process of downward assimilation of "new" immigrants in the United States (Vermeulen, 2010) – recent analyses tend, instead, to provide an opposing view.

In her study of Dutch society, Margaret Gibson (1997) was the first to argue that Turks and Moroccans represent cases of downward assimilation. Other scholars have, however, been more conservative, given that the number of second generations already positioned in the labour market in the Netherlands is still rather low (Roelandt, 1994; Vermeulen, 1998). That said the use of recent survey data on second generations in Europe (TIES, The Integration of the European Second generation project) allows scholars to detect a strong polarization among second generations of Turks and Moroccans, a quarter of whom outperform their parents while another quarter risk stagnation (Waldinger and Perlmann, 1998 in Vermeulen, 2010). At the same time, Antilleans are seen as a model of downward assimilation as newcomers are at a high risk for unemployment, one-parent families, criminality and violence.

Silberman, Alba and Fournier (2007) explore the case of Maghrebins in France, demonstrating that despite the challenges of revealing mechanisms of segmented assimilation, this group can be described as simply at risk of downward assimilation. They perceive that they are discriminated against, perform less well than natives in education, and are concentrated in the poorest neighbourhoods.

For the Italian case, our study refers firstly to the quoted paper of Gabrielli *et*

al. (2013). According to this article, the Italian social context is favourable to a rapid assimilation to the tastes and ideals of young Italians, measured using three indicators (linguistic abilities, friendship with peers, and sense of belonging in Italy). However, the similarity with the Italian peers is lower when the children of immigrants are first generations, or the economic condition and the social capital of the families of origin are poor, or if their scholastic performances are unsatisfactory. Moreover, if parents come from some countries (mainly China, Philippine, Yugoslavia and Peru), the children denote lower linguistic abilities, friendship with peers and sense of belonging to the host country.

More in deep, the assimilation is less rapid in relation to school performances. Some studies show that, for all types of schools, the results of the children of foreigners are worse than those of the children of Italians (see e.g. Azzolini *et al.*, 2012), although second generations perform better than the first generations. In addition, if the school achievement is the same at age 14, the proportion of students who choose the liceo (high school with strong theoretical formation, mainly based on mathematics, latin, classic Italian literature and philosophy), almost essential in Italy for facing higher education is lower among the first generations than among the natives (Barban and White, 2011). However, the latest available data in this regard show that – perhaps – something is changing. For the first time, the national standardized tests of mathematics (class 8th, age around 13) show that the average score is virtually identical for the children of Italians and the second generations (whereas the results of first generations are clearly less encouraging). The second generations instead get worse results than Italians on standardised tests of Italian, although differences ar not very large (Invalsi, 2013).

It is clearly impossible to test all the mechanisms of assimilation in a single article. We try to summarise the assimilation process, measuring differences between the children of Italian and foreign parents. We endeavour to enrich our analyses by including not only second generations but also first generations, based specifically on their time of arrival in the host country. This choice is driven by our aim to understand whether mechanisms of assimilation vary according to time spent in Italy.

We investigate mechanisms of assimilation by considering three aspects, often considered in literature as the main keys of assimilation: human capital, social interactions, and economic resources. We include a consideration of economic resources as we believe this aspect can reflect assimilation; indeed, migration to Italy is motivated primarily by economic reasons and the desire to improve social status. More specifically, we explore the educational expectations of children of immigrants from different countries, focusing on their timing of arrival in Italy,

their interactions with Italian peers, and the economic resources of their families.

Moreover, since previous analyses confirm the role of human capital in defining aspects of the assimilation process (Minello and Barban, 2012; Barban and White, 2011; Gabrielli *et al.*, 2013), we aim to investigate whether this association is confirmed if our indicators are considered. Since most of the immigrants coming to Italy have low educational skills, or they are unable to capitalise their skills on the Italian labour market, we hypothesise that immigrants' children will not benefit from this lack in the process of assimilation. Moreover, Italy is a country characterised by low levels of social mobility (Barone *et al.*, 2011), hence the immigrants have to face, as the Italians in the lower classes and with low educational background, the difficulties of a static job market. Hence, we hypothesise that children of immigrants with low parental support in terms of human capital are strongly different to the native peers with a high human capital, since they have less resources to spend in the three analysed dimensions. Moreover, we hypothesise that the time spent in Italy can help providing for the lacking resources. Hence, newcomers will be much more different from the natives whose parents have high educational skills, than second generations.

3. THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

The most recent and precise information on the presence of foreign children in the Italian school system can be found in the annual report of the Ministry of Education. In the 2011/12 school year, there were 755,939 pupils of non-Italian citizenship. The ratio of foreign students to total students increases for each grade level of study, with an overall total of 9 foreigners every 100 students. In 2011/12, approximately 73% of schools had a least some pupils of non-Italian citizenship, ranging from 1 to 30 per cent of the student body. The presence of foreign pupils is heterogeneous both in terms of origin and distribution of the various ethnic groups across the country. The largest migration flow comes from Romania, with 141,050 students or 18.7% of the foreign population in school. The proportions of students from Albania (about 103,000 or 13.6%) and Morocco (12.7%) follow closely behind. The Chinese population is also quite large, especially in some cities of the north and central regions (as the industrial town of Prato in Tuscany, Milan, Turin). Generally speaking, the industrialized regions have greater numbers of students of non-Italian citizenship.

Figure 1 compares data from the first decade of 21st century. In absolute terms, the number of foreigners has doubled in primary and lower secondary school and has tripled in the remaining school levels.
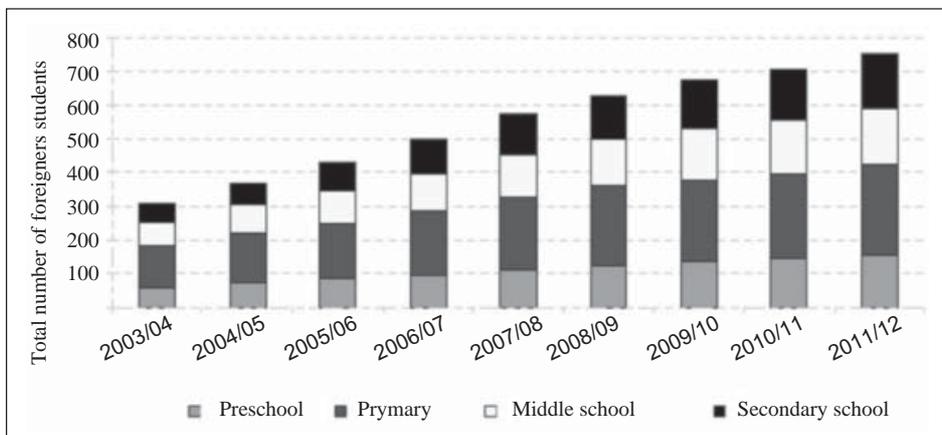
Figure 1: Foreigners in the Italian school system by level of education (school years 2003/ 2004-2011/2012).
Source: Italian Ministry of Education, 2012

At age 14 in Italy, children must pass the state examination in order to transit from middle school (*scuola secondaria di primo grado*) to secondary school (*scuola secondaria di secondo grado*). Secondary school is then divided into different alternative tracks: academic (*licei*), polytechnic institutes (*istituti tecnici*), and vocational schools (*istituti e scuole professionali*). Attending school in Italy is compulsory until age 16; as such the choice of secondary school represents an important turning point in a student's life. In 2012, 22% of foreign children attended an academic track, 38% polytechnic institutes, while 39% were enrolled in vocational schools.

4.   DATA AND METHODS

Analyses were performed using the Italian Second Generation Survey (ITAGEN2). ITAGEN2 is a survey of students living in Italy who attended middle school during the 2005/2006 school year (Casacchia *et al.*, 2008; Barban and Dalla Zuanna, 2010; Dalla Zuanna *et al.*, 2009; Barban and White 2011). It is the first nationwide extensive survey focusing on children with at least one foreign-born parent and concentrates primarily on the determinants of social integration including an array of questions on school environment. The survey consists of two waves. The baseline questionnaire focuses primarily on family characteristics, the migratory process, the use of time by children, and their opinions and aspirations for the future (Barban and White 2011). These data were collected through a questionnaire filled out by

the students under the supervision of a researcher and the students' teacher. This questionnaire has in part inspired the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS), a large scale investigation of the assimilation process in the US using a sample of "new second generation teenagers (Portes and Rumbaut, 2005).

Schools were randomly chosen among those with a foreign student body of at least +10% in the north and center of Italy and +3% in the south of Italy. In each school, researchers interviewed all of the immigrant children and one entire class for each grade level (6th, 7th, and 8th). In this article, we focus on children of immigrants and natives attending 8th grade, as our interest lies largely in their educational expectations; an examination of this group provides a good proxy for future educational choices. Our sample consists of 3,657 natives and 2,693 children of immigrants.

We consider three distinct dependent variables in order to capture the three dimensions of assimilation (educational attainment, social interactions and economic resources). More specifically, these include: educational expectations, a measure of interactions between immigrants' children and natives, and the possession of resources and goods.

Educational expectations are captured as students' self-reported expectations of attending an academic (*liceo)*, vocational or technical track, or, alternatively, stopping their education after middle school or still being uncertain about their future choice. This variable is ordinal. *Interactions* between natives and immigrants' children are captured using a dichotomous variable, using a question regarding the frequency of meetings with native friends. The variable has a value of 1 if the meetings are frequent, 0 if meetings are sporadic or non-existent.

The *possession of resources* and goods are captured using a normalized index, which collects indicators such as the possession of a computer, bicycle, cell phone, or other personal goods. These analyses primarily take into consideration two aspects: migration status and country of origin.

Migration status is defined by parents' and students' birthplace. Italian-born students with two Italian parents are classified as natives and serve as the reference group in the statistical analyses. Children of immigrants include youths living in Italy with at least one foreign-born parent. We distinguish among four groups of youths with immigrant backgrounds: second generation (those born in Italy and having at least one foreign-born parent); preschool-age immigrants (those who moved to Italy before they were five years old); child immigrants (those who arrived between the ages of five and nine); and adolescent immigrants (those who arrived at age 10 or older) – Glick and White, 2003. Second-generation children are usually not Italian citizens unless they have a parent with Italian citizenship. Italian law

allows children of immigrants born in Italy to obtain Italian citizenship when they reach age 18.

For the comparison between immigrants' children and natives by level of education of the parents and migration status, we introduced a new variable. This variable has 12 categories, due to the three categories that the level of education of the parents can have (high, medium low) and to the migration status. In this case, due to data restriction, we collapsed together the categories of preschool and childhood immigrants.

In addition, we distinguish the *national origin*s of youth with migration backgrounds, using information on their parents' country of origin. If both parents were foreign-born but their countries of origin do not coincide, we use the mother's origin. The sample size allows us to identify a number of countries in the non-native sample, including: Albania (13.0%), China (8.9%), Morocco (7.5%), Romania (9.0%), India (5.2%), Macedonia (4.5%), the Philippines (4.1%), and Tunisia (2.8 %). Other origins were aggregated into regional categories: Eastern Europe and the Balkans (10%); South America (11.6%); Developed countries (United States, Japan, and other European countries, 8.1%); Other Africa (8.8%), and Other Asia (6.3%).

Finally, we include several control variables in our analyses. These consist of family background, captured with measures of parental education and socioeconomic status, and other demographic and geographic attributes. Parent's education is measured using the highest education level obtained by either parent, and recoded into four categories based on the age they finished their education: high (studied beyond age 20), medium (studied until ages 15 to 19), low (left school before age 15), and unknown. Because this information is based on student reports, nearly one-quarter of the responses are missing. A standardised measure of socioeconomic status (ISEI scale) was used to determine the socioeconomic condition of each student. If both parents work, the ISEI scale for the highest status occupation of either parent was used. Unlike education, this item has less missing data (only 8%). Unfortunately, the survey lacks information on whether parents are self-employed or not. Other measures included in the analysis represent students' demographic characteristics: gender, age, number of siblings, children of mixed couples (i.e., only one parent born in Italy), and area of residence. Children of mixed couples are considered as immigrant's children. The geographical area of residence was coded by dividing Italy into three areas. The northern regions include Lombardy and Veneto; central regions include Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Marches, and Lazio; and southern regions include Campania, Apulia, Calabria, and Sicily. Emilia-Romagna is considered among the central regions because of the percentage of immigrants present in the region itself. Using this categorization we have a more

balanced distribution between northern and central regions. This distinction aims to capture territorial differences, while the number of siblings represents a measure of the resources available in each family that can be allocated to education. Age is included as a rough measure of educational performance, as proxy of repeating grade levels. ITAGEN2 does not contain detailed data on educational performance.

Educational expectations provide a convincing measure for capturing concrete plans for the future (Feliciano, 2006), corresponding to "the educational and occupational levels that children [of immigrants] realistically expect to achieve" (Portes *et al.*, 2010). Table 1 presents the educational expectations of pupils by migration status. Distribution of natives and second generations are similar, while differences are more pronounced as the amount of time spent in Italy among first generations decreases. Two points are immediately evident: expectations of attending an academic secondary school track is notably low for newcomers (especially adolescent immigrants) while the number of children who are still uncertain about their future or desire to leave school after completing middle school is extremely high. One quarter of adolescent immigrants belong to this category versus only 10% of natives.

**Table 1: Educational expectations of 8th grade students by migration status.**

	(%) *Academic Track*	(%) *Vocational or technical Track*	(%) *None, I don't know*	N
Natives	46.5	43.5	10.0	3,657
Second generation immigrants	43.9	45.0	11.1	654
Preschool immigrants (age at immigration 0-5)	27.4	53.3	19.3	300
Childhood immigrants (age at immigration 5-9)	26.1	53.5	20.4	571
Adolescent immigrants (age at immigration 10-13)	22.6	54.2	25.0	1,168

The second examined aspect concerns the possession of goods and economic resources. The use of a normalised index allows us to observe differentials between natives and immigrants' children, according to migration status. Table 2 reports the mean of the index according to the migration status of children. Much like educational expectations, differences here are much more evident depending on time spent in Italy. One might expect that children who arrived in Italy more recently have less contact with Italians. Our descriptive results, in fact, confirm this hypothesis: 80% of natives often meet their Italian friends outside of school

compared to only 40% of preadolescent immigrants (Figure 2). Due to the different nature of our dependent variables, we employ diverse methodological approaches. We used a multinomial logit model to study *educational expectations* while *interactions* between natives and immigrants' children are captured using a binomial variable. Our analyses are thus performed using logistic regression models. Finally, since the *possession of resources* and goods has been captured by a normalised index, we perform an OLS regression.

Table 2: Mean of the normalised index of economic resources and goods, by migration status.

	Index of economic resources and goods
Natives	0.67
Second generations immigrants	0.62
Pre-school immigrants	0.60
Childhood immigrants	0.56
Adolescent immigrants	0.55
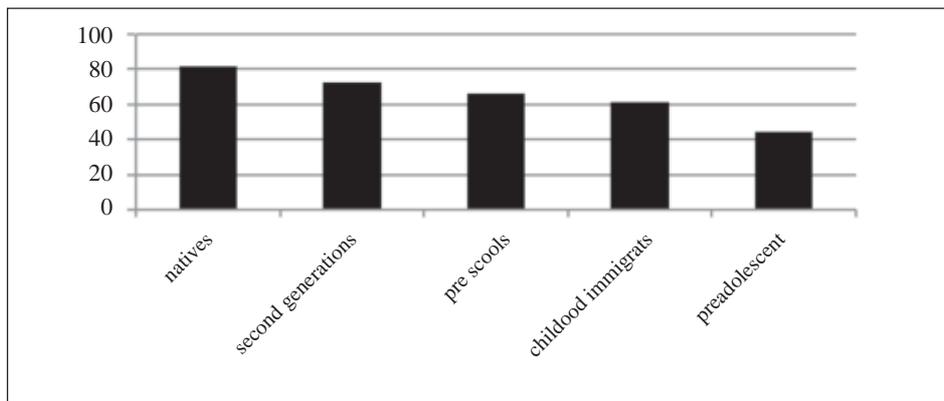
Figure 2: Friendship: Percentage of children who often or always meet Italian friends outside of school.

5. RESULTS

Table 3 reports coefficients from all of our multivariate models. We first separately define the different models, and then comment on the table as a whole. The first two columns of the table report educational expectations. We compare immigrants' children's expectations of attending vocational or technical tracks as opposed to an academic track, net of other differences. Results suggest that if the lapse of time spent in Italy diminishes, the propensity to choose one of these tracks (opposed to

Table 3: Coefficients from models comparing immigrants' children and natives: educational expectations, economic resources, social interactions (SE in brackets).

	Educational Expectations		Economic resources	Social Interactions
	Multinomial Logit		OLS	Logistic regression
	Academic	Vocational and Technical	Index of goods and resources	Meeting Italian friends often
Migration status *Ref. Natives*				
Second generation immigrants	-0.16	0.02	-0.03***	-0.47***
	(.23)	(.22)	(.14)	(.14)
Pre-school immigrants	-0.73***	-0.42*	-0.03***	-0.66***
	(.25)	(.22)	(.17)	(.17)
Childhood immigrants	-0.69***	-0.50**	-0.08***	-0.76***
	(.21)	(.20)	(.14)	(.14)
Adolescent immigrants	-0.77***	-0.48***	-0.10***	-1.44***
	(.19)	(.17)	(.13)	(.13)
Sex: Female	0.93***	-0.30**	-0.10**	-0.28**
	(.14)	(.13)	(.09)	(.09)
Zone of residence *Ref. North*				
Centre	-0.09	-0.26*	0.1**	0.48**
	(.15)	(.14)	(.10)	(.10)
South	-0.34**	-1.17***	-0.03**	0.30**
	(.20)	(.19)	(.15)	(.15)
Socio-economic status	0.04***	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00
	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)
Parents' education level *Ref. High*				
Medium	-0.51***	0.12	-0.00	0.00
	(.22)	(.20)	(.13)	(.13)
Low	-1.36***	-0.19**	-0.05	-0.04
	(.20)	(.21)	(.15)	(.15)
Unknown	-1.65***	-0.86***	-0.06***	-0.47***
	(.24)	(.22)	(.16)	(.16)
Number of siblings	-0.17**	-0.91	-0.00***	-0.15***
	(.06)	(.06)	(.05)	(.05)
Age	-0.89***	-0.31***	-0.03***	-0.27***
	(.12)	(.10)	(.09)	(.09)
Mixed couple	-0.29**	-0.21**	-0.03**	-0.12**
	(.18)	(.09)	(.12)	(.12)
N		6,350	6,350	6,350
R-square		0.15	0.17	0.08

*$p < .1$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

being still uncertain) diminishes as well, with respect to natives. Moreover, results show no differences between natives and second generations.

Among the various covariates, several aspects should be underlined. Females are much more likely to expect to follow an academic track, while differences between the north and south of Italy are evident both in the case of academic and vocational or technical tracks. The role of the family is determinant especially with regard to the likelihood of expecting to enroll in an academic track, both in terms of the parent's human capital and socioeconomic resources.

Column three reports the results of the economic index regression. Coefficients tend to go in the same direction as the previous models, with immigrants' children having poor resources compared to natives' children. In this case, also the second generations tend to have less goods and resources than natives, although differences with Italians are relatively narrow.

The fourth column concerns social interactions. Coefficients here show that the difference from natives is also pronounced across second generations, despite descriptive analyses which show approximately the same level of interactions. In this case as well, first generation children who arrived recently in the host country face more difficulties than the other groups.

To summarise, our results demonstrate that with a longer stay in the host country the differences between children of immigrants and children of Italians narrow, for all the three dimensions considered. However, in contrast to the previous studies, the process of assimilation seems to be faster with regard to the educational expectations (where – *ceteris paribus* – the second generation and natives are practically identical, confirming the results of Table 1), than for the indicators of economic resources and social interactions (where second generations are not fully "assimilated" with natives).

Additional results derive from analyses of ethnic groups and specific groups of students. Figure 3 shows results from a regression where we tested differences between immigrants' children and natives, according to the migration status of the latter, comparing the first quartile of the distribution of natives and the corresponding quartile of the distribution of immigrants. The graph shows how distant immigrants' children who have scarce resources are from natives with high resources. While it is evident that second generations and pre-school immigrants are similar to natives, large differences appear when we consider newcomers. The differences observed in the un-standardised model remain even when we include our control variables.

Figures 4 and 5 show the relative risk of expecting to attend academic or vocational and technical schools by ethnic group of origin. Several of the ethnic groups are consistently found at the bottom of the scale: children of Chinese,

Macedonian and Indian origin. Other groups, especially children of parents from developed countries, the Philippines, or Romania, are more similar to the natives, the reference group.
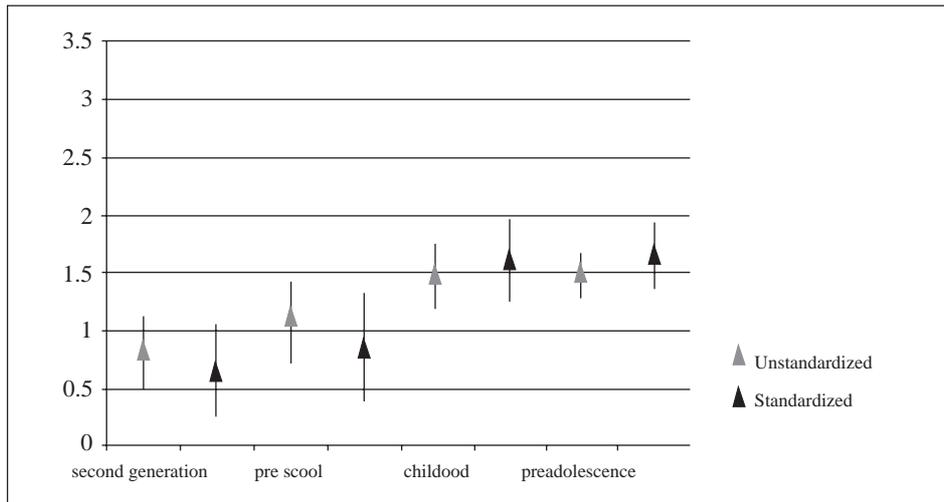

Figure 3: Economic resources. Distance between lowest quartile of immigrants' children and first quartile of natives. Standardised and unstandardised coefficients.
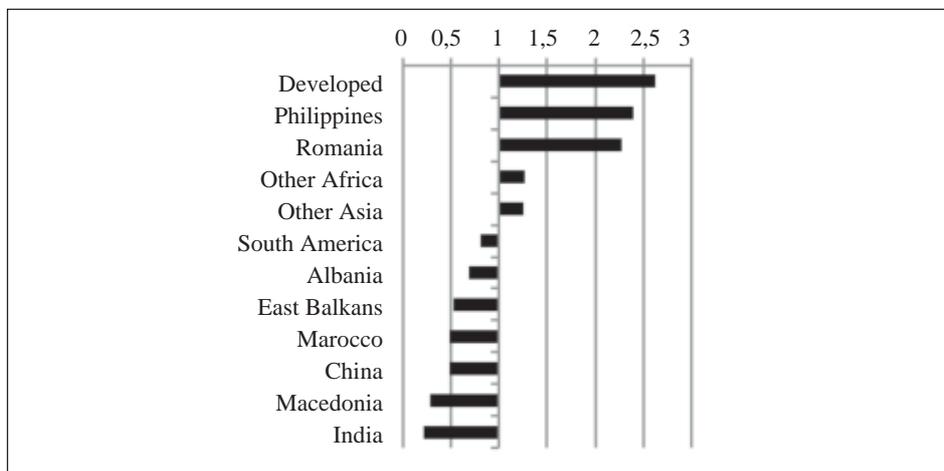
Figure 4[2]: Academic track: comparison between odds ratios of the variable ethnic origin.

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[2] The model controls for gender, education level, socioeconomic status of the parents, area of residence, mixed couple, age, and number of sibilings.
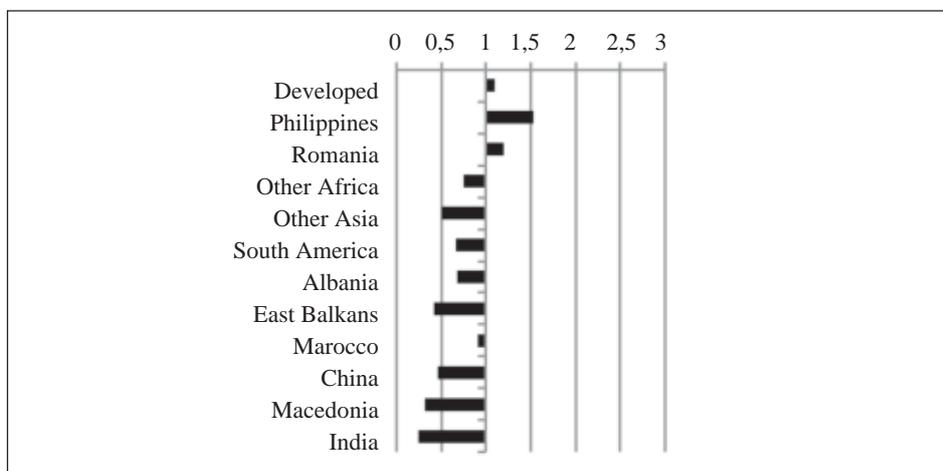
Figure 5[3]: Vocational or technical track: comparison between odds ratios of the variable ethnic origin.

Table 4 includes the results of two different models where we test differences across ethnic groups in term of goods, resources, and social interactions.

Introducing country of origin as an explanatory variable makes the differences between natives, second generations, and pre-school immigrants disappear. However, only a few of the ethnic groups show significantly fewer resources than natives: Asian, Chinese and the Philippine children.

If we look at social interactions, results from country of origin are remarkable. While the standard errors are generally elevated, the direction of odds provides significant information on different ethnic groups. Most show a higher propensity than Italians to have numerous meetings with their native peers. An important exception is, once again, Chinese children.

6. SIMILAR TO…?

Our results show increasing homogenisation over time: children of immigrants tend to become more and more similar to natives as their length of stay in Italy rises. However, just as children of immigrants differ from one another, Italian children are not all the same. Figures 6-8 show how natives differ according to the three dimensions under consideration. Parents' level of education is one of the major

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[3]   The model controls for gender, education level, socioeconomic status of the parents, area of residence, mixed couple, age, and number of siblings.

Table 4: Coefficients from models comparing immigrants' children and natives introducing ethnic groups: economic resources, social interactions[4].

|	Economic resources		Social interactions	
	Index of goods and resources		Meeting Italian friends often	
	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
Migration status *Ref. Natives*				
Second generation immigrants	-0.00	0.01	-0.84***	0.28
Pre-school immigrants	-0.01	0.01	-1.25***	0.30
Childhood immigrants	-0.06***	0.01	-1.39***	0.30
Adolescent immigrants	-0.07***	0.01	-2.08***	0.30
Sex: Female	-0.10***	0.00	-0.28***	0.09
Zone of residence *Ref. North*				
Centre	0.00	0.00	0.49***	0.10
South	-0.02***	0.00	0.31**	0.16
Socio-economic status	0.01***	0.00	.01***	0.00
Parents' education level *Ref. High*				
Medium	-0.03***	0.00	0.02	0.13
Low	-0.02***	0.01	0.00	0.15
Unknown	-0.01***	0.00	-.43***	0.16
Number of siblings	-0.01***	0.00	-.14***	0.05
Age	-0.02***	0.00	-.23***	0.10
Mixed couple	-0.01**	0.01	-.28***	0.12
Country of origin *Ref. Italy*				
Developed	0.05	0.02	0.74**	0.41
Philippines	-0.04*	0.02	0.02	0.36
Romania	-0.02	0.02	1.01***	0.32
Other Africa	-0.02	0.02	0.79*	0.31
Other Asia	-0.05*	0.02	0.29	0.31
South America	0.00	0.01	0.68**	0.32
Albania	0.00	0.01	1.13***	0.29
East Balkans	0.02	0.01	1.12***	0.32
Morocco	0.00	0.02	0.76**	0.30
China	-0.14***	0.01	-0.51**	0.30
Macedonia	-0.02	0.02	0.05	0.34
India	-0.12***	0.02	0.76**	0.30
N	6.350			
R-square	0.15			

*$p < .1$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

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[4] Coefficients on economic resources derive from OLS and coefficients on interactions derive from logit models.
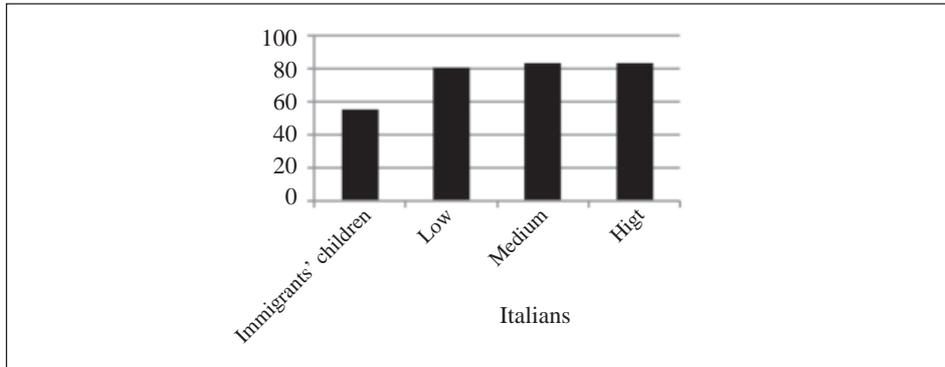
**Figure 6: Immigrants' children and natives' mean resources and goods by
education level of the Italian parents.**
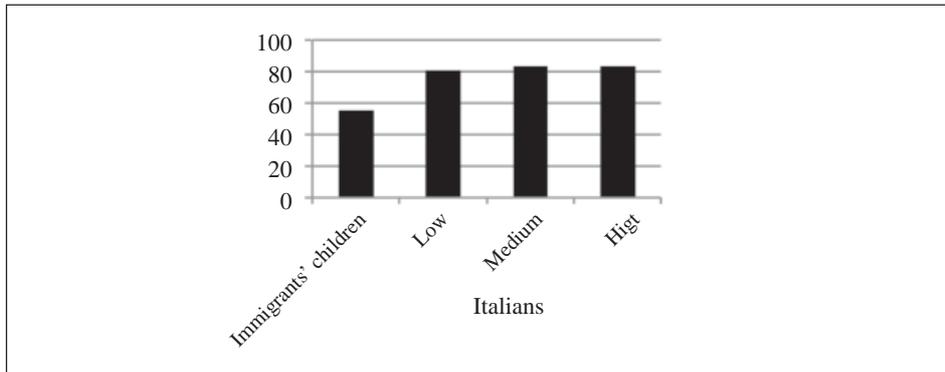
**Figure 7: Distributions of immigrants' children and natives' friendships by
educational level of the Italian parents.**
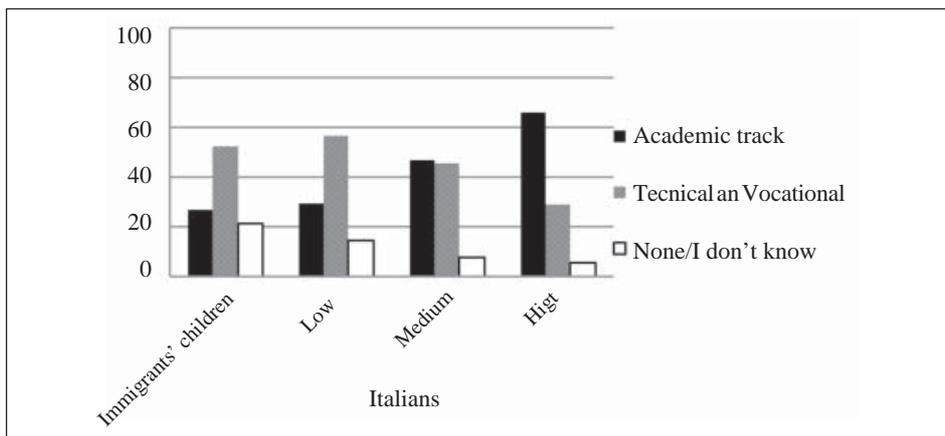
**Figure 8: Distribution of educational expectations of immigrants'
children and natives by educational level of the Italian parents.**

determinants of social differences among Italians. Level of education is defined, as in the previous models, as high if parents studied beyond age 20, medium between ages 15 to 19, and low if they left school before age 15. We expect – since parents' educational level matters more in terms of educational expectations – to find large differences when observing this specific aspect. Figures 6-8 confirm that especially in terms of educational expectations, *immigrants' children tend to be similar to Italian children of low educated parents*. The distribution is exactly the same for the two categories, even if Italians tend to be less uncertain compared to immigrants' children. The distribution completely changes if we consider children with high or medium human capital, who tend to be more concentrated in the academic track (especially children of high educated parents). In terms of resources as well, immigrants' children tend to be similar to Italian children with less human capital. With regard to interactions with Italian friends, natives are clearly more homogenous, while the percentage of children of immigrants who meet Italian friends often outside of school is noticeably inferior to that of natives.

However, as demonstrated above, natives as well as migrants should not be thought of as a homogeneous group. We decided to compute the coefficients of separate models, using natives with highly educated parents as reference categories and considering both the migrant status of the children and the level of education of the parents in order to have a variable with the twelve possible combinations of migration status and level of education of the parents (Table 5).

Results show that the educational expectations of second generations with highly educated parents are the same than those of Italians with highly educated parents, whereas the coefficients for the other categories are significant and negative. Children of immigrants (especially preschool and childhood child) with low educated parents are those who are more distant from the natives with highly educated parents. Generally speaking, the influence of social class on *educational expectation* is stronger than the influence of time-span of living in Italy. With regard to vocational and technical schools, similarities can be found between natives and immigrants' children, with the except of first generation children with low educated parents, who are less likely to choose this option.

In terms of *economic resources*, difference come again with both the level of education of the parents and the migration status. Coefficients of children with low educated parents are higer, especially for immigrants' children arrived during preadolescence.

In terms of *interactions with Italian friends*, Italians denote no differences according to the level of education of the parents, while differences appear once we look at the children of immigrants. Second generations and preschool and childhood

Table 5: Coefficients from models comparing natives with different education backgrounds of their parents and immigrants' children by migration status and education backgrounds of their parents: educational expectations, economic resources, social interactions[5].

Academic track				
	Natives	Second Generations	Preschool and Childhood	Preadolescence
High	Ref.	.00	-.78**	-.88**
Medium	-.54**	-.71**	-.98***	-1.29***
Low	-1.39***	-1.64***	-2.24***	-1.79***
Vocational or technical track				
	Natives	Second Generations	Preschool and Childhood	Preadolescence
High	Ref.	.61	-.26	-.13
Medium	.17	.26	-.53	-.41
Low	-.08	-.51	-1.04***	-.86**
Economic resources				
	Natives	Second Generations	Preschool and Childhood	Preadolescence
High	Ref.	-.03	-.02**	-.06***
Medium	-.00	-.04***	-.06***	-.07***
Low	-.03***	-.05***	-.09***	-.11**
Social interactions				
	Natives	Second Generations	Preschool and Childhood	Preadolescence
High	Ref.	.01	-.34	-1.24***
Medium	.04	-.74***	-.72***	-1.36***
Low	.03	-.94***	-1.06***	-2.00***

children with high educated parents are similar to natives, while for the other categories coefficients are significant and negative. The worse situation is the one of most recently comers with low or medium educated parents.

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[5]   Coefficients on academic and vocational tracks are derived from multinomial models, coefficients on interactions derive from logit models, and coefficients on economic resources derive from OLS. All models control for gender, and the socioeconomic status of the parents, as well as area of residence, mixed couple, age, and number of siblings.

7. DISCUSSION

There are three main results that clearly emerge from our paper.

First, confirming the findings of other scholars, the process of assimilation strictly depends on the length of time spent in Italy: second generations tend to be more similar to natives in all of the dimensions considered, while first generations demonstrate net differences with respect to Italians, considering the three aspects here considered. Moreover, our results show that this mechanism works also for the choice of the school path after the first eight classes: natives and second generation have a similar school "destiny" (although it does not mean that they will have similar school results). Second, it is essential, when speaking of assimilation of foreign children, consider their social class and social class of their Italian "counterpart", especially with regard to the expectations of education and the acquisition of economic resources. On the one hand, concerning these two dimensions, the immigrants' children live experiences very similar to that of Italians' children of low social status. On the other hand, differences in social class are more prominent than those related to the time of arrival in Italy, confirming, once again, the difficult social mobility that characterises the entire Italian society (Barone *et al.*, 2011). Finally, the process of assimilation is faster between Italian and foreign students if they are both children of educated parents, much slower if both are children of poorly educated parents.

Third, one ethnic group shows a tendency of little or no integration. Children of Chinese origins in fact manifest lower educational expecations than all others if compared to natives, as well as reduced levels of economic resources and goods with respect to natives. In terms of interactions with friends, the Chinese are the only ones who demonstrate a lower propensity than natives to have frequent meetings with Italian peers. Children of Chinese backgrounds tend to create strong co-ethnic communities where the process of acculturation is delayed and parts of the parental culture and language are maintained while the new culture is learned (Vermeulen, 2010). Moreover, their tendency to underperform other ethnic groups in terms of educational expectations is likely driven by the fact that they do not consider education as a means of social mobility, in that the latter is much more connected to strong family economic strategies.

Finally, as mentioned in the review of the literature, while some scholars believe that downward assimilation cannot possibly exist in Europe (Vermeulen, 2010), others have noticed signs of downward assimilation. Our results suggest that there is some evidence that Italy risks the latter, with newcomers at a higher risk of being very different to natives with high education backgrounds. Or – better – the idea is that immigrants' children share the difficulties of Italian children belonging to low social class of climbing the social ladder.

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