

## **Learning paths of students with migratory background: early school leaving and future selves**

**Caterina Bembich**

**Abstract** – *Students with a migratory background represent a constantly growing segment of the Italian school population. Therefore, it is more pressing than every to highlight aspects of their particular vulnerability. The difficulties encountered by these students may be attributed to a set of factors that often place them in situations of risk of school failure. One aspect correlated with academic achievement and dropout is the concept of possible future self. Possible selves constitute the representation that people create of themselves in the future, thus embodying the personal expectations and goals they wish to achieve. Possible selves are socially constructed and can be modified depending on the contexts, by the experiences and opportunities encountered. Starting from these premises, this study aims to investigate factors that may affect the learning path of students with a migrant background, through using an exploratory survey with first and second secondary school degree students.*

**Riassunto** – *Gli studenti con background migratorio rappresentano una fascia di popolazione scolastica in costante crescita nelle scuole italiane e che al contempo evidenzia degli aspetti di particolare vulnerabilità. Le difficoltà incontrate da questi giovani possono essere attribuibili ad insieme di fattori che pongono questi ragazzi spesso in situazioni di rischio di fallimento scolastico. Uno dei fattori che risulta correlato con i risultati scolastici e con la dispersione è rappresentato dal concetto di sé futuro. I possibili sé costituiscono la rappresentazione che le persone creano di sé stessi nel futuro, incarnano quindi le aspettative e gli obiettivi personali che si desidera. I possibili sé sono costruiti socialmente e possono essere modificati dai contesti sociali e dalle opportunità incontrate. Partendo da queste premesse, lo studio si pone l'obiettivo di indagare alcuni fattori che possono influire sul percorso scolastico dei ragazzi con storia migratoria attraverso un'indagine esplorativa a cui hanno partecipato studenti delle scuole secondarie di primo e secondo grado.*

**Keywords** – early school leaving, future selves, foreign-born student, inclusion, vulnerability

**Parole chiave** – dispersione, possibili sé futuri, studenti/studentesse con background migratorio, inclusione, vulnerabilità

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## 1. Introduction

Foreign students often experience more difficulties than peers during their learning pathway, exposing them to greater risk of scholastic failure and early school leaving. The schools they attend are not always able to develop strategies or paths to support these students to overcome obstacles, which causes them to be at a disadvantage. Therefore, social inequalities are not always able to tackle, with the result that many students with a migrant background do not complete their schooling or do not access post-diploma education<sup>1</sup>.

The scholastic difficulties faced by foreign students can be attributed to a complex intertwining of variables and a plurality of causes (such as different expectations towards the school, language barriers, disadvantaged socio-economic conditions). We know that academic success is an important aspect of a children's life that strongly influences their future path and career opportunities as adults<sup>2</sup>.

The data published by the Ministry of Education relating to students with non-Italian citizenship<sup>3</sup>, reveals that in the school year 2019/2020 foreign students constituted 10.3% of the school population, with an increase of 19,000 units (+2,2%), compared to a slight decline in Italian students (-1.5%). The growing trend confirms the data also reported in the previous report<sup>4</sup>, where a constant increase in the school population was already observed.

The Miur data also highlights how foreign students experience higher dropout rates both in lower and upper secondary school<sup>5</sup>, especially among young people born abroad. The numbers indicate that in the 2016/2017 school year and in the transition to the 2017/2018 school year, in lower secondary schools the percentage of foreign students who dropped out stood at 2.92% (versus 0.45% for students with Italian citizenship); in the transition between cycles the percentage increased to 5.21% (compared to 1.08% for students with Italian citizenship); and finally, in secondary school the percentage stood at 10.5% (compared with 3.3% for pupils with Italian citizenship).

Early school leaving therefore manifests an uneven distribution across the school population, reflecting social inequality in school pathways<sup>6</sup>, where the most disadvantaged and fragile individuals, coming from less privileged contexts, are most affected<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> G. Benvenuto, *La scuola diseguale*, Roma, Anicia, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> F. Morrison, H. Bachman, C. Connor, *Improving literacy in America: Guidelines from research*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Ministero dell'Istruzione dell'Università e della Ricerca, *Gli alunni con cittadinanza non italiana A.S. 2019/2020*, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Ministero dell'Istruzione dell'Università e della Ricerca, *La dispersione scolastica nell'anno scolastico 2016/2017 e nel passaggio all'anno scolastico 2017/2018*, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Ministero dell'Istruzione dell'Università e della Ricerca, *Gli alunni con cittadinanza non italiana A.S. 2017/2018*, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> F. Batini, G. Benvenuto, *Le parole disperse. La voce degli studenti drop-out e la ricerca etnografica in pedagogia*, in G. Szpunar, P. Sposetti, A. Sanzo (Eds.), *Narrazione e educazione*, Roma, Nuova Cultura, 2016, pp. 67-78.

<sup>7</sup> R. Serpieri, E. Grimaldi, *Che razza di scuola*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2013; M. Tarozzi, *Dall'Intercultura alla giustizia sociale. Per un progetto pedagogico e politico di cittadinanza globale*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2015

The definition of early school leaving includes a set of situations that determine an extension or an interruption of the school path and a change in its trajectory. It therefore includes missed entries, evasion of compulsory schooling, irregular frequencies, failures and abandonments. The factors that determine delays (for example, failures) or irregularities in school attendance, are thus considered risk factors indicating possible early exit from the educational system. School failure, characterized by low performance and continuous failures, repeated absences, poor involvement in school, especially if repeated over time, can therefore lead to early school leaving. These conditions may be reflective of a low level of investment made by the student in their educational path<sup>8</sup>, or negative attitudes toward the learning experience, and low expectations regarding future opportunities offered by the school<sup>9</sup>.

The school context is relevant in supporting the inclusion and learning path of young people with a migration background. It is important that teachers are trained to understand the needs of these students in order to ensure everyone's participation and enhance everyone's competences and peculiarities<sup>10</sup>. To contrast the risk of school failure and drop out, it is necessary to develop an in-depth knowledge of the student's skills, of the expectations placed on school and of their aims for on future life. It is important to help young people to develop a deeper awareness and knowledge of their own self, of their personal inclinations in relation to the opportunities present in the social context.

## 2. Future self and academic success

A student's time in school takes on different meanings depending on the future goals they set for themselves and expectations they work towards. School activities assume a positive value for students if they are perceived to act in line with their future goals and are considered significant for achieving their projects. By introducing the term "possible selves", Markus & Nurius<sup>11</sup> identify part of the concept of self that incorporates the future objectives that a person imagines they can achieve.

The concept of possible selves is considered one of the components of self-regulation: it involves a set of processes that allows people to regulate their behaviors, emotions and thoughts. Possible selves are closely linked to self-regulation abilities and influence their modulation: images of one's future self, create personal objectives and influence behaviors that are aimed at achieving that goal<sup>12</sup>. By constructing a positive future self-image to work towards and negative ones to avoid, possible selves personalize goals and link current behaviors to future

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<sup>8</sup> C.S. Dweck, *Mindset: The new psychology of success*, New York, Random House, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> I. Thompson, *Tackling social disadvantage through teacher education*, London, Critical Publishing, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> A. Canevaro, D. Ianes, *Buone prassi di integrazione e inclusione scolastica*, Trento, Erickson, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. H. Markus, P. Nurius, *Possible selves*, in "American Psychologist", 41, 1986, pp. 954-969.

<sup>12</sup> D. Oyserman, K. Terry, D. Bybee, *A possible selves intervention to enhance school involvement*, in "Journal of Adolescence", 25, 2002, pp. 313-326.

states. In this way, possible selves improve self-regulation and make one's current situation feel meaningful<sup>13</sup>.

Possible selves represent the embodiment of personal goals, expectations about what we can become and play a role in motivating behavior<sup>14</sup>. The motivational drive that leads the individual to persist in achieving a future goal, is strictly connected to the sense of competence that they have developed with respect to themselves and their awareness of being able to achieve that goal. Therefore, if the person feels that they are able to achieve a goal, they will act with confidence, commitment and persist in the face of obstacles<sup>15</sup>.

According to Oyserman et al.<sup>16</sup>, possible selves intervene more effectively in self-regulatory processes when the person has developed a detailed future self-image linked to specific action strategies, directly connected to the future state. This condition helps children to set specific goals and plan strategies to achieve them, boosting their motivational drive.

The concept of self gives meaning to experiences and at the same time is modified by them. The vision of ourselves in the future is an internal representation of the person we would like to become as a result of a path we have undertaken.

Possible selves are connected to academic achievement: students who think about their future self with confidence and develop a sense of self related to success, are more likely to be successful in learning<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, they tend to be the students who exhibit greater persistence when they encounter difficulties and develop higher motivation towards learning. This aspect is particularly significant when school contexts are supportive and reinforce the efforts made by children with positive feedback<sup>18</sup>. Context therefore plays a decisive role in the construction of the future selves of young people: in fact, if students feel that their effort is recognized and effective, they will be more motivated to follow their learning objectives. Research has also shown that possible selves have an influence on early school leaving: students who have developed a possible academic self, show lower dropout rates and higher percentage of academic achievement<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> S. Cross, H. Markus, *Possible selves across the life span*, in "Human Development", 34, 1991, pp. 230-255.

<sup>14</sup> L. D. Frazier, K. Hooker, *Possible selves in adult development: Linking theory and research*, in C. Dunkel, J. Kerpelman (Eds.), *Possible selves: Theory, research and applications*, Hauppaug, Nova Publishers, 2006, pp. 41-59.

<sup>15</sup> O. Fisher, D. Oyserman, *Assessing interpretations of experienced ease and difficulty as motivational constructs*, in "Motivation Science", 3(2), 2017, pp. 33-163.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. D. Oyserman, K. Terry, D. Bybee, *A possible selves intervention to enhance school involvement*, in "Journal of Adolescence", 25, 2002, pp. 313-326.

<sup>17</sup> E. Altintas, Y. Karaca, A. Moustafa, M. El Haj, *Effect of best possible self intervention on situational motivation and commitment in academic context*, in "Learning and Motivation", 69, 2020, pp. 1-23.

<sup>18</sup> D. Oyserman, *The essentialized self: Implications for motivation and self-regulation*, in "Journal of Consumer Psychology", 29(2), 2019, pp. 336-343.

<sup>19</sup> E. Horowitz, D. Oyserman, M. Dehghani, N. Sorensen, *Do you need a roadmaps or can someone give you directions: When school-focused possible identities change so do academic trajectories?* In "Journal of Adolescence", 79, 2020, pp. 26-38.

Evolutionary factors exert a strong influence over possible selves, as do contextual and cultural aspects; they are therefore modified by their experiences, by the opportunities they encounter, and by possible limits or lack of resources. Possible selves are always built through relationships, experiences and social contexts. The formation of one's future self is therefore shaped through culture and social aspects. For example, in forming an idea of their own successes and failures, the individual assigns value to their achievements by comparing them with the results obtained by others. Even at school, results are always derived from a comparative assessment within the group of students<sup>20</sup>. Thus, if the contexts in which children make their experience change, the possible selves identified for themselves can also be modified. Furthermore, social expectations, stereotypes and roles played within a community, can influence the way in which children form their future self.

Since possible selves are socially constructed, it becomes important to understand how students with a migrant background develop a concept of themselves in the future, in order to identify possible factors that could influence their learning outcome and academic and professional choices. It is thus interesting to understand which possibilities are imagined by foreign-born students for their future, what they consider possible for themselves and how these factors affect their learning experience. Understanding these elements could prove helpful for schools, in order to introduce interventions and experimentation to reduce inequality and negative outcomes.

Starting from these premises, this work highlights some data collected through an exploratory survey developed within the FAMI IMPACT FVG project (Qualification of the school system in multicultural contexts, also through actions to contrast early school leaving)<sup>21</sup>. The project aimed to analyze through an exploratory survey, the risk factors related to school failure in students in secondary schools (first and second year), and subsequently promote research and training actions with teachers to counteract school dropout, especially among foreign-born students.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. *The project and the survey*

Within the FAMI IMPACT FVG project in the 2018-2019 school year, the risk factors contributing to school failure were explored for students from Third Countries and with a migratory background, in secondary schools in Friuli Venezia Giulia region<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> D. Oyserman, K. Terry, D. Bybee, *A possible selves intervention to enhance school involvement*, in "Journal of Adolescence", 25, 2002, pp. 313-326.

<sup>21</sup> FAMI-IMPACT FVG 2018-2020 project, funded from 2014-2020 - OS2 Migration and Integration Asylum Fund. The project is carried out in collaboration with the University of Trieste and the University of Udine with the proponent Friuli Venezia Giulia region.

<sup>22</sup> The indicators of the project define this category as: students who have Italian citizenship or citizenship of another EU country, but who have at least one parent who immigrated to Italy from a non-EU country.

The definition of “students with a migratory background” is explained in the glossary of the European Union<sup>23</sup>, which clarifies the terminology. Person with a migratory background is a person who:

- a) immigrated to her current country of residence; and / or
- b) in the past had the citizenship of a country other than the current one of residence; and / or
- c) at least one of her parents has entered her current country of residence as a migrant.

A reflection on the definition of this indicator “migratory background” is needed to highlight some aspects of ambiguity that were found during the survey. In fact, compared to the Italian context, the term is not matched by the data made available by the MIUR and is very complex to disentangle. It can refer to a set of situations that reflect very different circumstances: for example, this category includes children of mixed couples with at least one parent coming from a third country (i.e., “non-EU”), and pupils with both parents originating from a third country of which at least one of the two has acquired Italian citizenship or citizenship of another member country of the European Union<sup>24</sup>. From a methodological point of view, the use of this definition derived from a European context, raised a series of questions and reflections on how to employ methods of investigation that were not stigmatizing nor invasive for children.

During the first phase of the project, a questionnaire was developed for students of lower and upper secondary schools which investigated a set of factors associated with the risk of school failure, employing a multifactorial analysis perspective. For the purposes of this research, the analysis focused on questions relating to particular dimensions:

1. Descriptive data of the school population: background of origin; delays in schooling; desired educational qualification.
2. The causes attributed by students to academic difficulties: possible general causes (“In your opinion, on what do students' academic difficulties depend?”); personal aspects (“Which of the following personal characteristics do you think affects academic success the most?”).

This study assumed as independent variables in the data analysis, the variable “Background of origin” of the students (students from Third Countries (TC); with Migratory Background (MB); with Italian citizenship or belonging to the European Community (UE) respectively in the two-school grade (first and second degree).

### *3.2. The participants*

The survey engaged a total of 526 students who answered an online questionnaire, divided into different sections and made up of closed items (on a Likert scale from 0 to 4): 244 attend

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-wedo/networks/european\\_migration\\_network/glossary\\_search/-person-migratory-background\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-wedo/networks/european_migration_network/glossary_search/-person-migratory-background_en)

<sup>24</sup> For further information: REPORT ON SCHOOL LEAVING FAMI IMPACT xxx Project - Qualification of the school system in multicultural contexts, also through actions to combat early school leaving (Action 1). University of Trieste, <https://www.regione.fvg.it/rafvfg/cms/RAFVG/cultura-sport/immigrazione/FOGLIA8>.

the first degree of secondary schools and 282 the second. The secondary schools involved were: high schools, technical and professional institutes, vocational training institutions.

For first degree secondary schools, have been involved students from 11th to 14th years old (average age = 13.32; SD = 0.74; female students = 42.2%; male students = 44.3%; undeclared sex = 13, 5%), while for the second degree the survey was aimed only at students under the age of 18 (average age = 16, 27; SD = 0.74; female students = 61.1%; male students = 35, 5%; undeclared sex = 1.4%).

### *Background of origins*

Considering background of origin, in the first degree 17.6% of students had a migratory background, 20.5% coming from third countries and 61.9% from the European Community<sup>25</sup> (Table 1). In the second degree: 13.3% had a migratory background, 10.6% from third countries, and 78% from European Community countries.

The students coming from a third country mostly originate from Kosovo (16.3%), Macedonia (11.3%) and Serbia (27.5%). As for students with a migratory background, there is a higher percentage of families from Albania (13%), Kosovo (14.7%), and Serbia (14.7%).

	First degree n. 244	Second degree n. 282
<b>Background of origins (%)</b>		
Migratory background	17,6%	11,3%
Third countries	20,5%	10,6%
European Community	61,9%	78,0%

*Table 1 – Descriptive data of the sample of participants: Background of origins*

<sup>25</sup> This category includes students from Italy and a very small percentage from other European Community countries.

### 3.3. Results

#### School delay

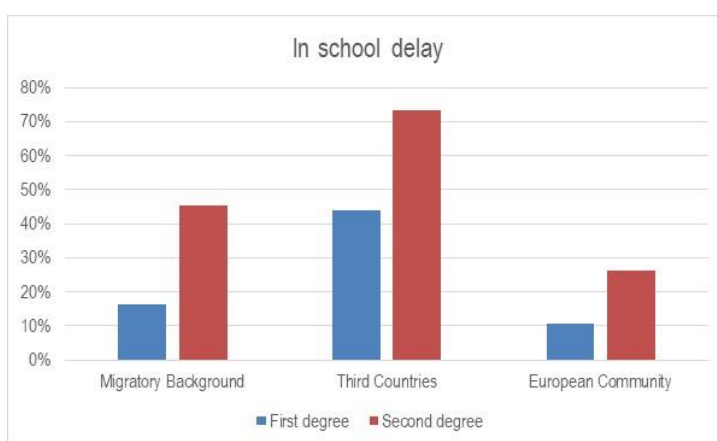
Background of origins	First degree n. 244		Second degree n. 282	
	In school delay	Regular classes	In school delay	Regular classes
Migratory background	16.3%	83.7%	45.5%	54.5%
Third countries	44%	56%	73.3%	26.7%
European Community	10.6%	89.4%	26.4%	73.6%

Table 2 – School delay-percentage of students in school delay and attending regular classes considering year of birth

Analyzing the trend of school delay in the two school degree classes – number of students attending a class lower than the class that is supposed to attend considering the year of birth – higher percentages are observed in the transition from first grade to second degree.

Furthermore, considering the three subgroups, a higher percentage of students from third countries and with migratory background experience school delay as compared to EU students (Table 2).

The percentage also tends to increase in the transition of school grade especially for this population group: first grade: BM = 16.3%, PT = 44%, EU = 10.6%; second grade: BM = 45.5%, PT = 73.3%, EU = 26.4%, (Graph 1).



Graph 1 – Percentage of students in school delay in the two school grades and in relation to background of origin



*Qualification to strive for*

<b>First degree</b>				
<b>Background of origins</b>	No educational qualification	3 years professional qualification	5 years high school	Bachelor's degree or other post-diploma training
Migratory background	2.32%	9.30%	30.23%	58.13%
Third countries	6%	20%	26%	48.0%
European Community	5.2%	9.93%	27.15%	57.6%
<b>Second degree</b>				
<b>Background of origins</b>	No educational qualification	3 years professional qualification	5 years high school	Bachelor's degree or other post-diploma training
Migratory background	0%	12.5%	43.75%	43.75%
Third countries	0%	16.6%	60%	23.3%
European Community	5%	81.8%	37.27%	52.27%

*Table 3 – Which educational qualifications would you like to achieve?*

In general, a majority of the students in the lower secondary school aspire to obtain a degree or to continue their post-diploma training (MB = 58,13%, TC = 48%, EU = 57.6%). On the other hand, a different picture is observed for secondary school students: while about half of EU and BM students are interested in continuing their studies after secondary school (MB = 43.75%, EU = 52.27%), among PT pupils only 23.3% seem to consider this possibility (Table 3).

*Causal attribution by students to academic difficulties*

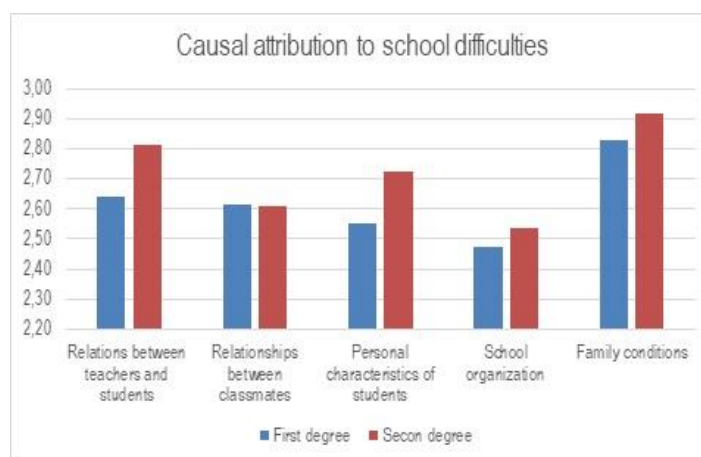
In the first grade school, a statistically significant difference is observed in the answers given in the three groups of students for the question relating to the relationship between students and the question relating to school organization. In particular, for the first question, students from third countries consider the impact of peer relationships on academic success higher than BM ( $F(2, 241) = 5.017$ ;  $p = 0.007$ )<sup>26</sup>. As for the question about the organization, students from third countries consistently assign a higher score to the answer, compared to EU ( $F(2, 241) = 4.6$ ;  $p = 0.011$ ). For secondary school students, no statistically significant differences were found in the three groups (Table 4).

<sup>26</sup> Anova corrected by welch and post doc games-howell for non-homogeneous variance.

Relations between teachers and students		
	First degree	Second degree
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Migratory Background	2,58 (1,07)	2,66 (0,95)
Third Countries	2,93 (1,00)	2,84 (1,01)
European Community	2,57 (1,03)	2,93 (0,89)
Relationships between classmates		
	First degree	Second degree
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Migratory Background	2,30 (0,95)*	2,66 (0,99)
Third Countries	2,93 (0,93)*	2,53 (0,98)
European Community	2,62 (0,97)	2,63 (0,91)
Personal characteristics of students		
	First degree	Second degree
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Migratory Background	2,76 (0,95)	2,60 (0,93)
Third Countries	2,44 (0,93)	2,71 (1,05)
European Community	2,51 (1,04)	2,85 (0,85)
School organization		
	First degree	Second degree
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Migratory Background	2,42 (1,10)	2,30 (1,02)
Third Countries	2,93 (1,05)*	2,62 (1,09)
European Community	2,36 (1,09)*	2,68 (0,95)
Family conditions		
	First degree	Second degree
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Migratory Background	2,68 (1,18)	2,96 (1,03)
Third Countries	2,97 (1,03)	2,75 (1,21)
European Community	2,83 (1,07)	3,02 (0,98)

Table 4 – Causal attribution by students to academic difficulties

Observing the global averages in the two school degree groups, in general students attributed the greatest weight to the family aspect compared to their academic difficulties and, secondly, to the relationship between teachers and students (Graph 2).



Graph 2 – Causal attribution to school difficulties

### *Personal aspects that affect academic success*

In the first grade school, there are no statistically significant differences in the three groups; while in the second grade school, there is a statistically significant difference in the answers given by the three groups of students for the question relating to motivation. In particular, students from third countries consider the impact of the motivational aspect on academic success, to be significantly lower than other children ( $F(2, 279) = 3.396; p = 0.035$ )<sup>27</sup>; (Table 5).

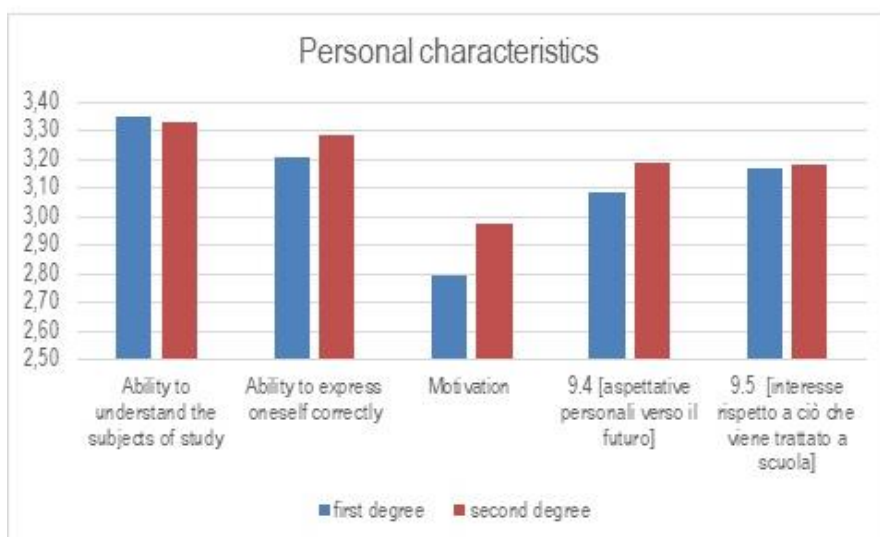
<b>Ability to understand the subjects of study</b>		
	First degree	Second degree
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Migratory Background	3,38 (0,85)	3,40 (0,81)
Third Countries	3,32 (0,89)	3,28 (0,72)
European Community	3,34 (0,74)	3,30 (0,73)
<b>Ability to express oneself correctly</b>		
	First degree	Second degree
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Migratory Background	3,04 (0,98)	3,40 (0,81)
Third Countries	3,30 (0,80)	3,28 (0,72)
European Community	3,27 (0,76)	3,30 (0,73)
<b>Personal characteristics of students</b>		
	First degree	Second degree
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Migratory Background	2,76 (0,95)	3,23 (0,81)
Third Countries	2,44 (0,93)	3,34 (0,70)
European Community	2,51 (1,04)	3,26 (0,73)
<b>Motivation</b>		
	First degree	Second degree
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Migratory Background	2,64 (0,92)	3,10 (0,80)*
Third Countries	2,95 (1,04)	2,68 (1,11)*
European Community	2,79 (1,04)	3,14 (0,90)*
<b>Personal expectations towards the future</b>		
	First degree	Second degree
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Migratory Background	3,10 (0,99)	3,26 (0,82)
Third Countries	3,04 (0,72)	3,12 (0,79)
European Community	3,10 (0,91)	3,16 (0,81)
<b>Interest in what is treated at school</b>		
	First degree	Second degree
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Migratory Background	3,14 (0,78)	3,23 (0,77)
Third Countries	3,16 (0,97)	3,18 (0,82)
European Community	3,20 (0,82)	3,13 (0,83)

*Table 5 – Personal aspects that affect academic success*

Observing the global averages in the two school degree groups, in general the students believe that the ability to understand the study subjects and to express oneself correctly, have

<sup>27</sup> Anova corrected by welch and post doc games-howell for non-homogeneous variance.

a greater impact on academic success. The intrinsic aspects (linked to motivation, expectations for the future, interest in school subjects) seem to be considered less decisive for achieving good results at school and especially for younger students (Graph 3).



Graph 3 – Personal aspects that affect academic success

### 3.4. Discussion

The results highlight that student from third countries and with migratory background, experience a higher rate of school delay especially in upper secondary schools. School delay is a risk factor that makes them more vulnerable and more likely to leave school early. This data is in line with the results presented in the MIUR report on early school leaving in Italy (2019), where it was observed that foreign-born children are more at risk of dropping out and show a higher percentage of school delay, especially in the transition to second degree at secondary school. Foreign-born pupils represent a constantly growing segment of the student population and at the same time are those most at risk of failure. This data appears very worrying because it means that in terms of future growth, a percentage of the student population probably will not achieve qualifications that allow them access to more qualified professions; it can be assumed that this situation will have a high social impact in the near future, leading to a more marked social stratification and an increase in inequalities.

Looking at aspirations for their future, the data show that the percentage of lower secondary school students who aspire to a degree or post-diploma training is about half for the global sample. It is interesting to observe how in first grade school the aspirations of the students seem

to compete in a uniform way towards post-diploma training: for younger children this constituted a concrete possibility that seems to fade with growth. In fact, this trend is not observed for third-country secondary school students, who mostly aspire to obtaining a diploma. This segment of the population therefore seems to invest significantly less in longer and more advanced learning paths and seems to be focused more on securing immediate job opportunities. This data therefore highlights the different investment that this segment of students makes towards their own training and reveals experienced inequality for these young people, who seem to be partially precluded from the possibility of pursuing more advanced training.

Compared to academic difficulties, first grade school students from third countries considered the relationship between peers and school organization factors which have a greater impact on school failure. This data suggests that these students find themselves in greater difficulty both in relating to classmates and in getting into the school organization. In all likelihood foreign-born students have little knowledge about the functioning of the school system and their language barriers make communication and relationships with their peers more difficult.

Furthermore, the results show that in general students believe that the academic difficulties are due, in higher proportions, to the relationship between teachers and students and to family conditions. Therefore, the relational dynamics are considered a central factor for achieving academic success, as the family context provides a possible source of support and stability.

The attribution of school difficulties seems to be more limited to relational and social factors and are lesser exposed to intrinsic causes. This data also explored the personal factors that according to the students influence academic success. Aspects related to intrinsic motivation, expectations for the future or interest in the subjects of study, seem to be considered secondary compared to such aspects as the understanding and ability to express language competencies.

#### 4. Conclusion

The learning paths of foreign-born students can often be difficult, exposing them to risk of school failure and dropout. Schools do not always develop strategies or interventions to support these pupils to overcome the obstacles they face, which results in them facing situations of disadvantage and fragility. Therefore, social inequalities are not always leveled, with the consequence that many foreign-born students do not complete their schooling or do not access post-diploma education levels<sup>28</sup>. There remains a very marked channeling of students into school paths determined by their socio-cultural context of origin, by their family background and also by their geographical provenances<sup>29</sup>.

Schools should consider some factors as contributing to school failure: for example, the lack of a sense of positive belonging to school, putting little investment into learning, that cause a disconnect between school and students' future life goals.

<sup>28</sup> G. Benvenuto, *La scuola diseguale*, Roma, Anicia, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> B. Losito, *Alcuni dati sulle disuguaglianze e iniquità nei sistemi scolastici*, in G. Benvenuto (a cura di), *La scuola diseguale. Dispersione ed equità nel sistema di istruzione e formazione*, Roma, Anicia, 2011, pp.177-186.

Attention should therefore be paid to the projects that schools can implement to make learning contexts inclusive and responsive to everyone's needs. This is a question of identifying possible factors that can determine positive school outcomes and launching interventions with the aim of providing equal learning opportunities for children in conditions of fragility, overcoming inequality.

The survey highlighted some differences in the perceptions of students in the two school grades and in the three groups, but at the same time highlighted some recurring and common aspects.

With regards to the investment one puts into one's own future, a change of perspective was observed in the two school grades. While most of the students in the first grade school imagined their future oriented towards post-diploma training courses, students coming from third countries in the second grade had greatly reduced educational ambitions. In fact, only a small percentage declared that they aspired to a high-level training course. This aspect needs further exploration to understand how the social context of these young people plays a role in creating their future self-image, and therefore how families, school and socio-cultural identities can influence the ideas that they develop. It can be assumed that the context in which young people live, influences the importance they place on their future schooling and future working life: pupils who are surrounded by positive expectations towards studying, will assuredly be facilitated and supported on their path as compared to those who don't receive such support and encouragement.

For students, relational aspects also seem to carry weight in influencing their learning path, both as regards to relationships between peers and relationships with teachers and family<sup>30</sup>.

In understanding how it is possible to support the paths of these young people, it is critical to begin with their schooling. For example, the socio-emotional climate they experience in the classroom, is closely correlated with the school results they obtain and also their future orientations<sup>31</sup>. Moreover, it is in turn correlated with the quality of the relationship they experience with their teachers: the emotional experiences represent an element that affects their future expectations and their investment in school<sup>32</sup>.

The survey further highlighted how students identify some personal skills as central to success in school – for example, the ability to express themselves correctly. On the other hand, intrinsic aspects, such as motivations, interest and expectations for the future, seem to be perceived as less decisive for success in school, especially for younger children. The focus of the students is therefore centered more on aspects related to performance and achievement, rather than considering factors related to mastery and personal involvement. This conception can be risky, as it highlights scarce investment in intrinsic factors which exert significant influence on

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<sup>30</sup> D. Oyserman, S. Fryberg, *The possible selves of diverse adolescents: Content and function across gender, race and national origin*, in "Possible Selves: Theory, Research, and Applications", 2(4), 2006, pp. 17-39.

<sup>31</sup> J.P. Barile, D.K. Donohue, E.R. Anthony, A.M. Baker, S.R. Weaver, C.C Henrich, *Teacher-Student relationship climate and school outcomes: Implications for educational policy initiatives*, in "Journal of youth and adolescence", 41(3), 2012, pp. 256-267.

<sup>32</sup> R.D. Taylor, E. Oberle, J.A. Durlak, R.P. Weissberg, *Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects*, in "Child development", 88(4), 2017, pp. 1156-1171.

learning, especially in difficult situations where higher motivation and ability to persist are required.

In conclusion, in order to understand how to support the educational pathways of the most vulnerable students, it is important to consider how a diversity of factors can affect learning outcomes. Social context, relational aspects and processes linked to the development of one's future self, create an intertwining of elements that can provide protection and resilience to support children who encounter obstacles at school. As such, helping students to develop a positive vision of their future self, connected to important life tasks (such as academic success), could prove critical for building learning pathways which strengthen their resilience and promote a positive perception of themselves.

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