



Immigrant background peer effects in Italian schools

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an empirical assessment of the effect of the concentration of students of immigrant origin on student learning, in Italian primary and lower secondary schools. I draw on the data of a national standardized learning assessment administered in 2010 to the entire student population at selected grades. The main threat to identification is given by the endogeneity of school characteristics, due to the fact that families choose their children's schools. To circumvent this problem I exploit the within-school random variability observed in the share of immigrant students across classes. I estimate peer effects allowing for heterogeneous effects between native and immigrant background children, and among natives, between children of different socio-economic background. The main finding is that the proportion of children of immigrant origin has a weak negative effect on child learning outcomes. This negative effect is somewhat larger for children of immigrant and low socio-economic background, while it is negligible or even positive for high social origin native children.

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1. Introduction

The rapid growth of immigrant flows which has occurred over the last decade in Italy, much like in other European countries, has sparked a growing concern within large sectors of the public opinion over the assimilability of newcomers and the demographic and cultural transformations of the Italian society. A key element of the integration process is the educational system, which is now confronted with the challenge of the inclusion of numerous immigrant children of diverse origins. Overall, at the national level, the share of students from an immigrant background in primary and lower secondary school has increased from 3% to 9% in ten years (with peaks of 20% in some Northern cities). This growth has contributed to raise the fear that immigrant students are detrimental to the learning opportunities of native children. However, whether this is true or not, is still an open empirical question.

Evidence of large performance gaps between native and immigrant background students is provided by many studies (e.g. OECD, 2012; Schnepf, 2007; Dustmann et al., 2011). Yet, there is a considerable cross-country heterogeneity in the magnitude of these gaps. In traditional immigration countries like USA, Australia and Canada immigrant background children perform much better relative to natives as compared to most European countries, where immigration is a recent phenomenon. Major differences are also observed within Europe, as in English-speaking countries the gap is much smaller. Focusing on the children of immigrants arrived in the second half of the 20th century, Heat and Brinbaum (2007) emphasize that educational inequalities in attainment and performance vary considerably across ethnic communities, but also within ethnic communities over host countries and migration waves.

The lower socio-economic background of immigrant communities is one possible explanation of their educational disadvantage. However, according to Heat and Brinbaum (2007) socio-economic background fully explains the educational disadvantage of traditional immigration groups of European ancestry, but not that of 'visible' minorities. Similarly, the findings of

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the literature on recent immigrant waves are that performance gaps are attenuated once conditioning on parental background, but in many countries do not disappear. Other factors seem to be responsible for immigrant disadvantage: language problems, the characteristics of origin and host countries' educational systems and cultural differences (Dronkers et al., 2012). In this perspective, since national educational curricula are designed with reference to the dominant native culture, immigrant background children may find it difficult to fully understand contents and relevance of what is being thought (Van der Slik et al., 2006).

School achievement is likely to be influenced not only by individuals' own characteristics, but, as individuals interact, also by the achievement and behavioral patterns of peers: within-children and children-teacher interactions may affect attitudes toward learning, class climate, teachers' pedagogical style and effort and learning targets. Understanding how peer effects function is crucial to analyzing a variety of educational policies (Hoxby, 2006). The existing literature mainly focuses on socio-economic background, gender and ethnic differences (e.g. Hoxby, 2000; Rangvid, 2007; Hanushek et al. 2003; Angrist and Lang, 2004; Schneeweis and Winter-Ebmer, 2007; Vigdor and Nechyba, 2007; Hanushek et al. 2009; Ammermueller and Pischke, 2009; Black et al., 2010), while only limited effort has been directed to the estimation of peer effects related to immigrant background. Effects related to socio-economic composition are often significant, although their magnitude is not easy to compare across studies. Ammermueller and Pischke (2009) use international PIRLS and provide evidence of sizable socio-economic background peer effects, variable across countries. Evidence of a positive effect of the share of females is provided by Hoxby (2000) on test scores and Black et al. (2010) on longer-run outcomes. Racial group effects have been studied in particular for the US. Hoxby (2000) finds significant composition effects, strongest within ethnic groups; similarly, Hanushek et al. (2009) provide strong evidence that school black proportion negatively affects achievement of blacks. Substantial effects of racial composition are also reported by Vigdor and Nechyba (2007). Angrist and Lang (2004) investigate the effects of the Metco desegregation program on students in the receiving district, and find little evidence that whites are negatively affected by the newly arrived black children, while effects on black children in the host districts are modest and short-lived.¹

Findings from studies on ethnic composition of schools may not be relevant for the more recent immigrants. On the one hand, while involuntary ethnic minorities often occupy the lowest levels of the social ladder and may have developed negative attitudes towards the values of the dominant majority group, including educational achievement (Ogbu, 1991), new immigrants may have higher aspirations and expectations over their offspring future (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Brinbaum and Cebolla-Boado, 2007) – although outcomes may diverge depending on the social capital of immigrant communities and the exposure to marginalized domestic minorities, as claimed by the theory of segmented assimilation (Portes and Zhou, 1993). On the other hand, the latest waves of immigrants differ from ethnic minorities in that they have experienced the uprooting from their country, and are confronted with a new, often hostile environment, different language, social networks, working conditions and living arrangements.

The sociological literature offers a number of papers on selected European countries and different levels of schooling. Cebolla-Boado (2007) focuses on French lower secondary school, and finds non-significant effects of the share of foreigners on various educational outcomes. Van der Slik et al. (2006) and Dumay and Dupriez (2008) study the effect on achievement in the Netherlands. While the first reports only small negative effects on language proficiency, and not always significant, the second finds stronger effects. Agirdag et al. (2012) study compositional effects of socio-economic background and minority status in Flemish Belgium on the achievement of lower secondary school pupils, finding non-significant effects. Cebolla-Boado and Medina (2011) report no significant effects of the share of immigrants in Spanish primary education. Fekjaer and Birkelund (2007) focus on upper secondary graduates in Norway, and examine the effect of immigrant school composition on achievement and the probability of university enrollment; they find small positive effects on both outcomes for native students and second generation immigrants, negative effects on achievement for first generation immigrants. Szulkin and Jonsson (2007) investigate the effect of ethnic concentration on school performance of ninth grades in Sweden and find noteworthy effects when the proportion of first generation immigrants passes the threshold of 40%. In the educational economics literature, exploiting aggregate data at the country level, Brunello and Rocco (2011) use international PISA data to analyse how immigrant background pupils affect the school performance of natives at age 15, finding evidence of small but significant negative effects, increasing with the level of segregation of immigrants. Gould et al. (2009) focus on the immigrant concentration in 5th grade on later educational outcomes in Israel; their results suggest that the overall presence of immigrants has large adverse effects on the dropout rate and on the chances of passing the high school exam necessary to attend college. Although findings from all these empirical studies are not always consistent, peer effects related to immigrant background are generally negative, but small and sometimes not statistically significant.

In this paper I provide an empirical assessment of the impact of the proportion of immigrant background children on student learning in Italian primary and lower secondary schools. By immigrant background children I mean children of first and second generation, where first generation are children born abroad to foreign born parents, regardless of their age of arrival – I lump together children of generation 1.5 (arrived at age 6–12) and 1.75 (arrived at age 0–5), according to the definition of Rumbaut (2004) – and second generation children are native born children to foreign born parents. To date, there are no such studies on Italy. I contribute to the existing literature by investigating peer effects on a very recent immigration country, where the majority of immigrant children are born abroad and there is no institutionalized body of policies aimed at their

¹ Metco is a long-running desegregation program that sends mostly Black students out of the Boston public school district to attend schools in more affluent suburban districts.

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