

inClusion of Refugee ChiLdren in Education
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1. Introduction

The Family and Childcare Center (KMOP), in collaboration with Amadora Inovation E.M. Uni-pessoalLda. - Amadora INOVA (PT), Câmara Municipal da Amadora - Municipality of Amadora (PT), Mar Violeta (ES), Provincia di Livorno Sviluppo Srl - PLIS (IT), Regional Directorate of primary and secondary education in Central Macedonia - KMAKEDPDE (GR), Provincia di Livorno (IT) and EUROTraining (GR), is implementing the two-year project entitled: CIRCLE, InClusion of Refugee ChiLdren in Education.

The project is funded by the European Commission under the call for proposals EACEA/10/2018 Key Action 3: Support for policy reform for social inclusion and common values: the contribution in the field of education, training and youth, and will last from February 2019 until January 2021

The overall goal of CIRCLE is to support the inclusion of newly arrived migrant/refugee primary and secondary students in education in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain by creating tools and policies aimed at the improvement of the assessment and validation mechanism of their prior learning in order to address their specific needs.

To meet this objective, in the context of the project we will proceed to:

- Develop a research aimed at identifying and assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of the evaluation practices of prior learning of migrant/refugee minors to be included in the educational system of the host country;
- Realize diagnostic tools and mechanisms specifically designed to evaluate the preliminary learning of immigrant/refugee children in primary and secondary school age;
- Elaborate and promote policy recommendations for policymakers in education.

The present National Report is a first achievement **designed by the Research Protocol within Work Package 1**, “Development of diagnostic tools for the assessment of prior learning” of the project CIRCLE.

In fact, the main outputs of WP1 are:

- **A research protocol** containing a set of rules and instructions for the conduct of the research, definition of research questions, methods, procedures, tools.
- **Four national reports**, compiled on the basis of a common template, that will include the findings of **the desk review** and **the focus groups** and evaluation of prior learning assessment practices and tools used in each partner country;
- **Diagnostic tools for assessing** the prior learning of newly arrived refugee/migrant children

2. Key findings from the Desk review

Aims and objectives

The objective of this research is to identify and evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of the tools and practices currently used to assess the prior knowledge of migrant or refugee students attending primary and secondary schools. To answer the research question, an initial presentation of the theoretical reference framework was made, including the national and European regulatory indications on the issue as well as a comprehensive review of the practices presently implemented by the schools. An empirical qualitative investigation was conducted by two focus groups, one for primary and one for secondary school education, in which state/regional education authorities, school administrators, teachers and other professionals were asked to express their opinions on the tools currently used in the national context.

Therefore the Desk review, through a theoretical research, has collected quantitative and qualitative data from all the exhaustive, available sources on the mentioned issues and was preparatory to management of 2 Focus groups - one for primary education, one for secondary education - by which we consulted the experts in the field (Education Office, school administrators, teachers, consultants and other professionals) - with the aim of receiving their opinions on the efficiency and effectiveness of existing tools, challenges and difficulties faced by foreign students, and needs that must be covered, etc.

After collecting the findings of the desk review and the qualitative data resulting from the focus groups, four national reports (one for each country) were drafted, combining the previously mentioned data.

Available data and other resources

The data contained in this research were collected from official sources and public information found in reports, specialized journals, national and international surveys.

Limitations of the desk review

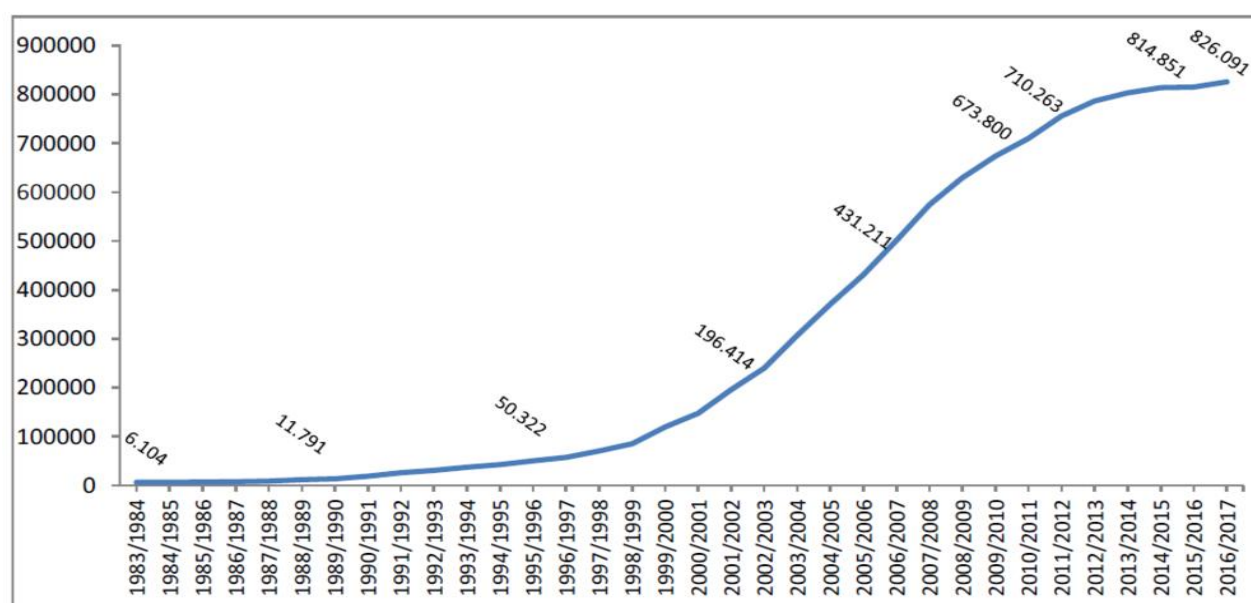
The information contained in this research refer to the country of Italy and take into account only registered data.

The analysis of the practices used to evaluate foreign students' prior learning is approximate as every school of the national territory has its own methods and tools: in this research, we analyzed only a few of them.

Setting the scene

The national context: migrant/refugee children in the educational system

According to the Focus on students with non-Italian citizenship in the academic year 2016-2017 (data updated to 31 August 2017) - published by the MIUR in March 2018 - there were around 826,000 foreign students in Italy (9.4% of the entire school population), with an increase of over 11,000 units compared to 2015/2016. In particular, the Focus highlights that "The presence of students with non-Italian citizenship, found to be limited in the 1980s, recorded a consistent increase in the subsequent 1990s with the influx of over 100,000 students. However, in the first decade of 2000 and up to the Academic Year 2012/2013 the figures become noteworthy with the entry of almost 670,000 students with non-Italian citizenship over the years from 2000/2001 to 2012/2013. The recent years are characterized by a decided slowdown of the growth with an increase of only 39,000 units from 2013/2014 to 2016/2017. The steady decline of students with Italian citizenship, which decreased in the last five years by almost 241,000 units, however it shows an increase of the incidence of students of migratory origin on the total, from 9.2% to 9.4%. We can infer that the students with non-Italian citizenship are still the dynamic factor of the Italian school system".



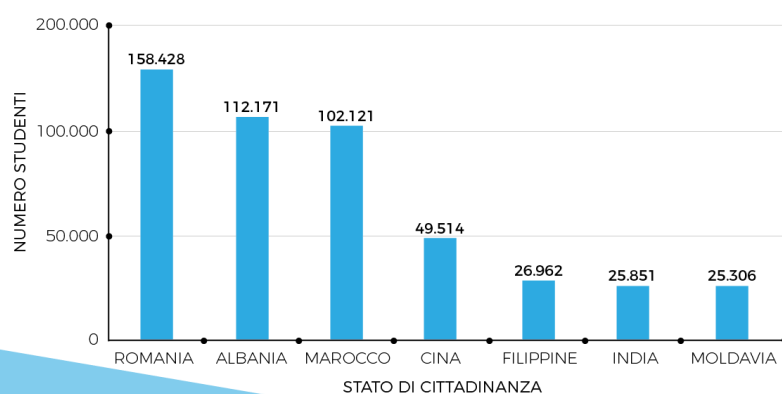
Students with non-Italian citizenship – academic years 1983/1984 – 2016/2017

The schooling rates of students with non-Italian citizenship are close to those of Italians in the 6-13 age group (around 100%), corresponding to the first-cycle school, falling to 90% in the 14-16 age group, corresponding to the first three-year second-level secondary school and to 64.8% at 17 and 18 years of age, i.e. in the last two years of secondary school. The region where students with non-Italian citizenship have the most impact in the local school context is Emilia Romagna, where

almost 16% of students do not have Italian citizenship. Lombardia (14.7%), Umbria (13.8%), Tuscany (13.1%), Veneto and Piemonte (13.0%), Liguria (12.3%) follow. Conversely, Campania is the region where the incidence of students with non-Italian citizenship is the lowest at the national level (2.4%). A further characterizing aspect of the phenomenon is the constant growth of students born in Italy from parents with non-Italian citizenship. In the five-year period 2012/2013 - 2016/2017 this group of students increased from around 371,000 to around 503,000, an increase of 35.4%. In the last year, the growth was 24,000 units (+ 5.1%). They represent, almost 61% of the total of students with non-Italian citizenship, while in relation to the total of students they represent 5.8% (4.2% in the 2012/2013 school year). With reference to the origins, the Romanians are the most numerous (158.428), followed by the Albanians (112.171) and the Moroccans (102.121). These are followed by pupils from China (6%), the Philippines, India and Moldova.



STUDENTI STRANIERI IN ITALIA PER CITTADINANZA 2016/2017



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Foreign students in Italy by citizenship 2016/2017

In the last decade, the presence of Romanian students has increased, while the presence of Albanians and Moroccans has decreased. In the same period, the number of students of Ukrainian, Moldovan and Egyptian origin has increased. The presence of Chinese students has more than doubled, from 24,000 to 49,000, making it the most represented Asian community in Italy, followed by the Filipino, Indian and Pakistani communities.



Foreign students mainly choose technical or professional courses. In the Academic year 2016/2017, the percentage incidence of foreign students in the three upper secondary education paths was 12.5% in Professional institutes, 8.5% in Technical institutes and 4.1% in Lyceums.

Overview of national laws and policies concerning the assessment of migrant/refugee students' prior learning

The evaluation of foreign students, and in particular newly arrived immigrants (NAI), poses several problems, from assessment to certification, to the need to take into account the individual learning path. The reference legislation must be read not as a sanctioning tool but as a "resource" in support of educational institutions.

Article. 45 of Presidential Decree no. 394/1999 establishes that *"the foreign minors present in the national territory have the right to education regardless of the regularity of their residence permit in the forms and ways provided for Italian citizens"*. In the second paragraph, the article also establishes that foreign students must be enrolled in the class corresponding to their chronological age, taking into account the assessment of the student's skills, abilities, and levels of preparation, the course of study, potentially attended by the student in the country of origin and any qualifications possessed (art. 45 par. 2). The article also provides that the Board of Professors define, in relation to the level of competence of individual foreign students, the necessary adaptation of teaching programs that actualizes in the definition of a Personalized Education Plan. However, the above-mentioned decree does not reserve any reference to the actual methods of assessing these competencies and abilities.

Article. 4 of Presidential Decree (DPR) no. 275/1999 ratifies the educational autonomy of Educational Institutions, assigning them the responsibility of identifying the criteria and methods for assessing foreign students, also providing that they operate "in compliance with national legislation". The legislation, however, does not provide specific indications but reinforces the role and responsibility of the institutions in their autonomy and of the teachers in the evaluation of the students.

With the Ministerial Circular no. 24/2006, the Ministry for Education, University, Research (MIUR) arranges the *"Guidelines for the reception and integration of foreign students"*, with the aim of guiding educational institutions without compromising their educational autonomy. In the section dedicated to the evaluation, it is underlined how the Italian model favors the "formative" dimension of the evaluation with respect to the "certification". In in this sense, together with the evaluation activities, it is of considerable importance to take into consideration elements such as the path of the pupil, the possible objectives, the motivation, the commitment, and the learning potential demonstrated.



The subsequent DPR n. 122/2009 refers to the aforementioned Presidential Decree n. 394/1999 and reaffirms, in this sense, the obligation to evaluate foreign students in the forms and ways provided for Italian citizens. The Decree also specifies that they have the right to a transparent and timely evaluation, periodic and final, based on criteria defined by the Academic Board.

In 2014, with the C.M. no. 4233/2014, updated the "Guidelines for the reception and integration of foreign students". In the new indications, it is expected that foreign students enrolled in Italian schools will be subjected to all the provisions contained in the Regulation on the assessment of pupils, issued with Presidential Decree no. 122/2009, and, with reference to the evaluation, have the right to a periodic and final, transparent and timely evaluation, based on criteria defined by the Academic Board. The Guidelines underline again the formative dimension of the evaluation. The school has the task of encouraging, with specific strategies and personalized paths, a possible adaptation of the programs to individual students, guaranteeing to foreign students an evaluation that takes account of their previous school history, of the results achieved, of the skills and competencies acquired.

Finally, the guidelines refer to the evaluation of foreign students. In particular, in the "*National guidelines for the curriculum of the first cycle of education*" (Ministerial Decree No. 254/2012) it is specified that "teachers are responsible for the assessment and care of the documentation, as well as for the choice of the related tools, within the framework of the criteria defined by the collegiate bodies". While not explicitly referring to foreign students and to the evaluation of their previous knowledge, the Guidelines sanction the "formative" nature of the assessment and the need to promote a culture of evaluation that discourages any forms of training exclusively aimed at the overcoming of tests. The above document also establishes that individual educational institutions are responsible for self-assessment and the consequent introduction of reflective methods on the educational and didactic offer of the school, then evaluated by the National Institute of Evaluation, a body of the MIUR in charge of these tasks.

Overview and evaluation of implementation of EU directives and other international legislation, related to the integration in the school system of migrant/refugee students and to the assessment of prior learning

As far as the European context is concerned, the directives that have been issued so far do not specifically address the issue of interest.

Directive 77/486/EEC, implemented in Italy by Presidential Decree no. 722/1982, regulates issues relating to the education of children of migrant workers. The children referred to in the directive and the related decree are, however, citizens of another EU member state: the provisions are therefore applicable to the large number of foreign children from Romania but, at the same time,

are not attributable to those from non-EU countries, which represent a significant percentage of foreign children included in the Italian education system. The transposing decree states that pupils who are children of foreign workers resident in Italy and who are nationals of one of the other Member States of the European Community are "enrolled in the class of compulsory schooling that follows, by number of years of study, the one successfully attended in their country of origin" (art. 1). *Although the decree does not mention how to assess prior learning, it states that in schools that receive these students, the educational programme must include activities of support and integration, in order to adapt the teaching of the Italian language and other subjects of study to their needs and to promote the teaching of the language and culture of the country of origin, coordinating it with the teaching of compulsory subjects (art. 2).* In addition, the legislation requires the Ministry of Education to adopt appropriate initiatives for the updating of teachers who deal with the teaching of the subjects mentioned above (art. 3).

Another source of legislation that can be referred to the citizens of the Member States is the Lisbon Convention, ratified in Italy with **Law No 148/2002**. The Convention concerns the recognition of qualifications and courses of study that allow access to higher education and it attributes this responsibility to universities and colleges of higher education.

Despite the fact that there are no specific directives that address the issue, the European Commission has repeatedly focused its pronouncements on the topic of the integration of foreign citizens through education. In particular, in the document "Green paper - Migration and mobility: challenges and opportunities for EU education systems" (2008) the central role of schools in the integration process of foreign children with a migration background is underlined: it is stated that schools must adapt their programmes and operating methods to the new multicultural context, in order to guarantee a successful school path also for newcomers to Italy.

Even though the European Commission's pronouncements deepen the issue of education as a mean of integration, they do not express an opinion on the actual methods and specific evaluation criteria that should be adopted to evaluate the prior learning of foreign students.

Evaluation of how the aforementioned policies and directives are actually implemented at the local level in both primary and secondary schools

The Italian schools, based on the autonomy granted to them by national law, establish internally the methods and criteria for assessing foreign students.

Even though the law does not prescribe its explicit adoption, most of the schools in the national territory make use of the so-called "Protocol for the reception of foreign students". The document is specifically drawn up by the individual schools based on the guidelines given by the Ministry of Education, University and Research. It contains information on the methods of reception and

integration of foreign students and, in some cases, establishes the procedures and criteria for assessing their prior learning. These modalities are usually determined by the so-called "Reception Commission", a working group and articulation of the collegial body of the institute for the integration of foreign students, generally made up of:

- School manager;
- A teacher in the field of inter-culture/integration of foreign students;
- A teacher, preferably from the class in which the student is going to be placed.

The Commission has the task to make the initial interview with the student's family to acquire information on the previous school situation, define the methods of observation of newly arrived students, prepare and choose the entry tests. These usually include a first part dedicated to the assessment of listening, reading and writing skills in Italian L2 (Italian as a foreign language), which is followed by a didactic-cognitive evaluation.

In most of the Reception Protocols, it is underlined that the entrance tests represent only a first step for the assessment of the student's competences, which requires longer observation times. After an initial assessment, an ongoing assessment will follow, which will be useful to ascertain the previous learning in a more in-depth way, regardless of any initial linguistic difficulties.

An interesting contribution on the subject of the evaluation of prior learning is the one offered by the **Territorial School Office of Bergamo**, which in **2012** drew up the "**Guidelines on the evaluation of foreign students**" and the "**Guidelines for the integration of NAI students (New Arrivals in Italy)**".

The first document specifies that the evaluation of foreign students must be carried out by teachers through various actions: interviews with students and their families, examination of the school documentation of the country of origin, entrance tests. If considered necessary, the intervention of linguistic-cultural mediators will also be envisaged.

According to the Guidelines, the knowledge in L1 of newly arrived foreign students should also be recognized and properly evaluated by a teacher in collaboration with a mediator.

The document also suggests some ways of evaluating prior learning, among which:

- True-false exercises;
- Multiple choice with a single answer;
- Multiple choice with multiple answers;
- Completion exercises;
- Exercises with the possibility of consulting texts;
- Exercises to be performed in the presence of a tutor.

The "Guidelines for the inclusion of NAI students" underline the importance of including newly arrived students in Italy in the class corresponding to their age, specifying that inadequate language skills are not a reason for the enrollment in a lower class. However, the document does not contain any reference to the criteria and methods for assessing the knowledge acquired in the countries of origin.

Evaluation of good practices carried out by primary and secondary schools (national level)

An example of a good practice is the one implemented by the "**Istituto Comprensivo Bariano**" which, in the early **2000s**, created the "**Foreign Students Desk**", a service addressed to the educational institutions with the aim of supporting them in the design and development of internal collaborations and consolidating good practices of inclusion, reception and literacy in favour of foreign students. The Desk deals with:

- Collecting, within the territory, the requests for Reception for newly arrived students and transmitting the relevant cards to the cooperative "Kinesis", which organizes the interventions of cultural mediation;
- Planning the consultancy meetings as well as the ordinary and extraordinary meetings with teachers and cultural mediators;
- Coordinating the activities of the intercultural referents and ensuring the comparison between the practices in place in different schools;
- Guaranteeing the diffusion of training opportunities for the teachers of the local schools;
- Preparing entry tests and verification tests to assess the prior learning of new students arrived in primary and secondary schools.

The Desk also has a dedicated blog in which are published updates and research on education of foreign students, as well as some examples of entry tests that the schools submit to newly arrived students.

Also in the **Municipality of Pontassieve, since 1995**, the "Intercultural Centre" has been established. The Centre is a territorial reference point for the promotion of interculturalism and has the aim of supporting the community in its intercultural transformation, in particular:

- Facilitating communication between institutions and foreign citizens and facilitating their access to public services;



- Promoting the intercultural growth of the community by creating opportunities for exchange, meeting, knowledge among citizens;
- Supporting the planning of policies and services in all areas that affect the life of the community, including school, through cognitive, educational and relational tools.

With specific reference to the school sector, the Intercultural Centre has drawn up its own Guidelines for the reception of foreign students, based on those of MIUR. The document provides that each school institute in the southeast Florentine area should have a "Reception Commission", responsible to organize the reception of new foreign students and to find and organize teaching materials for intercultural education. The Guidelines then sanction the adoption of the Institute's Reception Protocol and provide support for the families of newly arrived foreign students from the registration phase.

In the first phase, the Guidelines provide for a preliminary interview with one or more teachers, parents, the foreign student and the cultural mediator. This first meeting is aimed at allowing the school to get to know the child/young adult, to reconstruct his or her school history, the arrival path, and any problems of the family and to evaluate his or her linguistic-cultural, logical-mathematical and linguistic-expressive skills. These entry tests were carried out by a group of teachers from the first and second grade schools in the southeast Florentine area as part of the project "Language, languages, new citizens", presented by the Intercultural Centre and financed by the Ministry of the Interior and the European Union. The tests are addressed to foreign students newly arrived in Italy, are written in eight languages and have the aim of assessing the skills and prior learning and guide the planning of the first months of school.

The initial interview is followed by 2 two-hour interviews to be held in the first weeks of school. In the context of the three interviews, the abilities of the newly arrived students are evaluated and, after that, a "Personalized didactic plan" is drawn up.

During the school year, some support activities are also activated, such as:

- The bilingual laboratory, which takes place during school hours and is aimed only at foreign students;
- The Italian L2 laboratory, which takes place in the afternoon;
- The first language laboratory, to support the bilingualism of foreign students;
- The intercultural laboratory, an activity addressed to the whole class that aims to strengthen the intercultural skills of all, regardless of the presence of foreign students.

With reference to the support to teachers, the Intercultural Centre organizes training activities related to the reception, teaching of Italian L2 and intercultural education.





The state of art

Overview of research and reports (national and international) regarding the tools and practices used to evaluate migrant/refugee students' prior learning, the challenges they have to face and their actual needs

National research on the subject at issue focuses mainly on the analysis of the relevant legislation and good practices implemented by local schools. As we have seen, there is no univocal guideline for the structuring and implementation of practices for the evaluation of qualifications or prior learning, so the national research is limited to reporting what has been implemented by primary and secondary education institutions in the national context, comparing these interventions with what is prescribed by the Guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education. Below please find a list of a number of national research projects:

- "Assessing and customizing learning for non-Italian mother-tongue students through legislation", Annalisa Brichesi, Venice, March 2015;
- "The integration of foreign students in school. Summary of the legislation and notes on teaching strategies" - Venice, January 2003 - Gian Antonio Lucca;
- "The Italian way for intercultural schooling and the integration of foreign students" - National Observatory for the integration of foreign students and for intercultural education, October 2007;
- "The evaluation of non-Italian mother tongue students" - Ramona Ontanu.

For reference to international research, please refer to the next paragraph.

Overview of reports of international organisations and EU institutions

International organisations and European institutions have addressed the issue of the integration of foreign pupils in the school system in a large number of reports and researches. Below are some examples:

- "Education of migrant children - Education policy responses for the inclusion of migrant children in Europe" (RAND Europe, 2016);
- "Integrating Students from Migrant Backgrounds into Schools in Europe" (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019);



- "Helping immigrant students to succeed at school - and beyond" (OECD, 2015);
- "Integration of migrants: the education system" (European Parliament, 2016);
- "Immigrant Students at School: Easing the Journey towards Integration" (OECD, 2015).

Although there are many contributions, none of them deal specifically with the definition or analysis of tools and practices for the recognition of the prior learning of migrant/refugee pupils newly arrived in the host country but, more generally, with the way in which these pupils are integrated into the educational system.

The only document that addresses the topic of interest is the report drafted in 2018 by UNHCR and UNESCO "What a waste: ensure migrants and refugees' qualifications and prior learning are recognized". The report compares the orientations of some countries on the issue of recognition of qualifications and prior learning, reporting that:

- In Sweden, migrant/refugee children have the right to enroll in school, be assessed and placed in the appropriate class within two months of arrival in the host country. Materials for the evaluation of their prior learning are provided to the school staff and focus on literacy, mathematics, knowledge of the specific content of the curriculum subjects and past experiences;
- In Turkey, newly arrived children who do not have documentation of their previous studies are assessed through an interview or a short written composition;
- In Lebanon, before enrolling in the appropriate primary school class, newly arrived children must take a placement test. To enter secondary school, they need to provide certification that they have attended school up to the 9th grade.
- In Costa Rica, the Minister of Education and UNHCR signed in 2014 a Memorandum of Understanding on access to primary and secondary education and the recognition of qualifications for refugees and asylum seekers.

Overview of projects and project outputs (national)

As previously mentioned one of the national projects dealing with the theme is "**Language, languages, new citizens**", was presented by **the Intercultural Centre of the Municipality of Pontassieve** and financed by the Ministry of the Interior and the European Union, within the framework of the European Funds for Integration. **The project involved children aged 11-16 years**

of **secondary schools** in the activities of reception of foreign students newly arrived in Italy, in Italian L2 courses, in orientation meetings aimed at foreign students and their families, in intercultural workshops. The Lead Partner and the project partners have also produced:

- Tests to ascertain the entry skills of newly arrived foreign students, which have been drawn up in eight languages and can be downloaded for free from the project website;
- A multilingual publication on the Italian school system and orientation to services in the area, aimed at the families of foreign students.

Another important contribution on the subject is provided by **the Erasmus+ project "Like Home"**, implemented **by the University of Bologna** and other 8 European partners, which aims to promote the inclusion of refugees/migrants in the education system of the host country through the recognition and validation of their previous knowledge. In order to achieve this objective, the organizations and bodies involved analyzed the needs of migrants/refugees in the host country and identified seven examples of good practice related to the recognition of their prior learning, adapted them to their needs and implemented them in the partner countries.

Also the **Erasmus+ project "QuaMMELOT"**, presented by the Department of Science of Psychological Education of the University of Florence, of which Provincia di Livorno Sviluppo is a partner, deals with the school integration of newly arrived foreign students. The project promotes the strengthening of teachers' skills and creates a qualified training course at European level for secondary school teachers, aimed at promoting the school integration of minor migrants, to avoid disadvantage in learning and early school leaving.

Conclusions and recommendations

National and local level recommendations

Although the national legislation provides indications and guidelines for the assessment of foreign students, the autonomy given to schools means that the effectiveness of national assessment tools is not uniform: many national schools are in fact unable to produce effective assessment tools. Furthermore, given that the responsibility for integration and evaluation is entrusted to schools but no specific obligation is imposed on them, many of them do not bother to define methods for assessing prior knowledge, limiting themselves to include newly arrived students in the class corresponding to their age and activating interventions to support them.

A clearer, more precise and nationally structured regulation would allow institutions to create unique and more effective instruments to assess foreign students' prior learning.

EU level recommendations

At European level, some recommendations for the proper configuration of prior learning tools could be:

- Developing an agreement between Member States on a common framework for the evaluation and recognition of qualifications, so that monitoring processes could be shared, comparable and more structured;
- Inviting Member States to present research initiatives aimed at filling the gaps on some issues related to the monitoring and evaluation of policies addressed to students with a migrant background;
- Planning a training plan for primary and secondary school teachers, aimed at equipping them with the necessary skills to interact with migrant or refugee students.

Recommendations for future research areas

As for future research areas, some suggestions might be:

- Analyzing the training needs of teachers and school staff who are in contact with foreign students with a migrant background and provide any specific training courses dedicated to them;
- Focusing on the target group of unaccompanied foreign minors and assess their needs and requirements;
- Analyzing examples of good practice implemented by schools and identify a model to be proposed as a national standard;
- Analyzing the reasons behind the school drop-out of foreign students;
- Considering the difficulties encountered by newly arrived immigrant children who are illiterate or from cultures where the language is not written;
- Involving Italian native students in projects dedicated to supporting classmates/schoolmates with a migrant background.

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3. Field research Focus groups

Practical Information

On May 2019, on the 23rd and the 30th, in Livorno took place the two Focus groups foreseen within the Research Protocol of the WP1 of Project “CIRCLE”, the first at the Museum of Natural History of the Mediterranean and the second at Palazzo Granduca, headquarters of the Province of Livorno, with the participation of:

- teachers and managers of schools of primary and secondary education in the province of Livorno;
- teachers of the Provincial Centers for Adult Education (CPIA), state schools set up by the Ministry of Education which offer Italian and foreign citizens services and activities for adult education (from 16 years).

The aim of the focus groups was to gather participants' opinions on the evaluation practices of previous knowledge and competencies of foreign students currently in use in Italy and on their effectiveness.

The focus group reserved for primary education institutions involved 19 participants, including teachers and school administrators.

There were 10 participants in the focus group reserved for secondary education institutions, including first and second grade secondary school teachers and CPIA teachers.

Agenda of the two Focus Groups

Progetto CIRCLE (InClusion of Refugee ChiLdren in Education)

Livorno, 23 and 30.05.2019 - 15H30

15.30 Focus Group opening: greetings to participants and presentations

15.45 Project objectives

The main objective of the CIRCLE project is the identification and elaboration of:

- Tools for evaluating previous knowledge of migrant foreign students or refugees of school age;
- Mechanisms of validation of their previous knowledge in the local, regional or national education system in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain (and other EU countries).

Objectives of the Focus Group

The objective of the Focus Group is to collect the opinions of the Provincial School Office (USP), school administrators, teachers, consultants and other school operators about:

- Efficiency and effectiveness of the tools and practices currently in use to assess the prior knowledge of migrant / refugee students newly arrived in Italy;
- Problems and needs of newly arrived foreign students in Italy.

16.00 - Analysis of the practices and tools used by schools in the local context

1. What are the methods / practices used in your schools to evaluate the previous knowledge of migrant / refugee students (written tests, interviews ...)?
2. Are families involved in the evaluation process?
3. Is the mother tongue of migrant / refugee students evaluated?
4. Are linguistic-cultural mediators also involved in the evaluation process?
5. Does your school's Reception Protocol provide specific training courses for teachers and / or

other school operators regarding the evaluation of previous knowledge of migrant / refugee students? Have you ever attended one of these training courses? If yes, could you briefly describe their contents? What are the most useful and least useful elements of these training courses?

- Evaluation of existing tools and practices and their effectiveness

1. What do you think about the tools and practices currently used to assess the prior knowledge of migrant / refugee students?
2. Are students assessed with these tools fully integrated into the education system?
3. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of these practices?
4. Which of the practices do you think are the most effective?

16.30 - Difficulties and needs of the target group

1. What do you think are the main difficulties that migrant / refugee students face in the context of primary and secondary education?
2. What do you think are the main obstacles that prevent them from achieving successful integration?
3. What do you think are the needs of migrant / refugee students in the context of school education?
4. Do you think that currently used assessment practices are able to respond to the actual needs of migrant / refugee students?

Tips:

- Would you suggest changes to the tools and practices used by schools to assess previous students' foreign knowledge?
- Do you know good practices carried out by primary and secondary schools related to what is being examined?

17.00 Closing of the Focus Group

As shown in the Agenda, after the introduction to the objectives and aims of the project and the focus group, the participants presented themselves, sharing information with the rest of the group regarding the institutions in which they carry out their service. From this first comparison, it emerged that most of the schools in the area host a large number of foreign students: many of these are second-generation immigrant children and young people, a minority have arrived in Italy following a migratory path.

Key findings from Field Research for *Primary Schools*

Practices and tools used by local schools for the evaluation of foreign students

The teachers of primary and secondary schools in the area have confirmed what they learned during the writing of theoretical research: the tools for assessing prior knowledge of newly arrived pupils in Italy are structured independently by the individual schools. Most schools use the Reception Protocol, in which it is expected that a Reception Commission or, in many cases, a single teacher in charge of welcoming foreign students will evaluate:

- Italian language skills;
- Written and oral comprehension skills;
- Mathematical skills.

Evaluation usually consists of a first interview with the pupil's family, if necessary in the presence of a cultural mediator. In this first phase, information is acquired regarding the student's previous school career and the migratory events that involved him.

After the interview, the student carries out some entrance exams: in most of the institutes, they focus solely on the assessment of linguistic skills in Italian, in primary and secondary schools of first degree they also involve in some cases mathematical and logical skills. The tests are written in Italian and do not evaluate competences in the native language of foreign students. Some institutes make use of entrance tests based on iconography / symbology, to overcome the initial difficulties in understanding the Italian language. The survey forms used by the various institutes are drawn up by the teachers of the institute itself or of other schools / municipalities in the national territory.

The teachers point out that the previous competences of foreign students are not appropriately evaluated or held in high regard, also due to the different setting of the educational path in the countries of origin: many foreign students coming, for example, from Islamic countries have only attended the Koranic school and do not have specific knowledge related to the subjects included in the Italian training course.

Another critical aspect highlighted by the teachers is the lack of teaching staff dedicated to the reception and evaluation of these students, as well as the lack of specific training courses dedicated to reception teachers. The teachers who have been trained in this sense have done so, in fact, independently, obtaining certifications for the teaching of the Italian language as a second language (DITALS / CEDILS certification) in structures outside the schools where they are employed. In their view, these training courses should be planned and promoted by the School Activities Plan..

Evaluation of the tools and practices in use

The evaluation tools currently in use were judged valid by the participants in the focus group though certainly improvable. Below, we report the strengths and weaknesses of these practices identified by the teachers.

Points of weakness:

- The survey forms drawn up deal, in most cases, only with assessing language skills, neglecting any other previous knowledge: greater attention to the evaluation of other skills

could guarantee foreign students the acquisition of incoming credits even in scientific or, for example, computer science disciplines;

- The entrance tests are written only in Italian: the translation of these tests into the native languages of newly arrived pupils would allow an assessment of their competences which is independent of their linguistic knowledge;
- The autonomy reserved for scholastic institutions and the consequent lack of precise indications for the structuring of the surveys of prior knowledge of foreign students leaves teachers who deal with their reception in a condition of uncertainty and difficulty. Common guidelines and addresses for all institutions would allow, according to their point of view, them to draft more effective entry tests.

Strengths:

- The use of survey forms based on the iconography allow foreign students to be evaluated even if they do not have any knowledge of the language of the host country. The promotion and enhancement of this type of entry tests would permit the effective evaluation of competences, even different from the linguistic ones;
- The initial interview in the presence of the cultural mediator was judged as another useful tool for acquiring information on the knowledge of newly arrived students and on their life history.

Target group difficulties

The main difficulties encountered by newly arrived students in Italy are of linguistic nature: many of them practice the Italian language only in the classroom context or, in any case, in the scholastic context and, back home, speak with the family in their native language. This makes their linguistic progress slow and tiring.

The linguistic difficulties condition the performance in the other subjects of the curriculum and, in many cases, discourage foreign students who, very often, abandon their studies before obtaining a secondary school diploma.

To compensate for this criticality, following the ascertainment of the initial linguistic competences, educational institutions organize Italian language courses dedicated to these students. To avoid dividing the class group and not to "differentiate" foreign students from Italian ones, language courses are organized in the afternoon. If it is ascertained, however, that participation in afternoon courses is low, foreign students take the hours of strengthening in Italian during the morning, usually dividing themselves from the rest of the class during their hours of Italian and letters.

Another difficulty encountered by the target group is that of being accepted by the rest of the class: foreign students arrive with a baggage of strong prejudices, which probably breathe in the family environment, and from their behaviors in the school context one perceives the fear of not being accepted by the Italian comrades. If separated from the rest of the class to attend the Italian language lessons dedicated to them, this feeling of exclusion is further amplified.

2. Target group needs

Newly arrived foreign students need not only a solid and structured linguistic support but also figures that orient them in the new scholastic and cultural context.

To ensure that these needs are met, if on the one hand it is necessary that the school staff in charge of welcoming and integrating foreign students be more consistent and the hours and interventions, devoted to this type of work more numerous, on the other hand it is appropriate to identify solutions that do not differentiate foreign students from Italian ones. In this sense, some participants in the focus group proposed to use, when possible, the methodology of peer education for training the students so that the students themselves can help and support the mates of foreign origin. This would allow them to displace possible discriminatory tendencies and ensure greater possibility of integration within the class group and the educational system.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

In conclusion, **the focus group participants pointed out that the teachers responsible for welcoming and integrating foreign students meet different difficulties in structuring the interventions aimed at them.**

First, as mentioned, the hours devoted to the reception and integration of foreign students were, in most cases, insufficient as well as the staff assigned to the aforementioned duties. In this sense, institutes should make the teaching body aware of intercultural issues and adequately train them to be able to implement effective interventions on this subject.

Secondly, the generic nature of the guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education hinders the drafting of effective and efficient entrance and evaluation tests of prior knowledge: a more precise indication of how these tests must be prepared would, in their opinion, standardize entrance tests, make them more effective and facilitate the work of teachers.

Finally, to address one of the major needs of the target group, the participants suggested strengthening and promoting an intervention modality now implemented only in some institutions: the foreign students should be supported and followed not only by teachers but also and mainly by their classmates or schoolmates. In their opinion, the use of children / teen tutors and of foreign language students as supporters and linguistic mediators would facilitate language learning on the one hand, and on the other hand the integration of pupils newly



arrived in the classroom context and, more generally, in the educational system.

All the participants to both focus groups were enthusiastic of the project CIRCLE, ready to bring in each of them their motions and needs and collaborate to build together diagnostic tools that may be applied in all their institutes: the same for all of them, different only by target age cluster.

As already reported, they also complained about the lack of training on the issue in question, therefore they were very glad to hear that the project will also create a training path on it and already applied to participate in it.

