

# **Growing Up between Two Cultures: The Case of Children of Mixed Unions in Italy**

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## **Introduction**

In the western world, social acceptance of intercultural relationships and multiracial status is at any rate increasing. According to a Gallup poll conducted at the end of 2003, two thirds of white Americans said they would accept a marriage between one of their children and someone of a different race. An open-minded attitude towards intermarriages, as well as generally increasing in line with the level of education, is also more prevalent amongst the younger generations. The situation closest to the United States in Europe is that of the United Kingdom. In France, the number of marriages celebrated each year in which only one partner is French constituted around 5% of the total in the mid-1970s. This figure now stands at around 15%. According to statistics, in Italy within little more than one decade the incidence of mixed marriages has tripled. It is one of the strongest increases among the developed countries.

There are various reasons which justify a greater focus on unions between Italians and foreign nationals. The principal motive concerns the relevance of this phenomenon to the process of integration of immigrants. The children of mixed unions help us to understand what the future of Italy will be. The proof of the success or failure of the meeting of cultures that mixed marriages bring together, concerns, above all, their upbringing. Divergences in the children rearing are one of the principal causes of crisis within a mixed couple. The negative repercussions can be greater with respect to a break-up within a couple composed of two Italians, risking above all upsetting the delicate and complex path of the children towards integration and the development of their own multi-ethnic identity.

In general, the children of mixed marriages, being theoretically in a position between Italians and foreigners, constitute a privileged point of observation to study the opportunities and the disadvantages for the second generations and also to grasp what is successful and what's not in the integration process of immigrants, crucial for maintaining social cohesion of host societies and for economic development (Niessen, 2001). It is particularly crucial the role of school and more generally the opportunities caught during the socialization process and the early phases of the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Pavis et al., 2000).

The potential factors of disadvantages for the second generations have more possibilities to be removed with success when detected in the early stages of the life-course. Recent studies by James Heckman showed how important is investing more in young children who grow up in disadvantaged environments (Heckman and Masterov 2007). Paraphrasing Heckman and Masterov (p. 38) we may say that: "at the public level of public support, Italy under-invests in the early years of disadvantaged children and on second generation of immigrants. Redirecting funds toward the early years is a sound investment in the productivity and safety of advanced societies, and also removes a powerful source of inequality".

Taking into account this scenario, in this paper we study the disadvantages of the children of mixed unions. In particular we focus on their scholastic performances during middle school in comparison to students whose both parents are Italians or foreigners.

### **Immigration and mixed unions in Italy**

As a consequence of the intense immigration process, Italy is increasingly becoming a multiethnic society.

The growth of the foreign population in Italy over the past 15 years has been particularly consistent (and comparable in Europe only with Spain). The presence of foreign nationals in the early 1990s was below the half a million mark, whereas it is currently approaching 4 million, which is to say more than 6% of the total population, and reaches as high as 15% in some areas of northern Italy.

The proportion of foreign people is especially high amongst the young and the young adults: the 18 – 39 age bracket contains less than 30% of the Italian population, but more than 50% of the immigrant population.

Conversely, the proportion of immigrants among the elderly is very low: the over 65 years old are 2.1 % of the foreign population whereas the figure is 20% in the total Italian population.

This means that the incidence of foreign people is particularly consistent in the age interval where the propensity to form a family is more intense.

In fact, looking at the first step of the family formation process, we can observe that in Italy the incidence of mixed marriages has been progressively increasing in the last decade.

In 2007 almost 35,000 marriages were celebrated between an Italian and a non Italian citizen (13.8% of all marriages, in comparison to 4.3% in 1995). In most of the cases mixed marriages are composed by an Italian groom and a foreign bride (just above 7%). The marriages with the opposite combination are almost 2.5%. The remaining (4.4%) are unions between foreigners.

Not all mixed marriages result from immigration (sometimes they are rather the cause). That is, the foreign partner is not always resident in Italy when the couple is formed, and it is possible in a globalizing society that the meeting between the future spouses may take place as a result of a trip abroad undertaken for reasons of study, work or pleasure.

The percentage of births where at least one parent is foreign have also increased exponentially in the last 15 years, going from 2% to almost 15%. About 64,000 babies born in 2007 did not have an Italian parent, and 23,000 newborns had only one Italian parent (5%).

One of the strongest sign of a changing society is the presence at school of different nationalities. We can therefore confirm the intensity of immigration process looking also at the following figures.

The proportion of foreign pupils is equal 6.5% (574 thousand in the school year 2007/08), 7.5% in primary schools and lower secondary schools. In some regions of the North the percentage is up to 12%. The most frequent nationalities are Romanian, Albanian e Moroccan (44%).

It is important to note that the incidence of foreign pupils who failed a year (“rejected”) is always higher than the Italian one, at any level and kind of school. In the primary schools the incidence of foreign rejected pupils is four times higher than the Italian one (0.9% compared with 0.2%); in the first grade secondary school this incidence is not much higher than two times (6.3% against 2.7%) and in the second level secondary school it is always higher, even if in a more limited way (9.3% versus 6.9%). Altogether, in the scholastic year 2007/08 we observe an incidence of foreign pupils rejected equal to 4.5%, while for the Italian pupils this percentage lowers to 3.4% (Ministero dell’Università e della Ricerca, 2009).

The key role of socialisation shows another interesting point of view. A recent study, taking into account pupils attending the first grade secondary school, shows how the kids fully socialised in Italy are almost identical to the Italians in terms of popularity and expansiveness. And the expansiveness and popularity grow as school performance improves (Rivellini, Terzera, 2008).

These factors can easily hinder a quiet and linear process of social and cultural integration for foreign pupils living in Italy since a short time.

## **Data and methods**

We use data from a nationwide sample survey conducted in 2006 (ITAGEN2) - promoted by eight universities and an equal number of Regional Administrations - on a minors subgroup: the pupils attending the first-grade secondary school (from age of 11 to 14). A total of 20,000 pupils were interviewed, living in 48 Provinces. It is a national representative survey, in the un-weighted sample about half of these interviews regard pupils with at least one foreign parent (Dalla Zuanna, 2008; Casacchia *et al.* 2008).

The opportunity to collect data about scholastic performances of foreign pupils, children of mixed couples, is a peculiar characteristic of this survey. Further it is interesting for the original approach and topics surveyed in the Italian context, where the presence of young immigrants at school is impressively increased in recent time.

The most precise and complete official statistical sources consider as foreign pupils the children of both non Italian parents, born not necessary in Italy, but enrolled in Italian schools of any grade and order. For this reason, the typology of children of mixed couples, “figli adottati”, nomadi with Italian citizenship and pupils with a double citizenship are not taken into account.

We further remind that in Italy and in Germany, Luxembourg, Spain and Switzerland as well, the foreign pupils are the ones that don't have the citizenship of these countries. The children of mixed couples could have two citizenships, between them you could find also the Italian. This fact implies more difficulties to identify these pupils in the integrated official surveys of statistical system on education.

In this contribution our attention is therefore on children with at least one parent coming from countries with high emigration levels (“CHEL”), that is, from those countries that make up more than 95% of the Italian immigrants. Moreover, we will consider only children living with both their parents (more than 90% of the sample).

Our purpose is to analyze the school performance, considering both the self-evaluation by the student and the educational delay in school years missed by the student.

For this last aspect we need to take into account the Italian consolidated strategy of integrating new students in its schools. Usually, a new foreign pupil is placed in a class below the one corresponding to his age group in the belief that this will give him more time to learn and will reduce the number of future exam failures. However, this is an unfavorable strategy for a positive and successful placing, especially at the adolescent age (Besozzi, Tiana, 2005).

We analyze the education delay using a logistic regression model for binary response, where the dependent variable indicate whether the pupil is placed in a class level below that which would typically correspond to his/her age.

The self-evaluation by the student is measured by the following question: “How do you consider yourself as a pupil?” with four possible answers: “excellent”, “good”, “on average” and “under average”. Note that a recent study showed a strong correlation between this variable and the final secondary school grade (Barban 2006).

We analyze the determinants of the perceived school performance applying a logistic regression model for ordinal response.

We will include as independent variables the individual characteristics (i.e.: sex, socialization, number of siblings) and the familiar background (i.e.: socio-economic status, area of provenience).

Our study is focused on children of mixed couples.

## Description

Before considering the relationship between the school performance and the parent's nationality, we show in table 1 and 2 show some relevant details on the area of provenience of the foreign parent. This helps to better describe who are the children of mixed unions, taking into account the nationality and the main countries of provenience.

The cultural differences among the CHEL countries are well known and these can influence the process of parental education and the relationship inside the couple, crucial aspects to the transmission of skills, habits and behaviors. The different origin of each parent can influence the quickness and the ability in learning the basic elements for a satisfactory institutional education.

Reading the table 1 and 2, when the father is foreign, he comes principally from Eastern Europe and in particular from one of the countries more represented in Italy, that is Albania. But if we take into account the percentage of children of mixed couple the incidence of Eastern Europe is less important. We note a strong presence of African (mainly Morocco and Egypt) fathers, who are characterised by a long stay in Italy. There is also a relevant presence of fathers coming from Latin America (principally Ecuador) that are in Italy since a shorter period. Quite considerable is the presence of Chinese fathers with an Italian mother.

From the mother point of view, the outline changes. The Eastern Europe provenience is more significant because more than thirty percent of children are born in mixed unions where the woman is from Romania, Poland or Ukraine, the countries of strongest female recent immigration (CNR, 2009). Following this first group, we noted a quite relevant presence of women/mothers from Brazil, Peru and other countries of Latin America. It appears also a different composition of African countries: a predominance of mother coming from Morocco and Tunisia, but, also from Nigeria, Capo Verde and Eritrea.

*Table 1 – Children of mixed unions: area of provenience for foreign mother and father*

	Italian mother/CHEL father		CHEL mother/Italian father	
	Area of provenience	% Children (of mixed unions) ITALY	Area of provenience	% Children (of mixed unions) ITALY
Eastern Europe	30.9	16.4	41.3	35.2
North Africa	24.7	77.7	8.1	72.3
Other African countries	7.8	73.8	5.6	66.3
Asia	26.3	36.7	10.3	59.4
Latin America	10.3	53.6	34.8	49.1
Total	100.0		100.0	

*Table 2 – Children of mixed unions: main countries of provenience for foreign mother and father*

<i>Foreign father</i>	<i>Foreign mother</i>
<b>Eastern Europe</b>	<b>Eastern Europe</b>
Albania	39.1 Romania
Yugoslavia (Serbia-Montenegro)	22.6 Poland
Macedonia	16.5 Russia
Romania	13.0 Ukraine
<b>North Africa</b>	<b>North Africa</b>
Morocco	44.4 Morocco
Egypt	25.1 Tunisia

Tunisia	24.8	<b>Other African Countries</b>	
<b>Other African Countries</b>		Capo Verde	15.2
Ivory Cost	29.5	Nigeria	13.1
Senegal	29.5	Eritrea	13.1
<b>Asia</b>		<b>Asia</b>	
China	45.2	Philippine	39.7
India	10.2	Thailand	26.3
<b>Latin America</b>		India	10.6
Ecuador	33.7	<b>Latin America</b>	
Argentina	18.7	Brazil	22.5
Venezuela	13.0	Peru	12.0
Brazil	11.9	Ecuador	11.7
		Colombia	10.5

Focusing now on the research topic, we start our analysis by comparing the performances of the children of mixed couples with the pupils for whom both parents are Italians or foreigners. Moreover we distinguish the mixed couples according to the sex of the Italian parent.

Table 3 show the results concerning the analysis of the “self-evaluation”. As expected the pupils with both Italian parents are those with a better school performance. It is interesting to note that the children of mixed couples are more similar to the foreign origin children in terms of how they rate themselves as students. In particular the percentage of pupils saying that they are “among the best” is, in the “Italian” category“ about two times higher than the categories of the students with a least one foreign parent.

In the mixed couples the sex of the Italian parent seems to have a not negligible impact on the children's scholastic performance.

This is even more evident in table 4, where we study the school performance according to the origin of the child and the fact of being held back (for one or more school years). Among the students being held back, the pupils with foreign origin are more similar to the children of mixed couples having a foreign father (with the higher performance respectively equal to 54% and to 51%). Vice versa, more than 50% of the pupils of mixed couples with a foreign mother show a lower performance. This figure grows to almost 60% for the pupils whose parents are both Italians.

*Table 3 –Performance (self-evaluated) by parents’ nationality (%)*

Performance	Parents' nationality			
	Both Italian	Italian mother/ CHEL father	CHEL mother/ Italian father	Both CHEL
Excellent	21.8	10.8	13.1	10.6
Good	49.2	45.8	43.4	44.9
On average	21.5	33.1	31.6	30.7
Under average	7.4	10.3	11.9	13.8
Total	100	100	100	100

*Table 4 – Performance (self-evaluated), being held back and parents’ nationality (%)*

Held back	Performance	Parents' nationality			
		Both Italian	Italian mother/ CHEL father	CHEL mother/ Italian father	Both CHEL
Not	Excellent	22.7	13.1	13.2	11.7
	Good	50.2	47.1	47.7	44.9
	On average	20.9	33.6	27.5	30.3

	Under average	6.2	6.2	11.6	13.1
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Yes	Excellent	7.4	7.4	12.8	9.5
	Good	33.5	43.8	33.7	44.8
	On average	31.8	32.3	40.8	31.1
	Under average	27.3	16.5	12.7	14.7
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

## Analysis

We applied a binary logistic model for the analysis of being held back (yes versus no) (**Model 1**). For the self-evaluated performance we used an ordinal logistic model. A positive effect in this model implies an increase in the scale from “under average” to “excellent” (**Model 2**).

This model is also applied only to the subsample of the pupils who are in a class level typical for their age (not being held back) (**Model 3**).

We focused our study on children of mixed couples with one parent coming from a CHEL country. The variables used are described in Table 5. The detailed results of our analysis are shown in Table 6.

*Table 5 – Variables included in the models. Univariate distribution*

	N	%
<i>PERFORMANCE</i>		
Under average	398.3	13.0%
On average	928.4	30.3%
Good	1373.3	44.9%
Excellent	359.1	11.7%
<i>BEING HELD BACK</i>		
No	2020.2	62.8%
Yes	1195.1	37.2%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	1849.6	57.5%
Female	1365.7	42.5%
<i>Context of socialization</i>		
In Italy	1770.6	55.1%
Partially in Italy	790.5	24.6%
Elsewhere	654.2	20.3%
<i>Permanence in Italy</i>		
10 years or more	1716.8	53.4%
From 5 to 9 years	612.9	19.1%
From 1 to 4 years	385.8	12.0%
Less than 1 year	123.5	3.8%
Not known	376.3	11.7%
<i>Socio-ec. status</i>		
High	640.9	19.9%
Medium-High	999.6	31.1%

Medium-Low	750.4	23.3%
Low	824.4	25.6%
<i>Siblings</i>		
No	527.9	16.4%
Yes	2687.4	83.6%
<i>Gender and area of origin</i>		
Father_East Europe	563.9	18.4%
Father_North Africa	320.4	10.5%
Father_Africa (sub-sah.)	130.7	4.3%
Father_Asia	428.5	14.0%
Father_Latin America	187.9	6.1%
Mother_East Europe	568.3	18.6%
Mother_North Africa	119.8	3.9%
Mother_Africa (sub-sah.)	85.7	2.8%
Mother_Asia	133.3	4.4%
Mother_Latin America	520.6	17.0%
<i>Macro-region of residence</i>		
North	2028	63.1%
Center	915.9	28.5%
South	271.4	8.4%

*Table 11 – Results of the binomial logistic regression on the risk of being held back (Model 1) and of the ordinal logistic regression on the self-evaluated performance, for all the pupils from mixed unions (Model 2) and only for pupils not held back (Model 3)*

	<b>Model 1</b>		<b>Model 2</b>		<b>Model 3</b>	
	<b>coeff.</b>	<b>s.e.</b>	<b>coeff.</b>	<b>s.e.</b>	<b>coeff.</b>	<b>s.e.</b>
Being held back						
No			<b>0.183</b>	0.085		
Yes			0(a)	.		
<i>Gender</i>						
Male	<b>.922</b>	.102	<b>-0.298</b>	0.071	<b>-0.348</b>	0.09
Female	0(a)		0(a)	.	0(a)	.
<i>Context of socialization</i>						
In Italy	<b>-2.330</b>	.172	<b>0.293</b>	0.132	<b>0.476</b>	0.214
Partially in Italy	-.140	.145	0.036	0.112	0.131	0.213
Elsewhere	0(a)		0(a)	.	0(a)	.
<i>Permanence in Italy</i>						
10 years or more	-.295	.161	<b>0.593</b>	0.112	<b>0.730</b>	0.138
From 5 to 9 years	-.298	.186	<b>0.426</b>	0.139	<b>0.520</b>	0.189
From 1 to 4 years	<b>.581</b>	.221	<b>0.934</b>	0.167	0.582	0.267
Less than 1 year	<b>.584</b>	.327	<b>1,787</b>	0.227	0.277	0.426
Not known	0(a)		0(a)	.	0(a)	.
<i>Socio-ec. status</i>						
High	-.230	.147	<b>1,004</b>	0.108	<b>0.97</b>	0.143
Medium-High	<b>-4.34</b>	.136	0.106	0.095	<b>0.339</b>	0.13
Medium-Low	-.041	.137	<b>0.364</b>	0.098	<b>0.714</b>	0.144
Low	0(a)		0(a)	.	0(a)	.
<i>Siblings</i>						
No	<b>-2.83</b>	.138	-0.033	0.095	-0.03	0.121

Yes	0(a)		0(a)	.	0(a)	.
<i>Gender and area of origin</i>						
Father_East Europe	.837	.170	0.593	0.119	0.316	0.155
Father_North Africa	.694	.193	-0.008	0.127	-0.037	0.148
Father_Africa (sub-sah.)	.520	.279	0.628	0.186	0.514	0.212
Father_Asia	1.517	.180	-0.366	0.129	-0.247	0.182
Father_Latin America	-.665	.249	0.507	0.16	-0.315	0.199
Mother_East Europe	1.154	.168	0.212	0.118	0.22	0.146
Mother_North Africa	1.032	.288	-0.579	0.189	-1,142	0.219
Mother_Africa (sub-sah.)	-.573	.387	0.029	0.22	-0.036	0.243
Mother_Asia	.040	.293	-0.193	0.182	-0.602	0.207
Mother_Latin America	0(a)		0(a)		0(a)	
<i>Macro-region of residence</i>						
North	-.020	.185	-0.999	0.129	-1,284	0.168
Center	.098	.193	-0.927	0.136	-1,423	0.176
South	0(a)		0(a)	.	0(a)	.

(a) category of reference.

### Gender

Generally, female pupils are more committed to their studies and they obtain better grades.

In our analysis for this covariate we obtained a significant effect which corresponds to a male disadvantage, both on the risk of being held back (Model 1), and on their academic performance (Model 2 and 3).

### Presence of siblings

The presence of siblings, net of other factors, implies the possibility to have access to more information, experiences and opportunities of social interaction that may favour the process of integration. On the other hand single children may have the advantage of a stronger investment and support from their parents, as it usually happens in the Italian context (Dalla Zuanna 2000).

In our analysis this covariate shows a significant impact but only on the risk of being held back, which results to be lower for the single children.

### Socio-economic status of the family:

This variable has been constructed by combining the information on parental level of education and their type of employment

In Italy, the economic and cultural resources of the family have in general a substantial impact on the quality of the children's education. We may expect that this can be true also for the children of mixed couples.

In our analysis we found, net of other covariates included in the model, an higher risk of being held back for the children from a family with a low socio-economic status in comparison to the children from a family with a medium-high status (Model 1) and a better performance for the pupils belonging to the category "high status" in comparison to the other pupils (stronger in Model 2 than in Model 3).

### Context of socialization:

We could expect that children who grow up in the same country where they attend school may present less educational delay and problems than pupils who grew up in foreign countries.

This variable has three categories: "socialized in Italy", "partially socialized in Italy", "socialized elsewhere".

As expected, children socialized in Italy show a lower risk of being held back and tend to have an higher self-evaluated performance in comparison to children socialized elsewhere. The effect of the category “partially socialized in Italy” is in between.

#### Duration of permanence in Italy for the foreign parent:

The longer the permanence of the foreign parent in Italy the higher are the possibilities that the child is not linguistically disadvantaged and is better supported in the interaction with the teachers and in the educational process in general.

In our analysis we found a protective effect of a longer permanence on the risk for the child of being held back (Model 1).

Contrary to our expectations, in Model 2 we found a negative effect of the long parental permanence in Italy on the pupil self-perceived performance. This odd result could be explained by the fact that a shorter presence in Italy increases the possibility for the pupil of being held back (as seen in Model 1), but in many cases, on the other hand, being placed in a class level lower than the typical age can favor a better perceived performance in comparison to younger schoolmates.

In fact, if we analyze only the pupils without any educational delay, the sign of the covariate changes in the “expected” direction, showing a positive impact of the duration of permanence of the foreign parent on the child’s performance.

#### erritorial area of residence

The macroregion of residence is included as a control variable. Nevertheless it is interesting to note that the effect of this covariate is not significant on Model 1 but it is considerable on Model 2 and 3. The reason that the self evaluated performance for the pupils coming from mixed unions tends to be higher in the South of Italy than in the North can be explained by the fact that, as documented by the Pisa-Oecd indicators<sup>1</sup>, the scholastic performances are in general much lower in the South than in the rest of the country. This means that the possible gap for a child with a foreign parent in comparison to his/her schoolmates, tends to be higher in the North than in the South.

#### Country of origin and sex of the foreign parent

This variable has been included in the model with an explorative purpose, in order to identify the type of mixed families to which corresponds a higher risk of disadvantage for the children’s education.

Net of the other factors included in the model, a higher risk of educational delay is shown by pupils with an Asian father (and Italian mother), and East-European or North-African mother (and Italian father).

As to the performance, the worst situation concerns the children with an Asian father (and Italian mother) and a North-African mother (and Italian Father).

## **Conclusions**

In this paper we studied the educational delay and the performances of the children of mixed unions in comparison to other students.

The potential factors of disadvantages have more possibilities to be removed with success when detected in the early stages of the life-course.

It is increasingly recognized how important is investing more in young children who grow up in disadvantaged environments.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.pisa.oecd.org](http://www.pisa.oecd.org)

The result of our analysis are of particular interest also in terms of social policies since the lack in the learning process and the fact of being held back for one or more school years produce inequalities in the early phase of the transition from adolescence to adulthood with potentially negative consequences in the subsequent life-course.

In synthesis, we found that some important factors generally relevant for the scholastic performance, have also a significant impact for the children from mixed unions (such as gender and the parental socio-economic status).

Net of the other variables, we obtained a strong effect, in the expected direction, of some important factors related to specific characteristics of the immigration process (such as the context of socialization and the duration of permanence in Italy for the foreign parent).

However, it is also worth noting that the children of mixed unions who attend school in contexts where the quality of education is relatively low, they perceive themselves to be relatively less educationally disadvantaged.

In the South of Italy we therefore observe a lower degree of inequalities, but downward. Paradoxally this fact could favour integration for the reason that the gap to fill in is narrower.

Finally, the worst situations appear to be those concerning the children with an Asian father (and Italian mother) and a North-African mother (and Italian father).

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