



Article

Writing Educational Success. The Strategies of Immigrant-Origin Students in Italian Secondary Schools

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Abstract: This article provides an insight into ethnic inequalities in education, from the point of view of successful students with an immigrant background. Since the 1990s, educational and migration studies have examined the unexpected pathways of disadvantaged students: researchers tested different hypotheses concerning drivers of success, highlighting social, family, and institutional mechanisms that have reproduced inequalities but also generated new opportunities. The educational success of students with a migrant background, however, is under-investigated in Italy, which represents a relevant context in which to explore the coexistence of persisting educational drawbacks and successful schooling for the children of migrants, born in Italy or abroad. Using data from a qualitative study carried out in northern Italy, the analysis is based on autobiographies written by an heterogeneous group of 65 students of immigrant origin attending different types of upper secondary schools. The analysis reveals the presence of different meanings, attitudes, and narratives of success among these students, which vary according to the different cohorts of immigrant-origin students. Each group implements different successful strategies—*standing out*, *working hard*, *waiting*—inspired by individualistic and collective logics, which can imply specific risks for students and different types of impact on equal opportunities and social cohesion. These findings could open new avenues of research and intervention, helping policymakers and practitioners to think and act, given that success is indeed possible for immigrant-origin students.

Keywords: educational success; immigrant-origin students; educational inequalities; sociological autobiography; Italy



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1. Introduction

Many cross-national empirical studies highlight the educational disadvantage of students of immigrant origin, analyzing their lower academic achievements, their higher risks of school dropout, their concentration in VET (Vocational and Educational Training), and other indicators of the migrant–native gap (Dicks et al. 2019). Nevertheless, there is evidence that young people with a migrant background progress in educational attainment over several generations, and equality in opportunities increases from first- to second-generation migrants (Verhaeghe et al. 2017). Moreover, immigrant-origin students who are academically successful are present in the educational systems of many countries, representing almost one-quarter of socioeconomically disadvantaged students with a migrant background (OECD 2018). Although researchers and policymakers have focused more on educational failure than educational success, the focus on “good” or “excellent” students is crucial to understand how students negotiate structural and cultural opportunities and constraints, reducing and mediating the effects of social background on their educational careers (Stevens and Dworkin 2019).

Among European countries, Italy represents an interesting case study in which to observe the presence of both educational failure and success among students with an immigrant background. After all, Italy is a country characterized by a numerous and stable presence of immigrant-origin students, with an estimated population of over 850,000

units, which represent 10% of total students from kindergarten to upper secondary school (ISMU Foundation 2021). Unfortunately, Italy is also one of the highest-ranking European countries in terms of numbers of young ELETs (Early Leavers from Education and Training) and NEETs (Neither in Employment nor in Education and Training). Young people born abroad are overrepresented in these groups, and the corresponding migrant–native gap may have widened during the COVID-19 pandemic, given that it is a period characterized by the risk of generalized paralysis of educational, training, social, and work dynamics for the younger and more vulnerable.

However, cases of persistent educational drawbacks co-exist with examples of successful schooling, especially for children born in Italy or for those who arrived very young (Azzolini et al. 2019), and positive academic achievement among different generations of migrants remains an under-investigated issue. The present paper seeks to fill this gap in the literature by providing a novel insight into ethnic inequalities in education, from the point of view of successful students with a migrant background.

2. Background

As Pinson and Arnot state (Pinson and Arnot 2020), “the sociology of education is a wasteland as far as studies of the social effects of migration are concerned” (p. 830). Indeed, a strong, high-quality sub-field of studies that addresses the 21st century challenges that contemporary migration bring to public education institutions does not exist. The analysis of the successful trajectories of immigrant-origin students in Italy (presented in the following section) is based on a theoretical framework that intends to mix contributions from different, specialized sociological fields, each committed to understanding academic success among disadvantaged students and/or students of immigrant-origin. Three perspectives, derived from the sociology of education and *migration studies*, are examined.

2.1. The Unexpected Pathways of Disadvantaged Students

Since the 1990s, sociologists of education have paid attention to the “unexpected” academic careers of disadvantaged students, which disconfirm their family disadvantage by achieving good results and educational success. Bernard Lahire was one of first scholars who analyzed academic success among disadvantaged youngsters (Lahire 1995). He started from the empirical observation that students from similar deprived backgrounds can undertake three distinct educational trajectories—failure, dropout, or success—that need to be described in depth and understood. Within Lahire’s extensive body of work (Lahire 2017), Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction has found interesting developments: studying the unlikely success of working-class students, Lahire analyzed the societal mechanisms that reproduce social inequalities in education, but also the dynamics that generate social change and new opportunities for disadvantaged students.

According to Lahire (1994), although disadvantaged students tend to have poor educational achievements, those who succeed cannot be considered statistical exceptions, social irregularities, or some sort of “miracle of the school system”. This is an expression of Bourdieu (1989), who referred to those children with modest social origins whose social mobility ascension was due to scholarly merit rather than to inherited cultural capital. In Lahire’s opinion (Lahire 1995), such “exceptions” are rather to be considered as social possibilities, which can occur under certain conditions and must be explored to understand how agents critically and interpretively reproduce (or do not reproduce) the societal conditions to which they belong, forging social bonds and individual trajectories towards well-travelled and expected routes, but also towards new and unexpected directions (Lahire 2017).

2.2. The Educational Success among Children of Immigrants

In parallel with educational studies focusing on the success of disadvantaged students, *migration studies* have begun to deal with the educational success among children of immigrants, both in the United States and in Europe.

In the United States, researchers using different theoretical lenses have reached quite similar conclusions. Confirming the hypothesis of straightforward assimilation, [Park and Burgess \(1969\)](#), found that students with an immigrant background did much better than their parents in educational attainment and were less concentrated in unqualified “immigrant” jobs. Other studies have shown that the overwhelming majority of second generations are fluent in English and integrated in American society in many ways ([Portes and Rumbaut 2001](#)). However, longitudinal research suggests that patterns of intergroup differences in educational attainment do, in fact, exist: the segmented assimilation theory, developed by Portes and his colleagues ([Haller et al. 2011](#)), posits distinct assimilation trajectories for the descendants of recent immigrants. Only one path, upward assimilation, can be viewed as an “unexpected pathway” towards educational success, which can be achieved by immigrant-origin students who share many social features with most native-born youngsters in the United States.

To explain success among the children of immigrants, U.S. scholars introduced the hypothesis of “immigrant optimism” ([Kao and Tienda 1995](#)), considering the attitude of immigrant families as the main driver of success: parents look with optimism at their offspring’s prospects and this, in turn, affects their educational outcome. All immigrant parents, as [Portes and Hao \(2004\)](#) point out, regardless of nationality, have high educational aspirations for their children and they are willing to make major sacrifices to achieve these goals. The relevance of family aspirations for young people belonging to minority groups had already been discussed by [Mickelson \(1990\)](#), who underlined the attitude–achievement paradox, namely, the association between positive attitudes towards school and poor school results. In his vision, only “concrete attitudes”, i.e., awareness of school risks and obstacles and direct knowledge of the educational experience, turned out to be relevant in determining school performance (as confirmed in European studies: [Van Praag 2013](#)).

Other research in Europe outlined contradictions and dilemmas in the educational pathways of immigrant-origin students, whilst considering the influence of so-called “immigrant optimism”. Some studies have reported that the children of immigrants spend a relatively long time in education and choose more ambitious educational trajectories than might be expected either from their school results or from their family’s social background (UK: [Jackson 2012](#); Sweden: [Jonsson and Rudolphi 2011](#); France: [Brinbaum and Kieffer 2005](#)). However, in her qualitative studies, [Archer \(2008\)](#) emphasizes that the dominant educational discourses concerning “the ideal pupil” always exclude minority ethnic students and prevent them from accessing positions of success, even among those who are performing well.

In Italy, similarly to other Mediterranean countries, social origin has a significant influence on educational careers ([Schnell and Azzolini 2015](#)): the achievement gap faced by immigrant children is due to fewer economic resources, deriving from the very precarious socioeconomic integration of adults who, despite their relatively strong educational credentials, are placed in the lowest occupational positions ([Zanfrini 2019](#)). Testing the hypothesis of immigrant optimism, [Eve \(2015\)](#) found that children of immigrants in Italy, not dissimilar to what happens elsewhere, are characterized by the aspirations–achievement paradox: they have relatively high aspirations, especially considering family background and school results, and show a significant persistence in spending a relatively long time in education, despite difficulties. Italian studies are also beginning to suggest that successful migrants, who manage to complete upper secondary education and show a greater interest in higher education, do exist ([Paba and Bertozzi 2017](#)).

2.3. Educational Contexts Matter

Quantitative and qualitative studies often emphasize the dominant perspective that privileges the impact of individual and family-related factors on school success or failure among children of immigrants, without mentioning more structural factors (Verhaeghe et al. 2017, p. 2745). Qualitative studies that explore the narratives of successful second-generation young people seem to confirm a vision that emphasizes the individual's responsibility and commitment in achieving success, typical of post-industrial economies (Konyali 2014). Echoing Lahire's critiques, success among the disadvantaged is still interpreted as an unexpected and exceptional event, rather than being understood in the context of the social and institutional process that integration can make available.

Maurice Crul and his colleagues are the European scholars who have linked the idea of a specific individual and family driver of success to the theoretical issue of institutional barriers and opportunities in the educational system and in the labor market (Crul and Vermeulen 2003). Since the 1990s, in their comparative research conducted in different European countries, they have been studying the integration of second-generation youngsters in order to see how they manage institutional challenges and find alternative routes to success.

In their recent project, *Elites. Pathways to Success*, Crul and the other researchers, continued to build on the "integration context theory" (Crul and Schneider 2010): this approach holds that differences in institutional arrangements in education (i.e., pre-school facilities, the amount of school contact hours, selection and tracking mechanisms, and alternative pathways to higher education) and the labor market conditions across different countries affect the possibilities for upward social mobility among children of immigrants (Crul 2013). In this project, they highlight alternative routes to achieving a successful position: second generations are moving into a social world that their ethnic group has never inhabited in the country of immigration (Crul et al. 2016).

The results of this project also show how it is possible to accumulate social and cultural capital over time, while moving up the social ladder, thus breaking the perpetual cycle of habitus inherited through class position (Bourdieu 1990). Initially, small opportunities open to other possibilities and are the starting point for further gains, leading to a sort of snowball effect called "the multiplier effect" (Crul et al. 2017). This perspective reverses the traditional interpretation of ethnic inequalities, going from the idea of intersectionality of social disadvantages (Crenshaw 1989) to the idea that opportunities can be gradually accumulated, opening to a positive idea of intersectionality, still to be explored further.

Considering the relevance of institutional factors, Eve also points out that there is an Italian "unorthodox route" to university, because the education system offers alternative and often longer pathways to higher education through technical and vocational education. This is possible, because no high school diploma per se precludes access to university, but it is not the normal or expected way; it is an unorthodox route that is not really foreseen or envisaged by teachers (Bonizzoni et al. 2014) and requires an extra effort on the part of immigrant students. The literature on this topic, however, is still scarce in Italy, also because the presence of this group is low, and data are lacking.

3. Methods

To explore the unexpected and potential pathways of students with an immigrant background, data deriving from a qualitative study carried out in northern Italy from 2017 to 2018 were used. The Su.Per. project (Success in educational pathways of students with immigrant background: cf. Santagati 2019) investigates the emancipation of immigrant youth through education, relying on the sociological autobiography as a method for research participants to author, comprehend, and imagine social spaces of resistance within socio-educational inequalities.

The study focuses on the trajectories of successful students of immigrant-origin attending upper secondary schools in the province of Brescia, an emblematic area in terms of multicultural Italian schools. Brescia is a province in Lombardy, northern Italy: it is the

fourth largest province in Italy in terms of number and percentage incidence of students with an immigrant background, after Milan, Rome, and Turin. It is also well-known as a model of good local governance within a highly multicultural area (ISMU Foundation 2021).

3.1. Aims, Hypothesis, and Research Phases

The general aims of the research were to collect stories of successful students with a migrant background, from different generations of immigration, who were attending secondary schools, and to map the multiple meanings of educational success. More specific aims of Su.Per. include: identifying personal and social factors that determine educational success among students of immigrant origin; highlighting the difficulties and obstacles that these students face; and analyzing how these students transform the disadvantages connected to migration into an educational advantage.

In this paper, the aim is to answer to the following specific questions:

- What meanings do immigrant-origin students attribute to academic success?
- Which characteristics do successful students have?
- Which strategies do students with an immigrant background adopt to achieve educational success?
- Are there any differences between meanings of educational success, narratives and strategies used to achieve it, across different cohorts of migrant students?

The first, general guiding hypothesis of the study is that, given favorable contextual conditions, educational success among students with immigrant origin is possible (cf. Section 2.1). These students have learnt within their family to cultivate an optimistic attitude towards the future and to give a positive value to education (cf. Section 2.2). Consequently, they are interested in and motivated to take advantage of the opportunities that the Italian educational system can offer them (c.f. Section 2.3). Furthermore, a second hypothesis assumes that successful immigrant-origin students probably develop different narratives and strategies of success, which are affected by their migration experience, a more or less individualistic orientation, and that these differences have many implications for educational interventions and practice.

In order to achieve the research aims, to answer the research questions, and to test the hypotheses, the research was articulated in two phases. Firstly, thanks to a collaboration with the Brescia School Office, all representatives of upper secondary schools and VET centers of the province of Brescia were invited to the presentation of the research project (November 2016). Subsequently, the meeting participants were asked to communicate their interest in and their adhesion to the project, appointing a teacher that would act as the representative for each school (December 2016).

Eleven educational institutions—and their relative teachers coming from 9 upper secondary schools and 2 training centers—voluntarily decided to participate in the project. A focus group was carried out with teachers from each school (January 2017), in order to define the profile and the characteristics of successful students with an immigrant background and to share the criteria for the selection of the participants (see Section 3.3). In the meantime, a research committee was set up, that included university researchers, representatives of the 11 educational institutions, representatives of the Intercultural Territorial Centers, and the contact person of the Brescia School Office for the educational integration of students with an immigrant background. Furthermore, the tools for data collection were prepared, including: a letter presenting the project, for school managers and the teaching staff; a letter for the students; and a letter for the parents, that included a formal authorization for participation in the study.

Representative teachers were sent a brief synopsis of the criteria for identifying suitable students, a fill-in form with the reasons and motivations for selection, timetable, and description of the phases of the study. At the same time, researchers compiled a grid for students with suggestions on how to write the educational autobiographies, which was then sent to and revised by the wider research group, before defining a final version

(February 2017). From March to June 2017, the group of selected students worked on the educational autobiographies independently and individually, under close supervision of the research group, who verified their progress at each step.

The second phase of the research started with the completion of the autobiographies (June 2017). The data were then analyzed with the support of NVivo Plus 11 software. The analysis was developed as a result of the systematic reading and discussion of the texts with the research coordination group (Autumn 2017), with the integration of some socio-demographic data on the students (December 2017). On 31st May 2018, the first findings of the project were presented to the whole school community of Brescia, to the Su.Per. student and their classmates, and their teachers in a public event. The students read their stories and met with former students who had been successful in their studies and in the transition to work, thus sharing their desire to be the protagonists of their educational careers.

3.2. The Sociological Autobiography

As mentioned, selected students were asked to write an “educational autobiography” using a self-interview grid, constructed to help them recall and describe the most relevant experiences, encounters, emotions, and choices undertaken during their educational careers. They were asked to remember their past, reflect on their present and imagine their future, analyzing successes and failures. The grid was structured in 34 points, with an introductory presentation and a final section on personal data (cf. Table 1; for the whole grid, see Santagati 2018).

Table 1. Some key points extracted from the educational autobiography grid.

<i>Self-Presentation.</i>	I introduce myself. Main characteristics and qualities. My family.
<i>PAST</i>	
	The choice of upper secondary school.
	The effects of having a migrant background on my past educational career.
<i>PRESENT</i>	
	A success that I have achieved.
	A failure that I have experienced.
	The effects of having a migrant background on my current educational experience.
<i>FUTURE</i>	
	What have I achieved and what do I still want to achieve in my educational path?
<i>Personal Information.</i>	

Source: Su.Per. project. (2017).

The biographical approach seems particularly suitable to study the success stories of vulnerable and immigrant students, taking into account the dynamic process in which young people inherit some disadvantages from their families, but are also able to reduce or re-write these effects. Thirty years ago, in her PhD Thesis entitled *Migration and Biography* (1990), Ursula Apitzsch empirically demonstrated that young migrants generally develop an intercultural disposition that may lead to upward mobility in the receiving country, thus contrasting the working-class position of their parents (Apitzsch and Siouti 2007). In migration studies, the biographical approach was developed to put the focus on listening to and giving a voice to individual immigrants (Tonia: Tsiolis 2012; Al-Rebholz 2014; Atenea: Apitzsch and Siouti 2014; Destiny: Santagati 2018) as they offered first-hand information about their life experience. It is important to bear in mind, however, that their narratives are not the expression of socially isolated individuals, but they represent a fundamental mode of accessing those events, contexts, and, especially, those social processes that make up the uncertain daily lives of migrants.

Autobiographical narratives occupy a special place among biographical methods applied to education and migration studies. This approach is not new but goes back to the origins of qualitative sociology (Thomas and Znaniecki 1918–1920). An autobiography is the story of a person’s life, constructed by oneself and written over a period of time; it

has a retrospective and reflective quality, expressly elicited by researchers who sometimes use questions or offer a list of themes to help subjects in this construction (Corbetta 1999). Sociologically, the autobiography is a source of knowledge about the social world, to investigate how people create narratives about themselves and their environment.

Writing allows us to think about the dynamics of stability versus change and about the relationship between individual and social change, especially in situations of social and biographical fracture and discontinuity such as migration. Autobiographical writing is based on experience, but it allows one to distance oneself from one's lived experience, for example, in summarizing and reflecting on one's own educational experience, thus offering imaginative spaces of resistance to social constraints (Merrill and West 2009). It generates reflexivity and is connected to social action because it allows one to return to and make sense of past actions, to evaluate the effects of the past in the present, as well as to construct and prepare for future actions (Lahire 2008, p. 172). Through this practice, it is possible to highlight the nature of subjectivity as determined but also as determining: subjects are seen, in this perspective, as a product of the society to which they belong, but also as producers, inventors, and creators of the institutions that define them and which they also contribute to defining (Beltrán Llavador 2002, p. 26).

Using this approach, the Su.Per. project sought to analyze (in)equality in education, by working on a set of autobiographies of students of immigrant origin, outlining the generative tension between something that has already been written (in social and family destinies, but also as objectified in mainstream social science narratives), and something that has to be rewritten by each migrant. Individual agency can thus emerge in unexpected educational paths as new meanings are attributed to migration, learning, failure, and success, in a dynamic dialectic between subjects and their social contexts of reference.

3.3. Selection Criteria and Characteristics of the Students Participating in Su.Per.

Before turning to the presentation of the data, some information about the participants of the qualitative study must be added. The group of students was selected using specific criteria drawn from previous studies and further discussed in a focus group that included teachers and other representatives of the educational institutions involved in the project (cf. Figure 1). These criteria of educational success included good marks, high academic performance, high cognitive skills, and good relationships with peers and teachers (Colombo and Santagati 2017). The Italian research literature already identified two main axes of school integration: academic achievement and, potentially, learning difficulties among students with an immigrant background on the one hand; relational aspects and ability to fit in the school climate, on the other. Both dimensions define the quality of students' experience in the classroom (Santagati 2015, p. 305).

The research involved a heterogeneous group of 65 immigrant-origin students, differentiated by place of birth, age of arrival in Italy, citizenship, and type of school attended: they were aged 14–19, both foreign born (39) and native-born (26), males (21) and females (44). They came from 23 different countries (mainly Morocco, India, Albania, Pakistan, and Romania) and they were attending different types of upper secondary education: 13 students attended lyceums, 20 were enrolled in technical institutes, 22 attended vocational institutes, and 10 were participating in VET courses.

With respect to family composition, most students lived in traditional nuclear families with both parents. Only in 4 cases the mother was not present in the family unit, and in 5 cases the father was not present. Only one student (Kalós) did not live with parents, but cohabited with his married sister. Thirty-five students lived in larger families (ranging from 5 to 8 components), with many siblings: of these, 14 students had at least 3 siblings. If we consider family status, 14 mothers were blue-collar workers, 29 were housewives, and only 5 carried out qualified professions such as nurses, educators, or self-employed workers. Among fathers, 42 were blue-collar workers, the others were self-employed workers or qualified workers.

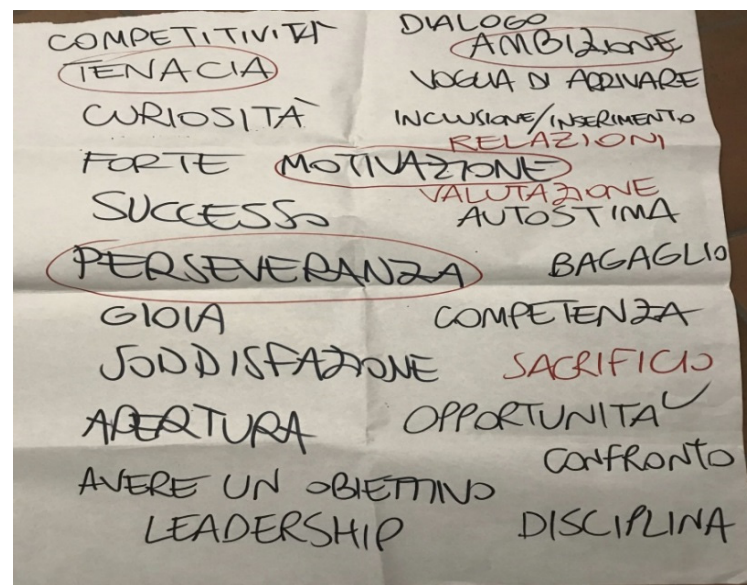


Figure 1. Brainstorming on the characteristics of successful students, during a focus group with teachers*. Source: Su.Per. project (January 2017). * Competitiveness, tenacity, curiosity, strong motivation, success, perseverance, joy, satisfaction, openness, goal-oriented, leadership, dialogue, ambition, inclusion, relationship, evaluation, self-esteem, competence, sacrifice, opportunity, discipline.

As shown in Table 2, in order to analyze the data, the students were divided into three groups, using Rumbaut's (2004, p. 1167) well-known empirical classification of distinct generational cohorts, defined by age and life-stage in which migration took place for foreign-born migrants, and by parental nativity for migrants born in the country of immigration. (1) The first group of students involved in the Su.Per. project was composed of 25 students who were born in Italy and represented the second generation (2 G). (2) The second group included 27 students who arrived in Italy in middle childhood (aged 6–10) and represented the 1.5 generation (1.5 G) of primary school-age children who began to learn to read and write in their mother tongue and in schools abroad, but whose education was largely undertaken in Italy.

Table 2. Students involved in the Su.Per. project and their characteristics.

Pseudonym	Gender	Origin	Attended School
Born in Italy—Second Generation (2 G)			
Aditti	Female	India	Technical Institute
Aicha	Female	Senegal	VET
Alessia	Female	Albania	VET
Alunna	Female	Morocco	Professional Institute
Anuar	Male	Morocco	Professional Institute
Aria	Female	Morocco	Professional Institute
Billy	Male	Morocco	VET
Callie	Female	Albania	Lyceum
Destiny	Female	Morocco	Lyceum
Fatum	Female	Morocco	Technical Institute
Georgia	Female	Senegal	Lyceum
Ikram	Female	Morocco	Professional Institute
Jenny	Female	Tunisia	Professional Institute

Table 2. Cont.

Pseudonym	Gender	Origin	Attended School
Jessica	Female	India	Lyceum
Kaer	Male	Albania	Lyceum
Krin	Male	Mauritius	Professional Institute
Lisa	Female	China	Lyceum
Matt	Male	Senegal	Professional Institute
Miriam	Female	Albania	Lyceum
Nur	Female	Morocco	Professional Institute
Rashid	Male	Iran	Lyceum
Ravenclaw	Female	Morocco	Lyceum
Salvador	Male	Albania	Technical Institute
Yasmine	Female	Morocco	Professional Institute
Yosra	Female	Morocco	VET
Arrived during Primary School—1.5 Generation (1.5 G)			
Aisha	Female	Morocco	Professional Institute
Amna	Female	Morocco	Lyceum
Anastasia	Female	Poland	Technical Institute
Anita	Female	India	Technical Institute
Annael	Female	Romania	Technical Institute
Annie	Female	India	Technical Institute
Deep	Female	India	Lyceum
Desi Girl	Female	Pakistan	Professional Institute
El Rubio	Male	Montenegro	Technical Institute
Eléna	Female	Romania	Professional Institute
Evie	Female	Bosnia	Technical Institute
Gianni	Male	Ethiopia	Lyceum
Iker	Male	Algeria	Professional Institute
Jawhara	Female	Morocco	Professional Institute
Kalós	Male	Albania	Professional Institute
Lovy	Female	India	Professional Institute
Malik	Male	Pakistan	Technical Institute
Mr. Nobody	Male	Philippines	VET
Mr. Fane	Male	Romania	Technical Institute
Nina	Female	Ukraine	Technical Institute
SaiSai	Male	India	Technical Institute
Sammi	Female	Pakistan	VET
Sole	Female	Morocco	Professional Institute
Sulejman	Male	Albania	Technical Institute
Tasfee	Male	Bangladesh	Lyceum
Trey	Male	Romania	Technical Institute
Willie	Male	Ghana	Technical Institute
Arrived during Secondary School—1.25 Generation (1.25 G)			
Alishba	Female	Pakistan	Professional Institute
Camilla	Female	Peru	Professional Institute
Essmeue	Female	Ivory Coast	Technical Institute
Hannah	Female	Albania	Professional Institute
Jaspreet	Male	India	VET
Leila	Female	Morocco	VET
Molly	Female	Moldova	Technical Institute
Paki	Male	Pakistan	VET
Preeti	Female	India	Professional Institute
Quiantrelle	Female	Philippines	Technical Institute
Sami	Female	India	Technical Institute
Tiana	Female	Pakistan	Professional Institute
Torry	Female	Moldova	VET

Source: Su.Per. project (2017–2018).

(3) The third group included 13 students born abroad who arrived in their adolescent years and attended secondary school in Italy after their arrival: it is the 1.25 generation (1.25 G) whose experiences and adaptive outcomes are hypothesized to be closer to the first generation of immigrant adults than to the native-born second generation.

4. Results

Using the classification illustrated above (Table 2), the empirical documentation was used in this paper to: explore the subjective meanings of educational success and failure, as attributed by the participants in the project; identify the narratives and attitudes of successful students, from their own perspective; highlight the successful strategies that have led those students to transform their disadvantages into educational advantages, facing adversities and overcoming disparities through different pathways, behaviors, and attitudes.

The data were analyzed with the aim of identifying common traits and specificities across the 2 G, 1.5 G, and 1.25 G, in terms of how educational success is defined, what narratives are constructed, and what strategies are used. Moving from open to interpretative coding (Charmaz 2006), the empirical material was then organized using a matrix analysis that classified success strategies corresponding to different meanings, narratives, and types of success, through categories applied to the different groups of students.

4.1. A Plural Definition of Success: Between Achievement and Progress

From the analysis of the collected autobiographies, four definitions of educational success emerged.

Students defined *academic success as a goal* that has just been reached or that they are tending towards, narrating it as a result referred mainly to academic achievement and school results (Azzolini and Barone 2013). This meaning appears to be the simplest for students to identify and the most visible in their career (both by the students themselves and by their others, i.e., parents, teachers, classmates, and researchers). Many examples, episodes, and stories concerned top marks, excellent evaluations, very good school reports, certificates of merit, scholarships, or the positive conclusion of an educational cycle. Some students—especially those born in Italy—used a meritocratic rhetoric and arguments that posited exceptional individual skills as the key to success (cf. Konyali 2014). Even among those born abroad, surprising episodes were described: despite having recently arrived in Italy, some students expressed their joy when they were evaluated as the best student in their class.

Anita. One successful moment in this school was my first 10/10 in Italian. I had received a 10 in other subjects, but never in Italian and, honestly, I never thought it would happen. My whole class applauded, because it is very difficult to get an excellent grade from our Italian teacher. I am also happy for the fact that I have maintained that 10, getting another 10 in the oral exam on Dante. (1.5 G, India)

Some students emphasized *the individual dimension of success*: all the goals reached in their educational career were the result of their personal commitment and of their extraordinary talents, deriving from their immigrant origins (something that has also emerged in other studies, e.g., Kasinitz et al. 2008). A lot of examples concerned students' character (Maccarini 2016) and many other qualities, including: perseverance and determination that enabled them to resist, handle difficulties, and gradually improve in their educational careers; motivation, dedication, commitment, as aspects that characterized the daily experience of immigrant-origin students; and high ambition, an orientation towards emancipation, and the ability to set goals and adopt adequate strategies to achieve them. In this sense, migration is considered as their most important learning experience, an important resource for biographical learning and success, in terms of reflexivity, awareness, and the development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills (Morrice 2014), that are strong predictors of educational success.

Destiny. The diversity in being an immigrant is an exceptional gift I have. (2 G, Morocco)

Fatum. Being one of the best students means being different from others. I always try to be the “black sheep”. I try to be the exception, because today we live in a monotonous society and we must try break through this curtain that surrounds everyone. (2 G, Morocco)

The participants in the Su.Per. project defined success not only as a result (which is always temporary and transitory), but rather as *a continuous progress* in learning. Some of them emphasized that the challenge is the perspective of constant improvement and lifelong learning. “True success” in education emerges from the attitude of not giving up in times of crisis, from the capacity to face and overcome obstacles and failure, and from the ability to continue cultivating hopes for the future. The reflections from students born abroad or those who arrived during primary schools are in line with this interpretation: they reported rapid learning improvement compared to the moment of arrival, especially in the linguistic skills needed to communicate and to study. Additionally, remaining in education and training and not leaving school early, redirecting their choices towards more apt educational paths for them, and reaching good result in pre-professional experience, were considered by these students as examples of a wider idea of educational success (defined by Colombo 2018).

Tiana. I want to show [. . .] how I achieved this success. I was very lucky not to give up after a failure. I tried until I overcame the obstacle that prevented me from reaching my goals. Always face insecurities and never stop trying. (1.25 G, Pakistan)

Anastasia. The goal is to overcome one’s limitations or at least to work on one’s weak spots. To obtain the desired result, then, it is not a goal but a transition. (1.5 G, Poland)

Mr. Nobody. I am not a successful student, but I think I have some ambitions. “Things to do in my life” is the name I have given to my list of projects. Teachers say that I am a good student, I prefer to call myself a “student full of hope”. (1.5 G, Philippines)

The last version of success, highlighted in some autobiographies, refers to *the socio-relational nature of success*: educational success manifests itself in good relationships with peers and a respect for teachers. Some successful students become a model for others, thanks to the positive roles of responsibility and leadership they sometimes acquire, for example, as student representatives. They experience reciprocal solidarity and mutual support from their Italian classmates, generating non-conflictual relationships or, through conflict mediation, they can solve problems among peers (Cf. Medarić and Sedmak 2012). In this relational dimension, for those born in Italy, success is connected to feeling good about oneself, being altruistic, recognized and respected by others, having a good reputation, and actively participating in school activities. Even those born abroad have an idea of success as related to feeling that they can ask for help, if needed, even if they are good students.

Georgia. I always try to give my best and when I can I get involved: I am a class representative, I participate in the institute’s Olympics and I help younger children in need. (2 G, Senegal)

Tiana. I used to think that excellent students were the ones who never need help, but now I know that, like everyone, I sometimes need help too. (1.25 G, Pakistan)

The adherence to democratic values (human rights, civil rights, freedom, respect, tolerance, etc.) is also included in this fourth dimension of success. Few students have written about how they have been introduced to the basic values of civil life, such as having respect for the dignity and the diversity of each person (Lodigiani 2020). This is an

important point, because very diligent students can show intolerant and radical attitudes, independently from their origins.

4.2. Portraits of Successful Students with an Immigrant Origin

Within this plurality of meanings of success, the analysis of the students' autobiographies allows us to add some details about the attitudes, the narratives, and characteristics of successful students of migrant origin. Different traits are outlined for each group involved in the project (summarized in Table 3).

Table 3. Successful students with an immigrant background: attitudes, narratives, and strategies differentiated by groups. Matrix analysis.

Groups of Students	Attitudes of the Successful Student	Narratives of Success	Success Strategies
2 Generation	Feel superior to natives React to self-redeem	Competition to excel Defense vs. discrimination	Stand out
1.5 Generation	Be like everyone else Never give up	Equal opportunities Studying as a duty and priority	Work hard
1.25 Generation	Accept downgrade Be patient, trust in the future	Temporary nature of failure Positive thinking	Wait

Source: Su.Per. project (2017–18).

(1) In the autobiographical texts of native-born students, ambitious and performative students were described. They felt superior compared with natives: a pride in their origins pushed them to success and becomes an ideal that they defend and try and live up to, especially when teachers and peers are not convinced of their special gifts. Success thus also has a demonstrative value for them: even if one is different and from another culture or nationality, one can still achieve excellent school results. It is not diversity but achievement that matters, and top marks are used as a defense from potential discrimination.

Ravenclaw. One of my main characteristics is competitiveness: tell me I am not able to do something, and I will show you that the opposite is true. Therefore, the adage “what does not kill you makes you stronger” is true for me. (2 G, Morocco)

Aicha. I never thought I was among the best students. In fact, I just thought I could get away with it. This thing woke me up and made me realize that it is not true that just because you are different you cannot have what they have, it is not that just because you come from another culture you cannot be good at school. (2 G, Senegal)

(2) Students belonging to the 1.5 generation wanted to be like everyone else: in their writing, they did not enter into a competitive comparison with natives, because they did not overestimate their abilities and they did not want to outdo their classmates. Thus, they were able to show their full potential and become active members of classes that appreciated them. They were aware of the difficulties they experienced during migration in early childhood: they showed pragmatic and realistic attitudes, self-confidence, and perseverance, despite some temporary failures. In their narratives, extraordinary actions were not so important: studying was their only priority and everyday duty. Their efforts will be rewarded, because they have faith in an educational system that can ensure the same opportunities to both native and migrant students.

Mr. Fane. I was the best student in the XI grade, but it was not always a bed of roses. (1.5 G, Romania)

Deep. For me, being a good student does not just mean having excellent grades, it also means having the desire to learn new things, recognizing your weaknesses, and not feeling superior to others. (1.5 G, India)

Willie. I am just doing my duty, like parents do to support a family, my duty is to be a student and I try to do it in the best possible way . . . it is not like I received a Nobel Prize. (1.5 G, Ghana)

(3) The students of the 1.25 generation remembered all the obstacles they faced in their educational careers: the memory of those aspects was still strong in their autobiographies. They wrote of stress and anxiety, health problems such as depression or PTSD, family problems that included deprivation, poverty, separation, or the death of a parent. In some cases, they talked of physical and psychological violence. In accessing the Italian school system during adolescence, they experienced learning difficulties and a sense of things worsening before they improved, that may have had motivational and emotional implications for them.

However, their autobiographies highlighted an attitude of acceptance to being “downgraded” in lower classes at school, with younger classmates, while at the same time a tendency to seek respect and recognition of their complex and difficult life histories. They demonstrated a humble and patient propension towards industriousness in their host environment, looking up at teachers and at educational institutions with hope and full of confidence in their roles and what they could offer them. They firmly believed that failure is a temporary condition and had faith in the future possibilities that their investment in education would bring. If they were no longer good students, due to a sort of retrocession as a result of migration, they trained themselves to think positively: they had learned to distinguish real problems from trivial issues, permanent difficulties from transitory challenges, and impossible endeavors from possible and open routes.

Alishba. Age and knowledge are not important to study. Unlike money, no one can steal knowledge. (1.25 G, Pakistan)

Essmeue. I prefer to think positively, life has already hit me enough. (G2, Ivory Coast)

Hannah. When you work hard to achieve something why not think you deserve such an opportunity? With a lot of patience and work, I managed to get respect. I am very demanding. (1.25 G, Albania)

Molly. Despite all the difficulties, I never thought about leaving school . . . I was sure that everything would change over time. For this reason, I decided to continue, with a lot of patience. (1.25 G, Moldova)

4.3. Three Strategies for Success: Stand Out, Work Hard, Wait

The final step of this analysis identifies the main strategies for achieving academic success used by the different groups of Su.Per. participants, reflecting on connected risks and revealing the underlying logic. In the previous matrix analysis (Table 3), a synthetic typology of successful students with an immigrant background that emerged from this study is presented.

First strategy. Typical of students born in Italy is the strategy of trying to *stand out from other students*, aiming at pursuing excellent academic achievements. These students seem to comply with a model of the “ideal student”: they consider their diversity as an added value to be used competitively and to their advantage. They are aware of having an extraordinary and exceptional capital at their disposal that can allow them to emerge in competition with natives, who represent the group that compares themselves to and that influences their academic behavior and strategies (Van Praag et al. 2015). They also use their migratory background to defend themselves and to react to injustices and discrimination when perpetrated by classmates or (sometimes) teachers. This competitive and reactive strategy aims at enabling individual empowerment among students, who are considered strong and valiant. The excessive competition and pressure which these students sometimes feel can undermine their whole integration process.

Ikram, a second-generation girl—and third generation in Europe because her grandfather emigrated from Morocco to France in the past—writes: “For years I have tried to make

myself similar to others, while society tried to prevent me from doing so, marginalized me and told me ‘you are different’ . . . now I’m saying to myself: I’m different, it’s true and I’m proud of this”.

Second strategy. Among the 1.5 generation, *hard work* is the predominant strategy adopted. These students show high academic engagement and commitment to education, and remain focused on their current school experience, revealing an incredible power of perseverance even when good results do not arrive immediately. These strategies are typical of an optimistic family tendency among migrants, where educational success is expected (Kao and Tienda 1995), and the whole family basks in it. To reach this goal, students are educated by their parents not to give up: the good results they achieve in the present are a stimulus that pushes them to strive for continuous improvement. The group associates academic success with the responsibility that being a child of immigrants entails (Colombo and Santagati 2010) opportunities that would be inaccessible in one’s country of origin and cannot be wasted. In fact, these students feel that it is their duty to repay the sacrifices their parents had to make, on the one hand, and to seize the rights and opportunities offered by the Italian public school system, on the other. However, they run the risk of living an unbalanced life, focused only on studying and limiting their spaces of freedom and action because they assume adult responsibilities early on and have a lot of expectations to meet, and material and nonmaterial debts to pay within their families.

These students who work hard use the strategy of “maximum commitment” to live up to natives’ standards. As SaiSai states, the road to the achievement does not allow for shortcuts, because “you cannot reap the same fruits and gain the same satisfaction as you would from working hard, through sweat and tears” (1.5 G, India). As SaiSai’s father often repeated to him: “you must never forget your starting point, because what matters is not who you are but how you became who you are”. The most important thing for SaiSai, then, was the journey: “going to school for me is like going to temple: this is where I expect I will get everything in my life, from a good career to becoming a worthy citizen”.

Third strategy. Newly arrived students implement the strategy of *waiting*. This is not synonymous with paralysis or immobility; at one and the same time, these students wait and act. Despite the rupture in their educational path, caused by migration during adolescence, they have a positive attitude towards the future. They are characterized by a widespread awareness that failures, problems, and deprivations of various kinds are temporary and surmountable: in a few words, they are moving away from a past of struggle and poverty. These students believe in and work for positive changes, trusting in education. Success for them takes the meaning of having a long-term vision and trusting in their future, because they continue experiencing numerous failures and difficulties in the present. The emphasis they put on the future, however, can be problematic when opportunities for success do not arrive quickly and the transition to adulthood is near. However, for those who have experienced poverty, hunger, or the damage caused by ignorance, arrogance, and violence, and for those who have found themselves growing up very quickly, a bad mark at school or a discussion with a friend are problems of little importance. Migration and other experiences in their country of origin have already put these students to the test and led them to rearrange their own value scales and priorities accordingly.

Nothing seems to stop some of them: “climbing the ladder is tiring, but I have learned to do it and the effort does not scare me”, said Alishba (1.25 G, Pakistan). “I think that I will always find the way to carry out my projects, because there is no easy way”. The expectations expressed in these narratives can be considered a self-fulfilling prophecy: a positive prediction for the future that helps to reinforce attitudes and behaviors, which may lead to the actual achievement of their goals in life.

5. Discussion

The autobiographies of the Su.Per. students offer an original contribution to our understanding of how migration impacts on educational careers, from the point of view of

the protagonists of this process. The value of these stories emerges from the words written by these successful students: by writing their autobiographies, they have voice as authors of their own educational experience, reflecting on their life without simplification or reductionism. After all, these autobiographies highlight that the different cohorts of immigrant-origin students are in a much more complex and ambivalent situation than what merely pessimistic or optimistic interpretations can truly explain (Zhou and Gonzales 2019).

Summarizing the research findings through a matrix analysis, diverse meanings of educational success, attitudes towards success, and narratives were identified, corresponding to different strategies of action. Second-generation students, who tend to try to stand out and outperform their classmates and competitors, often use the ethnic factor as a competitive advantage, adhering to an individualistic and instrumental logic whose final aim is to be the winner in the game of education. Students in this category of top performers run many risks, because their behavior can lead to excessive pressure and competition (Engzell 2019), which can undermine relational integration and effective school participation. The motto “may the best win” does not take into consideration nor give any support to those who lose or who cannot stand the competition. Successful students, in this race for success, can only represent an individual exception, with respect to a social vision that does not expect success from the children of immigrants.

The Su.Per. students belonging to generation 1.5 are the students who work hard and study a lot: they feel a big responsibility towards their parents, who have educated them to resist and endure fatigue, because they optimistically trust that their sacrifices will eventually be rewarded and socially recognized. The transformation from a migration made of single workers into a migration of families and offspring changes the relationship between immigration and the host society, emphasizing the claim for equality and non-discriminating actions. These students believe that if you work hard, it will yield results, because equal opportunities exist and positive educational contexts matter. They are not yet aware that discriminations persist in practices and in the normal functioning of democratic institutions, and end up reproducing, through a vicious circle, a disappointing condition of structural disadvantage in different spheres of life (Vianello and Toffanin 2021).

Finally, adolescents from generation 1.25 who participated in the project look primarily for meaning rather than for a rational strategy in their quest for success. They await better times, following a sociocultural—almost spiritual—logic of action capable of foreseeing possibilities, of positive prophecies; from this perspective, they are able to imagine and trust that everyone can become whoever they want, even if they start from a disadvantaged background (Zanfrini 2020). This providential vision, however, puts a problematic emphasis on an uncertain future, especially for adolescents who have recently arrived in Italy, and are very close to the transition to adulthood without the necessary time to consolidate competences and strategies that can ensure an actual biographical success.

In different ways, each group explores strategies and faces risks in their educational pathway to success: the challenge remains of harmonizing and balancing excesses in a situation where economic competition and social and cultural controversies exist, but equal opportunities in education are combined with the respect of social rights and with solidarity with peers, family members, and their transnational network.

The results of the study could also suggest new lines for interventions, identifying mechanisms capable of altering individual and collective attitudes and logic of action, crystallized ways of seeing disadvantage, proposing projects or instruments that can work to foster educational success for the most vulnerable students, helping both policymakers and practitioners in the field to think and to act on the assumption that accessing success is indeed possible for students of immigrant origin and those from ethnic minorities. Furthermore, reading success stories can make teachers and parents more aware of their role in supporting students’ school trajectories and lends itself to teachers’ and trainers’ training, based on direct life testimonies, as examples of agency expressed through writing (Stewart 2010).

Finally, these first 65 autobiographies could represent a core group of documents for structuring and widening a future archive of “unexpected stories” of improvements of disadvantaged people through education (widely used in sociological studies: Moore et al. 2016). This “qualitative database” could be implemented over time and extended within and beyond national borders, opening new paths for a more in-depth and shared analysis of the meanings of educational success, which may reorient research and practice.

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