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## INTRODUCTION



# Breaking down the barriers: educational paths, labour market outcomes and wellbeing of children of immigrants

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### ABSTRACT

The goal of successfully incorporating ethnic minorities represents a decisive challenge for modern societies. However, migratory background continues to negatively affect the life trajectories of migrants' descendants. 'Hard' and 'soft' barriers determine long-term inequality gaps and low intergenerational social mobility in both longstanding and more recent European immigration countries. This special issue complements the sparse findings on education, labour market outcome and wellbeing relating to immigrant offspring by providing original insight in order to individuate strategies for removing the obstacles that the descendants of migrants face. In-depth analyses have been performed for specific Southern European contexts in order to explore the specific inequality patterns that are emerging in these more recent and unexplored immigration contexts. The main findings suggest that the lower academic performances of immigrants' descendants can be raised through language-support programmes, mentoring programmes, positive role and disciplinary climate, extra-scholastic activities and parental involvement. Equality opportunities in education should support school-to-work transitions and better allocate the underutilised human capital reserves of migrants' descendants. Conversely, long-lasting penalties in educational careers and integration processes may arise when children are physically separated from their parents because of delayed family reunification.

### KEYWORDS

Children of immigrants;  
ethnic penalty; education;  
labour-market; well-being;  
Southern European countries

## Introduction

The children of migrants are an increasingly important part of European societies but their integration continues to be problematic (Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2012; Alba and Foner 2015). Immigrants' children occupy a socio-cultural middle ground between the mainstream culture in the country of origin and that in the country of arrival (Holland and de Valk 2013; Gabrielli and Impicciatore 2020). In many cases, they grow up in so-called low status groups (Algan et al. 2010; Alba and Holdaway 2013) that can negatively influence their life trajectories. The offspring of immigrants and natives do not enjoy equal opportunities and they are not equally able to develop their potential (Alarcón, Parella, and Yiu 2014). Given this vulnerability, it is crucial to

remove or at least reduce the existing barriers that hinder their inclusion. The goal of incorporating ethnic minorities in host societies represents today a common challenge for all European contexts, as underlined by the 'Zaragoza Declaration' of the European Commission<sup>1</sup> in 2010.

Scholars have demonstrated the direct relationships among high educational outcomes, successful entry in the labour market, a good income, well-being and health (Heath, Rothon, and Kilpi 2008; Alba and Foner 2015). This applies both to longstanding immigration countries – where large shares of immigrant offspring are of working age – and to more recent immigration countries – where the children of migrants are mostly in schools, though an increasing number are entering the labour market.

The reasons for the shortcomings of immigrants' children in Europe are difficult to grasp. Previous research has highlighted a number of factors and explanations for the ethnic penalty, although it has mainly focused on the North-western countries. The main aim of this special issue is to complement the sparse findings on education, labour market outcome and well-being relating to immigrant offspring in selected European countries with a specific focus on the Southern European context, thereby providing original insights in order to better inform policymakers and to individuate new policies and strategies for removing the obstacles that the descendants of migrants face. In-depth analyses have been performed for Italy and Spain to assess the generality of previous findings and explore inequalities that are emerging in these more recent and still largely unexplored immigration contexts.

This special issue is divided into three distinct but often interlinked domains: educational trajectories, labour market inclusion and well-being. The first part of the special issue concerns *educational trajectories*. Three articles focus on the efficiency of educational systems and school policies in fostering the academic integration of children of immigrants, exploiting both harmonised cross-national data and high-quality country-specific datasets. Accordingly, the following research questions are addressed: how may children of immigrants overcome their migratory related academic barriers? Do individual and family characteristics, school activities and resource-allocation strategies make a difference? Are there appealing or repulsive schools for children of immigrants?

The second part provides fresh evidence for ethnic inequalities in *labour-market inclusion* in Spain and the Netherlands. Emphasis tends to be put on labour market entry barriers, early-career occupational attainments and protection against the risk of job loss. The following research questions are addressed: are the disadvantages faced by the first generation of migrants transmitted to their descendants? To what extent do social origin and human capital explain observed ethnic inequalities in the labour market? Is the labour market more meritocratic for highly educated people or do ethnic penalties hold even among people with a tertiary degree?

Based on the Spanish case and exploiting *ad-hoc* data, the third part focuses on the *psychological wellbeing* of children of immigrants and the relationship with family ties. Stressful experiences such as physical separation from parents can be very harmful, especially among children of immigrants. This is an aspect often overlooked by educational policies, that could help to understand their underperformance (Crosnoe 2013). Here the research question is whether family changes and, in particular,

physical separation from parents can reduce mental health among descendants of immigrants.

Methodologically speaking, this special issue is both cross-disciplinary and innovative in different ways. First, it adopts a variety of quantitative methods including decomposition analysis, multilevel models, geo-localisation procedures, propensity score matching and treatment effects models. Second, by using different large datasets, relevance is given to cross-national, within-national and local contexts in incorporating migrant descendants. In particular, the largest number of papers in the special issue focuses on the case study of two Southern European countries (Italy and Spain), two countries substantially understudied so far, mostly because of the relatively young age of descendants of immigrants who have arrived massively only in the past three decades, with a consequent lack of exhaustive data until recent years. Third, all contributions analyse the patterns of immigrant descendants in comparison with those of their native counterparts. Fourth, the papers focus not only on objective indicators of integration such as educational performances and occupational outcomes, but also on subjective factors like mental well-being, job satisfaction and subjective job-skill match.

In this special issue, migration experts from different fields in the political and social sciences aim to produce up-to-date empirical evidence that not only enhances scientific knowledge of the offspring of immigrants in Europe but that also offers policy-relevant conclusions. Together and separately, the articles have the potential to move forward the evidence base and, in some cases, the theoretical debate as well.

### **Educational system and academic integration of second-generation migrants**

The educational system in the destination country represents an extraordinary context within which to promote the integration of second-generation immigrants (Brinbaum and Lutz 2017). However, children of immigrants suffer a number of negative outcomes at school with respect to their autochthonous counterparts: more school dropouts, lower academic performances and higher concentrations in vocational secondary schools (Alba, Sloan, and Sperling 2011; Heath and Brinbaum 2014). The ethnic gap increases even further among students who arrived during late childhood or adolescence because they were less exposed to the social and cultural background of the host country (Rumbaut 2004; Duong et al. 2016). These students are more vulnerable in terms of their likelihood of experiencing alienation after the migration (Padilla and Durán 1995). Poor outcomes at school have serious consequences by producing downward assimilation (Portes and Rumbaut 2001), low inter-generational mobility and long-term inequality gaps in terms of labour-market insertion, life opportunities and wellbeing (Heckman 2006). Although with some differences and specificities, these overall downward positions in educational paths do not seem to be substantially different across European destination countries (Heath, Rethon, and Kilpi 2008).

A number of contributors in the literature identify the risk factors that prevent students with a migratory background from achieving successful educational paths (e.g. Alba and Holdaway 2013; Heath and Brinbaum 2014). Four main, possibly overlapping, factors can be identified in the existing literature.

First, children of immigrants have a lower educational achievement than their native counterparts because of (on average) disadvantaged family background factors (low parents' social class, occupational, and income levels). This interpretation, involving basically a composition effect (Schnepf 2007; Heath and Brinbaum 2014), is based on the assumption that families in upper socio-economic classes can support their descendants in achieving better academic performance (e.g. though private lessons or achievement-boosting extracurricular activities) and pursuing more costly (but rewarding) educational careers, whereas investments in education tend to be lower among families with poor socio-economic resources (Blossfeld et al. 2016). Moreover, affluent families are better equipped to arrange 'flight' strategies, finding more distant and more appealing schools with selective admission policies or fee-based (Ichou and van Zanten 2019), thus resulting in potential social inequalities linked to geographical segregation of disadvantaged students (Andersson, Malmberg, and Östh 2012; Curaj, Deca, and Pricopie 2018).

A second perspective focuses on the ethnic-specific cultural traits (such as education, language abilities and skills) of the origin family. Parents' education may serve as a proxy of home environment and human capital. Higher educated parents are more likely to create a positive home environment by motivating their children (Spera 2006), providing material resources and equipment (Chiu and Chow 2015) and offering advice on school matters (Crul et al. 2017). Poor skills of migrant parents may impede their ability to support their children in education (van De Werfhorst and Van Tubergen 2007) in terms of parent-teacher contact (Crozier and Davies 2007) or in terms of school practices, norms, and activities (Pfeffer 2008). In addition, the language spoken at home proxies the integration of the origin family and the parents' capacity to assist their children (Janta and Harte 2016). In other words, children of immigrants suffer due to the low cultural capital of their parents in respect to their native counterparts (Portes and Zady 2001; Heath and Cheung 2007; Kogan 2007). This may be the result of the scarce transferability of educational degrees acquired in the country of origin, language barriers and skills, discrimination in the labour market, or difficulties in achieving upward social mobility.

Third, individuals' performance can be determined by their beliefs about how well they will do on the activity. Following this line of reasoning, which is also called the expectancy-value theory of motivation (Wigfield and Eccles 2000), pro-school attitudes and behaviours add pivotal resources to enable educational success and reduce existing social and familiar barriers, especially among children of immigrants (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Positive aspirations, psychological traits, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, as well as good intrinsic/extrinsic motivation in studying and perceived relevance of school success, can favour long-standing educational achievements (Miyamoto, Seuring, and Kristen 2018). This mechanism can be extended to the attitudes of their own parents. Positive parenting styles also play an important role in promoting student's educational outcomes (Kao and Tienda 1995). Scholars have found that positive parental aspirations, expectations and support translate into attitudes and behaviours that are prerequisites to educational success, such as parental active involvement at school and participation in their children's formal education (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Alba, Sloan, and Sperling 2011).

Finally, the school's environment, practices, and resources may support migrant students in overcoming the achievement gaps beyond individual and familiar factors

(Agasisti et al. 2021). Existing literature suggests the relevance of several aspects of learning activity in order to overcome shortages of the origin family and prevent children of immigrants from reducing achievement gaps, including: high-quality resources at school in terms of physical infrastructure (library, laboratory, gym), educational materials (books and PC devices) and technical infrastructure (internet, heating/cooling, lighting and acoustic systems; Borman and Overman 2004); a positive school and classroom climate (including supportive teacher–student interactions, good student–student relationships, and an orderly learning atmosphere with clear disciplinary rules; Cheema and Kitsantas 2014); and extracurricular activities (cultural, musical, artistic, sporting; Lavonen and Laaksonen 2009) and after-school collaborations (e.g. supporting with homework) with students, their families and the local community (Blomfield and Barber 2011). In addition, the short home-school distance may positively affect social integration and educational performance by promoting regular attendance, facilitating participation in extracurricular events, and determining higher levels of connectedness with the local community (Thomas 2016).

Three papers that are included in this special issue debate how children of immigrants can overcome existing barriers and achieve good educational performance. Although one paper provides a cross-country analysis, all of them analyse Italy as an understudied destination context. Italy is characterised by one of the greatest ethnic educational disadvantages in Europe (OECD 2018). Among the other indicators, children of immigrants in this country have one of the highest penalties in educational performances and one of the highest percentages of early leaving from education and training compared to the other EU15 countries (EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2014). In particular, scholars have outlined the problems of including immigrant children in the Italian educational system, with a particular focus on their regular participation, school success and training choices (Azzolini, Schnell, and Palmer 2012; Gabrielli, Paterno, and Dalla-Zuanna 2013; Buonomo, Strozza, and Gabrielli 2018).

In this special issue, Triventi, Vlach, and Pini (2022) analyse the micro-level drivers of the achievement gaps, both in linguistic and mathematic competencies, between children of immigrants and natives enrolled in two subsequent Italian stages of the school career (primary and lower secondary school). This article makes use of a large dataset from the National Institute for the Evaluation of the Italian School System (INVALSI 2012) on the whole population of students enrolled in fifth grade (primary education) and sixth grade (lower secondary education). Results confirmed that, on average, students with a migration background underperform in Italian and mathematics compared to natives. The gap is greater for linguistic competencies (especially for first generations), but it is also substantial for mathematic achievements.

Overall, the original outcomes provide support for the composition hypothesis and for the culturalist perspective on the ethnic gap. Indeed, socio-economic backgrounds (parents' occupational and educational levels) and cultural factors (language spoken at home and number of books at home) constitute the two pivotal driving forces regarding the gap between children of immigrants and of natives across subjects and educational levels. However, negative school-related attitudes (related to extrinsic motivation, internal attribution of failure, and anxiety for test) represent an additional factor that further contributes to increase achievement gaps, especially in lower secondary school. In contrast, material educational resources, educational support at home, and indicators

of students' homework-related behaviour contribute marginally to reduce the achievement gaps.

This contribution is supported and integrated, in this special issue, by Gabrielli, Longobardi, and Strozza (2022). By using the two most recent editions of OECD-PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) data, this article aims to analyse 'academic resilience' among students with and without a migratory background in seven European destination countries. Academic resilience refers to disadvantaged students (in terms of socio-economic status) who are able to 'beat the odds' by achieving good educational outcomes (Suárez-Orozco et al. 2018; Agasisti et al. 2021).

On average, resilient students are more frequent in North-western European countries (France, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK) than in Southern ones (Greece, Italy, Spain). Children of immigrants have lower percentages of resilience than those of natives in all countries, and disadvantaged students born in the host country or who migrate during early childhood perform better than the ones who migrate during middle childhood or adolescence. The culturalist explanation is supported by the fact that academic resilience among migrants tends to be positively associated with parents' educational level and language attitudes at home, with some exceptions in countries like France and the UK where no significant effects are observed for both factors. Other results tend to be confirmed across countries. Self-efficacy beliefs uniformly promote good academic adjustment among students with and without a migratory background. Interestingly, the 'double origin gap' (socio-economic and migratory) of migrants makes them more dependent on the school's quality and environment in contrast to their native peers. In all countries, for example, there is a direct association between the school's disciplinary climate and academic resilience. In contrast, school resources and school support for children's homework have a less evident cross-country association to resilience. Since the number of children of immigrants has increased significantly in Southern European countries only in recent years, the educational systems in these contexts still have a reduced ability to perform strategies that smooth out the gaps of disadvantaged migrant students (such as extracurricular activities). Once different school-related factors are considered in the analyses, the lower academic resilience observed in Southern countries by migratory generations becomes not statistically significant.

Within this school-related perspective, Mantovani, Gasperoni, and Santangelo (2022) examine whether and to what extent home-school distance is a significant factor in differentiating native and immigrant-origin students' educational opportunities and experiences. The analyses focus on two major Northern Italian cities (Milan and Bologna) and use INVALSI data on students enrolled in the final school year of lower secondary education, geo-referenced locations of students and schools, and specific socio-economic characteristics of territorial units from recent censuses. The original results show that educational opportunities do not differ between native and immigrant-origin children and that school proximity and the connected educational opportunities do not seem to penalise any particular subgroup. However, many pupils do not attend the school closest to their residence and natives are more likely to attend schools that are farther from home, especially if their parents are highly educated. This latter result clearly highlights the role of familial cultural resources. In Bologna, students travel greater distances than students in Milan to reach the nearest state school. However, 'flight' in general is more widespread in Milan, where native families tend to enrol their children in more

‘geographically inconvenient’ schools to an appreciably greater extent with respect to immigrant-origin households. A school’s attractiveness (in terms of attracting culturally advantaged families and repelling culturally disadvantaged ones) tends to rise as its share of immigrant-origin pupils decreases. In both cities, non-state schools tend to be appealing and deal almost exclusively with the educational needs of native students. Conversely, the relationship between cultural attractiveness and incidence of immigrant-origin is less evident in state schools.

### Labour market trajectories

Along with education, the labour market integration of the second generation offers key evidence on the ability of host societies to integrate ethnic minorities under equal conditions (Portes and Zhou 1993) and reveals the quality of structural integration processes giving insights into the extent to which labour market disadvantages found in the first generation are reproduced in the subsequent one (Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2012).

The difficulties faced by the first-generation migrants are basically linked to the low starting position of unskilled and low-skilled migrants and, for more highly educated migrants, a lack of skills transferability upon migration. Furthermore, their labour market outcomes are hindered by skill shortages in language proficiency (Van Tubergen and Kalmijn 2005), limited knowledge of the functioning of the labour market of the country of arrival (Kogan 2007) and country-specific cultural norms (Crul and Vermeulen 2003; Rumbaut 2004). However, disadvantages may persist among immigrants’ descendants. Several studies suggest that second-generation young adults are more likely to be unemployed, underemployed or to have only precarious employment (Algan et al. 2010; OECD 2010; Maes, Wood, and Neels 2019). A common explanation of the labour market outcomes of second-generation minorities refers to ‘ethnic penalties’ (Kalter and Kogan 2006; Heath and Cheung 2007). According to this hypothesis, ethnic minorities achieve poor labour market outcomes because of their ethnic/racial attributes that impose societal barriers over their labour market integration; this would be observed regardless of their demographic and socio-economic composition. Job candidates are hired or promoted according to their ethnic, religious or racial attributes instead of their skills and their job career may be negatively affected by discrimination in the workplace. This can also be the effect of a sort of assimilation paradox for the children of immigrants (Ambrosini 2020). Unlike their parents, employed in marginal and less desirable sectors, the children of immigrants aspire to find a job in a broader range of sectors and positions, often sharing the same goals with the natives. This would expose them to a higher risk of suffering racism and discrimination.

The ethnic penalisation among the second generation is also postulated by the segmented assimilation approach (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001), which gives more emphasis to the social mechanisms which make the initial disadvantages suffered by immigrants permanent over time. Despite the diminishing gap in human capital, immigrants remain permanently in secondary labour markets, with low-paying jobs and few opportunities for upwards social mobility. Persistent disadvantages based on ethnic and racial discriminatory practices can question the so-called meritocratic society, hinder social mobility and reinforce social reproduction in existing structures of inequality (Gracia, Vázquez-Quesada, and Van de Werfhorst 2016).



Although it is widely accepted that in the short term immigrants from Non-Western countries experience some kind of occupational penalisation in the receiving countries, there is consistent literature suggesting that the substantial disadvantages experienced by the first generation in terms of occupational attainment vanishes in the second generation, resulting in a substantial convergence in socioeconomic status among the children of immigrants and natives in different contexts (Pichler 2011; Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2012). This is basically one of the main assumptions of the traditional assimilation perspective that assumes advancements in the labour market by the second generation as long as they leave behind ethnic and ascriptive identities (Alba and Nee 2003; Heath, Rethon, and Kilpi 2008). Overall, assimilation proceeds as the children of immigrants become more educated and their human capital converges with that of natives. Thus, descendants of immigrants would occupy more desirable occupational positions than their parents' and show rates of upward mobility comparable to that of natives (Gracia, Vázquez-Quesada, and Van de Werfhorst 2016).

Potential patterns of social reproduction in occupational attainment across generations may thus be explained in terms of other factors mainly related to the social origin and human capital differentials. Social origin affects labour market outcomes both directly, through material resources and social networks, and indirectly through educational outcomes, language skills and cultural resources (Bourdieu 1984; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). Being disproportionally raised in working-class and low-income families, second generations are at a higher risk of early socioeconomic disadvantage both in the schooling system and labour market.

According to human capital theory (Alba and Nee 2003), education and job-related skills are crucial factors for labour market success because they increase productivity and the likelihood of being employed. From a rational viewpoint, job candidates should be selected and promoted according to their education and skills. The labour market disadvantage may thus be explained in terms of the lower levels of education of second-generation minorities. Nevertheless, once the social origin and human capital have been accounted for, the remaining unexplained variance in labour market outcomes between ethnic minorities and natives can be assumed as an ethnic penalty (Kalter and Kogan 2006; Heath and Cheung 2007)

In addition, the role of human capital and social origin can be considered as country-specific, with particular reference to the structural and institutional factors that might affect labour market outcomes (Ballarino and Panichella 2015; Cebolla-Boado and Finotelli 2015). Assimilation hypothesis and segmented assimilation theory have mainly been tested in Anglo-Saxon countries, while Southern European countries have only rarely been addressed (Dalla Zuanna, Farina, and Strozza 2009; Azzolini, Schnell, and Palmer 2012), despite their key role in migratory inflows to Europe.

Two papers in this special issue contribute to the existing literature in trying to understand the labour market integration of immigrants and their descendants in two different European contexts: Spain and the Netherlands. Despite the strong increase in the number of children of immigrants in the last two decades, their integration into the Spanish labour market remains an under-researched topic. However, its relevance has been emphasised by the segmentation of the Spanish labour market and the strong impact of the Great Recession in employment, particularly for the foreign-born population. The Netherlands has a longer history of immigration given that the share of immigrant

workers started to become relevant from the early 1960s. However, non-Western ethnic minorities have not performed as well in the labour market as Western minorities and almost all non-Western ethnic minority groups show a certain degree of disadvantage in their socioeconomic position. This ethnic penalty is a well-established conclusion in the existing literature as regards the lesser educated and school leavers, but it is not clear if it also persists among those more highly educated.

In this special issue, Muñoz-Comet and Arcarons (2022), using longitudinal data from the Spanish Labour Force Survey (SLFS 2008-2016), identify differences in occupational attainment and job loss among natives and first-generation immigrants from Latin America, Eastern Europe and Africa, whose children arrived at an early age (generation 1.5). The longitudinal perspective of these data is exploited by tracking individual status in the labour market over time, aiming to evaluate the role of structural factors related to job characteristics (i.e. type of contract and sector of activity) on the risk of job loss across different occupational categories. The main results confirm that, on the one hand, the first-generation immigrants continue to experience a persistent disadvantage in their occupational outcomes even after controlling not only for sociodemographic factors but also for time in the labour market. On the other hand, 1.5-generation immigrant men and women converge with natives in occupational attainment once their personal characteristics, such as education and age, and other context-related factors (such as partner's work status, period of access to the labour market and region of residence in Spain) are taken into account. Overall, the 1.5 generation achieves better outcomes than the first in the Spanish labour market. This result is in line with assimilation theory to the extent that immigrants are expected to achieve better occupational outcomes over generations, regardless of their ethnic origin.

The assimilation perspective is also questioned in this special issue by Belfi et al. (2022). Focusing on professional higher education graduates in the Netherlands and using a large dataset on recent Dutch college graduates who entered the labour market in the years 2007 through 2017, the authors compared the early career trajectories of first- and second-generation non-Western ethnic-minority graduates with those of natives. This study aims to evaluate to what extent background differences with regard to human capital accumulation, parental socioeconomic background and field of study preferences can account for potential ethnic-related differences in the labour market success of highly educated graduates. To do so, the analysis focuses not only on the typical objective outcomes, such as employment and wage, but also on more subjective indicators of career success, such as job satisfaction and subjective job-skill match. The main results show that in the first year after graduation both first- and second-generation non-Western migrants experienced lower employment chances than natives. Among those who find a job, ethnic minorities are poorly matched to their job in terms of their specific skill set, and they are less satisfied with their job than their native peers, even though there is no ethnic-related earnings penalty. These results, which to some extent are different from those obtained in Spain by Muñoz-Comet and Arcarons (2022), can be due to the large differences in the transition from education to the labour market between the Southern Europe and the Netherlands.

Furthermore, a follow-up survey four to eight years after graduation among a subsample of graduates revealed evidence of persistent lower employment chances and persistent poor job-skill match among first-generation compared to native graduates

whereas second-generation migrants improved their situation overall. The latter group maintained earnings parity with natives, and narrowed the gap in terms of job satisfaction, skill match, and to a somewhat lesser extent employment chances. Overall, even though in the short-term the results do not support the hypothesis of a progressive assimilation over generations, there are some signs of a progressive assimilation over generations in the long term although limitations in the data require further investigation.

## Family relationships and subjective wellbeing

Existing literature suggests that children who do not live with both biological parents have worse results on a variety of outcomes than those who can live in an intact family. This base of evidence mainly refers to the effect of parental separation (Härkönen, Bernardi, and Boertien 2017). Nevertheless, physical separation is a relevant and common situation experienced by children of immigrants. If native origin children might be affected by parental dissolution, immigrant-origin children may be at risk of experiencing a physical separation from parents caused by both parental union dissolution and the migration process itself.

International migrants often create transnational families, i.e. families where at least one adult member is currently living abroad (Mazzucato et al. 2015). Many families are split up at the global level and many of their members today qualify as left behinds, including children growing up in a condition of parental absence via migration (DeWaard, Nobles, and Donato 2018). Despite its estimated prevalence worldwide (Mazzucato and Schans 2011), the scarcity of data related to transitional families has resulted in a lack of attention to this phenomenon in both policy and science.

Nevertheless, recent research has started to fill the gaps in this field. For instance, it is known that children's emotional distress in relation to parental migration, such as loneliness, sadness and frustration, has been reported by children themselves (Zhao et al. 2018) and can translate into feelings of abandonment, vulnerability and loss of self-esteem (Kandel and Kao 2001), a situation that can be particularly evident when the absent parent is the mother (Parreñas 2005). All of these factors, linked to a lack of parental control aiming to avoiding patterns of downward assimilation (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, and Haller 2005), can be linked to problematic integration of the children of immigrants in Europe, which can influence their life trajectories, particularly in terms of educational and occupational performances.

Here, the concept of subjective well-being is crucial: being happy, having self-respect and satisfying one's own desires and aspirations all play an important role in determining a sense of 'being well' (Sen 1993). Although subjective well-being is a multidimensional concept encompassing many aspects of human life, it is usually considered in literature through the exploration of migrants' emotional and psychological health (Hao and Johnson 2000; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. 2006). These two aspects are considered determinants of integration outcomes among migrant children even in the long run (Eremenko and Bennett 2018).

The relational spheres, in particular within family relationships, are seen as strongly correlates of subjective well-being (Diener and Diener 1995). Nevertheless, only a few studies in migration research have so far considered this interrelationship (Dito, Mazzucato, and Schans 2017; Kao and Tienda 1995) and further research is needed in order to

evaluate how migration experiences and split family members' individual well-being are interconnected.

Cebolla Boado and González Ferrer (2022), in this special issue, provide a relevant contribution in this sense. They look at the cost in mental wellbeing that children of migrants and natives suffer as a consequence of long periods of physical separation from their parents, using a composite index of psychological wellbeing based on non-specific psychological distress. To do so, they use a number of somatic and psychosomatic indicators of distress, referring to a non-pathological dimension of psychological problems commonly used in social studies (problems in concentrating, sleeping and in making decisions; and how often they felt under pressure and how likely it was that they face difficulties in solving their own problems). The analysis is based on a unique dataset produced in the Municipality of Madrid (Spain) in 2011 among children aged 13–15 in lower secondary education.

Authors conclude that the loss in mental wellbeing reported by migrant-origin children who spent at least three months separated from their parents because of family migration, is similar to the loss suffered by native children upon parental divorce. Thus, while physical separation from parents is universally harmful, the reason for separation is a crucial point. Migrant children show interesting features. On the one hand, they emerge as resilient when they have to face parental union dissolution. On the other hand, they suffer a delayed family reunification following a sequential family migration. Therefore, the imposition of long periods of adaptation on immigrant parents before granting them the right to reunify their family is a painful and stressful experience for children that can hinder their educational career and, more generally, their successful integration into their new home country. From this perspective, this analysis represents an unprecedented opportunity to evaluate the impact of the timing of family reunification, as a specific control policy, on integration outcomes.

### **Areas for intervention policies**

Understanding factors that may hinder the integration process of children of immigrants is essential from both the scientific and policy viewpoints. Policy-makers should acknowledge that ethnic penalty is one of the most alarming forms of inequality in our societies and that, without specific measures, the disadvantages experienced by immigrants will be transmitted to some extent to their children. Specific strategies are needed to allow immigrants' children the ability to jump over social barriers. It is essential for the good of our societies that equal conditions are guaranteed to all participants, regardless of their ethnic background.

Although the overview given by this special issue on ethnic penalties experienced by children of immigrants is far from comprehensive, it introduces a set of valuable evidence-based policy recommendations for improving the living conditions and the life chances of the children of immigrants, for supporting equality of opportunities, and for building inclusive social cohesion in European societies.

Triventi, Vlach, and Pini (2022) stress the importance of the centrality of school in the broader processes of integration and social mobility. Addressing the ethnic gap in education represents a strategic choice against ethnic inequalities and must be pursued from the early stages of the life cycle of children of immigrants when the social policies

might exert the highest impact. This contribution mainly suggests that strengthening language-support programmes across school levels can be an effective way to raise the lower academic performances of immigrants' descendants. Further measures to improve equality of educational opportunity should include mentoring programmes that provide positive role models and cooperative learning, as well as extra-scholastic activities that support social interactions between students and parents with different ethnic backgrounds. This point has also been highlighted by Gabrielli, Longobardi, and Strozza (2022.) who observe that specific actions to improve a school's disciplinary climate and extracurricular activities (music, art, culture and sport) can greatly promote positive outcomes among disadvantaged students, bearing in mind that these students are at a higher risk of school discrimination, violence and bullying. Moreover, they strongly suggest that policies that remove barriers regarding migrant parents' involvement in their children's educational activities tend to improve the educational performance of second generations.

As reported for two Italian cities (Bologna and Milan) by Mantovani, Gasperoni, and Santangelo (2022), social housing policies implemented by local authorities aimed at favouring *mixité*, reducing the residential and school segregation of immigrant-origin individuals, are associated with a more equitable access to educational opportunities between native and immigrant-origin children. Full integration at school can be considered the basis for full occupational integration. This contribution also underlines the fact that the massive use of distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic might make home-school distance less relevant but introduces other sources of inequality based on access to digital technologies that might penalise immigrant-origin students.

According to Muñoz-Comet and Arcarons (2022), policy response to ethnic penalties in the labour market requires differentiated strategies depending on the specific group. To ensure equal opportunities for immigrant children, policies should focus on education by reducing school dropouts and supporting school-to-work transitions, particularly during the post-mandatory phase. On the other hand, policy interventions for the first generation of immigrants should pay attention primarily on structural factors of the labour market by mitigating deregulation and reducing temporary employment, which hinders occupational attainments.

Regarding higher educated people, Belfi et al. (2022) suggest that employers can obtain higher benefits by being aware of a large and underutilised reserve of highly qualified young people with migratory backgrounds. At the same time, they point out that it would be beneficial to the labour market to enhance diversity by attracting children of immigrants to fields of study in which they are currently underrepresented, such as education and health studies.

The experience of migrants and how relational aspects define their life conditions is key for policy-makers to promote the construction of a meaningful coexistence with the host communities (OECD 2017). In this sense, Cebolla Boado and González Ferrer (2022) emphasise the relevance of migration policies related to the timing of family reunification. Policy-makers should acknowledge the cost of their decision by considering that long-lasting penalties in educational careers and integration processes might arise when migrant families are obliged to spend long periods adapting before being granted the right to reunify.

Overall, second-generation issues have created a strong incentive to look for more cohesive societies. The risk of failure in the educational system and the labour market tend to be higher among children of immigrants compared to the rest of the population. Education plays a key role, given that it guarantees social inclusion and social mobility (de Haas, de Valk, and Willekens 2012). In order to reduce the lower language proficiency and the negative impact of socio-economic status, it is important to facilitate the access to education, increase the hours in contact in school or school-related activities, and postpone the selection to either academic or vocational tracks (de Valk and Crul 2008).

The contributions in this special issue stress that old and new immigration countries in Europe should better support migrant families in breaking social isolation and limit spatial. Furthermore, the role of parents is crucial from several points of view, so policies should promote their involvement in the care and education of their children. This can be particularly problematic for transnational families that struggle with economic and emotional difficulties. This also raises relevant policy-related issues because immigration regimes of receiving countries strongly affect the ability of transnational parents to move between countries, visit their family, strengthen family ties or facilitate reunification.

### Implications for future research

In conclusion, by mentioning the limitations of the analyses included in this special issue we can identify potential directions for future research. First, despite all articles in this special issue following a comparative approach between immigrant-origin children and natives, and providing the best-articulated scenario on the basis of available information on migratory generation status, all data-sources prevented us from further stratifying children of immigrants according to important characteristics such as (among others) country of origin, migration history and experience. Therefore, a consistent part of heterogeneity among children of immigrants remains unexplored, although it is likely that this group is internally no less diverse (and arguably *more* so) than the native one. Very often, the survey-designs were not fully focused on migrants and their descendants, triggering issues of selectivity and representativeness due to the small size of subgroups of interest. In terms of the necessity of preserving a comparison with the majority group, future research should more greatly consider the articulated background of the migrant-origin European population and better stratify this minority group. Without taking into account the entry channels and the family migratory background, future analysis may be strongly biased due to, for example, the increasing number of naturalized people.

Second, the cross-sectional perspective of data sources used in this special issue prevents the authors from adopting a time-related and/or a causal approach. Thus, all contributions remain descriptive by considering the (multivariate) association between covariates (or factors) and the dependent variables.

For example, it is very hard to investigate the role of immigrants' networks, family-child interactions and dynamics, and individual life trajectories over different domains. Future studies should provide empirical evidence on the specific role of such overlooked factors. Overall, the identification of causal relations and processes through which school and work paths change across the life courses of children of immigrants,

ideally through large retrospective or panel surveys, remain a challenging issue in the European framework.

Third, this special issue does not provide empirical evidence about the characteristics and peculiarities of destination contexts. On the one hand, national context may shape the life trajectories of immigrants' descendants; on the other hand, it is influenced by the migration process itself and migrants' selectivity. Common traits and differential peculiarities of each context can be highlighted by a comparative perspective. Furthermore, it remains open for cross-country comparative future research to use contextual indicators of migration policies (e.g. migrant integration policy index) as well as educational and labour market characteristics.

Fourth, the three domains of interest (education, labour market and well-being) can be analysed by looking at a wide set of possible outcomes, of which only a small part has been covered in this special issue. In education, for instance, articles mainly refer to school performances, whereas other aspects may be of interest, such as educational tracks, aspirations and opportunities and educational early leaving.

In conclusion, by commenting on the (perhaps trivial) consideration that more research and more exhaustive data are needed, this special issue fully supports the importance of conducting separate and in-depth analyses on minority subgroups in order to define different intervention strategies to reduce inequality gaps at international, national and local levels.

## Availability of data and materials

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

## Note

1. Access here: <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/declaration-of-the-european-ministerial-conference-on-integration-zaragoza-15-16-april-2010> (last accessed April 4, 2021).

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