Class Ethnic Composition and Friendship Integration of Immigrant-Origin Students

Giuseppe Calignano (Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences); Debora Mantovani (Alma Mater Studiorum-Università di Bologna)

Sociological literature has stressed that an even distribution of students with an immigrant background in classes reduces inequalities. Not only do mix-ethnic classes promote equal opportunities for educational achievement and attainment (Cardone, Falzetti, Severoni 2015), but they also encourage inter-ethnic sociability and reduce stereotypes and prejudice (Hallinan, Smith 1985).

In Italy, schools are formally constrained to form desegregated classes. Art. 7 of Presidential Decree no. 275/1999 stresses the importance of promoting an equal distribution of immigrant-origin students in schools to hinder any social exclusion risk. The Circular of the Ministry of Education no. 2/2010 aims to guarantee an equal distribution of non-Italian students by setting a cap of a maximum of 30% of foreign pupils in each class. This regulation should contextually prevent any (implicit) form of intra-school segregation policies and promote a good level of integration.

Empirical findings have stressed that the opportunity structure of the classroom is crucial to improving immigrant-origin students' propensity to develop inter-ethnic relationships: as the number of immigrant-origin students decreases, the propensity to be engaged in relationships with natives increases (Hallinan and Smith 1985).

This article aims to examine the social integration of immigrant-origin students resorting to a dataset which includes information on 2,175 students distributed in 120 classrooms (grades 9, 10 and 11) of 19 upper secondary schools in the province of Bologna (Italy). Network items revealing best-friend relationships within each class are examined to estimate students' sociability. The "best friend" criterion was selected since strong friendships/ties define social cliques (Granovetter 1973).

Applying the crisp-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (csQCA) approach, the "conditions" leading immigrant-origin students to develop better sociability are identified. The threshold of "satisfying" sociability has been set for an in-degree (number of connections that point inward at a vertex - i.e. non-Italian student) – at least equal to the median in-degree level of the classroom. The analyses consider both structural dimensions – such as the proportion of immigrant-origin students, the dimension (size) of the classroom and the classroom composition according to students' gender – and individual factors – such as the student's gender, fluency in speaking Italian language, social class of

origin and friendship integration outside school.

Preliminary results reveal that neither structural nor individual dimensions are necessary conditions to determine a satisfactory level of sociability, whereas there are seven solutions (i.e, configurations of conditions sufficient to produce the expected outcome). The proportion of immigrant-origin students is the most frequent sufficient condition for sociability appearing in six out of seven different combinations, followed by the proportion of same-sex students and, at the individual level, fluency in the Italian language and the social class of origin. In contrast, the class dimension plays a residual role contributing only to two configurations. Finally, some interesting differences related to the gender can be observed, the most important of which is that girls appear in a greater number of solutions and that their integration benefits from several elements (particularly a good knowledge of the Italian language in combination with the percentage of immigrant-origin students in the respective classes).