HOW MIGRANTS CAN AFFECT THE SCHOOL DROPOUT RISK IN HOSTING COUNTRIES: A REGIONAL ANALYSIS OF ITALY

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Abstract - Migration flows can influence a nation's features in many social aspects, including its propensity to invest in education. We examine how migrant inflows affect the proportion of students who drop out of school in Italy, before completing tertiary education. Our research is based on the fact that societies with higher proportions of immigrants tend to have more people born abroad in schools, who may have trouble adapting to the local educational system (e.g., for language barriers). This could cause problems for all students, native and foreign-born. With a regional analysis, we observe that the effect of migration exists in Italian regions during the period 2003-2021, and a higher percentage of migrants tends to decrease the dropout rates of all students. The effect is potentially the result of greater interest from policymakers due to a larger share of migrants in schools, involving greater specific investments for the benefit of all. We suggest how possible interventions can help the development of human capital by combining a better integration of young migrants.

Keywords - Migration, Human Capital, School Drop-Out

I. INTRODUCTION

The increase in migratory flows has drawn academic attention to its effects on the social backdrop in recipient nations [1]. One of the facets of migratory flows is how migrations affect human capital, a significant endogenous strength distinctive of complex economic systems.

Migration flows can influence the human capital of the destination country both through the education and experience of migrants, but also by influencing the educational path of young natives and migrants in schools. This would happen because migration flows are characterized by a very youthful demographic composition. The low average age of migrants is observed, for example, since they represent 12% of students aged 15 in OECD nations (on 2012 data [2]).

In this article, we study how the international inflows of migrants (i.e., subjects born abroad and that have taken up residence in the host country) influence the school dropout rate in Italy, being the latter a troubling side of the national human capital. The lack of continuation of studies towards tertiary education is in fact an endemic problem in Italy [3], an inadequacy that involves even more than 20% of the young population in some regions (on ISTAT data). Therefore, both the dropout and migratory patterns represent phenomena of great interest for policymakers.

The mechanism that we hypothesize in the relationship between migration inflows and school dropout is that a greater share of migrants on the population implies more foreign students in schools. Migrants are more affected by potential difficulties of integration and adaptation to the Italian school system and, consequently, may lead to scholastic problems for other students as well. In synthesis, a greater share of young migrants present in schools may influence the study path of other students (including both native and foreign-born) to continue after compulsory school [4].

Italy is an interesting case study for two reasons. First, we consider a country with an anomalously low focus on education, particularly on advanced education [5], which depicts the level of human capital as a negative anomalous case in the context of advanced economies [6]. Second, it is known that a large part of the incoming migratory flows in the country are composed of poorly educated subjects [7], influenced by the notorious medium- to low-tech economic specialization [8][9].

This study contributes to the examination of a phenomenon that occurs concurrently with migrant integration in the educational context from a macroeconomic perspective. Appropriate interventions can help rebalance efforts for developing the nation's human capital and facilitate migrant integration into society through schooling [10].

For the analysis of the Italian case, we consider panel regional data (for the period 2003-2021), and we propose a cross-sectional regression by including Fixed Effects (FE) and Random Effects (RE) approaches that highlight the influence of the migrant population (as a percentage of the resident population, by year) on the rates of school leaving after compulsory education – controlling for the main causes of dropout suggested by the literature.

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

Dropping out of school is the result of a protracted process heavily influenced by the convergence of complex relationships between the personal characteristics, the family, the school system, and the whole society [11].

Among the personal characteristics, we observe, for example, behaviors and attitudes such as disinterest in

school, motivation, and absenteeism [12][13]. A particular aspect is played by personal engagement, as it enables students to perform well in school, spurring to continue and, in the absence of commitment, the likelihood of dropping out of school will be high [14]. Among individual, behaviors affecting the health status are also important, as, for example, drug and alcohol abuse can impair young people's school (and life) progress [15].

The influence of family status on children's academic performance depends not only on economic opportunities, also including the transmission of cultural capital and lifestyles [16]. While the family's economic background is a significant variable influencing students' academic choices [17][18], parents' level of education appears to influence students' motivation to learn, thus increasing the chances of achieving better and more satisfactory goals [19].

Other causes of school dropout can be found in the educational system itself [20]. This set of effects includes the degree of attention from institutions to school quality, the teacher-student relationship, the presence of incentives dedicated to teachers that are reflected in the incentives for students [21], as well as the availability of educational and instructional programs that support students with disabilities, or the support during the transition from middle school to high school [22][23], up to inclusive and formative programs towards the diverse [24].

Still widening the observation to the whole society background, the latter plays a central role in many cases, as often young people are influenced by the contexts in which they live and the cultural activities existing in the same society [25]. In other cases, the background interacts with families, schools, and peers.

In recent decades, studies have emerged about the effect of migration flows on the human capital of natives, particularly in the context of school education [26][27]. Other research focuses on peer relationships, since young people affect each other's [28][29]; in gender and ethnicity differences [30], especially during adolescence; in bullying and victimization behaviors that can undermine young people continued academic pursuits, increasing the risk of depression and, consequently, dropping out from school [31][32].

Being a youth migrant means that the above-mentioned risks increase, since the arrival in the new society implies disadvantages during the integration process due to language differences [33], as also the new culture and lifestyle, which impacts on the well-being of the migrants [32].

In synthesis, migration practices influence the societies of origin of the migrants, as well as those in the hosting countries, and similarly influence the development of human capital in the two contexts. These effects are found in short-range and international migrations [34]. As far as human capital in host countries is concerned, the educational carriers of native and migrant students can be conditioned by new students from abroad, or by the education status of the same migrants, who are often disadvantaged. For example, Betts [35], in a study on the US secondary education, shows a negative relationship between being a migrant and the probability to reach the graduation of a secondary level of education (high school).

III. METHOD AND DATA

We use the FE and RE models to find relationships between variables within groups [36]. In the FE model, the individual effects are considered fixed, and they are included among the explanatory variables as individual constants, while estimated individual effects are a component of the error in the RE model. We consider the Hausman test [37] to determine what output has the best fit. Our equation can be written as:

$$drop_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1\, migr_{it} + \beta_2\, gdp_{it} + \beta_3\, hc_{it} + \beta_4\, family_{it} + \beta_5\, sc_{it} + \beta_5\, ict_{it} + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

In Equation (1), the dependent variable (drop) is the percentage of young people aged 18 to 24 who leave the educational path after compulsory school.

Our key regressor is migr, representing the percentage of foreign residents out of the total population, followed by other control variables: gdp is the per capita Gross Domestic Product at 2015 constant values, in euro, i.e. proxy of the average income; hc is the proxy of the advanced human capital of the regional population, represented by the percentage of the adult population with upper secondary, post-secondary non-tertiary, and tertiary education (International Standard Classification of Education levels 3-8); family is the percentage of people aged 14 and over who are very satisfied with family relationships out of all people aged 14 and over, hence representing the bond with the parental network; sc is social capital and it is proxied by the percentage of people aged 14 and over who, in the last 12 months, have carried out at least one social participation activity (participation in meetings of associations, of trade union organizations, of professional or category associations, of political parties) and/or carry out free activities for a party, pay a monthly or periodic fee for a club or sports club; ict is the percentage of families with at least one computer and Internet connection, representing new technologies as an aid to study. The source is ISTAT for all variables and EUROSTAT for hc.

We consider the 21 Italian regions (19 regions and 2 autonomous provinces, Trento and Bolzano) (i) and the period (t) is 2003 – 2021; $\beta_0, \cdots, \beta_6$ are the parameters estimated and ε_{it} is the error term.

In synthesis, our control variables represent the cultural and economic regional background (hc and

gdp, respectively) that can affect young people, the contribution of social networks close to the family group and extended to the whole society (family and sc, respectively) that could be a support at different levels, and the potential contribution and use of new information and communication technologies if used to support education practices (ict).
We present the summary statistics in Table 1.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
drop	15.89	5.56	6.20	34.68
migr	9.02	15.24	0.23	107.41
gdp	28309	7788	15312	45952
hc	57.13	8.04	39.30	71.80
family	24.95	5.47	11.60	49.80
sc	25.40	7.16	9.20	55.40
ict	51.98	13.45	17.30	74.80

Table 1. Summary statistics

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We present the result of the two models in Table 2. The Hausman test suggests considering results from the FE estimate.

Dep. var.: drop	RE	FE
migr	-0.0404626**	-0.050734**
	(0.0169328)	(0.0196619)
gdp	-0.0000106	-0.000271***
	(0.0000528)	(0.000102)
hc	-0.489438***	-0.408472***
	(0.050191)	(0.057432)
family	0.0283115	-0.0015948
	(0.0408876)	(0.0426656)
sc	0.0430969	0.0551815
	(0.0365419)	(0.0377202)
ict	-0.0427969*	-0.096792***
	(0.0224955)	(0.02608)
Constant	44.93413***	51.01733***
	(2.291222)	(4.235576)
R^2	0.7054	0.7114
Hausman test		19.66
		(0.0032)
Obs.	399	399

Note: ***, **, * statistically significant at level 0.01, 0.05 and 0.10.
Source: Our elaborations on ISTAT and EUROSTAT data

Table 2. Results for the Italian regions

Our key variable indicates that the share of migrants (migr) – a proxy of foreign-born students in schools – does not discourage students from continuing their studies, in the period considered, i.e. an effect not expected. Instead, the effect is to reduce the dropout rate. This effect could derive from the greater public resources that the constant increase in the foreign-born population imposes on policy makers. Therefore, the effect is virtuous and, at least at the levels considered, a sign of efficient scholastic and social integration.
The two proxies of the people's economic and cultural background – considered through the GDP per capita and the human capital level of the adult population – play an effective role in reducing dropout rates. The higher income favors the continuation of studies, as well as obviously making possible a high-quality education. The level of regional hc suggests that a population with a medium-high educational qualification encourages the younger generations to continue their training path. We can assume that this effect is related to the capacity of an educated society – similar to how wealthy and educated parents would contribute to the education of the children [38] – for example by creating a favorable environment conducive to education [39].
Both forms of social networks (narrow and broad) are not relevant, probably due to the low relevance of social capital in general in some Italian regions [40].
Finally, the proxy of the diffusion of ICTs among households shows how the endowment of technologies of study support, as well as public investment in this field (for example, through a greater integration of new technologies in the classroom), can constitute some help in study and school performance, even with the knowledge that technologies do not have only positive effects in the education field [41][42].

V. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Do migrant movements have an impact on the human capital of the host nations? One of the most problematic features of the "fragile generation" approach to postsecondary education has been investigated in this article along with the relationship between the dropout rate and the role of incoming migrant flows.
The research question arose from the fact that 23% of the adult population lacks an upper school diploma in Italy, making the country still far from reaching the goal of advanced economies in terms of education (OECD average is 14% [6]). The migratory phenomenon, increasing in recent years, could therefore contribute to the problem.
We, therefore, wondered whether the phenomenon of migration – measured as the proportion of residents born abroad on total residents – potentially adds to the anxiety that advanced education's low priority on the labor market, habitual lack of investment, and lack of interest in recognizing and rewarding knowledge workers already generate in Italy. Although this is a preliminary work that investigates the phenomenon exclusively from a macroeconomic point of view, our results suggest that the effect of migratory flows has a statistically significant effect on the Italian regions, during the period 2003-2021. However, the effect is not that feared, of increasing difficulty in the study

paths of young Italians (natives and born abroad).

Indeed, precisely the consideration of the important migratory flows during the last decades has helped to focus the attention of the institutions on school problems and increasing, among other things, specific public investments. In fact, international organizations such as the UNHCR have highlighted for years the need to invest in Europe in adequately trained teachers, the removal of language barriers, and greater access to psychosocial support. To these indications, the concrete plans actually in place by the European Commission are added, which helps through funding from the European Union (EU), while considering national governments as the main ones responsible for social policies. The EU develops guidelines and facilitates forms of collaboration on inclusive education and training from early childhood to higher education, with a particular focus on faster recognition of qualifications and language learning, for migrants and refugees[1]. An effective aspect of this commitment is the SIRIUS program (Policy Network on Migrant Education) "that promotes the social inclusion of children and young people with migrant background by fostering their effective access to the universal right to education". [2]

In this sense, the UNHCR highlights the importance for Italy to combat the scarce opportunities still offered to some young migrants, which would be useful not only for individuals but for the development of the society as a whole, as a future investment for integration and the building of useful and productive links with immigrant families [43].

In synthesis, of the two possible phenomena that foreign students could trigger (positive, by stimulating the increase in public resources in education; negative, by making the education path more difficult for natives, due to their greater needs, such as language issues), the positive seems to prevail.

However, the effect observed in the Italian regions could also have other causes, which will be addressed in further research. It is known that Italy mostly attracts subjects with a low level of education, being a country characterized by medium- to low-tech economic specialization. This should lead to a substitution effect in a context of scarce protections and great precariousness for weak categories of workers, in which migrants would get jobs as a substitute for low-educated native workers. This effect could encourage the natives to exploit educational opportunities, with regards to the labor market prospects.

Thus, the answer to the question at the beginning is positive, and the growing flows of foreign migrants can affect the national human capital at least in the Italian case, by focusing the attention of national and international policymakers on concrete actions and improving public investments in education, for the benefit of the entire population.

Other aspects are evident in the analysis of the Italian case. The first aspect is the low influence of social networks and relationships, assumed as the help that the family or local societies can have in supporting young people. This result confirms what is already known about the role of social capital for young Italian and their education [44]. The second aspect concerns the support that economic well-being and the average education level of the adult population (observed at the regional level) can have in encouraging the continuation of studies. This would be both as a practical, economic, and experience aid towards tertiary education, and also as an example of personal success to imitate. However, this observed aspect concerns the so-called education premium, which is notoriously weak in Italy, where subjects with secondary education could have greater employment chances than more educated subjects. This aspect, therefore, concerns a challenge for national and local policymakers to overcome.

Furthermore, the important support for education deriving from the condition of economic well-being would imply inequality of opportunities. Inequality would just arise from the fact that the worse socio-economic conditions affect precisely those with low income and low education backgrounds (for example, at the family level), often including old and new migrants.

A possible answer arises from one of the actions already assumed, which is to use trainers who accompany young people that are often more fragile in the choices of their school career, as happened in the recessionary years and in the local context most at risk. This solution would be translated from the actions that are already in place in many countries to protect the school-to-work transition, with the aim of avoiding risks such as youth unemployment and the NEET conditions. In fact, not having the proper training and the lack of adequate education are among the main causes leading to NEET status. This status is notoriously a condition from which it is difficult to get out and with serious repercussions on the future of the young people involved, and it is also a very worrying aspect in the Italian context [45][46].

In accompanying young people during the transition to adulthood, we refer, for example, to public programs such as the GOL program (Garanzia di occupabilità dei lavoratori – Employability guarantee for workers) established by the Italian Ministry of Labor, which provides personalized paths for accessing the labor market and training, for many fragile subjects including young people.

A further aspect on which policymakers should intervene is indeed that of social networks and local social capital. In fact, as suggested by Ream and Rumberger ([47] for Mexican students in the USA)

[1] https://education.ec.europa.eu/it/focus-topics/improving-quality/inclusive-education/migrants-and-refugees Retrieved on 22.06.2023.

[2] https://www.sirius-migrationeducation.org/ Retrieved on 22.06.2023.

exploitations of social networks as peer networks would be useful, encouraging student engagement including migrant students. Of course, the limitations of social capital, mainly in some southern regions of Italy are known, up to impose severe limits on development, and not to be easily changed [48].

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