

Differentiation within Integration. Grade Postponement of Newly Arrived Migrants in the Italian School System



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1 Introduction

The increasing presence of students from migratory backgrounds, and particularly those who of new arrival (OECD, 2023), poses important challenges to European educational systems, whose policy strategies are alternatively inspired by separation or integration approaches (Dupriez et al., 2008; Kerckhoff, 1995; Mons, 2007).

Italy follows an integrated approach, by establishing the right-duty to compulsory education in mainstream comprehensive settings for any child living in the country, regardless of their legal status and of their moment of arrival. In line with the country's broader approach to inclusion, there are no separate schools or classes, but direct enrolment into mainstream classes upon arrival in Italy. However, schools—acting through the school principal together with the teacher council—may decide to place newly arrived migrant students in a grade below the one corresponding to their age, an educational practice that we refer to as grade postponement.

According to national guidelines, grade postponement should be exceptional and based on students' entry competencies, in particular in Italian proficiency, and on the educational credentials acquired in their country of origin. However, the regulatory framework does not specify: (1) the specific competence domains to be assessed (e.g. curriculum specific subject, cognitive skills, socio-emotional skills conducing to learning...); (2) the assessment framework that schools should follow; (3) a

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minimal threshold for what should constitute “grade readiness”. Evidence on the prevalence and the determinants of grade postponement is very limited, because this practice has been seldom investigated, partly due to the empirical difficulty of disentangling it from other forms of school delay, chiefly grade retention, in the available data. Yet, since the opacity of the regulatory framework leaves substantial discretion to individual schools and teaching staff, the decision of grade postponement is likely context dependent.

The aim of this study is to analyse the individual and contextual determinants of grade postponement among newly arrived migrant students in Italy, i.e. migrant students at their first entry into the compulsory school system. Specifically, we address the following research questions: (1) *Do grade postponement decision vary by students’ characteristic and background?* (2) *Is grade postponement related to school characteristics, with systematic differences in its use?*

We address these questions by analysing data for the full population of first-generation migrant students attending grade five in the school year 2021/2022 ($N = 12,218$) and replicating our analyses on a sample of first-generation students attending grades six and seven in the school year 2014/2015 ($N = 5,099$).

In light of the limited evidence in the literature on grade postponement, in order to formulate our hypotheses, we draw on the literature that examines individual and family factors shaping the competencies of first-generation migrant students, as well as on studies that have examined two closely institutional practices in which teachers assess students as not “ready” for the age-appropriate grade: delayed school entry (i.e. starting compulsory schooling 1 year later than the expected age) and grade retention (i.e. repeating a grade).

The chapter is structured as follows. In the second section, we situate grade postponement within the framework of integration vs. separation models to deal with the heterogeneity of student competences, we review related literature and derive our hypotheses. After a section describing the Italian school system and the legal framework for grade postponement, we move to the presentation of the data, variables and methods. The following sections present our main results and offer some conclusive remarks.

2 Background and Hypotheses

Grade postponement, which we have defined as the allocation of students to a grade below their age-appropriate level, can be seen as an educational practice to deal with the low competences, in particular linguistic, of newly arrived migrants.

In order to understand this practice, it is necessary to consider the two main institutional models to deal with the heterogeneity of competences of same-age students, namely separation and integration (Dupriez et al., 2008; Kerckhoff, 1995; Mons, 2007). Under the first one, same-age students with different competence levels are placed into separate educational institutions that teach different curricula and result in different certificates. Examples of separation are: (1) special needs schools,

which cater for children with disabilities as soon as they enter the educational system; and (2) school tracking, which allocate students into hierarchically structured pathways based on their learning achievements in the first years of schooling. Under the integration model, in contrast, same-age students with different competence levels attend the same institutions and—provided that they do not drop out from school—attain the same types of certificates. Examples of integration are: (1) school systems where students with disability attend mainstream schools, receiving individualised support within the classroom; and (2) systems where no tracking or ability streaming occurs throughout the whole phase of compulsory schooling.

We can retrace the separation vs. integration approaches in the way European educational systems have chosen to deal with the inclusion of newly arrived migrant students. Some systems temporarily place newcomers in separate classes, offering intensive language teaching and an adapted curriculum for other subjects, until they reach a satisfactory level of proficiency in the language of instruction. Depending on the national regulations, such temporary separate classes can last only few months or several school years (Eurydice, 2019). Moreover, even if migrants should eventually attend mainstream schooling, this is not always the case, as they are often over-represented in special schools (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2017). In other educational systems, newcomers directly enter mainstream classes, with supplementary language-support measures being implemented outside regular school hours, or during school hours by specialised teachers and/or cultural mediators. Integrated systems usually foresee additional financial, human, and pedagogical resources to help mainstream schools adapt to meet the different learning needs of their student population (OECD, 2012). However, when these resources are not sufficient, integrated systems may introduce some form of differentiation between same-age students with different competence levels (Mons, 2007).

Italy follows an integration approach, with newly arrived migrant students directly placed in mainstream comprehensive schooling. However, no additional financial or human resources is systematically foreseen for schools hosting newly arrived migrant students, hindering the effective implementation of a fully integrated learning setting. Within this setting, schools can use grade postponement to set apart, within the group of newly arrived migrants, those with a level of competences insufficient to fruitfully attend mainstream age-appropriate classes.

The decision-making process behind grade postponement has not been specifically investigated. However, the literature has studied two practices that, although applying to the entire population of students and not only to newly arrived ones, similarly move from the premise that a given student is not “ready” for the age-appropriate grade. The first is delayed school entry, present in countries where, in addition to age, one of the criteria for admission to the first year of primary school is the level of development or school readiness (Borodankova & Coutinho, 2011). The second related practice is grade retention, referring to the decision to have students who do not meet baseline performance standards to repeat a grade. Previous studies clearly indicate that, beyond student competences, their ascribed characteristics, particularly in terms of family background, may affect the decision-making

process defining grade readiness and resulting in school delay (see below).¹ We may therefore expect that the decision-making process for grade postponement—which typically occurs under conditions of highly limited information—is not only influenced by student entry competences and that schools might also factor in observable student and family characteristics.

In order to formulate specific hypotheses on the determinants of grade postponement, the following paragraphs analyse four main factors that the literature identified as important for the educational success of students from migratory background, in terms of competence development, delayed school entry, and grade retention. Specifically, we examine advantaged socio-economic background, preschool attendance, younger age at arrival and proximity between the mother tongue and the language of instruction. Finally, we discuss how school composition might affect teachers' assessments concerning grade readiness and consequent decisions on school delay.

2.1 *Socio-Economic Status (SES)*

Socio-economic and cultural resources of the family of origin are well known factor of advantage in educational achievement. For first-generation migrants, this advantage appears to be even stronger (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2017; Karakus et al., 2023; Silveira et al., 2019). Research on school readiness finds early SES gaps among children with immigrant backgrounds already in kindergarten (Han et al., 2012; Koury & Votruba-Drzal, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2016).

Parental involvement, which is generally limited among migrant families, is especially scarce among those with low socioeconomic status, due to structural constraints (Antony-Newman, 2019; Turney & Kao, 2009), increased language barriers (Martin et al., 2025), and cultural capital influencing parents' confidence in interacting with teachers (Antony-Newman, 2019; Jamal Al-deen & Windle, 2015). Parental involvement is a key predictor of students' academic achievement (Tan et al., 2020), by—on the one hand—enhancing competence development and—on the other hand—directly influencing the (socially biased) assessments and decisions of teachers (Gil-Hernández et al., 2024). Specifically, concerning teachers' assessment on grade readiness, Agasisti and Cordero (2017) find that, net of a number of ascribed

¹The decision-making process for these two practices varies between institutional contexts. For example, in Germany, the final decision for delayed school entry is taken by the principal of the receiving primary school (Tuppat et al., 2016), while in the US, it is up to kindergarten teachers (Robertson, 2021). Yet in other countries, such as Australia (Larsen et al., 2021), delayed school entry is chiefly a parental decision. Regarding grade repetition, the main decision-makers are usually classroom teachers (Borodankova & Coutinho, 2011) although the degree of discretion varies across countries. In some systems, promotion is strictly based on tests, while in most European countries teachers have greater discretion, even if the decision remains based on student performance.

factors, children of parents who are more involved in their education are less likely to be retained in the same grade.

Concerning the practices more closely related to grade postponement, Tuppatt et al. (2016) study the process of delayed school entry among children of immigrants and natives in Germany. They find that coming from vulnerable households significantly increases the probability to receive a recommendation for delayed school entry, even net of cognitive, behavioural, and motor skills. Socio-economic disadvantage is also strongly associated with grade retention, although in this case, to the best of our knowledge, no study has explicitly focused on first-generation migrants or children of migrants more broadly. Analysing a large longitudinal dataset from Italian secondary schooling, Salza (2022) provides compelling evidence that low SES increases chances of grade retention not only through academic achievement, but also independently from it. Similar results are found for other European countries (Agasisti & Cordero, 2017; Klapproth & Schaltz, 2015).

Building on the reviewed evidence, we hypothesise that socio-economic background affects grade postponement chances of newly arrived migrant students. We envisage this association to work through three main pathways: early competence development, parental involvement, and teacher social biases. Since our empirical context does not allow us to disentangle such pathways, our broad hypothesis is that *newly arrived migrant students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to be postponed than their peers from advantaged backgrounds (H1)*.

2.2 Early Education and Care Attendance

Early inclusion in the educational system seems to be a crucial empowering feature for children of immigrants (Biedinger et al., 2008; Crosnoe, 2007; Dicks & Lancee, 2018). For many, entry into early childhood or primary education represents the first sustained opportunity to speak the host-country language with native adults and peers. Socialisation in pre-school settings involves not only linguistic aspects but also the acquisition of social norms and cultural codes that will be taken for granted later in the educational trajectory. The earlier this process begins, the higher the likelihood of success, as both children and parents learn to master these codes more quickly (Moinolmolki et al., 2016).

Research shows that ECEC attendance is positively correlated with the probability to be considered ready for the age-appropriate grade, also for students from migratory backgrounds. Although part of this difference is mediated by the increased opportunities for competence development during these early years, having attended preschool also has a direct effect on schools' decisions concerning grade readiness. Tuppatt et al. (2016) show that longer ECEC attendance significantly reduces the likelihood of delayed school entry, even net of children's cognitive, behavioural, and motor skills. Similarly, using data from the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS), Agasisti and Cordero (2017) find that, across a number of countries children who attended at least 3 years of preschool are less likely to be

retained during primary schooling. This holds also net of a number of family and school characteristics, and of children's cognitive skills before entering compulsory schooling as reported by their parents.

All the factors that we examine (age at arrival, SES, linguistic proximity) are plausibly associated to higher ECEC rate attendance among first-generation migrants. Clearly, chances of ECEC attendance in the destination country are constrained by age at arrival. However, even among those who arrive at very early age, attendance is often low, due to both demand-side and supply-side factors associated with low SES (Carbuccia et al., 2023, 2025). Hence, ECEC attendance is best seen as a mediator than as an independent factor conducive to more successful educational outcomes among first-generation immigrants.

Taken together, these considerations lead us to hypothesise that ECEC attendance may be associated with the likelihood of grade postponement mainly through school-entry competences development, particularly linguistic skills. Accordingly, we further hypothesise that *among newly arrived migrant students who arrived before compulsory school age, grade postponement is less likely for those who attended early education and care (H2).*

2.3 Age of Arrival

A robust stream of literature, based on sibling comparisons that account for household-level selection, consistently documents a negative relationship between age at arrival and educational outcomes of first-generation migrants. This holds both in terms of educational attainment (Ansala et al., 2020; Basu, 2018; Bratsberg et al., 2012) and educational achievement (Böhlmark, 2008). Several studies identify the period between 7 and 9 years as critical ages at which educational outcomes deteriorate compared to emigration at a younger age (Basu, 2018; Böhlmark, 2008; Bratsberg et al., 2012).

The age at which individuals arrive in the destination country affects educational outcomes through multiple mechanisms. A first channel operates through exposure to the host-country language (Bleakley & Chin, 2004). Also in this case, critical ages of arrival seem to exist: as shown by Basu (2018), for children who arrive after 8–10 years of age, proficiency in the English language deteriorates significantly quicker than for those who arrive earlier.

The effect of age at arrival on educational outcomes is not explained solely by language acquisition. Arriving at an older age also implies shorter exposure to the education system of the destination country (Cortes, 2006), resulting in fewer opportunities to benefit from early educational services and less time to acquire information about and adapt to the functioning of the school system (Hermansen, 2017). Moreover, a higher age of arrival usually entails greater exposure to the education system of the country of origin, which may differ substantially from that of the destination country in terms of language used and educational standards (Åslund et al., 2015; Heath & Kilpi-Jakonen, 2012).

In light of this literature, we argue that grade postponement among newly arrived migrant students may be affected by their age of arrival not only through differential proficiency in the language of instruction, but also through expectations held by decision-makers regarding students' readiness. Although we cannot test these underlying mechanisms, our third hypothesis is that *the likelihood of postponement increases with age at arrival (H3)*.

2.4 Linguistic Distance

The language proficiency of newly arrived migrant students in the language of instruction is not only affected by their age of arrival, but also by the linguistic distance from their mother tongue. Empirical evidence suggests that greater dissimilarity is associated with lower proficiency in the school language (Isphording et al., 2016) and with lower academic achievement (Borgonovi & Ferrara, 2020).

Proficiency in the host-country language is central not only as a skill in its own right, but also because it is the main vehicle through which students access the curriculum and acquire subject-specific knowledge (Akresh & Akresh, 2011; Dustmann & Glitz, 2011; Isphording et al., 2016). Focusing on the causal relationship between language proficiency and achievement, the evidence suggests that, among first-generation students, language skills have a significant effect on competences (Akresh & Akresh, 2011; Isphording et al., 2016). By contrast, studies reporting no effect of language proficiency on standardised test scores (e.g. Fenoll, 2018) typically pool first- and second-generation students, which may attenuate estimated effects. Evidence for Italy has focused on second-generation students (Cavallo & Russo, 2025), while evidence for first-generation students remains limited.

Building on this literature, we argue that linguistic distance is associated with higher grade postponement chances because, on the one hand, a higher linguistic distance negatively affects students' actual proficiency in Italian as observable by teachers at the moment of the decision. On the other hand, a higher linguistic distance might also lower teachers' expectations regarding students' capacity to quickly acquire the language. Accordingly, we hypothesize that *greater linguistic distance between mother tongue and Italian is associated with a higher probability of being postponed (H4)*.

2.5 School Composition

Since grade postponement is fundamentally a school-level decision and the regulatory framework allows for great discretion in the assessment of grade readiness, students' chances of grade postponement may vary depending on the characteristics of the individual school they attend.

Research shows that, in particular, the composition of the student body is a relevant school-level characteristic that can shape decision making concerning grade repetition. Agasisti and Cordero (2017) show that, across many countries, grade retention decisions during primary education are more common in schools with a socially disadvantaged population. Salza (2022) finds similar results for grade retention during secondary schooling in Italy.

Within this framework, additional resources (e.g., language support, individualised learning plans) may represent potential alternatives to grade postponement. Schools with a more socially advantaged student body may be better positioned to allocate a substantial share of their financial and human resources to newly arrived migrants and therefore may rely less on postponement. Conversely, schools with disadvantaged student body have to deal with a variety of learning needs and thus rely more often on grade postponement as a comparatively low-cost and administratively simpler response to initial competence gaps. Accordingly, we expect the *probability of being postponed to decrease as the socio-economic composition of the school improves (H5)*.

Regarding the share of students with a migrant background, we do not formulate a directional hypothesis. On the one hand, a growing number of migrant students may encourage the use of postponement as a tool to manage increasing competencies heterogeneity; on the other hand, although no additional financial or human resources is systematically foreseen for schools hosting large shares of students from migratory backgrounds, such schools may have been able to mobilise dedicated resources or may have developed alternative strategies, such as language support or intercultural mediation.

3 Italian Educational System

3.1 General Structure

Before moving to our results, we introduce the key features of the Italian educational system that are most relevant for the inclusion of newly arrived migrants, who—just like any other resident—have the right-duty to mainstream compulsory schooling.

Compulsory schooling starts at age six and lasts for 10 years, covering the stages of primary (grades 1–5) and lower-secondary education (grades 6–8), which are taught in a fully comprehensive setting, as well as the first 2 years of (tracked) upper-secondary education (grades 9–10).

The core of the Italian school system is highly standardised. Educational curricula guidelines are set at the national level, as are budget allocations to schools and regulations for teachers' training, hiring, and career progression. School provision is essentially a responsibility of the national State, with a residual role for local and private actors. However, since the late 1990s, as part of a general trend towards

decentralisation and liberalisation of educational systems common to other European countries (Borgna et al., 2022), schools have been granted increased autonomy in designing educational curricula and managing human and financial resources.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), crucial for the inclusion of migrant children who arrive before compulsory schooling age, is characterised by significant fragmentation across the country. ECEC services for children aged 0–2 are offered by local institutions and certified private actors. Children attendance, possible from 3 months of age, is low and highly variable across regions (20.2% in the South, 35.3% in the North, and 39.4% in the Centre of Italy) as well as between urban and rural settings, reflecting both supply and demand factors (ISTAT, 2024). Children from low-income families, and from migratory background are significantly underrepresented in ECEC 0–2 services. ECEC services for children aged 3–6 take the form of pre-primary schooling, mainly provided by the State and, to a lesser extent, by local institutions and private actors. Although not compulsory, pre-primary schooling has a virtual universal coverage (96%) and, when provided by public institutions, it is essentially free of charge. Despite the absence of economic barriers, the ECEC 3–6 attendance for foreign children is lower than for natives (84%).

3.2 Regulatory Framework for Grade Postponement

As a general rule, newly arrived migrants in Italy should be placed in the grade of their age-appropriate level. National regulations allow for grade postponement under two scenarios, depending on whether the students arrived before compulsory schooling age or not.

Children who reside in Italy and turn six by December 31 of a given school year are required to enrol in the first grade of primary schooling, leaving little room for grade postponement. Only in exceptional cases, enrolment can be postponed, provided that they attend ECEC, for a period not exceeding one school year. The decision is made by the school principal, after a complex process of consultation with various actors (families, teachers, medical professionals, and local services) who certify the actual need for retention in the interest of the student.² Postponement through retention is therefore, at least on paper, extraordinary in nature.

Children and adolescents who arrive in Italy after age six can enrol in the school system at any point during the school year and are normally allocated to the class corresponding to their age. Exceptionally, they can be allocated to a class immediately below or above their age.³ The decision is at the discretion of the school

²See Article 114 of Presidential Decree No. 297 of April 16, 1994, and Ministerial Notes No. 547 of 2014 and No. 4555 of 2015.

³See Article 45 of Presidential Decree 31/08/1999.

principal together with the teaching council, who are required to take into account: (a) the education system of the pupil's country of origin; (b) the assessment of the pupil's skills, abilities, and level of preparation; (c) any courses of study taken by the pupil in their country of origin; (d) any qualifications held by the pupil. The 2014 Ministerial Guidelines for the reception and integration of foreign students clarify that schools may specifically take into account the student's level of knowledge of the Italian language. The national regulatory framework does not further specify how schools should assess students' competences, previous qualifications, or language proficiency in Italian, nor does it provide a definition of what a minimum threshold for placement in the age-appropriate grade should be. This type of postponement is therefore less exceptional than the previous one and leaves a substantial degree of discretion to individual schools. Although migrant families are not mentioned by the regulatory framework, it is likely that schools consult with parents in order to acquire more information to make the final decision concerning grade placement.

4 Data, Variables, and Methods

4.1 Data

Our primary data source is collected by the National Institute for the Evaluation of the Italian School System (INVALSI). The Institute collects standardised measure of competences and student background information through questionnaires and administrative records. We focus on data from grade five (primary education) collected in May 2022 ($N = 448,772$). Despite the richness of the dataset on student competences, INVALSI provides limited information regarding students' migrant background.

To address this gap, we also utilise data from the 2015 "Integration of the Second Generation" (ISG) survey, collected by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), from which we select students in grades six and seven ($N = 21,991$). Due to the design oversampling schools with students from migratory background,⁴ the ISG data are not nationally representative and cannot be used to quantify the spread of grade postponement. However, by replicating our analyses on the ISG data, we assess the robustness of the findings across different data sources. Specifically, the ISG dataset allows us to operationalise key explanatory variables related to Hypotheses 1, 3, and 4 using alternative measures, and to examine whether our results hold across data collected in different time period. In particular, the measure of linguistic distance available in the ISG data, which explicitly identifies students' country of birth, provides an alternative operationalisation of the same construct used in the INVALSI data.

⁴The ISG survey is based on a sample of schools with at least five students without Italian citizenship. Note that, despite its name, the survey includes not only second-generation but also first-generation students.

First-generation students—our population of interest—are identified by both the students' and parents' place of birth: we consider as first-generation students those who were born abroad with both parents born abroad ($N = 12,218$ for INVALSI and $N = 5,099$ for ISG). Note that, while our focus of interest is on newly arrived migrants, we do not restrict our samples to those who arrived shortly before the data collection. This is because our interest is on the migrants who are newly arrived from the perspective of the educational system, i.e. migrant students at their first entry into the compulsory phase of schooling.

Unfortunately, both datasets are limited in that they do not contain any information on the Italian language proficiency nor on the early competences of students when they entered compulsory schooling, therefore preventing us to directly investigate the importance of these factors on the likelihood of grade postponement.

4.2 Variables

The dependent variable is a dummy variable that equals one if the student was postponed, and zero if they were not. The administrative information (year and months of birth) available in INVALSI allows us to identify students with school delay (i.e. students who are older than the expected age for the grade they are attending). As school delay could also result from grade retention, which is not recorded in INVALSI data. Hence, we focus on primary education, where retention is uncommon in Italy (Borodankova & Coutinho, 2011). In contrast, ISG covers secondary education (both lower and upper) and collects information on both grade retention and age. This allows us to distinguish between grade retention and postponement. To compare the two datasets, we focus on lower secondary school, specifically on grades six and seven. We exclude grade eight because age is available only in class intervals (10–12; 12; 13; 14–25), which does not allow us to construct our dependent variable for the specific grade. For the first part of the analyses, we focus on individual and family variables. Age of arrival in Italy is coded as numeric (1–10 for INVALSI; 1–13 for ISG) and is directly provided only by INVALSI. For ISG, we reconstruct this variable using information on the year of arrival, the survey year, and student's age at the time of the survey. Because age is available only in class intervals, we can reconstruct age at arrival only for the two unambiguous categories (12 and 13 years old). This results in 1678 missing cases (32.91%), which we exclude from the analyses.

Family economic, social, and cultural resources are operationalised through multiple indicators. First, we capture institutionalised cultural capital through parental education, applying the dominance principle, that is, selecting the highest educational qualification attained by either parent ("Primary", "Lower secondary", "Upper secondary", and "Tertiary"). Second, we proxy social class in the destination country using parents' occupational position (available only in INVALSI data), again following the dominance principle ("Unemployed", "Manual workers", "Small employers and self-employed", "Intermediate occupations", "Managers and

professionals”). Third, we use several indicators of home possessions. Specifically, we use the set provided by INVALSI (a quiet place to study, a computer for studying, a desk for homework, encyclopaedias, internet connection, an exclusive bedroom, and the number of books at home) and the indicators available in ISG (an exclusive bedroom and possession of a computer). These measures provide a more direct proxy of study-related material resources. Moreover, books at home are widely used in the literature as a proxy for socio-economic status and are strongly correlated with educational outcomes (Heppt et al., 2022).

Using multiple indicators in the same models helps capturing the social, economic, and cultural resources available to students in a more comprehensive way. This is particularly relevant for first-generation migrants, for whom single indicators may be insufficient, if used in isolation, to capture the related dimension. On the one hand, parental education (acquired in the origin country) may not be fully transferable to the destination context, leading to an overestimation the cultural capital of immigrant families. On the other hand, occupational status may be affected by temporary occupational downgrading after migration, leading to an underestimation of social class of origin. Similarly, newly arrived families had less time to accumulate home possessions including cultural resources like books, which therefore would be an insufficient proxy of objectified cultural capital.

Another main independent variable is linguistic distance from Italian. To construct it, we compare students’ mother tongue with Italian using the language family criterion (Eberhard et al., 2023). To identify the mother tongue, we use the student questionnaire for INVALSI which includes a question on the language spoken at home (At home, which language do you speak most of the time?). For ISG data, we use the majority language in the country of birth. We operationalise linguistic distance into a categorical variable with three main categories: “Low Distance”, including Romance languages (e.g., Spanish, Romanian); “Medium Distance”, including other Indo-European languages (e.g., Albanian, English); and “High Distance”, including languages from other families (e.g. Arabic, Chinese). For INVALSI data, the variable also includes categories “Italian” (those who speak Italian at home) and “Other” (those who speak other languages at home). Since all Romance languages are included in the specific categories, the “Other” category mainly includes non-Romance Indo-European languages or languages more distant from Italian.

ECEC attendance is operationalised as having attended at least 1 year of pre-school in Italy as recorded in school registries.

Additional control variables that we use in all models include students’ gender and the Italian macro-region of residence (North-West, North-East, Centre, South, Islands). When we add linguistic distance to the model, we also include place of birth as control (European Union, European country extra-EU, and extra-European country for INVALSI data; world region of birth for ISG data⁵).

For the second part of the analysis, we only use INVALSI data because, as mentioned, ISG data only comprises schools with at least five students with foreign

⁵We group countries into eight regions: Western countries; Eastern Europe; North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia; Sub-Saharan Africa; South and Central America; Southeast Asia; South Asia; and East Asia.

citizenship. The independent variables at school level that we use in this part are: (1) the school index of Economic, Social and Cultural Status (ESCS), directly provided by INVALSI and calculated based on the three components mentioned above (parents' occupational status, parental education, and home possessions); (2) the share of migrant-background students, which we compute by taking the sum of first and second generation students over the total number of students in grade 5, for each school; (3) the number of computer rooms, as a proxy for school resources.

4.3 *Methods*

In the first step of the analysis, we investigate the extent to which first-generation students with different characteristics have different probabilities of being enrolled in a school class below that corresponding to their age. We estimate two different logistic regressions for each dataset. Model 1 includes age at arrival and SES indicators as predictors of grade postponement, while controlling for gender and macro-area of residence, thereby testing *H1* and *H3*. Additionally, to test whether ECEC attendance is associated to grade postponement (*H2*), we estimate the same logistic regression model on a sub-sample of first-generation students who arrived in Italy before age six (Model 1b). To test hypothesis *H4*, we add linguistic distance as a potential mediating factor (Model 2) and run the model on the entire sample. To account for potential dependence among students within the same school, standard errors are clustered at the school level. This is possible only for INVALSI data, as the ISG survey does not include a school or class ID.

In the second step, we examine the role of school-level characteristics. We estimate a logistic regression that includes both individual-level predictors and school-level characteristics (Model 3), thereby testing *H5*. Although our data has a hierarchical structure (students nested in classes nested in schools), we opted for single-level logistic regressions with school-level covariates and clustered standard errors rather than multilevel models. This decision is based on preliminary analyses showing an intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) of the null model at 0.05, indicating that only 5% of the variance in postponement occurs between schools. Multilevel logit models would thus unnecessarily reduce statistical power, creating problems of empty cells, given that some of the categories of our variables are very small (e.g. students with medium linguistic distance that are born in an extra-European country).

4.4 *Treatment of Missing Information*

In INVALSI data, both administrative records and student questionnaires contain missing information, particularly for first-generations students. For the key variables, age at arrival and linguistic distance, there are respectively 4,483 (36.69%) and 2,116 (17.32%) missing cases. We chose to keep cases with missing

information and code missingness as an additional category, for several reasons. Missing information in administrative data (e.g., age at arrival; parental educational) may reflect communication barriers between schools and families, as such information is requested from families at the time of enrolment, which could influence the postponement. Similarly, non-response to questionnaire items (e.g., linguistic distance) may indicate limited Italian proficiency, which correlates with our outcome of interest. Moreover, missing values on linguistic distance may indicate that respondents speak multiple languages at home and could not adjudicate the one that they speak most of the time.

Our analysis of missing data patterns (Appendix 2) reveals that students with missing age at arrival also tend to have missing SES indicators in the administrative data. However, these students often respond to the questionnaire, allowing us to recover some information, for example on SES through questions about home possessions. In contrast, questionnaire non-respondents often have missing values in both administrative and survey data, potentially reflecting linguistic difficulties faced by student and their family.

To assess the robustness of our findings, we replicated all main analyses excluding cases with missing data on key variables. Results remained substantively unchanged (available upon request), confirming that the inclusion of missing cases does not bias our estimates.

We report the coefficients for the missing categories but do not comment them, as they are heterogeneous categories and do not allow for meaningful interpretation.

5 Results and Discussion

5.1 *The Social Stratification of Grade Postponement*

In order to seize the incidence of grade postponement, we report the shares of students who are postponed within our sample of first-generation migrants, divided between those who arrived before and after age six, as well as within other categories of students, which serve as baselines: second-generations migrants (born in Italy from both parents born abroad), mixed-origin students (with one parent born abroad and the other born in Italy), and native students (born in Italy with both parents born in Italy). Figure 1 clearly shows that grade postponement is a widespread practice among first-generation migrants, affecting over 30% of them. Those who arrived after age six are particularly likely to be postponed (46%), while the percentage is lower for those who arrived before age six (19%).

As shown by Fig. 2, which presents the Average Marginal Effects (AMEs) of Model 1, postponement is a socially stratified practice, in line with our first hypothesis (H1). Children of tertiary educated parents are 9.2% points less likely to be postponed than children of parents who only attained primary education. A similar

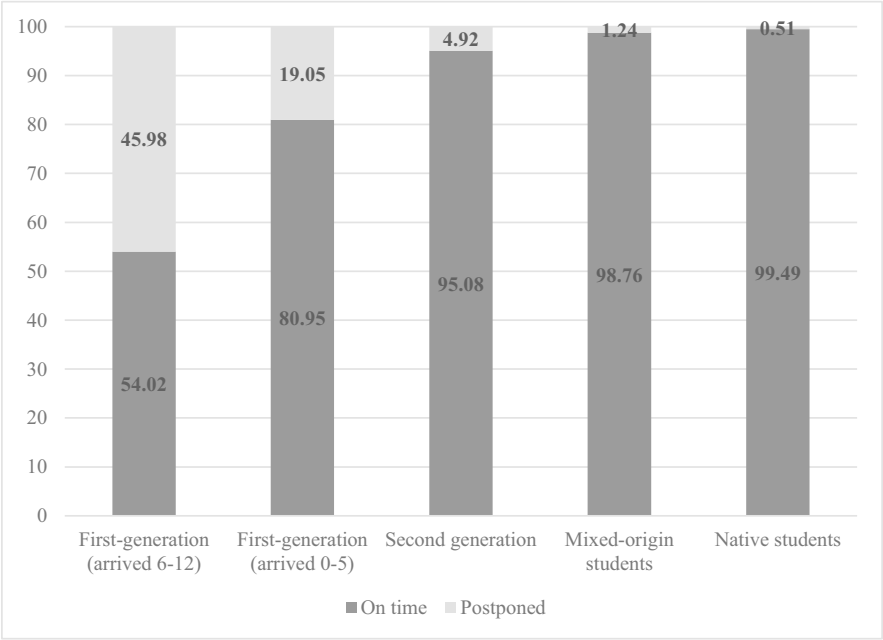


Fig. 1 Grade postponement rates among students, by migratory status (INVALSI data)

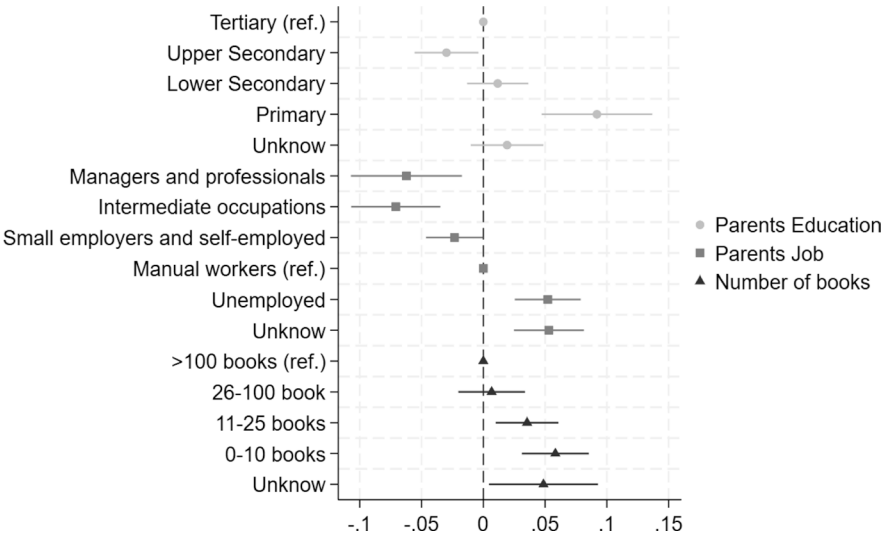


Fig. 2 Average marginal effects (AMEs) and 95% confidence intervals of social origin variables (parental education, parents’ employment status and number of books) on the probability of grade postponement, Model 1 (INVALSI data)

pattern is observed for parents' employment status: children whose parents hold intermediate occupations are 7.1% points less likely to be postponed compared to those whose parents are manual workers (reference category). Additionally, children from homes with very few books are 5.8% points more likely to experience postponement than those with more than one hundred books. It is very likely that these gaps reflect different degrees of initial competences, especially in terms of Italian language proficiency, which are influenced by socio-economic background. In the ISG survey, the findings are consistent with the stratification hypothesis, although the measures of socio-economic background are less rich. Nonetheless, the results for parental educational attainment remain consistent: having parents with tertiary education reduce the probability of being postponed. For the full results, see Table 1, Appendix 1.

As noted above, we cannot directly control for students' competences when they enter compulsory schooling. However, for students who arrived in Italy before compulsory schooling age, we expect that such competences, especially in terms of proficiency in Italian, are stronger among those who attended ECEC in Italy and that therefore ECEC attendance is associated with a lower likelihood of grade postponement (*H2*). To test this hypothesis, we ran a separate set of analyses on the sub-sample of first-generation students who arrived in Italy before age six and thus had the possibility to attend ECEC in Italy. Within this sub-sample, students who attend ECEC are 80.5%. Not having attended ECEC is a strong predictor for grade postponement (15.5% points difference), hence supporting *H2*.

As ECEC attendance is likely correlated to early competence development, these additional analyses are also useful to explore, although only indirectly, the extent to which the social stratification of grade postponement operates through prior competences. After controlling for ECEC attendance, several coefficients for socio-economic background indicators become smaller and less significant. Figure 3a reports the AMEs from the model estimated without controlling for ECEC attendance (Model 1a), whereas Fig. 3b shows the estimates from the model including this control (Model 1b), where the coefficients are attenuated (see Table 2, Appendix 1). Importantly, the reduction in statistical significance is not driven by differences in sample size, as both models are estimated on the same sub-sample, namely children with non-missing information on ECEC attendance.⁶ Therefore, ECEC attendance partially mediates the effect of social-advantage. Since prior competences are presumably associated with both social-advantage and ECEC attendance, these results indirectly suggest that the social-stratification of grade postponement partially operates through such competences.

The third hypothesis (*H3*) is also confirmed. Age of arrival is the most significant factor in predicting postponement. The likelihood of postponement increases with age at arrival, with some clear jumps in probability. The first jump is around compulsory schooling age: students who arrive at age seven are 21.6% points more

⁶Results are unchanged when missing values are included as a separate category of the ECEC attendance variable (results available upon request).

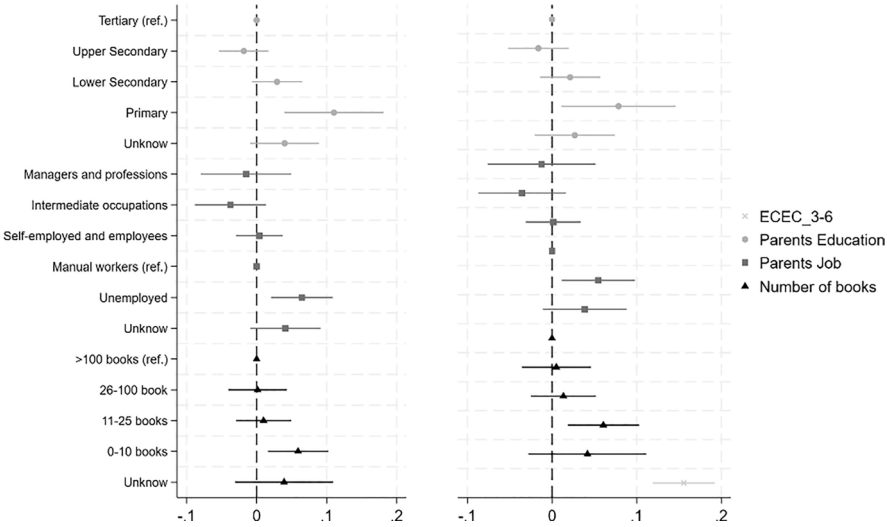


Fig. 3 (a) Average Marginal Effects (AMEs) and 95% confidence intervals of social origin variables (parental education, parents’ employment status, and number of books) on the probability of grade postponement among those who arrived before age six (INVALSI data). (b) The same specification additionally controlling for ECEC attendance in Italy (ref.: no attendance)

likely to be postponed than those who arrive at age six (M1). However, even for those arriving at age six, the probability is significantly higher than for those arriving at age five (−8.5% points). We find the same jumps in probability between ages five and six and between ages six and seven in the ISG dataset as well, confirming the key role of age at arrival. Figure 4a shows the AMEs from the models estimated on INVALSI data, while Fig. 4b presents the corresponding estimates based on IGS data.⁷ See Table 3, Appendix 1, for the full results.

Our fourth hypothesis (H4) is not confirmed, because, as linguistic distance increases, the chance of being postponed does not increase. The reference category consists of students who speak Romance languages at home (Low Distance), mainly Romanian and Spanish, and this is the group most likely to be postponed. By contrast, pupils who report speaking Italian at home (−7.4% points) and those who speak languages more distant from Italian (−9 and −8.6% points) are less likely to be postponed. We find the same pattern in ISG data, where linguistic distance is operationalised differently, but the reference category is the same. In this dataset, both high distance (−3.8% points), and very high distance languages (−5.6% points) are associated with a lower likelihood of postponement. Thus, the result holds regardless of whether linguistic distance is measured through the language spoken

⁷The coefficient for age of arrival = 12 in the IGS survey is not interpretable. By construction, this category includes students who are either 13 at the time of the survey and arrived 1 year earlier, or 12 and recently arrived (less than 1 year). In the sample, it almost exclusively comprises the latter group, who cannot be delayed in grades six or seven, making the coefficient meaningless.

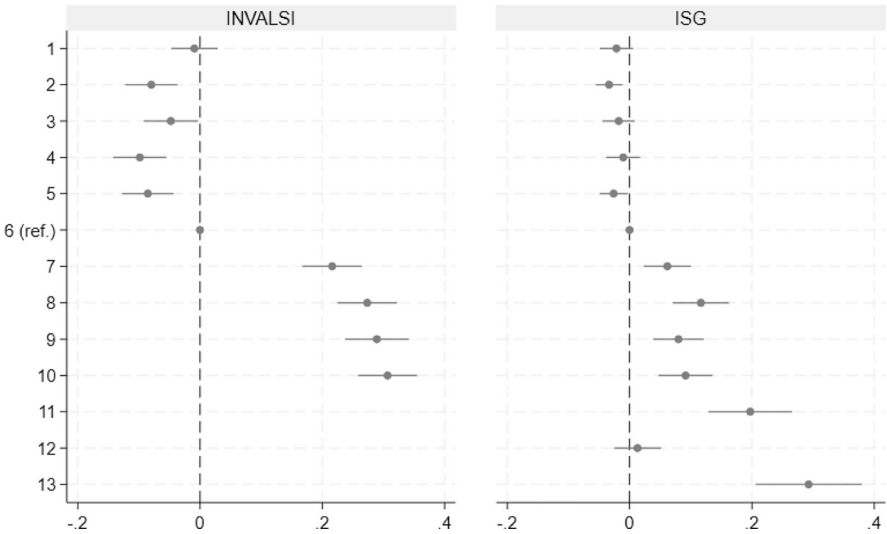


Fig. 4 (a) Average Marginal Effects (AMEs) and 95% confidence intervals of age of arrival (in years; ref.: age six) on the probability of grade postponement estimated on INVALSI data (Model 1). (b) The same estimates based on ISG data (Model 1)

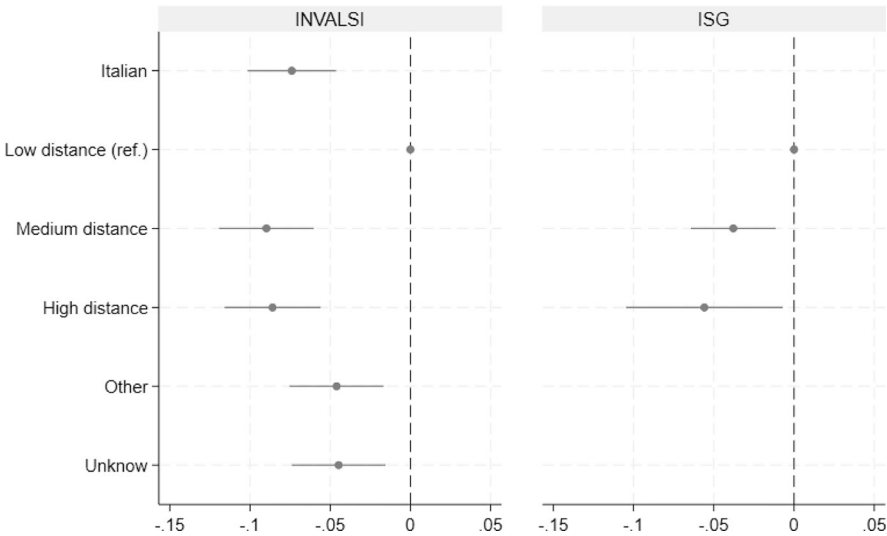


Fig. 5 (a) Average Marginal Effects (AMEs) and 95% confidence intervals of linguistic distance (ref.: low distance) on the probability of grade postponement estimated on INVALSI data (Model 2). (b) The same estimates based on ISG data (Model 2)

at home (INVALSI) or through the majority language of the origin country (ISG) (Fig. 5). This finding is unexpected, first because linguistic competences in Italian at the time of school entry are widely considered central to the decision to postpone a student.

5.2 School Differences in Grade Postponement

In order to investigate the differences between schools, we estimate the likelihood of being postponed in relation to school level characteristics. Specifically, in Model 3, we add average ESCS at the school level, the presence of a computer room and the percentage of migrant-background students. With regard to average socio-economic background, our hypothesis was that attending a school with a more socially advantaged composition would decrease the probability of being postponed (H5). The results of the logistic model do not support this hypothesis due to non-significant results (see Fig. 6a). We also model the relation as curvilinear, including the quadratic term of the school ESCS, but the quadratic term is close to zero and not statistically significant. We conclude that the school social composition does not affect the probability of postponement and therefore reject H5.

Concerning school composition in terms of migrant-background students, we did not have any directional hypothesis. Figure 6b reports the predicted probabilities of grade postponement by percentage levels of migrant-background students. As visible, we estimate a curvilinear relationship. In this case, the quadratic term is negative and statistically significant, indicating that only schools with very high shares of migrant-background students resort less often to grade postponement. However, the coefficient is very close to zero (1 for OR). Also in this case, we therefore conclude that the share of migrant-background students in school does not affect postponement decisions. This zero effect may be due to mechanisms working in opposite directions, namely that, when having to deal with a larger presence of migrant-background students, some schools may increasingly resort to grade postponement, while other schools may be able to attract additional financial and human resources that help avoiding postponement. The intra-class correlation of multilevel models is also consistent with these results: only approximately the 5% of the variance is explicable at school-level.

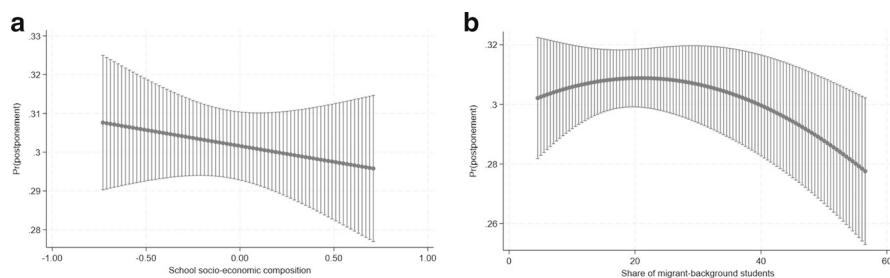


Fig. 6 (a) Predicted probabilities of grade postponement by levels of school-average ESCS (economic, social and cultural status). (b) Predicted probabilities of grade postponement by the share of migrant-background students. Estimates are based on INVALSI data (Model 3). Vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals

6 Conclusions

In this chapter, we analysed the educational practice of grade postponement for newly arrived migrant students in the Italian school system. We conceptualised grade postponement as a differentiating practice to deal with the low competences of newly arrived migrant students, that may occur even in systems that are otherwise integrated (see Mons, 2007; Dupriez et al., 2008, for a similar conceptualisation of grade retention). In the Italian context, grade postponement can occur either through retention in ECEC and consequent delayed enrolment in primary schooling or through enrolment in a grade below the age-appropriate one for students who move to Italy past compulsory schooling age.

By analysing data for the full population of first-generation students attending grade five in the school year 2021/2022 (INVALSI data) and replicating our analyses on a sample of first-generation students attending grades six and seven in the school year 2014/2015, we estimated logistic models in order to identify the individual and contextual determinants of school postponement. Our main findings reveal that grade postponement is highly socially stratified, in terms of parental education, parental occupation, and wealth as proxied by home possessions. This result is in line with previous studies on two practices that are closely related to grade postponement, namely delayed school entry (Knudsen et al., 2025; Pohlmann-Rother et al., 2024) and grade repetition (Agasisti & Cordero, 2017; Salza, 2022). Moreover, ECEC attendance is negatively correlated to the likelihood of grade postponement and attenuates the influence of family background indicators. A major limitation of our analyses is that we cannot control for student competences and language proficiency at the moment of school entry, as these are not systematically collected in the Italian system. However, the mediating role of ECEC attendance indirectly suggests that the social stratification of grade postponement partly operates through the level of competences accumulated during early childhood.

We also find that the younger children were when they arrived in Italy, the less likely they are to be postponed, in line with the wide literature indicating that age at arrival is a strong predictor of early competence development for first-generation migrants (Ohinata & Van Ours, 2012).

Unexpectedly, linguistic barriers do not emerge as a predictor of grade postponement. On the contrary, our results indicate that the most frequently held-back students are those who speak Romanian or Spanish, Romance languages that are very close to Italian. These results suggest that, beyond linguistic distance, there may be differences related to the ethnic group of origin in the probability of being postponed. This does not necessarily reflect discriminatory behaviour, as children belonging to different ethnic groups may display different levels of initial competences, including but not restricted to proficiency in the language of instruction. Moreover, depending on their country of origin and on the norms prevailing in the educational system they attended, parents may have different attitudes towards grade postponement, indirectly influencing the school decision-making, as

previously suggested by qualitative evidence for delayed school entry in Germany (Pohlmann-Rother et al., 2024).

Finally, we find that the social composition of schools (whether in socio-economic terms or as prevalence of students from migratory backgrounds) does not appear to influence the prevalence of grade postponement decisions. This null finding does not necessarily indicate that grade postponement is independent of the characteristics of the student body, as only a very small share of variance lies at the school level. Rather, we conclude that—despite the substantial discretion enjoyed by schools—grade postponement is a widely used practice throughout the Italian educational system.

The core contribution of this chapter is the investigation of a largely underexplored school practice and its individual and contextual determinants. However, many questions remain open. In order to understand the logic underlying the decision-making processes of grade postponement, future research should investigate the explicit or implicit criteria adopted by the school principal and the teaching staff and their interactions with the other actors involved, primarily the family, especially in light of the literature documenting teachers’ social biases in their expectations and assessments (Gil-Hernández et al., 2024). Moreover, further research is needed to assess the causal impact of grade postponement on students’ competences and wellbeing in the short run and on their long-term educational outcomes.

Competing Interests We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

Appendix 1

Table 1 Logistic regression results for grade postponement (INVALSI data). Odds ratios are reported

	M1 (N = 12,218)	M2 (N = 12,218)	M3 (N = 12,212)
Age at arrival (6)			
1	0.951	0.978	0.971
2	0.610***	0.624***	0.623***
3	0.756*	0.765*	0.761*
4	0.529***	0.529***	0.528***
5	0.585***	0.591***	0.588***
7	2.678***	2.713***	2.705***
8	3.388***	3.427***	3.426***
9	3.614***	3.637***	3.629***
10	3.885***	3.894***	3.860***
Unknown	1.160	1.179*	1.166
Parents education (tertiary)			

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

	M1 (<i>N</i> = 12,218)	M2 (<i>N</i> = 12,218)	M3 (<i>N</i> = 12,212)
Upper secondary	0.851**	0.868*	0.871*
Lower secondary	1.063	1.097	1.095
Primary	1.571***	1.656***	1.647***
Unknown	1.105	1.134	1.131
Parents job (<i>manual workers</i>)			
Managers and professionals	0.702**	0.695***	0.698**
Intermediate occupations	0.665***	0.637***	0.641***
Small employers and self-employed	0.881*	0.893*	0.902
Unemployed	1.303***	1.283***	1.286***
Unknown	1.309***	1.282***	1.286***
Number of books (>100)			
26–100	1.038	1.031	1.028
11–25	1.209***	1.207***	1.202**
0–10	1.358***	1.357***	1.352***
Unknown	1.293**	1.297**	1.298**
Female	0.874***	0.873***	0.871***
North-east	0.951	0.941	0.942
Centre	1.015	1.019	0.998
South	1.191**	1.195**	1.178*
South and islands	1.054	1.050	1.037
Linguistic distance (<i>low distance</i>)			
Italian		0.687***	0.690***
Medium distance		0.630***	0.628***
High distance		0.644***	0.647***
Other		0.796***	0.801***
Unknown		0.801***	0.807***
Place of birth (<i>EU</i>)			
European not EU		1.071	1.064
Extra-Europe		1.002	0.999
Unknown		0.719	0.713
School characteristic			
Average ESCS			0.958
Presence of computer room (1 or more)			0.952
Share of migrant-background students			1.005
Share of migrant-background students ²			1.000**
Constant	0.274***	0.348***	0.351***

Notes: All models control for home possessions variables (see Sect. 3.2)

****p* < 0.01, ***p* < 0.05, **p* < 0.1

Table 2 Logistic regression results for grade postponement on a sub-sample of first-generation students who arrived before age six (INVALSI data). Odds ratios are reported

	M1a (N = 3459)	M1b (N = 3459)
ECEC attendance (<i>no attendance</i>)		2.813***
Age of arrival (5)		
1	1.240	1.461***
2	0.991	1.107
3	1.262	1.452**
4	0.869	1.029
Parents education (<i>tertiary</i>)		
Upper secondary	0.849	0.867
Lower secondary	1.255	1.187
Primary	2.088***	1.751**
Unknown	1.356	1.237
Parents job (<i>manual workers</i>)		
Managers and professionals	0.880	0.899
Intermediate occupations	0.709	0.720
Small employers and self-employed	1.031	1.012
Unemployed	1.577***	1.497***
Unknown	1.355*	1.343
Number of books (>100)		
26–100	1.011	1.046
11–25	1.086	1.124
0–10	1.555**	1.603***
Unknown	1.357	1.404
Female	0.911	0.925
North-east	0.739**	0.767**
Centre	1.278*	1.296*
South	1.455**	1.542**
South and islands	1.126	1.239
Constant		0.0826***

Notes: All models control for home possessions variables (see Sect. 3.2)

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Table 3 Logistic regression results for grade postponement (ISG data). Odds ratios are reported

	M1 (N = 3410)	M2 (N = 3410)
Age at arrival (6)		
0	1.149	1.197
1	0.423	0.469
2	0.115**	0.112**
3	0.519	0.538
4	0.715	0.705
5	0.304**	0.295**
7	2.830***	2.947***
8	4.704***	5.036***
9	3.422***	3.562***
10	3.816***	3.892***
11	8.035***	8.186***
12	1.362	1.435
13	13.10***	15.65***
Parents education (<i>tertiary</i>)		
Upper secondary	0.687	0.634*
Lower secondary	0.765	0.626*
Primary	0.983	0.707
None	0.920	0.970
Unknown	0.925	0.863
Female	0.599***	0.579***
North-east	1.154	1.150
Centre	1.881***	1.764**
South	1.866***	1.828**
South and islands	1.684**	1.562*
Linguistic distance (<i>medium</i>)		
High distance		0.585***
Very high distance		0.415**
Place of birth (<i>Eastern Europe</i>)		
Western countries		0.182**
North Africa, Middle East and Central Asia		2.730**
Sub-Saharan Africa		0.758
South and Central America		0.441***
Southeast Asia		1.216
South Asia		2.085***
East Asia		4.564***
Constant	0.0406***	0.0558***

Notes: All models control for home possessions variables (see Sect. 3.2)

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Appendix 2 (Tables 4 and 5)

Table 4 Patterns of missing data for age at arrival. Percentages of each category are reported for the full sample and for the subset of observations with missing age at arrival

	Age at arrival (<i>N</i> = 7735)	Missing of age at arrival (<i>N</i> = 4483)
Parents education		
Tertiary	21.32	11.35
Upper secondary	21.75	17.38
Lower secondary	31.66	24.67
Primary	4.84	3.97
Unknown	20.44	42.63
Parents job		
Managers and professionals	3.31	1.94
Intermediate occupations	5.54	3.37
Small employers and self-employed	16.71	12.74
Manual workers	43.24	32.95
Unemployed	12.67	11.04
Unknown	18.53	37.95
Number of books		
>100	12.62	12.18
26–100	21.77	22.35
11–25	33.91	33.15
0–10	25.48	25.92
Unknown	6.22	6.40
Female	48.30	46.58
North-west	41.63	35.02
North-east	27.94	28.53
Centre	17.14	19.74
South	8.52	9.03
South and islands	4.77	7.67
Linguistic distance		
Italian	18.86	21.66
Low distance	15.37	14.39
Mild distance	15.43	16.97
High distance	15.96	15.24
Other	16.44	15.13
Unknown	17.94	16.61
Place of birth		
European Union	13.72	16.46
European not EU	22.40	25.16
Extra-Europe	63.15	58.38
Unknown	0.72	0
School characteristic		
Average ESCS (mean)	−0.027	−0.15
Presence of computer room	51.30	50.01
Share of migrant-background students (mean)	25.55	23.30

Table 5 Patterns of missing data for linguistic distance. Percentages of each category are reported for the full sample and for the subset of observations with missing linguistic distance

	Linguistic distance (<i>N</i> = 10,008)	Missing of linguistic distance (<i>N</i> = 2116)
Age at arrival		
1	14.17	12.67
2	5.46	5.39
3	5.40	4.82
4	4.63	5.01
5	5.81	6.05
6	5.99	5.53
7	5.98	5.06
8	5.92	5.43
9	4.36	5.62
10	5.31	9.55
Unknown	37.01	34.88
Parents education		
Tertiary	18.41	14.08
Upper secondary	20.92	16.59
Lower secondary	29.79	26.13
Primary	4.44	4.82
Unknown	26.45	38.37
Parents job (<i>manual workers</i>)		
Managers and professionals	2.83	2.60
Intermediate occupations	5.04	3.36
Small employers and self-employed	15.69	13.19
Manual workers	40.46	34.70
Unemployed	12.37	10.83
Unknown	23.61	35.32
Number of books		
>100	12.08	12.08
26–100	22.68	19.05
11–25	34.50	29.35
0–10	25.92	24.20
Unknown	4.82	13.33
Female	48.60	43.38
North-west	40.13	35.02
North-east	27.29	32.04
Centre	18.03	18.38
South	9.05	7.23
South and islands	5.51	7.33
Place of birth		
European Union	14.75	14.60

(continued)

Table 5 (continued)

	Linguistic distance (<i>N</i> = 10,008)	Missing of linguistic distance (<i>N</i> = 2116)
European not EU	23.60	22.54
Extra-Europe	61.19	62.38
Unknown	0.46	0.47
School characteristic		
Average ESCS (mean)	−0.08	−0.05
Presence of computer room	51.22	48.77
Share of migrant-background students (mean)	24.59	25.38

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