

International Journal of Inclusive Education

ISSN: 1360-3116 (Print) 1464-5173 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/tied20

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To cite this article: Caterina Balenzano (2025) Adopted students' educational paths and inclusiveness of Italian school system: an explorative study using parents' evaluation, International Journal of Inclusive Education, 29:5, 658-675, DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2023.2215241

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2023.2215241

Published online: 29 May 2023.

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION
2025, VOL. 29, NO. 5, 658–675
https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2023.2215241

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Adopted students' educational paths and inclusiveness of Italian school system: an explorative study using parents' evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Using a mixed-method approach, the study explored the capacity of the Italian educational system to be oriented at inclusion examining, according to adoptive parents' perspectives, the enforcing of the national guidelines on adopted students' right to education (NG). It explored the main obstacles and opportunities faced by families in their children's school path, as well as their suggestions to meet adoptive children's educational needs. Eighty parents of school-aged (6–14 years) adopted students participated in the study. Sixty-five were involved in the quantitative step of research and filled out an ad hoc survey; 15 took part in the qualitative step, by participating in the focus group discussions. Results show that adopted students face a variety of educational barriers in school environments and their educational paths are not always characterized by the principles of NG, suggesting that Italian schools are generally little equipped to promote the school achievement and inclusion of adopted students. The findings are discussed highlighting some practical implications to improve adopted students' adjustment at school and underlining the need to promote specific training programs for teachers, better communication among partners involved in the adoption process, and measures aimed at supporting adoptive families.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 1 March 2022
Accepted 12 May 2023

KEYWORDS
Inclusive education; parents' views; student-centered approach; adoptees' right to education; obstacles and supporting factors; adopted students' needs

Introduction

While much research has investigated adopted children's behavioural and emotional adjustment, little is known about their educational needs, paths, and outcomes (Stother, Woods, and McIntosh 2019), despite studies showed that they are vulnerable to educational difficulties and have often specific learning disorders (Miller et al. 2009; Molin, Cazzola, and Cornoldi 2009). Specifically, scholars evidenced that adopted students are underachieving academically and that, probably due to their background, have poor concentration skills and weak ability to pay attention, memorise and complete a task independently (Gunnar and Van Dulmen 2007; Juffer and Van Ijzendoorn 2005; Osborne, Norgate, and Traill 2009). The research highlighted, then, that intercountry

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adoptees can present also poorer comprehension skills (Desmarais et al. 2012) caused by the difficulties related to the learning of a new language (Glenn 2007) and that pre-adoptive adversity affects not only adoptees' educational attainment but also their ability to start and maintain positive peer relationships, both inside and outside the classroom (Tarren-Sweeney 2010).

Because adopted students are vulnerable to academic and social difficulties at school, additional support within school is often required for this 'disadvantage group', particularly during the first school placement and the educational transition to a new school, generally considered critical events (Garro, Novara, and Di Rienzo 2013), especially for the adoptive children of foreign origins, who must adjust to a new socio-cultural context. In this regard, scholars evidenced that adopted children's adjustment to the new context depends also on the capacity of local community and school to welcome them (Novara et al. 2015). Alongside family, the school context is very important: it has a strong influence on adopted students' paths and aspirations, affecting significantly their identity, as it may help to promote their school achievement or to exacerbate their difficulties (Flum and Kaplan 2012; Klein, Cornell, and Konold 2012; Sempowicz et al. 2018). Specifically, teachers' specific training and a positive school climate have been considered important protective factors to promote educational inclusive practices, as they help teachers to meet the challenges that adopted students bring to their classrooms (Novara, Lenzi, and Santinello 2018). Also, investing in the positive partnership between teachers, principals, and parents seems to be a promising strategy, both to satisfy adopted children's educational needs and help them to achieve positive outcomes, and to support families during critical periods (Baker 2013). The literature highlighted, indeed, that when adoptive parents can let teachers know about their children's characteristics, background, and needs, teachers can better understand the singular adoption experience (Lucato and Zambianchi 2011) and this could help them to personalise their teaching approach, thus promoting adopted children school success.

However, most teachers do not have sufficient knowledge and competencies to meet adopted students' specific educational needs and are not aware of their crucial role in handling adopted children's learning difficulties (Favaro and Pregliasco 2010). Therefore, adopted students frequently remain 'invisible' within the education system, as well as overlooked within classrooms, as their requirements are often inadequately understood and supported by school staff, and more generally, by postadoption services (Adoption UK 2018; Barratt 2011; Gindis 2009). Furthermore, the school can become a very unhappy place for adopted children when teachers, that generally follow curricula according to the National Guideline (for Italian context, see National Guideline for the first cycle curriculum, MIUR 2012), ask them inappropriate questions and-or tasks they cannot or do not know how to answer, for example, 'family trees' or 'my history' (Lancaster and Constantin 2014).

Finally, especially in unsupportive and less responsive school contexts, intercountry adopted children coming from different ethnic backgrounds are often discriminated against by their classmates (Scarvelis, Crisp, and Goldingay 2014). In this regard, it should be emphasised that students with an adoptive background may present a multiple and simultaneous intersectionality condition, with an overlapping of different identities (adoptive, ethnic, and ability), which exposes them to possible multiple micro-exclusions which in turn can cause marginalisation and dispersion (Migliarini, Stinson, and D'Alessio 2019).

In the wake of this evidence, across the countries, several initiatives have been introduced to promote adopted students' engagement, achievement, and inclusion. In the Italian context, in 2014, the Italian Minister of Education signed specific guidelines to facilitate the inclusion and well-being of adopted students and their adoptive families (see 'Guidelines to Promote the Right to Education of Adopted Students'). The national guidelines (NG) point out the challenges faced by adopted students (identity, learning, emotional and social difficulties) and describe some recommendations to promote their positive school inclusion and learning experience. They include the training of teachers about adoptees' needs and the nomination of a designated teacher; the gradualness of first school placement; the continuity between the different grades of school; the collaboration among family, school, and other services; the possible personalisation of the learning path by a personalised didactic plan (Piano didattico personalizzato, PDP, see page 13). It is a plan based on personalised educational and didactic strategies useful to support adopted students, both in first school placement and in the educational transition to other school orders and grades. It has been formulated by the class council or teachers' group and signed by the head teacher, the teachers, and the family. It can be temporary and includes all the modifications to the standard teaching methods that it is felt need to be implemented to help the student and support its strengths.

The opportunity to personalise the educational path of students who seemed more exposed to risks of exclusion and underachievement is grounded in the Ministerial Documents related to the Italian Law 170/2010. In particular, according to Ministry guidelines about students with Special Educational Needs (SENs, see the Ministerial Directive of 27 December 2012, the Ministerial Circular n. 8 of 6 March 2013, and the Ministerial Note n. 2563 of 22 November 2013), not only children with specific learning disabilities but also students with other generic special needs or with sociocultural disadvantages can be supported by a PDP. Even if adoption by itself should not be perceived as a disadvantageous condition, adopted students may be included in this latter category, because the adverse childhood experiences that characterised their pre-adoptive life (e.g. socio-cultural deprivations in early childhood; institutionalisation, physical and psychological abuse, neglect, etc.) can increase the risks of educational failure and social exclusion.

However, though Italy represents the first country in Europe to have passed national rules dedicated to the well-being of adoptees in school, no standard criteria have been defined to guarantee a certain degree of uniformity in the different Italian local contexts. On the empiric level, no national plan for training school staff has been implemented, organised programmes for adopted students' inclusion have been few and inconsistent, as well as specific projects to meet the educational needs of foreign students. Thus, even if Italian teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education are generally positive (e.g. Sharma et al. 2018), adopted children's right to education risks remaining elusive if the school environment is little inclusive, that is not sufficiently equipped to recognise the needs and the difficulties of the adopted students and handle the complex biographies of who may have, at the same time, specific learning disabilities and-or a different ethnic origin (Ferritti and Guerrieri 2020).

In this perspective, beyond the directions advocated in the NG, this explorative study aimed to explore adopted students' educational paths and the inclusiveness of the Italian school system, according to adoptive parents' perspectives. The concept of inclusive education is here considered in terms of how the school environment itself adapts to each

child's individual characteristics and takes account of adopted students' difficulties related to different ethnic origins and-or pre-adoptive backgrounds. Based upon Fishman's application of inclusive education to the adoption field (2020), the study assumes that an inclusive school system adopts a 'student-centered approach', in which teachers acquire a deep understanding of the adoption process and are able both to create a sensitive environment to support adopted students' inclusion and to compensate for the gap in disciplinary learning to promote their achievement.

The current study

This explorative study addressed the current gap in the literature on adopted students' educational needs, experiences, and outcomes, by examining their school paths according to parents' perspectives. The mixed-method research is based on two main data sources that correspond to the two steps of the study: (1) ad-hoc questionnaire built by the author to assess adopted children's school paths and examine how much principles and recommendations suggested by the NG are met in adoptive families' experience; (2) two focus group discussions (FGDs) with adoptive parents designed to deeper explore their views regarding their children's educational paths. Combing such quantitative and qualitative data, the study tried to answer the following research questions:

(1) Are the Italian guidelines on adopted students' right to education enforced in educational contexts, which means is it ensured an inclusive education for adopted students?
(2) Which are the main obstacles and opportunities faced by adoptive families in their children's school path?
(3) What proposals can be made to plan an educational system that meets the educational needs of adopted children?

Specifically, the quantitative step of the study made it possible to answer the first research question, while the qualitative step allowed for reflection on the second and third research questions.

Method

Participants

Regarding the quantitative step of the study, 65 mothers (76.6%; $M_{age} = 47.78$; SD = 4.74) and fathers (23.4%; $M_{age} = 49.61$; SD = 5.23), parents of 77 children (male: 59.7%; female: 40.3%) aged 6–14 (mean: 10.79; SD = 2.37) placed in domestic (19.5%) and intercountry adoption (80.5%) participated in the survey. Fifty-five adoptive couples (84.62%) had 1 adopted child, 8 (12.31%) had 2 adopted children, and 2 (3.7%) had 3 adopted children. Around 93.5% of them have no biological children. Children were mainly adopted during pre-school age ($M_{age\ at\ adoption} = 5.39$; SD = 3.06).

As regards the qualitative step of the study, a convenience sample composed of 15 adoptive parents participated in the FGDs: 7 parents (4 mothers and 3 fathers) of

children attending primary school were involved in the first FGD, and 8 parents (5 mothers and 3 fathers) of adopted preadolescents and adolescents attending junior high school were involved in the second FGD.

In both the research steps, only parents of adopted students aged from 6 to 14 were involved, both because adopted students are generally enrolled in the school system within the first cycle of schooling, and the NG reflect more on the educational paths of adopted students in primary school (6–10 years) or in the junior high school (11–14 years).

Procedure

Research procedures were conducted according to the American Sociological Association (2018) ethical guidelines. Adoptive families were recruited by e-mail through contact with Mama-Happy association and were invited to participate voluntarily and anonymously in the study. Both parents who adopted from Italy and from other countries were asked to fill out a digital questionnaire and express their availability to be involved in an FGD, to confront each other about their children's school paths. Only two selection criteria were used to select the sample: (1) parents had to have children aged at least 6 years and no older than 14 years at the time of assessment; (2) the children had to have been adopted for at least 1 year.

As regards the quantitative step of the research, after agreeing to participate, participants completed questionnaires online at home. The questionnaire could be filled out by only one parent per adoptive family; in particular, the parent who is primarily involved in school matters was chosen to be involved in the study. Indeed, the literature has shown that although adoptive mothers assume the role of primary caregiver in adoptive families (Piermattei et al. 2017) by having a greater involvement in childcare (Ferrari et al. 2015), fathers have also recently assumed a more involved role in child rearing, especially in dual-earner families (Wall and Arnold 2007). However, since the distribution of parental roles and tasks in adoptive families is not rigid and universal but depends on the characteristics and skills of the parents, the completion by the parent who is 'most informed about the adopted students' inclusion in the school and their educational background' was expressly requested in the e-mail. Parents with more adopted children filled out a questionnaire for each child. The survey took approximately 10 min to complete, and no time limit was set.

As regards the qualitative step of the research, due to the participants' geographical disparity, the two FGDs were conducted online. The researcher facilitated the discussion among participants and took the role of moderator, asking questions, listening, keeping the conversation on track, and ensuring that everybody had the opportunity to speak. Both the FGDs lasted about two and half hours; they have been audio-recorded and later transcribed the contents for analysis.

Instruments and measures

The questionnaire: family demographics and adopted students' school paths

In the preliminary section of the questionnaire, parents were asked first to indicate their age, how many children they had adopted, the adoptees' genders, ethnic origin (Italian vs.

not Italian), adoptees' current age, and age at adoption. In the central section, the school path was investigated. First, parents were asked if they knew the school-designated teacher for adoption and if the child (1) was placed in the regular class (according to his/her age) or in one or lower classes; (2) had had an experience of contact with school spaces, before starting the school attendance (1: yes; 0: no); (3) had had the opportunity to take part in a flexible timetable at the beginning of school attendance (1: yes; 0: no) and (if not), why not? (parents' choice; children's willingness; school organisational difficulties); (4) had a personal didactic plan (PDP) at the beginning of school attendance. Then, three sets of items were formulated. Specifically, the first 7 dichotomous indicators explored parents' perspectives about their children's first placement into school (e.g. *In the first meetings, I could share with the school staff information on child's history, in order to personalize his/her welcoming*); other 4 dichotomous indicators investigated parents' evaluation about how the school has monitored adopted children's school adjustment (e.g. *The school staff was careful and interested in monitoring student's school placement and educational path*), while 14 items asked parents to evaluate, according to a four points scale (Not at all; A little; Pretty much; Very much), their children's overall school path, including the degree of inclusiveness of educational and didactic strategies and school environment (e.g. *Overall, the child was able to feel welcomed by his/her classmates*). To calculate a total score for each of these three areas, the latent structure of the item set was determined through generalised least squares exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and reliability tests were applied. Results suggested that, for each set of items, a single factor was extracted and that the three scales show good reliability estimates (respectively, Cronbach's = .82; .71; .96). For the first seven items the factor explained the 48.43% of the total variance; for the following four items the single factor explained the 54.18% of the total variance; for the last 14 items the single factor explained the 68.23% of the total variance. The three factors were named as follows: (1) first school placement (items 1–7), (2) monitoring of school adjustment (items 8–11), and (3) inclusiveness in adopted students' school path (items 12–25). However, after verifying the validity of the measurement and the one-dimensionality of all three scales, to obtain easier-to-interpret scores, average scores were computed for each of the three examined areas (items 1–7 items, and 8–11, range: 0–1; items 12–25, range: 1–4).

Key themes and questions of FGDs

FGDs investigated obstacles/difficulties and opportunities/supportive factors experienced in the school environment and asked adoptive parents' suggestions to improve adopted students' educational paths. Specifically, adoptive parents were asked to reflect on the following questions:

(1) How was your son's first school placement and educational path? Tell us about your experience!
(2) What are, according to you, the main weaknesses of the Italian educational system on inclusion? / Which are the obstacles and difficulties that as adoptive families you faced?
(3) Were there positive elements, supportive factors and-or opportunities that you want to highlight?

(4) Which suggestions would you give to improve the educational system, so that it meets adoptive children's educational needs, and promotes their achievement and inclusion?

Data analysis and findings

Data analysis

First, to answer the first research question concerning the implementation of the Italian NG on adopted students' right to education, descriptive statistics using SPSS (version 24) were applied to quantitative data collected by the ad hoc questionnaire. Both single indicators and average scores of the three areas investigated by the questionnaire were considered. Then, partial correlations between such dimensions were computed.

Second, to answer the second and third research questions concerning respectively obstacles and opportunities faced by adoptive families in their children's school path and proposals to plan an educational system inclusive, that meets the educational needs of adopted children, FGDs transcripts have been examined. Specifically, each FGD has been used as a unit for analysis for the qualitative content analysis (QCA), a 'careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings' (Berg 2009, 338). Using a conventional QCA (Hsieh and Shannon 2005), the researcher examined the texts, identifying categories that were emerging about parents' views on their pupils' school path and educational system. During the first level of codification line-by-line, notations were made of the verbatim transcript, summarising content, and reflecting on participants' meaning. At the second level, the identified content's patterns clustered them into semantic categories.

Results

Quantitative results

Frequency analyses show that 71.4% of the parents don't know the designated teacher for adoption. In most cases (67.5%), the child is placed in the regular class (according to his/her age). About half of the children were able to attend school spaces, before starting school (54.5%) and to take part in a flexible timetable (51.9%), but only in 11,7% of the cases, this opportunity was not granted because of school organisational difficulties. The PDP was used in less than 1/3 of the cases (27.3%).

When moving to consider parents' evaluation of their adopted children school path, for each of the three considered areas, descriptive statistics show that lesser scores were reported for the first school placement score ($M = .32$; sd = .30; range: 0–1), but also the assessment of the monitoring of school adjustment is not very positive ($M = .43$; sd = .33; range: 0–1). However, the parents' evaluation of their adopted children's overall school path, including the degree of inclusiveness of educational and didactic strategies and school environment is quite positive ($M = 2.5$; sd = .83; range: 1–4). As expected, this last score is significantly associated both with the first school placement score ($r = .63$; $p \leq .01$), and with the monitoring of the school adjustment score ($r = .57$; $p \leq .01$). First school placement score and monitoring of school adjustment score are interrelated ($r = .58$; $p \leq .01$).

Adopted students' school experience according to parents' views can be better understood by observing the specific indicators tailor-made to the specific purpose of this study. As regards the features of the first school placement (see Table 1), over half of the participants declared to have shared with the school staff information on child's history, to personalise his/her welcoming (67.5%). However, less than half believe to have been supported to choose the class (39%), and just in about 1/3 of the cases parents have received useful information about school norms and organisation and possible actions to promote school inclusion. Even more rarely, parents have met the designated teacher for adoption at the time of school registration and have filled out structured forms to provide key information on the child (15.6%), as suggested in the NG.

Proceeding to analyse the management of adopted students' school path, it is noted that in over 2/3 of the cases, participants believe that the school staff was careful and interested in monitoring student's school placement and educational path. Nevertheless, in less than half of the cases, participants declare that the school staff of the welcoming school has shared information with the school staff of the next grade school (continuity) and that rarely school workers have used the documentation provided by services supporting the child and have maintained contacts with their professionals (collaboration, see Table 2).

Finally, when parents' views of inclusiveness in adopted students' overall school path were examined (Table 3), the most encouraging data concerned: the positive welcoming of the child by his/her classmates (rather or a lot positive: 91%); the respect of the times of the child during the school placement (rather or a lot positive: 74%) and the attention paid by some teachers to the emotional aspects of the child (rather or a lot positive: 63.7%). The most warring aspects include: the training of school staff, often considered not able to manage adopted children's pathways (none/not much: 63.7%); the limited use of specific educational strategies, such as cooperative learning and tutoring models, to facilitate the inclusion of the child (none/not much: 59.8%); the weak continuity of the

Table 1. Indicators of the first school placement.

	Yes (%)
1. I had the opportunity to meet the designated teacher for adoption at the time of school registration	15.6
2. Before the child's school placement, the designated teacher for adoption and-or the principal gave me useful information about school norms and organisation	33.8
3. In the initial talks, the school staff (principal, designated teacher, and other teachers) used structured forms to collect key-information on the child	15.6
4. In the first meetings, I could share with the school staff information on child's history, in order to personalise his/her welcoming	67.5
5. I received from the school staff adequate support to choose the class	39
6. I could confront the school staff to choose the school section	24.7
7. I have been properly informed by the school staff about the actions which the school may implement to promote school inclusion	31.2

Table 2. Indicators of the monitoring of school adjustment.

	Yes (%)
1. The school staff was careful and interested in monitoring student's school placement and educational path	76.6
2. The school workers have regularly requested and reviewed the documentation provided by public and/or private services supporting the child	24.7
3. When necessary, school workers have maintained active contacts with professionals who assist the child (e.g. post-adoptive social workers; specialists …)	31.2
4. The school staff of welcoming school has adequately taken care of information sharing with the school staff of the next grade school	42.9

Table 3. Indicators of inclusiveness in adopted students' school path.

	None	Not much	Rather	A lot
1. The school placement was well managed, respecting the times of the child and allowing him/her to gradually adapt to the new situation	15.6	10.4	50.6	23.4
2. Constant network comparison (school, family, institutions, and services) was ensured to monitor the child's adjustment in the school context and share useful strategies to improve it	23.4	28.6	33.8	14.3
3. Overall, the child was able to feel welcomed by his/her classmates	6.5	2.6	46.8	44.2
4. Thanks to an accurate exchange of information (agreed with the family) between teachers of different grades of school, continuity and sharing of the approach used towards the child was ensured	33.8	22.1	26.0	18.2
5. Teachers showed adequate attention to the affective and emotional aspects of the child, beyond the specific aspects related to the learning process	15.6	20.8	42.9	20.8
6. When necessary, teachers took into account the child's history, revising the planning of teaching activities (e.g. approach to personal history)	19.5	22.1	37.7	20.8
7. Teachers used cooperative learning and tutoring models to facilitate the inclusion of the child	35.1	24.7	24.7	15.6
8. The teachers showed flexibility and openness for the realisation of any personalised educational paths	22.1	31.2	31.2	15.6
9. The teachers showed sensitivity in dealing with the issue of adoption in the class	29.9	24.7	28.6	16.9
10. Teachers used an appropriate approach to dealing with issues related to personal history and ethnic-cultural differences	27.3	19.5	36.4	16.9
11. Overall, I believe that the school staff I met are adequately trained to effectively manage adopted children's pathways	27.3	36.4	26.0	10.4
12. Overall, I believe that the school staff I met were able to adequately plan the ways of welcoming the child	23.4	23.4	35.1	18.2
13. Overall, I believe that the school staff I met were able to adequately plan the strategies to encourage the child's learning	19.5	27.3	31.2	22.1
14. Overall, I felt supported by the school staff in the management of the child's school path	24.7	29.9	28.6	16.9

approach between different grades of school (none/not much: 55.9%). All the other indicators show any significant predominant response category, as positive and negative evaluations are almost equivalent.

Qualitative results

As regards the second research question, qualitative analyses highlighted some obstacles faced by adoptive families, as well as the main opportunities encountered during their children's school path (see Figure 1). First, parents underline as the main weakness the lack of knowledge and application of the NG in school contexts. As parents narrate, in most cases they have met principals who didn't know such guidelines; so, in the absence of a designated teacher, families had to deal with the poor skills of school staff to manage adequately adopted students' placement and path. In this respect, parents report that not only were some school principals often unaware of the NG but also that in some cases they themselves brought them to school to make them known to school staff.

> The head teacher did not even know the guidelines and the first contact with this topic happened thanks to the association! We never knew the designated teacher for adoption!

Second, parents report the poor acceptance by some principals, who have not always made it possible to firstly place an adopted child in a classroom during the school year, even if the NG permits this opportunity.

> The head teacher made me realize that placing two adopted children at school in December would probably lead to a stop time of the didactic program!

Furthermore, data from FGDs evidenced that in most cases educational paths are little flexible and personalised, concerning both the required tasks that take no account of the basic skills and learning prerequisites, and the evaluation of children's performance.

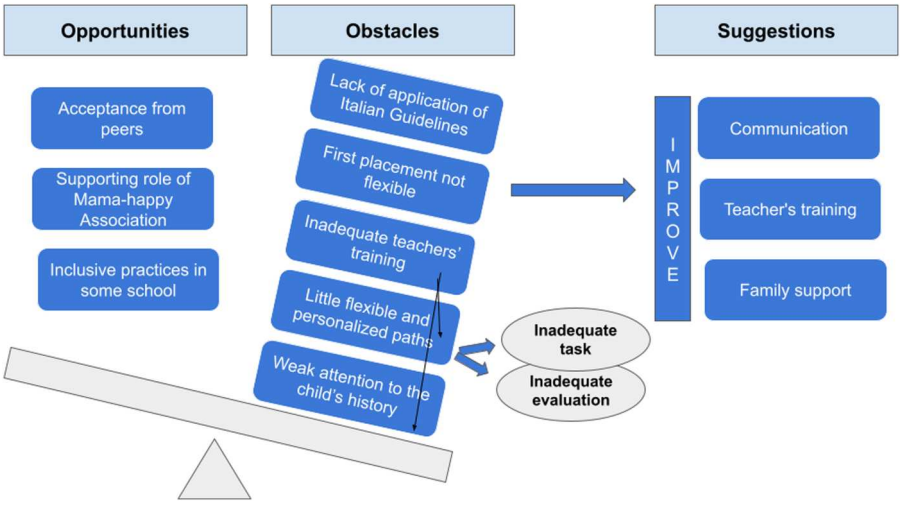

Figure 1. Themes and subthemes identified within adopters' narratives.

> Teachers have demanded the same performance as his classmates … I had provided some notebooks, but they have not been taken into account, he has had many difficulties because he did not have a personalized plan.

Further obstacles highlighted by adoptive parents participating in the FGDs concern the weak attention paid to the history of the children. In this regard, most mothers and fathers underline that prior to the children's first school placement, the school staff has not asked any questions about adoptive history and that, in many cases, some inadequate tasks have been assigned. As most teachers are untrained on adoption issues, adopted students are often faced with little responsive attitude and school assignments that don't respect their history.

> … They didn't ask US anything, there was not an 'adoption history'; I brought some documents, after the theme 'tells your story', there was the first split!

> On mothers 'day, teachers said to the child: 'if you want, you can avoid doing this activity!'

Parents' perspectives mirror the various competences of the teachers met during the path, but generally stressed a picture of a poor inclusive school where teachers are little trained on adoption issues.

> Excepting some competent and responsive teacher, the school is totally untrained to welcome adopted children … Some teachers tried to help the children, but they made clumsy mistakes due to their inexperience, in others, sensibility and open-mindedness miss!

However, despite the numerous obstacles, weaknesses, and difficulties, parents described some positive elements and opportunities encountered during their children's school path. Specifically, they underline as supporting factors (1) their adopted children's acceptance from peers and the absence of discriminatory attitudes; (2) the supporting role of local associations and the help function of their staff, who guided them in school choices; (3) the good management of adoptees' school paths, in the educational institutions where NG was applied. There is, indeed, according to parents, a great variability about inclusive practices in school contexts, that means a clear difference between an educational institution that assumes the guidelines and one that does not.

> (1) The child was welcomed, there were absolutely no discriminatory episodes!

> (2) We did the school placement very slowly also thanks to Mama-Happy … We have given a lot of thought and we have chosen a lower grade placement than his age … We learned of the guidelines through the association! We were lucky enough to meet … who directed us, she was our guide.

> (3) In this school there is an active and efficient referent for the adopted children and all teachers are fully aligned. This is the clear difference between an educational institution that accepts the guidelines and one that does not! From the total lack of sensitivity to an important collaboration

As regards the third research question, the interviewees highlighted some suggestions to overcome the obstacles they have faced as adoptive parents. First, parents suggest improving the communication between the different stakeholders involved in adoptees' development paths, since professionals who interact with adoptive families often don't confront each other.

> You should work on communication between the various actors, we had relations with the Courts, neuropsychiatry departments, but a math teacher does not know that my child has a PDP, that he is ADHD … He did not interface with the designated teacher for adoption!

Not less important are the needs to improve teachers' training and expand family support initiatives, to guide adoptees' school inclusion, avoiding that adoptive families are abandoned to themselves in the management of adoptive children's school paths. The supporting role of local third sector organisation's professionals is repeatedly stressed by adoptive parents.

> Teacher training is necessary, they must know what we are talking about, otherwise we do not understand!

> I have met Mama-Happy in my life because I know her, but families that become new families remain abandoned to themselves, school inclusion is not guided … The adoption does not end with family integration!

Discussion

This explorative study examined adopted students' educational paths as narrated by their parents to explore, according to their perspectives, the real capacity of the Italian educational system to be oriented at inclusion, that is to adapt itself to adopted students' individual characteristics by a 'student-centered approach'.

As regards the first research question, concerning the implementation of NG, quantitative data highlighted that most parents have never known the designated teacher for adoption who was supposed to guide them in educational choices regarding their adopted children, according to the principles of NG. Thus, the level of inclusiveness experienced by adopted students in the different school contexts is, naturally, very different from each other, as many parents were not informed about norms and possible actions to promote their children's school inclusion. Even if the gradualness of adopted students' first school placement seems to be ensured in many cases (e.g. attending school spaces, before starting school; using a flexible timetable), the personalisation of the path is not always safeguarded. Indeed, differently from what NG suggests, information on child's history is not collected in a structural way by school staff. Also, the indicators of the continuity among the schools and the collaboration between school and services (e.g. appropriate information-sharing about the child's adoptive history and use of services' documentation) evidence that these principles are not always reflected in adoptive families' experiences. Although the absence of discriminatory attitudes and behaviours represents the main positive element narrated by parents, in line with literature (Favaro and Pregliasco 2010), the training of school staff remains the most problematic issue.

Overall, the results of the quantitative step of this study confirm that, without a national plan for training on adoption, many teachers are unprepared to use personalised teaching strategies and-or to favourite adopted students' school achievement and inclusion. They are in line with literature highlighting that teachers denounce the lack of support from experts, the weak support network from institutions, and the difficulties to cooperate among educational institutions (Milione 2011), as well as the need for more specific training to promote inclusion (Saloviita and Consegnati 2019).

This evidence is consistent also with the results of the qualitative step of this study, which allowed us to answer the second and the third research questions. They highlight the various obstacles faced by adoptive families, because of a weak enforcement of NG, confirming that adopted students' educational paths are not always flexible and personalised. The teachers, indeed, are often untrained on adoption topics, and both continuity and collaboration during adopted students' educational path are not ensured. Parents believe, in particular, that their adopted children's needs are dismissed within the school context, and that school staff struggles to contextualise adopted students' behaviour in light of their history and pre-adoptive adverse experiences. Moreover, in many cases, adoptive families are often left alone to manage the relationship with the different stakeholders (post-adoptive services, teachers, school principals, specialists …) who don't dialogue with each other. However, adoptees' acceptance by the peers and the positive role of local third sector organisation's professionals, constantly emphasised by adoptive parents, suggests that the sensitivity of the community towards adoption issues has grown over time. It remains clear that Italian schools are always not able to welcome adopted children and promote their learning, school inclusion, and adjustment, as uniform guarantees for adoptive families are lack. The adoption of a multi-axis approach based on the concept of intersectionality may help to explain how certain students (e.g. adopted students with different ethnic origins or specific learning disorders) encounter varying levels of inclusion in schools because of the ways in which school environment address the intersection of their identities (Ferritti and Guerrieri 2020).

To increase adoptees' school inclusion and achievement, parents suggest some recommendations: improving communication, family support, and teachers' training. The crucial role of effective family–school communication, partnership, and positive relationships for adopted students' positive educational experiences is coherent with literature (Best, Cameron, and Hill 2021; Cooper and Johnson 2007; King 2009). Likewise, increasing family support interventions and improving teacher's competences to reduce the adverse impact that stressful school experiences have on family life represent recommendations earlier mentioned in previous studies (e.g. Best, Cameron, and Hill 2021; Novara, Lenzi, and Santinello 2018). Specifically, in this context, the specific training of the teachers seems to be an essential element, not only to personalise teaching strategies but also to cultivate sensitive classrooms in which all students can feel accepted and valued (Wang and Degol 2016). In this way, adopted students can be helped to develop friendships and trusting relationships at school (Crowley 2019; Templeton, McGlade, and Fitzsimons 2020), as well as to build their sense of membership in the school setting (Tillery et al. 2013) and in the community.

Examined altogether, the results of the two steps of the research show that there is a gap between the suggestions of NG and the actual capacity of the schools for implementation of such principles, evident in the significant disparities within local communities, that depend on the various attitudes and competences of individual teachers, as well as on the different schools' organisational structure. This suggests that the overall Italian school system is, in practice, unsupportive and little inclusive, that is poorly equipped to cope with the diversified adopted students' educational special needs, as well as unable to promote adopted students' inclusion and achievement by a 'student-centered approach'. As Anastasiou, Kauffman and Di Nuovo suggested (2015), despite the promises of full inclusion, the everyday reality in Italian classrooms is more complex and not as

encouraging as one might hope (439), as few school staff in Italy are trained for ensuring the inclusion of students having educational special needs. Similar findings were recently obtained in Best, Cameron, and Hill (2021), which revealed negative adoptive parents' views about the inclusiveness of school context. Even if their study concerns the British context, which is characterised by a school system and cultural background different from the Italian national context, parents' judgments are coherent with those highlighted in this study.

Conclusions and practical implications

This study offers insights into the inclusion of adopted children at school by providing an in-depth analysis of the factors that their parents perceive as affecting their children's educational paths. In line with the literature (e.g. Cáceres et al. 2020; Paniagua, García-Moya, and Moreno 2020), the results confirm that adopted students faced a variety of educational barriers in school environments. Particularly, they suggest the need to continue working to achieve the goal that the school environment and relationships with teachers become supportive of adopted students. In order to promote inclusive education, all aspects of adopted students' identities that represent possible disadvantage factors need to be considered simultaneously and in an integrated way, rather than examined individually (Bešić 2020). However, while current inclusive education policies are focused mostly on children with disabilities, the potential risk of exclusion of adopted pupils with different ethnic backgrounds who may have also specific learning disabilities is still a rather unexplored area.

Overall, despite the study's limitations (only parents 'perspective was examined; small sample size; the use of an ad hoc questionnaire), the current study is the first Italian contribution that explores the disseminations of the NG. It has the strength of expanding existing knowledge about this little explored topic (Crowley 2019), combing surveys and FGDs to obtain a more detailed representation of Italian adopted students' paths, examining their parents' perspectives. Furthermore, the study suggests some practical implications that can be used to develop a multilevel approach to inclusion, aimed to promote (1) specific training programmes for teachers, (2) better communication among partners, and (3) target measures to support families.

First, to promote adoptive children's wellbeing at school (Palacios, Román and Camacho 2011), teacher programmes should be oriented not only to the knowledge of NG, but also to the awareness about the possible needs of adopted students. An initial assessment, that is often lacking, could be thus crucial both to ensuring an appropriate first placement and to provide possible educational support during the school path. Such assessment, indeed, would offer the opportunity to personalise the educational environment according to the child's unique characteristics (Lutes, Johnson, and Gunnar 2016), but also to identify students at risk for poor educational outcomes, and use time with them effective teaching practices in promoting motivation and bridge the gap in disciplinary learning. Furthermore, teachers should become 'guardians of resilience', that is be able to listen, reassure, and propose appropriate tasks, in an intercultural and inclusive perspective. Specifically, they could develop the mastery of an adoption-friendly language (e.g. birth parents rather than real parents) and be able to plan evaluation tools and tasks which take account of

adoptees' history (e.g. narratives of 'special events' rather than autobiographies; avoid asking baby pictures). Moreover, they could discuss adoption as part of lesson plans about multi-cultural, blended, or 'unique' families (Botta 2010), using the presence of the foreign adopted pupil as an opportunity for intercultural exchange and dialogue (Novara, Serio, and Lavanco 2017).

On a second level, to accompany families in the adoption challenge, it is imperative promoting a real sharing of goals and approaches among local services, schools, and families, and developing a dialogue with the community (Chistolini 2013). In order that adopted students' needs can be recognised and met, not only the school staff and professionals of post-adoption services must work together (Best, Cameron, and Hill 2021), but continuous and constant communication and joint work between all the partners should be ensured, especially during the first placement and the primary to secondary school transition. In this regard, for example, memoranda of understanding could be signed in the different local contexts among schools, health and social services, associations of adoptive families, universities, and research institutes, so that adoption scholars, social workers, teachers, and families could collaborate to monitor adopted students' inclusion and achievement, and more generally adoptive families' adjustment. This would allow us to create a territorial support network able to support both the work of teachers and the well-being of adopted students and their families (Ouellette, Belleau, and Patenaude 2001).

Finally, on a third level, best practices for adoptive families' support that have been proven as effective in some local contexts should be equally ensured to all adoptive families. Since the community could represent an informal support system, all the territorial resources within the third sector should be activated in the effort to accompany the family throughout the adoption process and the child throughout his/her social inclusion and academic progression. If such community interventions can intertwine with post-adoption services' activities, the accompaniment of adoptive family and the monitoring of its adjustment can be combined.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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