Including migrant students in the primary school: perspectives of Italian principals

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this article is to examine the perspectives, experiences, roles and values of Italian primary school principals regarding the inclusion of migrant children.

Design/methodology/approach – The method of the study is qualitative and consists of a semi-structured interview, which was carried out with 17 primary school principals and examined using content analysis.

Findings – The following six categories emerged: (1) school organisation and services, (2) projects and activities for inclusion, (3) teaching methods and strategies, (4) assessment, (5) networking and (6) challenges. The findings highlighted the complexity of the principals' role; they have to take on several tasks to foster a positive school experience for migrant students. A student-centred approach was considered relevant for intercultural education to promote inclusion and well-being. Curriculum activities were designed according to student needs.

Research limitations/implications – The number of participants was limited, and they all worked in a small area of northeast Italy. Future research should examine the perspective of other school stakeholders such as teacher coordinators, the Commission for School Inclusion, teachers and tutors.

Practical implications – The findings could be used as a framework for defining a model of the organisation of the school useful for discussing the relevance of the activities and for comparing schools in different contexts. The development of reflective practice to analyse the activities inside the schools could be considered.

Social implications – Stakeholders could consider the findings before making decisions and developing policy actions countrywide.

Originality/value – The key factors included the awareness of the school principal role in managing the school and of the importance of connecting their school with the local community and external agencies.

Keywords School principals, Migrant students, Integration in Italian school, Intercultural education

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

In recent decades, Italy has developed a multicultural identity as a result of migratory flows from several countries in Europe, Africa and Asia (Chiofalo *et al.*, 2019). Changes have characterised many aspects of Italian social life and human activities, including the work of schools. Recently, debates about how to include migrant children in Italian schools have been the focus of several analyses that seek to understand the practices of teachers and the issues experienced by the professionals who are involved in migrant students' education (Biasutti *et al.*, 2020). Although the Italian laws mentioned migrant children and adolescents as students with special needs, there are still few explicit indications for managing their process of school inclusion from national agencies, and school staffs often have to design new solutions and develop techniques and tools for supporting migrant students' experience (Dovigo, 2019). The aims and content of schoolteachers' educational activities have been widely examined (e.g. Kaukko *et al.*, 2021; Margari *et al.*, 2013). However, the work of administrators and school principals in encouraging an inclusive approach at school and in welcoming and supporting non-native students has received less attention. Institutional policies have a powerful impact on teachers' values, perspectives and activities (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020) and often influence the access to educational opportunities for both students and instructors. Educators and administrative staff are constantly working to enhance school experiences for non-native children, especially those who are newly arrived (Biasutti *et al.*, 2021). School principals play a key role in defining policies focused on inclusion and intercultural education, leading teaching staff to connect school life to external agencies (Faas *et al.*, 2015; Grannäs and Frelin, 2020).

In the present study, the experiences, perspectives and values of Italian school principals concerning the inclusion of migrant children in primary school are considered. Through semi-structured interviews, these principals described the current situation in Italian schools regarding the education of students of migrant families. The background section is focused on issues around the inclusion migrant students in school and the role of school principals in promoting an inclusive approach.

Issues of school inclusion for migrant students

School is one of the most crucial contexts for fostering the integration of migrant children (Segura-Robles and Parra-González, 2019). Unfortunately, in many countries, there are unequal opportunities to access quality educational experiences, with a particular disadvantage for children coming from social and ethnic minorities (Kostoulas-Makrakis and Makrakis, 2020). For example, newly arrived migrant students could be placed in segregated classes that aim to prepare them for integration into mainstream education, which can cause issues in addressing class allocation, interaction with mainstream classes and transition procedures in the educational journey.

One of the main problems is represented by school segregation, which is induced by the prevalence of students from a few cultural groups (Dronkers *et al.*, 2012). European policies regarding the school inclusion of migrant children must consider the issue of segregation (Grannäs and Frelin, 2020). Before discussing how to promote the integration of migrant students in schools, it is essential to study how to reduce school segregation and encourage an intercultural approach in public schools (Bonal, 2012). Reducing school segregation is a necessary step in closing the achievement gap between native and non-native students (Schneeweis, 2015) and guaranteeing a fair school system for all.

Confronting segregation means reducing conditions that directly or indirectly affect cultural minorities. There are contextual features that may lead to situations of educational segregation in specific areas (Karsten, 2010): residential conditions, formal and informal educational selection practices and family choices about educational opportunities.

Moreover, several students' characteristics should be considered when planning equal and effective educational opportunities for all (Dronkers *et al.*, 2012) because migrant students' countries of origin may impact their school experiences. School segregation can negatively affect children's educational experiences because some of the characteristics of a class can influence students' learning achievement and their social and relational skills. The following two main dimensions characterise school segregation (Karsten, 2010): an imbalance in the number of migrant students among schools (unevenness) and the extent of social interactions between two different cultural groups (mainly native and migrant students).

When facing segregation, the school has to consider economic, social and institutional factors. Institutional policies on education may contribute not only to opposing segregation and encouraging equity in education but also to orienting the work and decisions of school principals towards inclusion. The attitudes of the school staff must sustain inclusive practices and an intercultural approach to education (Bonal, 2012).

The role of school principals in promoting an inclusive approach
School principals have major responsibilities in promoting the integration of migrant students (Grannäs and Frelin, 2020). School principals can influence institutional decisions and practices to support and sustain an inclusive perspective in teaching. While working to foster programs for pupils with special educational needs (Cobb, 2015), school principals may act on several dimensions for the implementation of programs and projects, such as advancing collaboration among the school staff and the involvement of families in school activities. A school's educational climate is influenced by its principal's pedagogical views and values (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020): if principals consider an inclusive approach essential for all students' well-being, more attention will be dedicated to the promotion of opportunities for equity in the school environment. School principals have to address the different needs, issues and difficulties that arise in schools between teachers, staff and families while working to sustain migrant students (Dovigo, 2019). Intercultural values and attitudes are fundamental for orienting principals' actions towards inclusion. Moreover, principals' expertise should include professional competences related to special pedagogy, intercultural education and inclusive approaches in teaching (Norberg, 2017). These topics have been introduced in the training of school principals, who have often been compelled to find, on their own or with minimal support, information, theoretical approaches and educational models for effectively facing the complex task of supporting migrant students' education.

The role of principals in promoting an intercultural approach in schools must be supported by both internal and external factors (Faas *et al.*, 2015). The internal context largely involves changing the attitude of the teaching staff, while the external aspects are related to economic and educational support from the national department of education and other institutions. Unfortunately, external support is often perceived as insufficient (Biasutti *et al.*, 2020), which obliges principals to seek resources and opportunities for enhancing and empowering the school experience of migrant children. Unclear or unrealistic national education policies may negatively affect school administrators' efforts to enhance inclusion in their institutions by inhibiting the implementation of specific actions and overloading principals with bureaucratic demands. National and international policies should be based on supporting principals' work and actions, offering adequate resources not only on an economic but also a regulatory level. In addition, actions that encourage networking for sharing ideas, experiences and best practices must be developed.

The analysis of previous studies has defined the key role that principals play in promoting an inclusive approach for supporting the education of migrant students within schools (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020). Principals can influence not only the general perspectives on inclusion and intercultural education but also the work and day-to-day practices of the

teaching and administrative staff (Faas *et al.*, 2015). However, there are little data on principals' perspectives on and actions in managing multicultural schools.

The present study focuses on analysing the views and practices of Italian primary school principals regarding the inclusion of migrant children. Data on how school principals perceive their role in inclusive education and how they manage the different professionals, services and relations in the process of inclusion are collected.

Method

Aims of the study

The current study was developed to investigate the perceptions, experiences and needs of Italian primary school principals regarding the educational inclusion of migrant students. The following research questions are posed:

RQ1. What is the role of school principals in fostering migrant students' inclusion?

RQ2. What are the teaching and assessment methods that school staff have adopted for promoting migrant students' inclusion?

RQ3. What are the relationships between schools and other private and public agencies for sustaining the process of inclusion of migrant children?

RQ4. What are the challenges that primary schools face when dealing with the educational inclusion of migrant children?

Participants

In total, seventeen school principals (13 women and 4 men, age range 40–65, mean age 55.76 years, standard deviation = 6.97) working in primary schools in northeast Italy were interviewed. Participants had different levels of professional experience as school principal (range 2–20 years, mean years of professional experience = 8.88, standard deviation = 5.30). Participants worked in schools that were located in a geographical area of the northeast of Italy, which had been experiencing migration for decades, with migratory flows from different European Union (EU) and extra EU nations. Schools in the northeast of Italy were facing the issue of integrating migrant children and adolescents, frequently collaborating with external and private agencies for supporting the school for the social integration of the students.

Participants were selected from direct contacts of the researchers, considering the principals that worked in schools where the presence of students from migrant families was high. In participants' schools, there was a mean percentage of 25% of migrant students on the total school population with a wide range, from 5 to 75%. The percentage of migrant students is an aspect that mainly depended upon the fact that in specific residential areas there was a great concentration of migrant families, influencing the composition of the school population in those areas.

The semi-structured interview

A semi-structured interview was developed to examine the perspectives and practices of Italian primary school principals regarding the inclusion of migrant children. The first part of the interview focused on collecting information about participants' demographic characteristics (gender, age, years of professional experience and school's geographical location). A second section of questions aimed to collect data about the current situation regarding the presence of migrant students (number of migrant pupils, main countries of origin) in each interviewee's school. Finally, 12 core open questions were proposed, focusing

on aspects such as the different institutional roles involved in the process of migrant children's inclusion, the activities that schools propose to foster that inclusion and the teaching and assessment methods adopted by the school staff to promote migrant students' inclusion. In addition, the relationships between schools and external private and public agencies for sustaining the process of inclusion of migrant children and the challenges that primary schools face while dealing with the educational inclusion of migrant children were considered. The complete list of semi-structured interview questions appears in Appendix.

Data collection
School principals were contacted through e-mail messages that presented the aims of the research. A total of seventeen principals agreed to participate in the study and were contacted to schedule a face-to-face interview. At the beginning of these meetings, participants were informed that their answers would remain anonymous and that all data collected would be used only for research purposes. Consent to record participants' interviews was requested and obtained, except in one case, where one principal politely asked to take written notes and not record the semi-structured interview. The interviews occurred in the principals' schools after school hours to facilitate their participation; the average duration was about 30 min.

This study was carried out in accordance with the recommendations of the British Psychological Society, with informed consent from all subjects in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Results
Data analysis
The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were sent to each participant to check the correctness of what was reported and, eventually, to integrate the answers. The collected material was examined through content analysis, a form of inductive qualitative analysis in which codes and categories were extracted from the data (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Content analysis was developed under the theoretical framework of grounded theory, which has been used in previous research on teachers' perceptions of intercultural education (Biasutti *et al.*, 2019). The aim was highlighting the meanings and attitudes of the actors involved in the socio-educative process of developing the school inclusion. The coding process included three main phases. The preliminary phase was dedicated to reading the written material several times to become deeply familiar with it. In the second phase, the text was divided into smaller sections, and units of analysis were identified. In a procedure of open coding (Corbin and Strauss, 1990), different codes were assigned to the defined units of analysis. At this stage, each researcher worked independently. Their results were then compared to check the codes and discuss ambiguous statements or passages in the text: similar codes were unified to reduce their number and make clear the distinctions among them. In the final phase, codes were examined, and relations were defined, grouping codes into categories that covered the same theme. Investigator triangulation was used to check and confirm the results, comparing and discussing the independent analysis of different researchers on the same material. From this inductive analysis, 35 codes emerged, divided into the following six categories:

(1) School organisation and services (seven codes)

(2) Projects and activities for inclusion (five codes)

(3) Teaching methods and strategies (seven codes)

(4) Assessment (four codes)

(5) Networking (four codes)

(6) Challenges (eight codes)

The relationships between codes and categories are presented in Figure 1.

Description of the categories
Each of the six categories represented a thematic area related to principals' experience regarding the inclusion of migrant students; examples of quotations related to each code are reported in Table 1.

(1) School organisation and services

The codes in this category describe the organisation and services that school permanently offer to welcome and enhance the inclusion of migrant children. School organisation is guided by the principal's beliefs and visions about the school's role in promoting migrant students' inclusion, the impact of intercultural education and the most effective strategies for implementing them. The following statements capture these perspectives: "The school becomes a union between society and the first forms of inclusion [for the whole family]. Children have this ability to involve us: there is the activity of sports, there is the party (. . .) we have many realities where parents are involved". "Our challenge as educators is no longer to make migrants students to learn Italian, as it was in the past. Conversely, the challenge is to offer migrant students an opportunity for integration as a school". "Sometimes it is also necessary to field professional skills that are different from what is available in the school".

Another aspect regards the role of the principal as a school manager, for organising activities and leading the staff – a challenging task – as reported in the following passages: "[The school principals] have to supervise the welcoming phase and decide what class the newly arrived students should be placed in, considering the overall situation of the class. The school principals have to supervise the teachers' activity to ensure that all the strategies needed not only for welcoming but also for teaching are in place". "The task of the school principal is at first to offer educational opportunities: at the beginning of the year through the
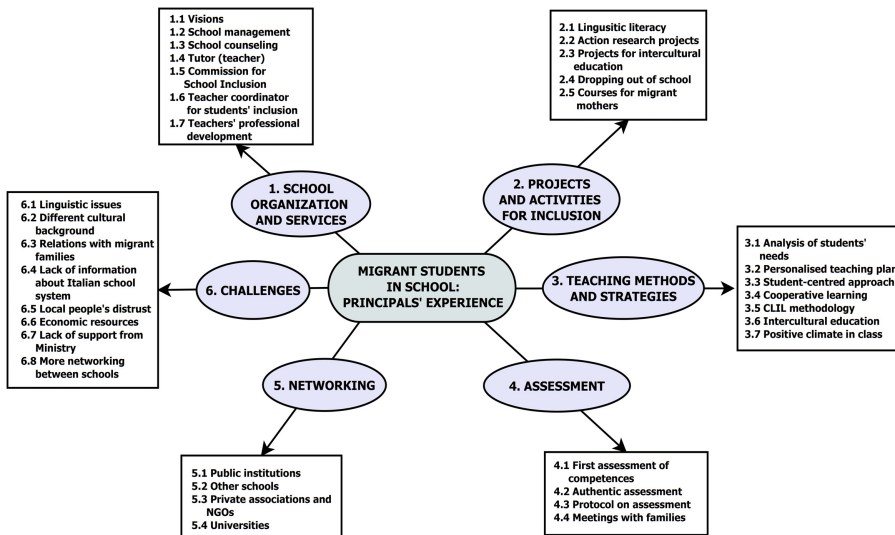

Figure 1.
The scheme with all the categories and codes emerged from the analysis of the semi-structured interviews

Categories	Codes	Quotations	Explanations
1. School organisation and services	1.1 Visions	"My opinion is, do not do too many new things, but intensify . . . be more and more attentive to this problem because it is becoming more and more present, and there are many difficulties to solve"	This category includes codes that describe the organisation of the school staff and the services that are permanently offered for enhancing the welcoming and inclusion of migrant children
	1.2 School management	"The principal organises any working groups, signs protocol of agreement and finalised agreements with external subjects from the voluntary sector and/or institutional subjects"	
	1.3 School counselling	"We offer a school counselling service"	
	1.4 Tutor (teacher)	"During curricular hours, based on financial and professional resources, a teacher is available as a tutor"	
	1.5 Commission for School Inclusion	"The Commission promotes collaboration between the participants in the network, schools, and the local institutions of hospitality and intercultural education"	
	1.6 Teacher coordinator for students' inclusion	"The coordinator maintains the relationships with family members and tutors"	
	1.7 Teachers' professional development	"In a project, we designed many hours of teacher training activities for inclusion"	
2. Projects and activities for inclusion	2.1 Linguistic literacy	"Italian courses such as L2, divided by levels, are launched for a network of schools or within our school"	This category includes temporary activities related to promoting the educational inclusion of migrant children
	2.2 Action research projects	"Our school offers an action research group that defines the minimum levels in each disciplinary area"	
	2.3 Projects for intercultural education	"We try to activate several projects for inclusion, such as the theatre one"	
	2.4 Dropping out of school	"We try to address calls to promote inclusion and reduce early school leaving"	
	2.5 Courses for migrant mothers	"We managed to carry out literacy activities for mothers"	

(*continued*)

Categories	Codes	Quotations	Explanations
3. Teaching methods and strategies	3.1 Analysis of students' needs	"We start with [the student's] needs analysis"	This category includes the methods and strategies that are encouraged among the teaching staff according to the specific educational perspective of the school
	3.2 Personalised teaching plan	"For the first six months, a personalised teaching plan is prepared to allow students to acquire the Italian language"	
	3.3 Student-centred approach	"Individual characteristics and students' needs are at the centre of our curriculum design activities"	
	3.4 Cooperative learning	"We try to enhance their skills with cooperative learning activities"	
	3.5 CLIL methodology	"We use CLIL mode for developing language skills"	
	3.6 Intercultural education	"We propose interventions for literacy and intercultural issues"	
	3.7 Positive climate in class	"We promote activities aimed at creating a positive climate within the class"	
4. Assessment	4.1 First assessment of competences	"We administer an entrance test to assess the language proficiency, and we start from there"	This category includes the assessment strategies and practices adopted for migrant children's inclusion in school
	4.2 Authentic assessment	"We use authentic tasks in situations for assessing students' competences"	
	4.3 Protocol on assessment	"We have our own protocol on assessment, in which there is a part referring to first- and second-generation foreign students [. . .] it is for both refugee migrant pupils and adopted foreign children"	
	4.4 Meetings with families	"We have meetings with the family and the student to learn about the previous school path and expectations"	

Table 1.

Table 1.

Categories	Codes	Quotations	Explanations
5. Networking	5.1 Public institutions	"A collaboration with the public administration has been in progress for years to carry out activities aimed at inclusion"	This category includes the relationships that the school developed with public or private agencies for working collaboratively for migrant students' inclusion
	5.2 Other schools	"The Institute is part of a territorial network"	
	5.3 Private associations and NGOs	"For years, there has also been a collaboration with cooperatives operating in the local social context"	
	5.4 Universities	"We collaborate with a university where there is a department that deals specifically with intercultural issues"	
6. Challenges	6.1 Linguistic issues	"A challenge is represented by [students'] linguistic difficulties, in particular for the Italian L2 disciplinary language"	This category addresses the challenges and issues that characterise the process of inclusion of migrant children in school
	6.2 Different cultural backgrounds	"A challenge is to deal with some cultural schemes"	
	6.3 Relations with migrant families	"One of the challenges is the cultural gap with the families of origin . . .]; there are difficulties in involving families in school activities"	
	6.4 Lack of information about Italian school system	"A challenge is the students' and families' limited scant knowledge of the Italian school system. They think that there is an equivalence between the school curricula of the different countries"	
	6.5 Local people's distrust	"The biggest challenge is the distrust of residents[. . .] we have had a drop in enrolments from this [. . .] the challenge is to make residents understand"	
	6.6 Economic resources	"Increasing financial resources let us improve the activities for supporting inclusion, Italian courses such as L2, and hours for the acquisition of a study method"	
	6.7 Lack of support from Ministry	"The Ministry imposes many prescriptions, mostly useless"	
	6.8 More networking between schools	"Resuming good practices implemented in previous years within school networks allows schools to activate individual initiatives and avoid the loss of economic and professional resources"	

school bodies we try to activate educational paths and projects. Certainly, the educational paths focused on inclusion".

The other codes explain the services offered by the school to assure the best possible experience for the inclusion of migrant pupils as reported in the following quotes: "We have a commission that deals with the general inclusion [Commission for School Inclusion], not only of foreign children, but also of other students with specific educational needs". "The teacher coordinator for students' inclusion, this year, had a survey carried out regarding how many students we have, where they came from, how long have they been in Italy or if they were born in Italy by foreign parents, what level of education they have". School principals reported that a school counselling service and a teacher-staffed tutoring service for sustaining students in the first phase of their learning experience were available. General decisions and relations between families and teachers are managed by the Commission for School Inclusion and by the teacher coordinator for students' inclusion. Finally, other important services include the opportunities offered for teachers' professional development focused on intercultural education: "Shortly, we will hold a series of meetings on inclusion, which are linked to diversity understood both as a handicap and as a foreign diversity. Thus, either inside or outside our school there are always opportunities for professional development events. Whoever wants to catch them, she/he can catch them".

(2)   Project and activities for inclusion

This category comprises all the temporary activities related to promoting the educational inclusion of migrant children. Temporary activities may depend upon projects and interventions that are activated only for a specific period, although they can be repeated when needed and if resources are available. The activities include courses for linguistic literacy ("Years ago, training courses were held for the teaching of the L2 language for foreign children"), action research projects that offer teachers opportunities to improve their educational skills with migrant students and projects focused on intercultural education involving extra-curricular activities ("There have been some theatre workshops whose main characteristic was to involve both Italian and migrant students"; "We have also done several activities related to workshops over the years, for example related to sport"). Other projects considered specific issues such as the risk of school dropout among migrant students and the need to promote linguistic literacy (e.g. "We offer to students intensive linguistic workshops"). Parents could also take advantage of linguistic literacy offerings, with particular attention paid to the mothers of migrant families: "We did literacy courses for parents for two years, mainly mothers; we had a space, and it was free in the morning and we managed with the cooperative services to carry out literacy activities for mothers".

(3)   Teaching methods and strategies

This category is focused on the methods and strategies that are encouraged among the teaching staff, based on the educational perspective of the school. A personalised teaching plan is defined for each student that respects their needs and abilities: "The class council prepares personalised programming". All the educational activities are framed by a student-centred approach that represents the core of the school's inclusive process, as one participant summarised: "In the first six months [after their arrival], we try to enhance their skills". Cooperative learning is widely used to encourage interaction and collaboration between Italian and non-Italian students, especially in the welcoming phase. As linguistic literacy is one of the central issues when introducing a newly arrived migrant student to a class, participants frequently mentioned the adoption of a content and language integrated learning (CLIL) methodology, as exemplified in the following statement: "We also try to enhance their skills in CLIL mode".

School principals often mentioned the importance of adopting and promoting a CLIL perspective among the teaching staff in the theoretical framework of intercultural education. Professional development activities could focus on these issues: "[The principal] is really working hard to make it clear that a country or a school that has a high percentage of registered migrants can be considered an asset, a resource, because it creates an intercultural context". Finally, the creation of a positive climate within the classroom is another aspect that is encouraged as reported in the following quote: "However, the class has always been heterogeneous, even when there were no foreign children, it has to become homogeneous, it must become positive!"

(4) Assessment

The fourth category includes codes referring to strategies and practices for assessing migrant children's inclusion in school. When non-Italian students are introduced into a school, an initial assessment of competences is proposed to understand their ability level in Italian and in other subjects: "A test is scheduled for the assessment of the starting levels in the basic subjects: Italian, mathematics, and English". Considering the linguistic issues that may arise in these situations, teaching staff often adopt assessment strategies based on authentic tasks: "For assessing migrant students' competences we use authentic tasks in real situations". Several participants noted that their schools have developed a specific assessment protocol that can be implemented while working with migrant students: "When a new foreign child arrives, we administer some entry tests". Another feature relevant for the assessment is meeting families to acquire information about the students and their educational histories: "First we set up an interview with the family to understand what the family context is, and the situation at home".

(5) Networking

This category includes the codes connected to the relations developed by schools with external public or private agencies for working collaboratively to encourage migrant students' educational inclusion. Participants mentioned collaborations with public agencies: "In particular, there is the public supports, which is a territorial agency on which the municipalities rely on for supporting [migrant] children". Schools in neighbouring areas developed a specific network to support one another and share tasks and good practices: "We are in a network of schools"; "The network of schools has as a leader, to which we are associated". In addition, schools rely on the support of private associations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which offer help with intercultural mediation, literacy courses, interpreting and initial assessment: "We managed with an external association to carry out literacy activities and courses"; "We are also in contact with associations that can provide us specialists such as interpreters, mediators and facilitators". Finally, many schools promote collaboration with local universities with the aim of enhancing teachers' professional development in the areas of intercultural education and inclusion: "specific educational opportunities for inclusive teaching are proposed in collaboration with the local university".

(6) Challenges

The last category addresses the challenges of the inclusion process of migrant children in school. Linguistic issues represent one of the central challenges, since knowing Italian is the fundamental prerequisite for attending school lessons and interacting with classmates and teachers. Another critical aspect is the gap between non-Italian children's cultural background and the Italian culture which – at first – may create difficulties with participating in school life and lead to possible misunderstandings in social interactions as expressed in the following quotation: "uses and customs are a challenge. Look at some

cultures; they have really different habits, even compared to the approach to school". The impact of the children's background is also summarised well in the following statement: "[Migrant students' abilities are] highly variable on an individual level, with a certain influence from the culture of origin in terms of respect for the rules and sense of commitment". Participants reported that some difficulties may arise in relationships with migrant families, who are often reluctant to become involved in school life, though their reasons may differ: "For example, parents participated very little to class parents-teachers meeting, so it becomes difficult to make them understand what the proposed activities are". Moreover, a lack of information about the Italian educational system may negatively affect parents' and children's first experiences with school.

The social context may create difficulties in the inclusion process of migrant children, including negative attitudes among local people towards multicultural schools. The need to involve local citizens when promoting migrant children's inclusion is expressed in the following remark: "Especially for those regions, provinces or countries where migratory flow is most important, there is a need to educate local citizens". In total, two critical points are related to the need for more financial resources for activating effective actions supporting school inclusion and the lack of support from Italy's Ministry of Education: "Perhaps an increase in [financing] hourly packages would be needed to manage these cases and really be able to do something. Some projects could be activated even in the afternoon and in one-to-one relationship in order to have the right feedback for understanding to where one can succeed". Finally, many participants advocated encouraging more networking between schools to create cooperation and contribute to the spread of best practices.

Discussion

The present study focuses on the experiences and perspectives of Italian primary school principals in fostering the educational path of migrant children in Italian primary schools. Principals were interviewed about the challenges of welcoming and including non-Italian students in school, the organisation and services offered by their educational institutions, and any projects that have been activated for intercultural and inclusive education. In addition, the role and tasks of the principals, the role of teachers, the opportunities for the teaching staff's professional development in the area of intercultural education and the support given by the national department of education were considered.

Regarding research question one (What is the role of school principals in fostering migrant students' inclusion?), the results highlighted the complexity of the principals' role; they have to fulfil several tasks to successfully foster migrant students' school experience. School principals covered a key role in promoting an inclusive climate in school, managing the many different services and promoting collaboration within the school and between schools and external agencies (Grannäs and Frelin, 2020). These results accord with Cobb (2015), who reported that school principals have different roles in the process of educational inclusion of migrant children: they manage the organisation of the school and view themselves as leaders for their school staff. Moreover, they contribute to directing and developing the pedagogical visions of their school in collaboration with other professionals. Participants demonstrated awareness of their role as school principal in managing the school and of the importance of connecting the school with the local community.

Regarding research question two (What are the teaching and assessment methods that school staff have adopted for promoting migrant students' inclusion?), the participants made clear that a student-centred approach was crucial for intercultural education that promotes the inclusion and well-being of migrant students. Curricular activities were designed according to the students' needs. The teaching methods and the assessment practices that each school adopted were influenced by the visions that the principals had developed about

inclusive education and an intercultural perspective. If principals believe in the importance of promoting an intercultural context for enhancing the individual well-being and interpersonal interactions among all students, they are more likely to transmit this pedagogical perspective to the teaching and administrative staff of their school (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020). In addition, creating opportunities for teachers' professional development regarding intercultural and inclusive education was an important element. From a more general perspective, this finding underlines the key role of professional training for primary school principals; it offers them the specific competences and knowledge needed to effectively address the inclusion process of migrant students (Norberg, 2017).

As to research question three (What are the relationships between schools and other private and public agencies for sustaining the process of inclusion of migrant children?), participants reported that, as school principals, they managed complex networks that schools activated within and outside the institutional context to create effective opportunities for migrant students' school inclusion. Schools worked collaboratively with public administrations, universities and private agencies that seek to involve families and create an alliance to promote children's well-being both inside and outside school. This critical task implies a great awareness not only of the organisation but also of the dynamics within the school and in the school's local community (Dovigo, 2019).

Regarding research question four (What are the challenges that primary schools face when dealing with the educational inclusion of migrant children?), participants referred to one main challenge in supporting migrant students' school inclusion, revealing the impact that internal and external factors can have on the work of school principals (Faas *et al.*, 2015). More specifically, substantial support from the national department of education is often required, not only in terms of economic resources but also with specific and realistic formal guidelines.

Conclusions

The results of the current research highlighted several crucial issues that characterise the work of the school principals and could be useful for designing plans to support school principals and teachers in their efforts to improve the educational experience of children from migrant families. The six categories of school organisation and services, projects and activities for inclusion, teaching methods and strategies, assessment, networking and challenges provided a rich scenario of the current school situation in Italy, and it could be relevant to discuss the implications of the current findings in theory, policy and practice for the integration of migrant students.

Regarding theory, the categories that emerged could be used as a framework for developing a model of the activities and the organisation of the school. This model could be used for discussing the relevance of the activities and comparing schools working in different contexts and situations.

Regarding policy, the themes that emerged in the participants' narratives should become key elements of any institutional agenda for planning and implementing actions to support school staff in their inclusive education work. A stakeholder could benefit in reading the current situation of the principals' work before taking important decisions and developing policy actions that are relevant countrywide. The results of the current study provided evidence of the need of supporting the teaching staff with the promotion of projects and activities for inclusion.

Regarding practice, several actions could be undertaken and further projects and activities should be based on sharing of best school practices. Plans for reflecting on how institutional networking could be developed for enhancing migrant students' educational experience could be considered. Moreover, the categories that emerged could be used as a

framework for developing a reflective practice to analyse the activities inside the schools. Aspects such as school organisation and services, projects and activities for inclusion, teaching methods and strategies, and assessment are crucial elements that must be constantly monitored involving the principals and the teaching staff. In addition, it emerged that teachers' professional development is essential for achieving the integration of migrant students (Biasutti *et al.*, 2020), as is the role of school principals in creating the best possible conditions in their institutions for promoting professional growth in an intercultural context.

This research project has certain limitations that should be considered when generalising its findings. The number of participants was limited, and they all worked in a small area of northeast Italy. Future research should examine the perspective of primary school principals in other Italian regions, where the impact of migration flows and cultural traditions could be different, to compare the results and offer a comprehensive perspective of the national situation. Another aspect absent from the present study is the perspective of other school stakeholders involved in the process of migrant students' inclusion, such as teacher coordinators, the Commission for School Inclusion, teachers and tutors. To better understand the complex role of the school in migrant children's education, it is essential to consider and examine the experience and perspective of all these professionals.

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Appendix

Interview for school principals

School_____ Gender_____
Years of professional experience as school principal_____
How many migrant/non-Italian students do you have in your school? _____
What are their countries of origin? _____

(1) What are the challenges you face in working with migrant students?

(2) How do you assess the basic skills of migrant students?

(3) What actions do you propose to meet the educational needs of migrant children?

(4) What kinds of services do you offer for migrant students?

(5) What are the tasks that a school principal carries out regarding migrant students?

(6) What tasks does the commission or the working group for migrant students perform?

(7) What kind of training activities focused on intercultural education do you offer to in-service teachers?

(8) What kind of activities do you undertake in collaboration with external agencies to support migrant students?

(9) What actions and projects for schools with migrant students does the national department of education promote?

(10) At the ministerial level, what activities and resources could be activated or improved for migrant students?

(11) Do you have any suggestions for improving schools' actions for migrant students?

(12) Do you have any additional questions that were not addressed above?

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