



School Dropout Intention and Self-esteem in Immigrant and Native Students Living in Poverty: The Protective Role of Peer Acceptance at School

Dora Bianchi¹ · Elisa Cavicchiolo² · Fabio Lucidi¹ · Sara Manganelli³ · Laura Girelli² · Andrea Chirico¹ · Fabio Alivernini¹

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Abstract

The psychological well-being at school of immigrant students living in poverty is currently an understudied topic in developmental psychology. This is an important shortcoming because this population, which is rapidly increasing in many western countries, is in a double minority condition and has a greater risk of experiencing psychological distress at school, in comparison with their native peers. In order to improve our understanding on this issue, the present two-wave study investigated the prospective relationships between peer acceptance and two aspects of well-being at school—intention to drop out of school and negative self-esteem—specifically focusing on the differential effect of having (vs. not having) an immigrant background. The participants were 249 preadolescents and adolescents living in poverty ($M_{\text{age}} = 12.76$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.34$; 41.8% girls; 19.3% immigrants) who were attending educational centres for disadvantaged minors. The poverty status of the participants was an inclusion criterion. A multilinear regression model with multigroup analysis was tested. As expected, the results showed that peer acceptance had a significant negative association with school dropout intentions and negative self-esteem only for immigrants, but not for natives. For immigrant students, the protective effect of peer acceptance was comparable to the stability over time of dropout intention and self-esteem, a result that has promising implications for prevention programs. The applied implications of the study for educational and clinical contexts are discussed.

Keywords School dropout intention · Negative self-esteem · Peer acceptance · Immigrants · Poverty

Introduction

Psychological well-being at school is a construct that has been broadly examined in literature (e.g. Zhou, Huebner, & Tian, 2020). It is characterized by affective components, as well as behavioral indicators of positive adjustment (Renshaw & Bolognino, 2017). Individual self-esteem—as an affective component—and school dropout—as a behavioral

indicator—have been considered indicative aspects of psychological well-being at school (Bizumic, Reynolds, Turner, Bromhead, & Subasic, 2009; Korhonen, Linnanmäki, & Aunio, 2014; Ogle, Frazier, Nichols-Lopez, & Cappella, 2016), although these two variables have rarely been investigated together in the context of school mental health (Wells, Miller, Tobacyk, & Clanton, 2002).

The psychological well-being at school of immigrant students living in poverty is currently an understudied topic in developmental psychology. Nevertheless, this is a vulnerable population characterized by a double minority condition—being both immigrants and part of a disadvantaged social group—which makes them more exposed to peer discrimination and psychological distress at school during childhood and adolescence (Weeks & Sullivan, 2019). As pointed out by Mc Andrew et al. (2015), a considerable number of immigrant families live below the poverty threshold, as a consequence of their migration history. For this reason, it is often difficult in research to distinguish the specific effects

✉ Elisa Cavicchiolo
ecavicchiolo@unisa.it

¹ Department of Developmental and Social Psychology, Sapienza University of Rome, Via dei Marsi 78, Rome, Italy

² Department of Human, Philosophical and Educational Sciences, University of Salerno, Via Giovanni Paolo II, 132, Fisciano, Salerno, Italy

³ National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education System (INVALSI), Via Ippolito Nievo 35, Rome, Italy

of immigrant background from those of persistent poverty in general (Archambault, Janosz, Dupéré, Brault, & Andrew, 2017). In this regard, poverty itself is a condition frequently associated with higher rates of school dropout, poor self-esteem, and poor psychological well-being at school (Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Sinclair et al., 2010).

Considering the steadily increasing number of immigrant students in European and Italian schools (Foundation for Initiatives and Studies on Multi-Ethnicity, ISMU, 2020; Ministry of Education, Universities and Research, MIUR, 2019), a better understanding of the school well-being of immigrant minors living in poverty is needed. Mass immigration to Italy is a relatively recent phenomenon, and there are still many difficulties in Italian schools in dealing with the special needs of foreign students (Milione, 2011). Immigrant children and adolescents in Italy are often subjected to social discrimination and peer victimization (Palladino, Nappa, Zambuto, & Menesini, 2020), and the school system is not always able to successfully integrate their cultural and linguistic diversity (Milione, 2011). International studies suggest however that immigrant minors have certain specific risk and resilience factors. According to the segmented assimilation theory (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), the social context of reception can make a considerable difference, leading to either positive or negative developmental outcomes: in favorable social contexts immigrant adolescents may reach a positive adjustment at school despite a low socioeconomic status—even outperforming their native peers (Alivernini, Manganelli, & Lucidi, 2018; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). Nevertheless, in the presence of adverse social conditions, they are often more vulnerable to negative outcomes (Klimidis, Stuart, Minas, & Ata, 1994), and there is evidence that non-inclusive school contexts usually lead to problems in the adjustment of immigrant youths to school (Dimitrova, Chasiotis, & Van de Vijver, 2016).

Recent findings on the developmental tasks of immigrant minors can help to explain these phenomena (Suárez-Orozco, Motti-Stefanidi, Marks, & Katsiaficas, 2018), suggesting that immigrant adolescents aim to attain a high level of social and cultural integration in the host community, and that school is the main social context of reception in which they can achieve this integration (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2018). As a consequence, immigrant students sometimes have higher levels of motivation and more positive attitudes toward school than natives (Liebkind, Jasinskaja-Lahti, & Solheim, 2004; Vedder, Boekaerts, & Seegers, 2005). However, when the school context is not inclusive and they find it difficult to be socially integrated, they could suffer from psychological distress (Dimitrova et al., 2016). Surprisingly, research on the psychological well-being at school for immigrant minors is still fairly limited.

According to the segmented assimilation theory (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), it is possible to expect perceived peer acceptance to play a key role in the psychological well-being of immigrant adolescents at school, and recent studies have provided initial evidence to support this idea (Motti-Stefanidi, Pavlopoulos, Mastrotheodoros, & Asendorpf, 2020). Peer acceptance has a pivotal role in emotional and relational development in general (Harris, 1995): during preadolescence and adolescence, the perception of belonging to a peer group sustains the gradual processes of individuation and of increasing autonomy from the family (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006), protecting the individual's psychological well-being in spite of other contextual difficulties (Birke-land, Breivik, & Wold, 2014). However, peer acceptance might play an additional role for immigrant adolescents, sustaining their processes of acculturation and of social integration, which take place mainly at school (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2018). As a consequence, the lack of peer acceptance might be specifically detrimental for the psychological well-being of immigrant students at school.

The present study investigated the role of peer acceptance at school in the development of school dropout intention and negative self-esteem—as indicators of psychological well-being at school—for immigrant preadolescents and adolescents living below the poverty threshold, compared with their native peers. The following sections will describe the relationships of peer acceptance with school dropout intention and self-esteem, as well as their specific connections with immigrant background.

School Dropout Intention and Peer Acceptance

The intention to drop out of school has strong associations with subsequent actual dropout in adolescence (Davis, Ajzen, Saunders, & Williams, 2002), and, in this regard, it has been the object of many studies (e.g. Carsley, Heath, Gomez-Garibello, & Mills, 2017; Eicher, Staerklé, & Clémence, 2014). Conceptual models of dropout have consistently indicated that the combined effects of individual and contextual factors may lead preadolescents and adolescents to leave school early (review by Rumberger & Lim, 2008). At the individual level, gender differences have consistently emerged in most studies, indicating that boys are more at risk of dropout from school (review by Ripamonti, 2018). Although school dropout increases with age, with a higher prevalence in late adolescence, it can be considered as the outcome of a long process that starts during the earliest years of school (Ripamonti, 2018). Recent studies have shown that dropout intention is present and measurable as early as elementary and junior high school (Lee, Chun, Kim, & Lee, 2020; Oh, Jung, & Lee, 2018). Low academic achievement is another frequent predictor of school dropout (Ripamonti, 2018).

The socio-economic background is one of the main individual predictors of school dropout, with low family income and poverty conditions leading to more frequent dropout from all grades of school (Ripamonti, 2018; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Poverty predicts negative school outcomes through the mediating effect of poverty-related stressors, such as family conflicts, home removals, or daily hassles (Wadsworth et al., 2008). Stressors related to poverty and to immigrant background interact in various ways on school dropout (Archambault et al., 2017), suggesting the importance of more specific research targeting immigrant and native students living in poverty.

Regarding contextual risk factors for school dropout, studies have revealed the protective role of family supervision, support from teachers, and a positive school climate (see reviews by Ripamonti, 2018; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Conversely, the role of peers in school dropout intention has been less extensively explored, with most studies focusing on affiliation with deviant peers (Glaser, 2009), and on bullying and victimization (Cornell, Gregory, Huang, & Fan, 2013) as predictors of early school leaving, due to negative peer influence. Only two studies have investigated the positive role of peers, indicating that participation in extracurricular activities with classmates is a protective factor that may act as a defense against school dropout during preadolescence and adolescence (Crispin, 2017; Mahoney, 2014), whereas the role of peer acceptance in preventing intention to drop out from school has been insufficiently studied. These sparse and generic findings suggest that the relation between peer acceptance and school dropout might be mediated by other factors, such as sharing learning activities with peers, leading to a greater interest in school.

However, the relationship between peer acceptance and dropout intention might be very different for immigrant students, with group-specific risk factors. Since school represents one of the main social contexts of reception for immigrant minors in the host country (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2018), peer acceptance at school may help them to feel well integrated in the host community. In accordance with the theoretical framework of the segmented assimilation theory (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), the research based on the peer nomination technique has confirmed that peer acceptance at school can be used to predict positive acculturation processes for immigrant adolescents (Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2020). This evidence, although it is still limited, indicates that it is worth further investigating the role of classmates in the psychological well-being of immigrant students. It seems plausible to suppose that not being accepted by their classmates might have more negative consequences for immigrants, such as the intention to drop out of school.

Self-esteem and Peer Acceptance

Self-esteem has been defined as a general evaluation of one's own worth and importance (Rosenberg, 1965), which develops gradually during childhood and adolescence and becomes more stable in early adulthood (Huang, 2010). Studies on the Rosenberg's model (1965) have suggested the existence of a positive and a negative component in self-esteem, working as two complementary dimensions (Huang & Dong, 2012). Positive self-esteem (satisfaction with the self) may be considered a good indicator of psychological well-being at school (Bizumic et al., 2009), as it averts depression and anxiety (Sowislo & Orth, 2013), and it is positively associated with school engagement and academic achievement (Ogle et al., 2016). Conversely, negative self-esteem (dissatisfaction with the self) during adolescence is related to negative developmental outcomes, such as academic failure and dropout (Wells, Miller, Tobacyk, & Clanton, 2002), mental disease, depression, and anxiety (Sowislo & Orth, 2013), and it is very common among minors living in poverty (Veselska et al., 2010). Family income indeed has a well-proven impact on self-esteem, predicting negative self-concept in different domains for low income adolescents (Veselska et al., 2010). Sharp declines in individual self-esteem across adolescence are due to the perception of being part of a socially disadvantaged minority, such as being low income and/or immigrant in a more advantaged native community (Rhodes, Roffman, Reddy, & Fredrik, 2004). This corpus of research has shown that native and immigrant adolescents living in poverty are highly vulnerable to developing negative self-esteem, suggesting the importance of studying group-specific protective factors.

Positive and negative self-esteem are strongly related to the quality of one's closest relationships with others and to perceived social approval (Leary, 2005). Accordingly, the "sociometer theory" (Leary, 2005) considers self-esteem as a subjective evaluation of one's effectiveness in social relationships, and thus as a meter of perceived social acceptance. Particularly during adolescence, the subjective perception of acceptance or inclusion within one's peer group has a significant role in building the positive component of self-esteem, and in sustaining the development of personal and social identity (Brown & Larson, 2009). Several studies using subjective evaluations and/or sociometric measurement of peer acceptance have confirmed the positive association between peer acceptance and positive self-esteem in children and adolescents (Birkeland et al., 2014; Pinto, Veríssimo, Gatinho, Santos, & Vaughn, 2015).

On the other hand, a meta-analysis (Blackhart, Nelson, Knowles, & Baumeister, 2009) has disconfirmed the direct link between peer exclusion and the negative side of self-esteem, uncovering that individual self-esteem is sustained by positive acceptance, but it is not directly undermined

by social exclusion. According to Leary (2005), individual self-esteem may result from a general evaluation of one's own eligibility for close social relationships and one's estimation of the probability of having such relationships in the future, rather than being a direct response to contextual events. Thus, the relationship between peer acceptance and negative self-esteem needs to be investigated in more depth.

In line with the segmented assimilation theory (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), the important role of the social context for immigrant students may establish a specific association between peer acceptance and negative self-esteem in immigrant adolescents, since this population has specific needs as regards peer relatedness. Immigrant adolescents are more subject to peer exclusion in the class group due to their cultural and ethnic diversity (Plenty & Jonsson, 2017). Immigrants are not only overtly victimized, but also frequently exposed to subtle and hidden forms of exclusion by their native peers (Plenty & Jonsson, 2017), as forms of social isolation and low acceptance. The literature suggests that the feeling of belonging to the school community is related to positive aspects of self-esteem and psychological well-being for immigrant adolescents, whereas feelings of isolation and exclusion are predictive of negative outcomes (Gummadam, Pittman, & Ioffe, 2016). Overall, the research provides support for the hypothesis that peer acceptance at school may be a protective factor for immigrant students, contrasting negative self-esteem, and sustaining their well-being at school.

The Current Study

This two-wave study investigates the differential effect of immigrant background in the relationship between peer acceptance (measured at the baseline) and two components of psychological well-being at school: school dropout intention and negative self-esteem (measured seven months later). The study targeted a population of preadolescents and adolescents from the 6th to the 13th grade, who lived in conditions of poverty. Disentangling the specific effect of immigrant background from the general effects of poverty is made more difficult by the disruptive impact of poverty on school dropout (Duncan & Murnane, 2011) and on self-esteem (Veselska et al., 2010). Therefore, in our study, the effect of poverty was controlled by the homogeneity of our participants, all of whom had a family income that was below the poverty threshold. Immigrant background has hitherto been insufficiently studied in the context of school dropout (Archambault et al., 2017), although previous research has suggested the important role of the social context in the adaptation and psychological well-being of immigrant minors (Schwartz et al. 2010).

Thus, we hypothesized that peer acceptance at school may protect immigrant students living in poverty from developing negative self-esteem and the intention to leave school early.

Gender, age, and school achievement were also controlled for, in conformity to previous studies (Bleidorn et al., 2016; Ripamonti, 2018). As suggested by the literature (Wells et al., 2002), we also expected to find a positive correlation between negative self-esteem and school dropout intention.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

The participants enrolled in this study were preadolescents and adolescents attending secondary school from the 6th to the 13th grade, and living in conditions of poverty. The participants were recruited from nine after-school educational centres for disadvantaged minors, in the urban and suburban areas of different Italian cities. These centers provide support services to minors in disadvantaged conditions, in the form of educational and recreational afternoon after-school activities. They are a reference point for several schools within their districts, while being independent from the schools themselves, and hosted students from many different classrooms and schools.

As a necessary inclusion criterion, the participants in the present study were all certified as being below the poverty threshold, according to the Italian official index of household welfare (Equivalent Economic Situation Indicator; ISEE). Written informed consent was obtained from the respondents and their parents. The data were collected via an online survey administered in the educational centres under the supervision of trained researchers, so as to ensure the participants' privacy and the standardization of the research procedures. The study and its procedures were in conformity with the Italian national ethical guidelines.

At the baseline level of data collection (time 1, April/May), all the minors from the 6th to the 13th grade attending the nine educational centres in that period ($n=306$), were invited to take part in the study. Only 5 minors refused, and the online questionnaire was therefore administered to 301 preadolescents and adolescents. At the moment of the second data collection, seven months later (time 2, October/November), 52 of the original participants could not be contacted, as they were no longer attending the after-school centres for various reasons (e.g. their families had moved, or they had reached the age of 19 and were no longer eligible to attend the centres), and they were therefore excluded from the study. Overall, we obtained a response rate of 98.4% at the baseline, and of 81.4% at time 2. The high response rate at the baseline probably reflected the trustful and positive climate of educational centers and was in line with recent studies on Italian adolescents (Bianchi, Lonigro, Baiocco, Baumgartner, & Laghi, 2020). The attrition between waves is in line with the response rates in other longitudinal studies

on adolescent samples (Van der Vorst, Engels, Meeus, & Deković, 2006). A set of one-way ANOVAs was conducted on the baseline data, entering participation groups (only first wave, vs. both waves) as between-subject variable, in order to test if the included and excluded participants were significantly different on the study variables. These analyses did not detect any difference in the study variables between the participants who were excluded, and those who were included.

Thus, the final sample consisted of 249 preadolescents and adolescents living in poverty, and attending school from the 6th to the 13th grades ($M_{\text{age}} = 12.76$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.34$, age range: 9–18; 104 girls and 145 boys). Forty-eight of the participants (19.3%) had an immigrant background, with 25 first generation immigrants and 23 second generation immigrants. This percentage is in line with the overall figures for low-income immigrant students attending Italian schools according to the most recent national reports (ISMU, 2020; MIUR, 2019), suggesting that our participants can be considered a good representation of the population of immigrant students living below the poverty threshold in Italy. Ethnic origin and languages spoken in the family were not investigated in the present study so as to protect the privacy of the minors, but according to national data most immigrant students in Italian schools come from other European countries or North Africa, with Romanian, Albanian and Moroccan students alone accounting for around 45% of all foreign students in lower secondary school, and 40% of those in upper secondary school (MIUR, 2019).

The first generation immigrants in our sample were all enrolled in the current school year and, at the time of baseline data collection, they had spent a minimum period of 8 months in the Italian school system. Due to the duration of school attendance, all the immigrant minors were able to understand the research questionnaires, which were administered in the Italian language.

Measures

Socio-demographic Information

The gender, age, and country of birth (Italy vs. abroad) of the participants were collected, as well as the country of birth of their parents. Participants who were born in a foreign country (first generation immigrants), or participants who were born in the host country to foreign-born parents (second generation immigrants) were considered as having an immigrant background, according to the criteria adopted by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (2014). Gender (0 = girls; 1 = boys) and immigrant background (0 = native; 1 = immigrant) were dummy-coded.

School Achievement

In line with previous studies (e.g. Niepel, Brunner, & Preckel, 2014), academic achievement was measured on the basis of self-reported school grades. For each participant, a mean score of achievement was computed by calculating the average of self-reported grades for mathematics and Italian language during the previous school term. Grades in these subjects, which are considered to be the two main subjects in Italy, are closely correlated with students' final academic achievement ($r > 0.80$; Martini, 2016). They therefore represent an effective measure of school achievement.

The study of Italian language includes several skills such as listening, oral production and interaction, reading and comprehension, writing, vocabulary, grammar, and includes the study of Italian literature. In the Italian school system, marks of ≥ 6 indicate a satisfactory level. In our study, these grades ranged from 4 to 10. Since the educational centres were not directly in contact with the participants' schools, only self-report grades, rather than officially registered grades, were available for our study. However, self-reported school grades are closely correlated with official school grades, and they reliably predict future educational outcomes (Dickhäuser & Plenter, 2005).

School Dropout Intention

Intention to drop out of school was measured by three items retrieved from previous studies (Hardre & Reeve, 2003; Italian adaptation by Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011): "I sometimes consider dropping out of school" (item 1); "I intend to drop out of school" (item 2); "I sometimes feel unsure about continuing my studies year after year" (item 3). Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). The scale proved to have good reliability, criterion validity, and consistency across time in previous research (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; Hardre & Reeve, 2003), and it also reached excellent reliability in our sample (Cronbach's alpha of 0.92 at T1, and 0.87 at T2), according to benchmarks proposed by Ponterotto and Ruckdeschel (2007). Similar measures of school dropout intention have been successfully used in recent studies on minors attending primary, lower and upper secondary school (Lee et al., 2020; Oh et al., 2018), providing evidence about the feasibility of measuring school dropout intention in all school grades.

Negative Self-esteem

As suggested by previous studies (Birkeland et al., 2014), the self-esteem was evaluated by four items taken from the adolescent version of the Global Negative Self-Evaluation Scale (Alsaker & Olweus, 1986), an instrument adapted from the negative self-esteem dimension of the Rosenberg

Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965; Italian validation by Prezza, Trombaccia, & Armento, 1997). The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very often), with higher scores indicating a greater degree of negative self-evaluation (a sample item was: “I certainly feel useless at times”). The instrument has been shown to have good psychometric properties in preadolescent and adolescent samples, demonstrating good reliability, external validity, and measurement invariance across time as well as across gender, in previous studies (Birkeland et al., 2014; Alsaker & Olweus, 1986). The scale also achieved an excellent level of reliability in our study (Cronbach’s alpha of 0.86 at T1, and 0.86 at T2).

Peer Acceptance

The level of peer acceptance perceived at school was evaluated by the 4-item Acceptance subscale from the Classmate Social Isolation Questionnaire for adolescents (CSIQ-A; Cavicchiolo, Girelli, Lucidi, Manganelli, & Alivernini, 2019). The CSIQ-A is a self-report questionnaire validated on Italian adolescents and consisting of two dimensions: Acceptance—which measures overall acceptance within the class group—and Friendship—which assesses friendship with classmates also outside the school context. For the purposes of the present study, only the first dimension was used. The Acceptance items measured the number of classmates with whom the participants have good relationships at school, on the basis of some self-reported behavioral indicators (e.g. “How many of your classmates speak with you?”; “How many of your classmates do you talk with or exchange messages with on your mobile phone?”). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = none; 2 = very few; 3 = some; 4 = many; 5 = all), with higher scores indicating a greater degree of peer acceptance. Classroom size in Italian schools may range from a minimum of 18 to a maximum of 28 students per class (Presidential Decree number 81 of March 20, 2009), and according to the most recent studies on national representative samples, the average number of students per class is around 21 (e.g. Alivernini, Cavicchiolo, Manganelli, Chirico, & Lucidi, 2020). In the Italian school system, the students attend all lessons with the same classmates for a succession of school years, with changes in the compositions of classes occurring only in the transition from primary to lower secondary school, and from lower to upper secondary school. The CSIQ-A has been shown to have good psychometric properties in preadolescents and adolescents, demonstrating good criterion validity, internal consistency, and measurement invariance across different genders and immigrant backgrounds (Alivernini & Manganelli, 2016; Cavicchiolo et al., 2019). Reliability also was good in the current study (Cronbach’s alpha of 0.79 at T1).

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed by using version 8.0 of the statistical modelling software programme MPLUS (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). In order to test our hypotheses on the differential effects of immigrant background on the relationships between peer acceptance, school dropout intention and negative self-esteem, we tested a multivariate regression model with a multi-group analysis, using the Maximum Likelihood estimator. The baseline level of peer acceptance was defined as a statistical predictor of both school dropout intention and negative self-esteem at T2, while controlling for their corresponding baseline levels. Gender, age, and school achievement measured at T1 were also controlled as covariates. The T2 levels of school dropout intention and negative self-esteem were set to correlate. Immigrant background was used as grouping variable, and a series of multi-group analyses were performed to test the model in the two groups of natives and immigrants. Following a procedure acknowledged in previous studies (Matthews, 2017) the first multigroup model was run allowing the parameters to vary freely between groups, while in the second multigroup model all parameters were constrained to be equal across groups. The two models were compared with a χ^2 difference test to determine if the unconstrained model explained the data significantly better than the more conservative constrained model. Then, independent Wald χ^2 tests were performed to determine which specific paths significantly differed between groups. An adjusted model was tested in which only the significant paths emerged by the Wald χ^2 tests were allowed to vary freely between groups, and the adjusted model was finally compared with the more conservative constrained model.

The variables were entered into the model as observed variables in order to conserve statistical power due to the modest sample size. Goodness of fit of the models was assessed with the chi-square test statistic and the following fit indices: the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), both of which should be higher than 0.95 in a good model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999); as well as the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), which should both be lower than 0.05 in an acceptable fit (Kaplan, 2000).

Results

The assumptions of normality were verified on the variables entered into the model, ensuring that skew and kurtosis values were within accepted ranges (± 2 ; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013; see Table 1). Descriptive statistics and differences

Table 1 Descriptive statistics on the study variables

	Range	Skewness	Kurtosis	Natives		Immigrants		<i>F(df)</i>	Total sample	
				<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
School achievement T1	4–10	0.28	− 0.19	6.86	1.18	6.82	1.22	$F(1,248)=0.03$	6.85	1.19
Peer acceptance T1	1–5	− 0.58	0.11	3.69	0.86	3.73	0.83	$F(1,248)=0.09$	3.70	0.85
School dropout intention T1	1–5	0.95	− 0.09	2.26	1.26	1.64	0.92	$F(1,248)=10.23^*$	2.14	1.22
School dropout intention T2	1–5	0.78	0.25	2.25	1.07	2.07	1.18	$F(1,248)=1.13$	2.22	1.09
Negative self-esteem T1	1–5	1.16	0.94	1.98	0.97	2.17	1.11	$F(1,248)=1.35$	2.02	0.99
Negative self-esteem T2	1–5	1.30	1.39	1.91	0.94	2.10	1.07	$F(1,248)=1.42$	1.95	0.96

* $p < 0.01$ **Table 2** Bivariate correlations between study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender (0 = girls; 1 = boys)	1								
2. Age	0.001	1							
3. Immigrant background (0 = natives; 1 = immigrants)	− 0.04	.14*	1						
4. School achievement T1	− 0.12	− 0.41***	− 0.01	1					
5. Peer acceptance T1	0.09	0.01	0.02	0.08	1				
6. School dropout intention T1	0.17**	0.10	− 0.20**	− 0.15**	− 0.04	1			
7. School dropout intention T2	0.20**	− 0.02	− 0.07	− 0.01	0.02	0.45***	1		
8. Negative self-esteem T1	− 0.10	0.09	0.07	− 0.09	− 0.34***	0.13*	0.05	1	
9. Negative self-esteem T2	− 0.10	0.09	0.08	− 0.04	− 0.25***	0.06	0.16**	0.48***	1

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

between natives and immigrants are shown in Table 1. Correlations between study variables are shown in Table 2.

The unconstrained multi-group model showed a good fit to the data: $\chi^2(4) = 2.06$, $p = 0.72$; RMSEA = 0.000; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.09; SRMR = 0.01. The totally constrained multi-group model did not fit the data very well: $\chi^2(15) = 25.51$, $p = 0.04$; RMSEA = 0.07; CFI = 0.93; TLI = 0.87; SRMR = 0.08. The Chi-square difference test conducted on the two models indicated that constraining the model's parameters significantly worsened the fit indexes: $\Delta\chi^2(11) = 23.45$, $p = 0.01$. Subsequently, a series of Wald χ^2 tests were conducted on individual paths. Both the path from peer acceptance to school dropout intention, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 6.49$, $p = 0.01$, and the path from peer acceptance to negative self-esteem, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 6.90$, $p = 0.008$, showed significant differences between natives and immigrants. The adjusted model, in which only the two above-mentioned parameters were allowed to vary freely between the groups, showed a good fit: $\chi^2(13) = 13.99$, $p = 0.37$; RMSEA = 0.02; CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.99; SRMR = 0.04, and described the data significantly better than the totally constrained model: $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 11.52$, $p = 0.003$.

The final adjusted model accounted for 26.4% of variance for school dropout intention ($p < 0.001$) and 19.2% of

variance for negative self-esteem ($p < 0.001$) in the native group, while in the immigrant group the explained variance was 19.4% for school dropout intention ($p = 0.01$), and 50.2% for negative self-esteem ($p < 0.001$). The results indicated that peer acceptance was significantly and negatively related to school dropout intention in the immigrant group ($\beta = -0.29$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = 0.02$), but not in the native group ($\beta = 0.09$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = 0.11$), and that it was significantly and negatively related to negative self-esteem for immigrants ($\beta = -0.36$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < 0.001$) but not for natives ($\beta = -0.05$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = 0.43$). In both groups, school dropout intention was positively associated with gender and baseline levels of school dropout intention, whilst negative self-esteem was positively associated with its baseline level. Finally, school dropout intention and negative self-esteem were positively correlated in both groups. The results of the adjusted model are presented in Fig. 1. Two simple slope analyses (Aiken & West, 1991) were also run for school dropout intention and for negative self-esteem, by plotting the predicted values of the dependent variables as a function of peer acceptance, at the two levels of immigrant background (natives = 0; immigrants = 1), controlling for the effects of the covariates. The simple slopes are shown in

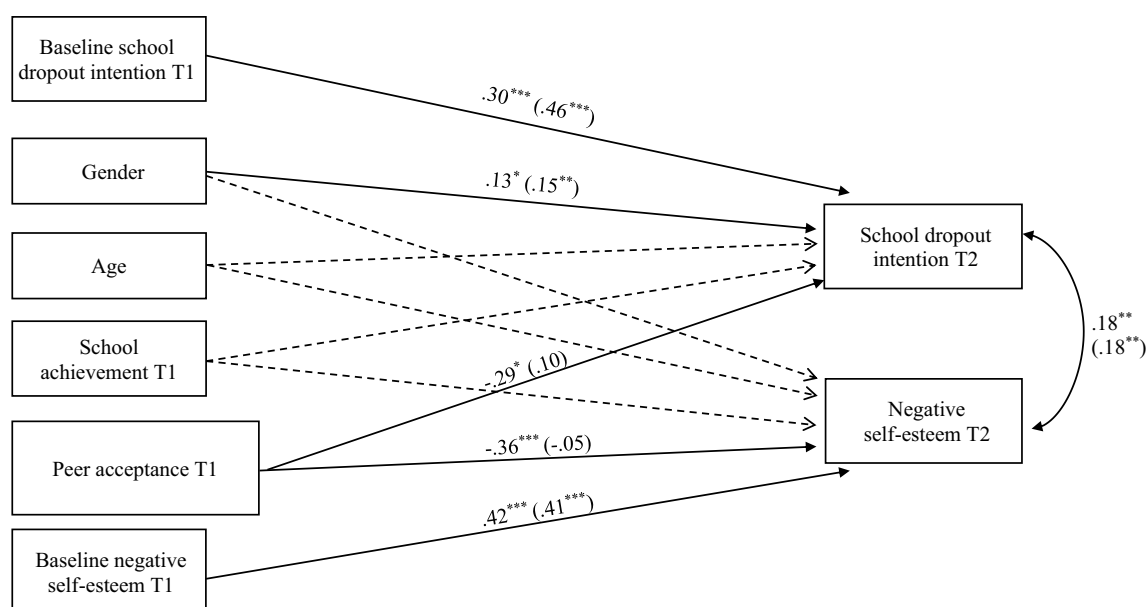


Fig. 1 Multigroup adjusted model for immigrants and natives. *Notes:* Parameter estimates are standardized. Estimates for natives are reported in brackets, estimates for immigrants are outside brackets. Dashed lines represent non-significant relationships. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Fig. 2 Moderating effect of immigrant background in the relationship between peer acceptance at T1 and school dropout intention at T2, controlling for gender, age, school achievement and T1 baseline level of school dropout intention

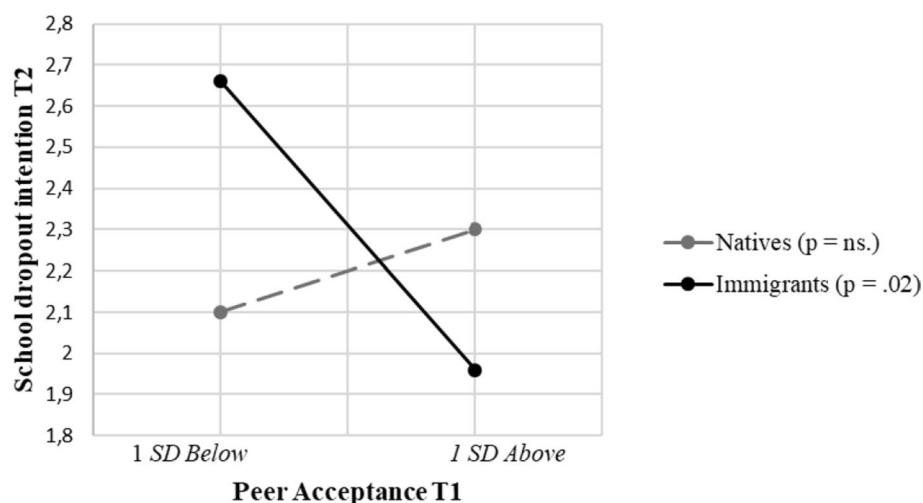


Fig. 2 for school dropout intention, and in Fig. 3 for negative self-esteem.

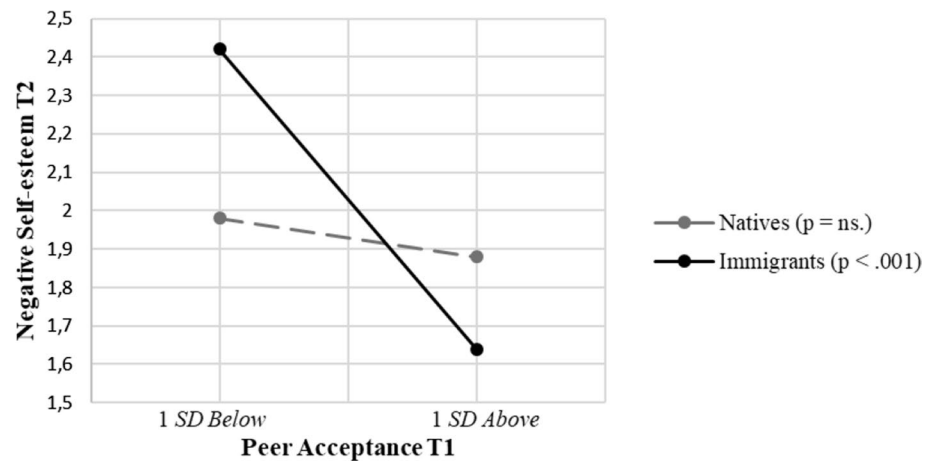
Discussion

This study, conducted on a population of students living below the poverty threshold, explored the differential role of immigrant background in the associations of peer acceptance with changes in school dropout intention and negative self-esteem over time, controlling for gender, age, and school achievement. According to the segmented assimilation theory (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Schwartz et al., 2010),

the characteristics of the social context can shape the adaptation processes of immigrant minors, leading to adjusted or maladjusted outcomes. Consistently with this theoretical model, and supporting previous knowledge about the role of peers for the well-being of immigrant adolescents (Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2020), the findings of our study indicated that peer acceptance at school is a protective factor associated with the reduction of school dropout intention and of negative self-esteem among immigrants living in poverty, whereas the same relationships were not confirmed among their native peers.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to detect the specific role of having (vs. not having) an

Fig. 3 Moderating effect of immigrant background in the relationship between peer acceptance at T1 and negative self-esteem at T2, controlling for gender, age, school achievement, and T1 baseline level of negative self-esteem



immigrant background on the association of acceptance by classmates with school dropout intention and negative self-esteem, disentangling the effects of being an immigrant from those of living below the poverty threshold. The need for relatedness may be particularly salient to immigrants living in poverty, as they are more subject to social discrimination due to their double minority status (Alivernini, Manganeli, Cavicchiolo, & Lucidi, 2019; Plenty & Jonsson, 2017). Our findings have confirmed and expanded those of previous studies, showing that immigrant minors living in poverty who perceive themselves as not being accepted by their classmates may be more likely to develop the intention to leave school, and may suffer an increase in negative self-esteem over time. These results did not apply to native adolescents in conditions of poverty, indicating that native students are probably not as sensitive to peer acceptance/rejection as their immigrant peers. Various other contextual and individual variables may moderate the link between perceived peer acceptance and well-being at school in the native low-income population, as suggested by the absence of clear findings in previous research (Blackhart et al., 2009; Ripamonti, 2018).

In our study, we controlled for individual differences related to gender, age, and school achievement, in consideration of the existing literature (Bleidorn et al., 2016; Ripamonti, 2018), but only gender proved to have a significant role on changes in school dropout intention over time in both groups. This result confirmed the fact that boys are more likely to leave school earlier (Eicher et al., 2014), and suggested that gender is a risk factor in both natives and immigrants. The fact that no other individual differences emerged in either of the groups may be due to the high degree of homogeneity of our sample, since the overall negative impact of poverty on school dropout (Duncan & Murnane, 2011) and self-esteem (Veselska et al., 2010) may annul the variations expected in the general population.

In accordance with previous studies (Wells et al., 2002), our results also showed that the school dropout intention was positively related to negative self-esteem. Confirming past research (Eicher et al., 2014; Orth, Robins, Widaman, & Conger, 2014), in our study, these two variables were quite stable over time, as shown by the significant positive effects of their baseline levels. More interestingly, in the immigrant group the relationships of peer acceptance with school dropout intention and negative self-esteem were inverse and almost equal in magnitude to those of the long-term stability of the latter two variables.

Findings from this study are a promising indication of the positive role of peer acceptance for the well-being at school of immigrants living in poverty, even if the results are necessarily limited to the characteristics of our sample. Several studies have found that dropout intention is relatively stable across school years (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; Eicher et al., 2014), however, the protective factors that emerged in prior research have rarely showed effects comparable to the persistence of this intention. Similarly, our findings suggest the potential of peer acceptance to oppose the persistence of negative self-esteem over time, indicating new directions for prevention programs targeted at immigrant students. This important role of peer acceptance for immigrant students living in poverty suggests that prevention and intervention programs may be more likely to succeed if they focus on strengthening the classroom group.

One of the limitations of this study is the modest sample size, which was due to the difficulties in identifying and contacting such a specific population, and it has some implications, above all the fact that some relationships with small effect sizes may not have been detected. Nevertheless, several significant relations have been discovered, which can make an important contribution to this field of research. The percentage of immigrant participants (19%) was consistent with the percentage of low-income immigrant students that attend Italian schools (ISMU, 2020; MIUR,

2019). However, it will be worth conducting future studies on larger samples, in order to explore the possible existence of other important effects, which may be specific for immigrants or for natives. A second limitation is the absence of information about the ethnic origins and the family language of the immigrant participants, as well as their ages at the time of their arrival in Italy. These characteristics were not investigated in the present study, in order to safeguard the privacy of the minors involved, although it is acknowledged that most of the immigrant minors in Italian schools are from other European countries and from North Africa (MIUR, 2019). Future research should also control for these variables, in order to account for the expectable heterogeneity in the immigrant group. A third limitation was the adoption of a two-wave research design, and it will be necessary to apply some more complex longitudinal models in order to verify this pattern of results.

Finally, our findings will hopefully be confirmed by future research that also controls for the problem behaviors and clinical conditions that might be involved in the psychological well-being at school of immigrant and native students living in poverty. For example, immigrants living in poverty may well be more exposed to internalizing symptoms (such as anxiety and depression), due to the migration history of their families, or to the discrimination by peers that they suffer. On the other hand, natives living in poverty might have more behavioral problems, due to the difficulties in their families. These variables could probably help to explain the relationships that have emerged in our study, as mediating or moderating factors, and could point the way for future developments in this area of research.

Conclusion

This study is the first evidence for the differential role of immigrant background in the relations of peer acceptance with subsequent school dropout intention as well as negative self-esteem. Peer acceptance at school is negatively associated with school dropout-intention and negative self-esteem in immigrant students living in poverty, but not in their native peers. This study has revealed the specific role of immigrant background, controlling for the overall impact of low socioeconomic status, providing unique evidence for the different developmental needs of immigrant (vs. native) students living in poverty.

The present study has research and practical implications. Our findings revealed the positive role of peer acceptance exclusively measuring the number of social interactions, but not their quality. Therefore, future research should be directed to further explore which different aspects of peer relationships may contribute to school engagement and self-esteem in immigrant vs. native students. School

psychologists working with at-risk students will be able to take into account the specific needs of immigrants living in poverty, by dedicating special attention toward supporting their relations with their peers. Our findings indicate that prevention programs for school dropout should focus more on the classroom group, encouraging and sustaining the development of positive peer relationships, combating prejudice, and attempting to prevent discrimination and social exclusion among classmates. Clinical support for adolescents who are thinking of dropping out of school should take into account possible vulnerability factors related to gender, low family income, and immigrant background, while also considering the role of negative self-esteem as an important correlate of dropout intention and an indicator of psychological well-being at school.

Author Contributions DB conceived of the study, performed the statistical analyses, participated in interpretation of the data, and drafted the manuscript; EC performed the statistical analyses, participated in interpretation of the data and helped to draft the manuscript; SM, LG, and AC participated in data collection and interpretation, helped to draft the manuscript and critically revised the drafted manuscript for important theoretical contents; FL critically revised the drafted manuscript for important theoretical contents; FA conceived of the study, supervised the study design and all the statistical analyses, and critically revised the drafted manuscript for important theoretical contents. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee of Ricerca Azione Onlus and with the 1964 Declaration of HELSINKI and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all the individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflicting or competing interests.

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