

Facing Mistrust and Suspicion—for a Cohesive Community

Support for the Inclusion of Foreign Minors in the Schools of Portomaggiore in Italy

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“Global education is our gateway to understanding diverse worlds, fostering empathy, and building bridges across cultures to create a more connected and compassionate future.”

Abstract: *This project is an initiative in a small Italian town grappling with community mistrust, economic decline, natural disasters, and immigration challenges. In collaboration with the non-profit Mondo Donna Onlus, this project targets foreign minors, providing language support and social integration through educational and extracurricular activities. The initiative emphasizes the importance of integrating foreign children into the local schools to enhance their academic experience and promote mutual understanding within the community. The project's alignment with Global Citizenship Education (GCED) values showcases its commitment to fostering inclusion, understanding, and intercultural dialogue, which are essential for building a cohesive community. The effort underscores a broader attempt to address social and cultural rifts through targeted educational strategies, ensuring equal opportunities and promoting a sense of global citizenship among all students.*

Keywords: *Inclusion; GCED; Intercultural Dialogue; Education; Community Trust*

Fig. 8: The logo of MondoDonna



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Members of the project

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The reasons behind the project

This project is a response to the complex social and cultural challenges, including economic decline, a devastating earthquake in 2012, political scandals, and ongoing struggles with cultural integration and immigration. This mistrust and suspicion have pervaded interactions between lo-

cal residents and immigrants, further exacerbated by the lack of effective integration policies and existing prejudices.

The project addresses these issues by focusing on the younger segment of the migrant population—foreign minors attending local schools. The need for this initiative emerged from the observation that while adults in the immigrant community often find themselves isolated due to cultural and language barriers, children have the potential to bridge these gaps more naturally through the school environment. Schools are pivotal arenas for integration, where children can learn the language, customs, and social norms of their new home while maintaining their cultural identities. By improving the school experience for these minors, the project aims to lay a foundation for better integration and social cohesion in the broader community.

Portomaggiore has experienced a significant shift in demographics with new residents from diverse cultural backgrounds, which has introduced a series of integration challenges. The suspension of the Immigration Consultation Board, deemed obsolete by the local administration, has complicated these efforts, highlighting the need for renewed strategies to manage cultural diversity effectively. The arrival of immigrants has often led to isolated communities, misunderstandings, and occasional conflicts, indicating a critical need for structured integration initiatives. Thus, the project responds to the urgent need for linguistic and cultural mediation in schools, supporting not only children but also their families as they navigate the complexities of a new educational system and community life.

Furthermore, the decision to prioritize foreign minors and their inclusion in local schools is a response to the growing phenomenon of Italian families abandoning public schools in favor of private institutions, attributing this trend to the challenges posed by integrating foreign children without adequate support. This project strategically addresses these issues by enhancing the educational environment through mediation, tailored educational support, and extracurricular activities that foster interaction and mutual understanding among all students.

Recognizing the difficulty of including adults, the Municipality decided to collaborate with the *Mondo Donna Onlus* association to focus on for-

eign minors attending local schools. The goal is threefold: to actively involve families in their children's school life; to provide students with the tools needed to prevent school dropout; to improve learning; and to promote inclusion and mutual understanding.

Project description—When a Municipality teams up with a non-profit organization

This initiative comprised *four primary actions* aimed at *facilitating the integration and support of migrant communities* within the municipality.

Central to the project are *linguistic and cultural mediation efforts*, including linguistic mediators assisting parents with school procedures and electronic registers, supporting school enrolment phases, and providing in-class mediation to support the inclusion of foreign children. Mediation also played a pivotal role in socio-educational activities provided through gaming activities designed to bridge educational gaps and facilitate interaction with Italian peers. Such action is essential for enhancing communication and linguistic comprehension for both students in the classroom and their parents. Mediation activities were conducted during school hours to assist students from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Morocco in learning Italian and actively participating in the learning process. Additionally, mediation facilitated school meetings, disciplinary discussions, and access to school services by translating educational materials, circulars, and requests in various languages. The second action, *educational support*, was designed to assist students with behavioral difficulties in the classroom and hallways. Educators worked closely with teachers to render the curriculum more comprehensible for foreign minors and to facilitate cultural interactions. This often involved employing cultural mediators to address teachers' questions and manage conflicts and emotions. The socio-educational support activities include bridging activities in which social operators collaborate with teachers, social workers, and families to integrate each child into the class.

Such educational mediation in the classroom involves small group activities that promote integration and cooperation. Extracurricular activities for minors aged 5–10 and 11–13 foster socialization, play, and autonomy, with additional leisure and summer activities promoting overall well-being. Peer discussion groups focus on socio-affective and sexual education, gender differences, and raising awareness of respect and non-discrimination. Educational support includes afternoon school support for homework and study methods, integration activities to combat demotivation, and language reinforcement through Italian L2 laboratories.

Fig. 9: Activity with children



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The socio-educational activities over the school year 2023–2024 comprised a total of 620 hours, including 380 hours of linguistic and cultural mediation.

The third action, *psychological support*, was divided into two components:

- support for migrant families identified by social services,
- psychological support for groups of migrant women.

An expert psychologist, accompanied by a cultural mediator, worked with families to address parental dynamics and issues related to parenting, navigating requests from social services and the Court's decisions, as well as cultural backgrounds. Another psychologist, specializing in ethnopsychology, collaborated with groups of migrant women, particularly those from Ukraine, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, utilizing Dixit cards to facilitate the expression of complex emotions.

The use of Dixit cards, dreamlike, imaginative pictorial cards, allows for the expression of very complex emotions without the need for words. In this context, the cards were employed as a medium of perception, enabling women from diverse social and economic backgrounds to find common ground. Through these cards, the women were able to first identify their unique characteristics as women, find commonalities, and, most importantly, define their pre- and post-migration experiences—that is, their lives in their countries of origin and in their new host countries.

This work with the cards culminated in a series of meetings and the creation of a collective identity collage. Each woman contributed a piece representing her perception of the definition of a “migrant woman.” Additionally, they developed individual artworks, adding descriptive words to illustrate their condition of “double absence” (A. Sayad), referencing both their identity and their status as migrants. Additionally, group meetings for vulnerable parental figures, especially women, served as a protected space for expressing emotions, sharing experiences, and collectively reconciling their migratory traumas.

These meetings foster a sense of belonging, reduce loneliness, and promote positive social relationships. Facilitators create an empowering atmosphere, encourage assertiveness and empathy, and guide participants through planned activities and shared sessions, fostering mutual

trust and cohesion within the group. The groups were intended mostly for women, also to intervene and act on the gender exclusion (and sometimes violence) faced by women in the Bengali and Pakistani cultures. The psychological support provided 100 hours of group and family support.

The fourth action involved *information, dissemination, training, and awareness*. Psychologists and staff from the MondoDonna Onlus Association provided training with a transcultural and trauma-oriented focus for teaching staff and social services. The objective was to bridge the cultural gap and foster genuine mutual understanding, which is critical in a town like Portomaggiore, where a significant migrant population has faced challenges in integrating into the social and economic fabric. Episodes of exploitation and cultural incompatibility have caused tensions, and the project sought to address these issues.

The effort was enhancing for all involved professionals the understanding of migratory paths and the ethno-cultural characteristics of foreign students, while reducing the communication gap through linguistic mediation, promoting multicultural socialization among minors with educational support, closing the emotional and empathetic gap with psychological support, and training stakeholders involved in managing migration to facilitate integration into the social fabric. 56 % of the Municipality's employees and health personnel in such a district were involved in the workshops.

New initiatives include the creation of a mobile school help desk to facilitate access to school services and understanding of school dynamics for migrant parents. Multilingual video tutorials will also be produced to explain how to use school services. Furthermore, activities promoting support and dialogue between Italian and migrant women (e.g., Mindfulness workshops on parenting and stress) and library activities on universal themes such as Peace, Equality, Empowerment, and Gender will be promoted.

Children, supported by linguistic facilitation, will become the focal point around common and universal ideals, enabling the overcoming of differences and cultural barriers.

Fig. 10: Creative approaches to working with migrants.



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The Portomaggiore Project and its Alignment with GCED Values and SDGs

The project for socio-educational support for foreign minors in Portomaggiore exemplifies the core values of Global Citizenship Education (GCED) through its comprehensive approach to promoting inclusion, understanding, and intercultural dialogue. This initiative not only addresses the immediate educational and social needs of migrant chil-

dren but also fosters a broader sense of global citizenship among all participants.

Promotion of Human Rights and Social Justice and SDG4: By providing linguistic and cultural mediation, the project supports the rights to quality education and to participate in cultural life, which are fundamental human rights. Additionally, the focus on reducing language barriers and promoting understanding of school services helps to ensure that migrant families can fully engage with and benefit from the education system, thereby promoting social justice.

Encouragement of Diversity and Intercultural Awareness and SDG16: By integrating diverse groups and fostering active participation in community governance, it enhances institutional integrity and ensures that all community members, particularly the vulnerable and marginalized, have access to justice and equal opportunities.

Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10): The educational support provided helps to level the playing field for migrant children, ensuring that they have the same opportunities for educational success as their native peers.

Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11): The project contributes to making Portomaggiore more inclusive and sustainable by promoting social cohesion and intercultural dialogue-

Lesson Learned: What challenges and difficulties did the project face; what experiences were gained?

Cultural and Language Barriers

One of the primary challenges faced by the project team was the significant cultural and language barriers between the migrant families and the local community. This challenge was particularly pronounced in schools, where the language barrier impacted the academic performance and social integration of migrant children. The deployment of linguistic and cultural mediators proved crucial, not only for assisting communication but also for helping school staff and local community members understand the cultural nuances that shape migrant families'

interactions and behaviors. The experience highlighted the importance of ongoing cultural competence training for all stakeholders involved in educational and community integration projects.

Resistance from the Local Community

Another challenge was the initial resistance from parts of the local community, including some educators and parents of non-migrant children, who were concerned about the impacts of integration on educational standards and resource allocation. The project team learned the importance of community engagement and dialogue in addressing these concerns. Hosting inclusive community meetings and open dialogues, where community members could express concerns and receive direct responses, helped mitigate some of the resistance and fostered a more inclusive atmosphere.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Effectively measuring the impact of integration initiatives posed significant challenges due to the complexity of social dynamics and the long-term nature of integration outcomes. The project team realized the importance of establishing robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks from the outset. By collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data, the team could adjust strategies in real time and provide evidence-based reports to stakeholders, which were crucial for securing continuous funding and support.

Sustaining Engagement and Outcomes

Finally, maintaining sustained engagement from both migrant and local populations was challenging. The initial enthusiasm sometimes waned due to the slow pace of visible change. The project learned the importance of creating short-term, visible wins alongside long-term goals to keep the community engaged. Organizing regular community events and vis-

ible improvements in school environments helped maintain momentum and demonstrated the tangible benefits of the project to all participants.

From these challenges and experiences, the project team gained a deeper understanding of the multifaceted approach needed to successfully integrate migrant children into local schools and communities. These lessons underscore the necessity of adaptability, continuous community involvement, and the importance of addressing both immediate needs and long-term integration goals.

For further reading

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