



I27 Mental Health in Migrant Schoolchildren: Teacher-Reported Behavior and Emotional Problems

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The goal of this presentation is to highlight the need for intervention regarding the mental health of non-Italian schoolchildren in the public school system for the prevention of mental illness.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating the importance of prevention planning for the mental health of migrant schoolchildren, which involves both parents and teachers.

The mental health of migrant children is becoming an increasingly important area of study due to the continued growth of migrant children in Italy. The Italian Ministry of Education and University Research (MIUR) and the Foundation for Multi-Ethnic Studies (ISMU) have presented a detailed background on the national school population of non-citizen Italian residents for the academic year of 2010/2011. School enrollment of migrant children increased from 59,389 in 1996/97 to 711,064 in 2010/11. Currently, migrant students make up 7.9% of the total student population in Italy. Primary schools have the highest number of migrant children.

A significant gap in promotion rates between Italian and foreign students has been observed, most notably at the secondary school level. Although this gap has closed slightly in the recent past, 30% of non-citizen students were not promoted to the next level in the academic year of 2009/2010. This is about twice the number of Italian secondary school students.

The migration process is physically and socially stressful. It may lead to mental health problems, particularly in children. There are few Italian studies which address migrant children's mental health. The goal of this study was to compare the prevalence and types of emotional and behavioral problems in migrant schoolchildren with those of Italian-born children. This study involved migrant (first- and second-generation) and native schoolchildren attending kindergarten, primary, and secondary school. A questionnaire was administered to teachers in order to gather information regarding family composition, country of birth, age upon arrival in Italy, religion, and general level of integration outside the school setting. All teachers filled in the Teacher Self Report (TSR) for migrant and native children. The first of these items examines the child's participation in sports, hobbies, games, activities, involvement in organizations, jobs, chores, friendships, social interactions during play, independent work, and school functioning. The second section consists of 120 items related to behavioral and/or emotional problems during the preceding six months, as rated on a three-point scale. The main areas of this construct are aggression, hyperactivity, bullying, conduct problems, defiance, and violence. The following behavioral and emotional problems are also measured: aggressive behavior; anxiety/depression; attention problems; delinquent rule-breaking behavior; social problems; somatic complaints; thought problems; withdrawal; externalization; internalization; and, general problems. Lower scores on the Academic Performance and Adaptive Functioning Scales indicate lower functioning.¹ Higher scores on the Syndrome, Total Problems, and Externalizing and Internalizing Scales indicate higher levels of maladaptive behavior. The findings of the study show that teachers detect academic and adaptive problems more easily in migrant schoolchildren than in Italian-born natives, but they might possibly be less aware of their psychological structure.

The results of this study were that the migrant children reported more problems in adaptive functioning and academic performance when compared to native-born Italian children. Problems in adaptive functioning and academic performance in migrant children may be attributed to language difficulties and a lack of family involvement with the school and its educators.

The observations from this study provide a starting point for understanding the psychological structure and the more significant difficulties which migrant children may encounter. This study also underscores the importance of early detection of these problems, so that appropriate intervention strategies might possibly be formulated.

In Italy, it is necessary to develop a multicultural approach to promote the mental health of migrant children. It is also necessary to develop intervention models for appropriate and timely access to the Italian national health system (Sistema Sanitaria Nazionale Italiana (SSNI)), in consideration of the diverse cultural groups in Italy.

Reference:



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1. Achenbach TM. *Manual for the Teacher's Report Form and 1991 Profile*. Burlington, VT: University of Vermont Department of Psychiatry; 1991.
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