

Chapter 2

School as Integration Gateway: The città-IN Project



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Abstract This chapter presents the città-IN project, which positions public primary schools as the essential gateway for integration of immigrant families and as the central nodes within their broader rights. Rather than viewing school services as mere administrative tasks, we frame them as interfaces where parents first encounter the digital infrastructures and institutional rules of the welfare system. These interactions are critical, as they often dictate whether a family feels empowered or excluded from their rights. The study focuses on the San Siro neighbourhood in Milan, an area characterised by both rich cultural diversity and significant socio-economic pressure. Here, the città-IN project employs an action-research model, adapting the Mediation Grammar (MG) framework to evaluate five school services. By moving beyond top-down observation, the project combines participatory research with user-centred evaluation to see how language barriers, the quality of information, and the real-world accessibility of rights impact the daily lives of immigrant families. Ultimately, the chapter argues that in contexts marked by school segregation and vulnerability, the school acts as a double-edged sword: it can be a space of profound inclusion or a barrier to it. By applying the Mediation Grammar, we provide both a way to measure these empowerment gaps and a practical strategy for redesigning services to be more equitable. This discussion establishes the groundwork for the empirical findings and community interventions explored in the following chapters.

Keywords School-related services · Immigrant families · Public service ecosystems · Mediation grammar · Integration · San Siro

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2.1 School-Related Services as the Gateway to Integration of Family and Children

For immigrant families, schools play a dual role: both as a place for their children's academic learning and socialisation and as the primary point of contact between a household and its new society. Despite the frequent relational and educational challenges faced by immigrant parents and pupils, schools' impact extends beyond their boundaries, serving as a first significant step towards the inclusion and integration of immigrant families (Onsès-Segarra et al. 2023; Selimos and Daniel 2017; Vassallo 2021). For parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the school represents a dual promise: a vehicle for their children's upward social mobility and a chance to learn the host country's culture, norms, and educational system (Perino and Allasino 2014).

Particularly when an institution becomes an enabler by facilitating the procedures and inviting parents into their child's educational journey, then the impact becomes transformative. These school-related services become catalysts for a family's sense of belonging and collective empowerment (González-Falcón et al. 2022). Given the variety of requirements and services related to access to education, schools represent an entry point for immigrant parents into the bureaucratic and welfare systems, as well as into transversal competences and social capital (Karaagac et al. 2022).

However, this gateway may further fragilise already fragile subjects. As the school holds such power over a family's daily life, it can also become a site of friction. Small moments of exclusion, whether through subtle microaggressions, a lack of intercultural sensitivity, or a total absence of procedural support, can unintentionally wound a family's sense of agency (Ron-Balsera 2015; Bruno and Iborra Cuéllar 2025). As a result, if the school and the surrounding community do not dismantle these barriers, they don't remain just at the school gates; they create additional obstacles and reinforce broader patterns of marginalisation and segregation. As Selimos and Daniel (2017: 91) describe, schools can "function simultaneously as sites of social inclusion and exclusion" for newcomer youth and families unless both the institution and community stakeholders provide welcoming support services and collaborative practices. Proper integration is not only about assisting immigrant families but also about moving towards active collaboration and co-creation, where the school, the local community, and families work together as equals (Boulaamane and Bouchamma 2021; Díez et al. 2011; Sordé-Martí et al. 2023).

As the literature above suggests, school experience for immigrant families is rarely a straight line. It is a complex ecosystem in which institutional support should align with the community's needs and realities. Additionally, during the interaction process, tension can arise between a school's potential to empower and the systemic barriers that often get in the way, as summarised in Table 2.1: success factors versus integration obstacles.

This book argues that to understand whether a school service is truly working, we must centre the voices of the immigrant families themselves. By viewing the school-family relationship through their eyes, we can identify exactly where the connection

Table 2.1 Success factors versus obstacles to integration

The gateway to inclusion (drivers)	The risk of exclusion (barriers)
Active outreach: Promoting family involvement in educational pathways (González-Falcón et al. 2022)	Microaggressions: Subtle or overt biases that undermine a family’s agency (Ron-Balsera 2015)
Social capital: Gaining bureaucratic know-how and transversal skills (Karaagac et al. 2022)	Procedural gaps: Lack of support for complex digital or administrative tasks (Bruno and Iborra Cuéllar 2025)
Co-creation: Engaging families as partners rather than just recipients of aid (Boulaamane and Bouchamma 2021)	Cultural blindness: A lack of intercultural knowledge within the institution (Selimos and Daniel 2017)

breaks and how to fix it, thereby enabling immigrant integration by improving service quality.

2.2 School Environment as an Ecosystem of Services

Schools act as a gateway (or gatekeeper) for the social inclusion and integration of immigrant families, as they not only provide educational opportunities for the youngest generation, but they also allow parents and caregivers to access an ecosystem of interconnected services and rights. Echoing Osborne et al. (2022), schools can be identified as public service ecosystems: they constitute and contribute to a learning ecosystem across different levels of service delivery (societal, organisational, and individual levels); and they generate value in the short and long-term for pupils, for families, and for the community. Adding to this concept, school services are, as argued by Karimi and Concilio (2026, in this book), interfaces between individuals (i.e., immigrant families) and their rights (Concilio et al. 2022). School services, from the enrolment procedure or the insurance payment to the pre/after-school programmes, have the capacity to connect families to an interplay of services, unlock multiple requirements, and lead to the exercise of correlated rights, beyond the right to education.

A variety of social and welfare spheres are affected by the use of school services, including access to healthcare, better working and socio-economic conditions, housing, digital rights and skills. For instance, the use of pre/after-school programmes offers multiple opportunities for immigrant parents along their integration path: they can work or invest in their personal development and social capital, knowing their child is in a safe and educational environment. On the other hand, specific socio-economic documentation, such as residence status or income certification, is an essential requirement for access to the school canteen and other subsidised services. However, when information and support from the school are limited, requirements and digital procedures turn into additional obstacles to accessibility. Immigrant families, as a marginalised and highly discriminated group, are disproportionately affected

Table 2.2 Categorisation of school services within the framework of the città-IN Project

Category	Services	Status
Mandatory school services	School enrolment, insurance payment, Electronic school register	Obligatory
Supplementary school services	Pre- or after-school programmes, summer camps	Optional

by cultural, language, socio-economic, bureaucratic, and digital barriers when interacting with public school services (Kaun and Liminga 2023; Watkins et al. 2012). As a result, accessibility barriers to school services not only challenge everyday family-school communication but also restrict families' access to an ecosystem of services and rights, leading to further exclusion and inequalities.

By viewing schools as public service ecosystems, this chapter introduces the città-IN project as a legacy of the easyRights project¹ and as a fruitful opportunity to further develop the Mediation Grammar (see Karimi and Concilio 2026 in this book). The città-IN project is an action-research project funded by the Polisocial Award 2023 programme² at the Politecnico di Milano, Italy. Moving from the broader European context of the easyRights project to an in-depth investigation of the local case study of the San Siro neighbourhood (Milan), the project focuses on analysing school services. It demonstrates how the Mediation Grammar can be adapted to different contexts and applied through multiple methods.

2.3 The città-IN Project

The città-IN research project analysed the experiences of immigrant parents in the San Siro neighbourhood of Milan as they interacted with five school services: school enrolment, insurance payments, the electronic school register, pre/after-school programmes, and summer camps. By adopting the Mediation Grammar as its theoretical and methodological framework, the project identified the obstacles that immigrants face when interacting with mandatory and supplementary school services (Table 2.2). Through a holistic, multidisciplinary approach, the project analysed language accessibility, information adequacy, and the actualisation of rights to understand the specific three empowerment gaps addressed in Mediation Grammar and to explore in depth the obstacles users face when accessing and using school services.

Access to a service represents a twofold challenge within the broader framework of human rights and the right to education. On the one hand, it is a practical challenge related to the enabling capacity of services and the interfaces' ability to ensure that users can complete the required procedures. On the other hand, it is a theoretical

¹ easyRights, <https://www.easyrights-project.eu/> (accessed: February 2026).

² Polisocial Award, Social Engagement and Responsibility Programme by Politecnico di Milano, <https://www.polimi.it/en/sustainable-development/polisocial-award> (accessed: February 2026).

challenge that intersects different disciplines. A multidisciplinary team allowed for the development of a work plan divided into five working packages focused on three main research objectives:

1. Identify the difficulties and obstacles immigrant families face while using school services;
2. Develop an action strategy for the redesign of these services based on the evaluation;
3. Contribute to the testing and development of Mediation Grammar as a service-quality tool.

The Project Context

The research took place in the San Siro district to align with the demands that emerged from Off-Campus San Siro, one of the multidisciplinary observatories of the Politecnico di Milano University, which addresses issues such as inequalities, access to the city, and social marginalisation processes. The neighbourhood of San Siro is characterised by significant socio-economic vulnerabilities, including a concentration of housing precarity, migration, and fragmented service infrastructures (Terenzi 2022). The area is a diverse, multicultural urban periphery characterised by ethnic and residential segregation, where socioeconomic challenges intersect with issues of social and school segregation. There is a high concentration of immigrant residents in the San Siro neighbourhood, defined as NIL 57 San Siro (Comune di Milano, 2021)³ (see Fig. 2.1). This population, as a percentage of total residents, is approximately 36%, which, compared to the city average of roughly 21%, is relatively high (Data sources: Milano Statistica 2024a). The high rate of early school dropout highlights the need for an in-depth investigation into the quality of interactions with school services (Ranzini 2024: 78). The district is also marked by a high prevalence of public housing. State primary schools in the neighbourhood are ethnically segregated, in some cases with a high proportion of pupils with a migrant background, ranging from 65 to 90% (Rete Locale SanSheroes 2019: 19; Cordini 2025: 138).

Within the migrant communities, the most represented nationalities in the neighbourhood, living predominantly within the social housing area, are the Egyptians (37%), followed by the Filipinos (11%) and Moroccans (6%) (Milano Statistica 2024a; CURA Lab 2024; Artero and Chiodelli 2020). Furthermore, over 17% of San Siro residents are minors (0–19 years old)—exceeding the city average (16.7%)—and around half of them have a migratory background (49%) (Milano Statistica 2024a; CURA Lab 2024). The diversity of nationalities in San Siro underscores the importance of assessing the linguistic accessibility of school services. The presence of residents from 85 different nationalities highlights the urgency of addressing their needs and prioritising actions to improve public service access (CURA Lab 2024).

In addition, Milan has the highest share of pupils with a migrant background in Italy. From 2000 to 2021, their presence in schools grew from 6% to over 20%. Today, 1 in 5 pupils in primary school and 1 in 10 in middle school are of foreign

³ NIL (*Nuclei di Identità Locale*) in Milan are the city's 88 distinct urban planning neighborhoods or local identity units used in the Territorial Government Plan (PGT) (Comune di Milano 2021).

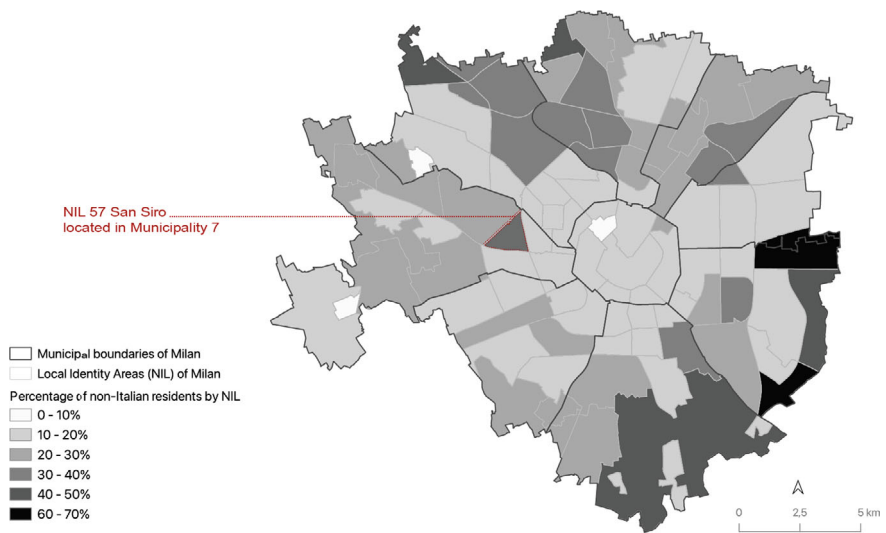


Fig. 2.1 The position of the San Siro neighbourhood with respect to the City of Milan and the percentage of non-italian residents by NIL. *Source* Authors’ elaboration from data by Comune di Milano, 2021 and 2024

origin (Fig. 2.2). In Municipio 7, where San Siro is located, the share of enrolled primary school pupils with non-Italian citizenship increased by 23% from 2019 to 2023, even though the total number of pupils decreased.

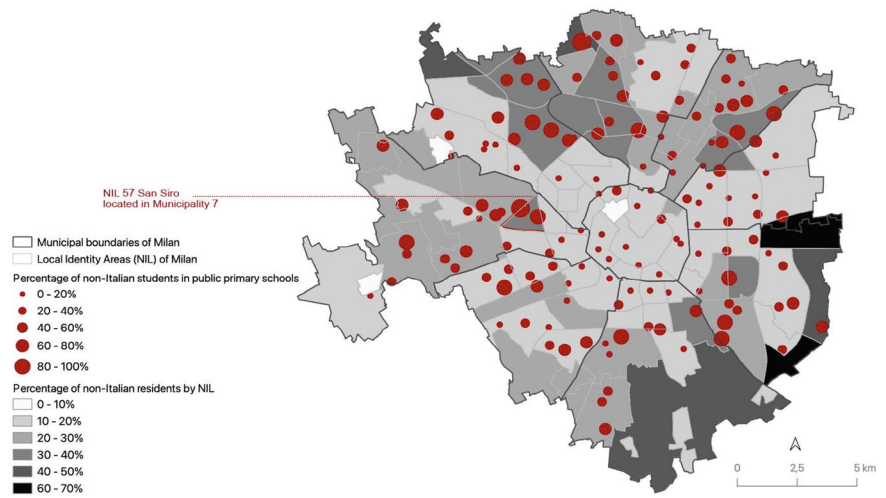


Fig. 2.2 Percentage of non-Italian pupils in public primary schools in Milan. *Source* Authors’ elaboration from data provided by Comune di Milano (2024)

The Project Activities

The città-IN project initially explored the user's experience with three primary school services, all of which are mandatory for parents:

- **Annual school enrolment:** A fundamental first step to guarantee the duty and right to education for all minors. Assessing the enabling capacity of this service, especially for immigrant families, is crucial to identifying the empowerment gaps.
- **School insurance payment:** Required to cover pupils against accidents during school activities. While collecting preliminary information on school services, the dialogue with local schools in San Siro was crucial to confirm the choice regarding both the electronic school register and the insurance payment, as both services were reported as rarely used by families with migrant backgrounds, making them difficult for the school administration to manage.
- **Electronic school register:** The key communication platform between the school and parents in Italy, used for sharing information on pupil progress, homework, and official notices. Hence, assessing access to and use of the electronic school register for immigrant families can shed light on a crucial form of interaction between users and the school that reinforces the educational co-responsibility pact (Messere and Zanier 2024).

Subsequently, in collaboration with the Comprehensive Institutes (primary schools) of San Siro and the Municipality of Milan (School and Educational Services Department), we decided to add the two supplementary school services provided by the Municipality of Milan. This decision was based on the suggestion by municipal staff, highlighting the fact that their services have been extensively underused, especially by immigrant families. By adding these extra services to our further analysis, we aim to develop a better, more systematic understanding of the challenges and possible interventions through the città-IN project. The two services are:

- **Pre- and after-school programmes:** Municipal supplementary childcare services provided before and after regular school hours, designed to support families in reconciling working time with school schedules. These programmes offer supervised activities in a school environment and represent an essential opportunity for children's socialisation and educational continuity.
- **Summer camps:** Municipal summer recreational programmes offered during school closure, typically including sports, cultural activities, outings, and supervised play. They provide safe daily care and continuity of social activities during school closures.

Although these services are not mandatory school activities, they both constitute strong opportunities to enhance pupils' educational skills and well-being through socialisation and peer support, as well as strong support for parents, especially those who already have a job or are seeking one. The project therefore analysed these five services and mapped the key actors and the governance of service management, design, and delivery for each of them. As shown in the scheme below (Fig. 2.3), the Ministry of Education and Merit (MIM) manages the national online school

enrolment platform. The Municipality of Milan manages requests for pre-school, after-school, and summer camp programmes. Local schools manage communications via the electronic school register (the Axios platform in San Siro) and the insurance service. For all these services, access is limited to online modes, primarily in Italian, and requires a national Public Digital Identity System (SPID). These access requirements are key to completing procedures and, consequently, to enabling the full exercise of fundamental rights.

To investigate in depth the complexity of each service, the città-IN project developed a multi-level action-research methodology that engaged with the entire school service ecosystem, from immigrant users to service providers and supporters. The primary research method was the MG user survey, administered face-to-face with parents with migrant backgrounds in San Siro. This data was complemented by:

- (a) In-depth semi-structured interviews with service providers and service supporters.
- (b) Participant observations in the field.
- (c) Participatory co-design activities with communities and local organisations.
- (d) User Experience (UX) and User Interface (UI) accessibility analyses of the digital platforms.

Crucially, while applying the MG methodology, the research project actively supported immigrant parents through a dedicated physical help desk, assisting with digital procedures, face-to-face training, and informational sessions on digital and human rights literacy.

2.4 Adopting the Mediation Grammar in the città-IN Project

The città-IN project adopts the Mediation Grammar (MG) not only as an evaluative framework but also as a guiding methodological approach to understanding and transforming the interaction between immigrant families and school-related public services. In line with the human rights-based and user-centred perspective outlined by Karimi and Concilio (2026, in this book), the MG assesses the enabling capacity of school services by focusing on what users are effectively able to understand, access, and achieve as they navigate service procedures. Applying the MG to the context of school services required a process of contextual adaptation. While the MG was initially developed within the easyRights project, the città-IN project extends its application to the educational sphere, conceptualising schools as interfaces for the exercise of a plurality of rights. These include not only the right to education but also social, digital, informational, and welfare-related rights that are activated through school enrolment, communication platforms, and supplementary educational services.

Methodologically, the application of the MG in the città-IN project follows a multi-step and multi-level approach. First, each of the five selected school services

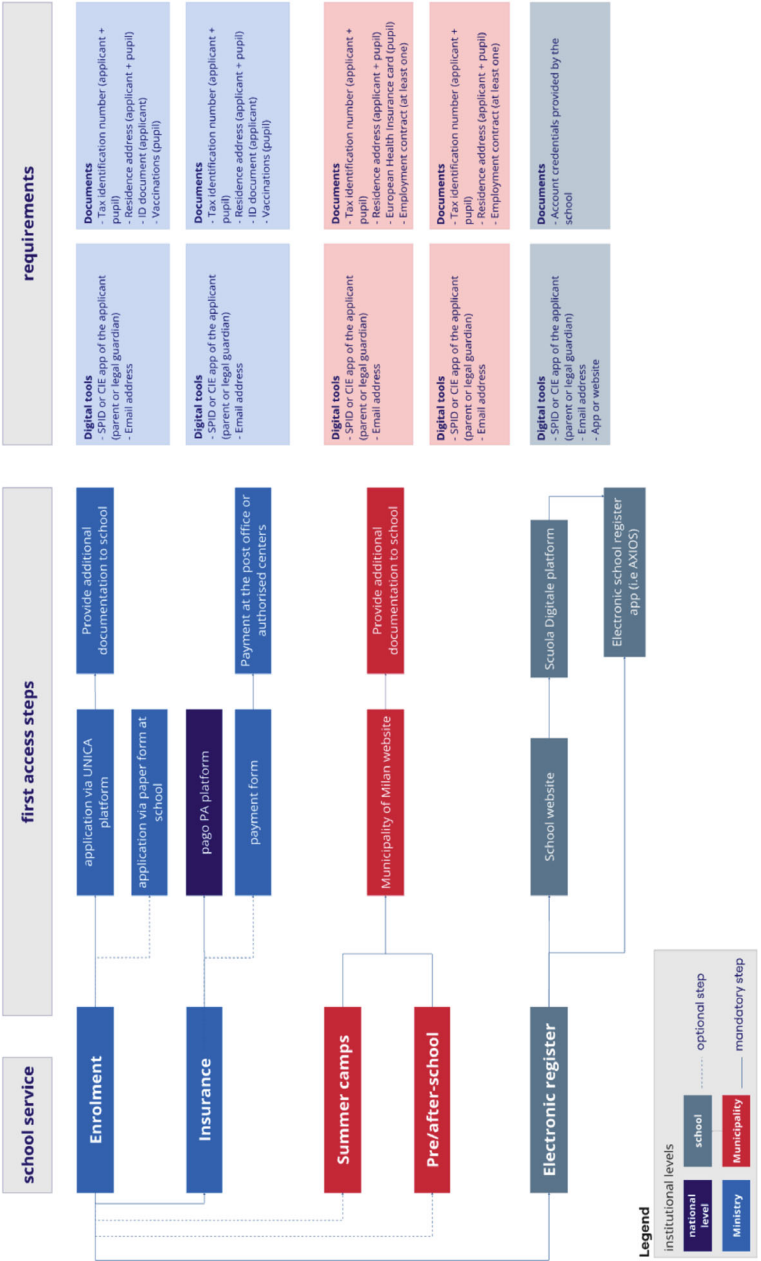


Fig. 2.3 Governance scheme of the five school services

was analysed as a distinct yet interconnected service pathway, involving specific requirements, digital tools, institutional actors, and governance arrangements. For each service, the project mapped the user journey, identifying key access points, procedural steps, and interaction points where empowerment gaps were likely to emerge.

Second, the MG user survey was adapted to the school context and administered face-to-face to immigrant parents residing in the San Siro neighbourhood. The survey operationalised the three pillars of the MG—language accessibility, information adequacy, and the actualisation of rights—through service-specific questions, enabling the classification of users into different empowerment profiles (A: basic, B: independent, C: autonomous). This quantitative and qualitative data enabled the identification of recurring patterns of dependency, partial autonomy, or exclusion across different services and user groups (see Karimi and Casarin 2026 in this book).

Third, the survey data were complemented by qualitative methods aligned with the MG framework, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews with service providers and intermediaries (see Casarin and Karimi 2026 in this book), and participatory activities with families and local organisations (Galluzzo and Bergaoui 2026; Giudici and Brambilla 2026 in this book). This triangulation allowed the project to capture not only individual user difficulties but also structural and organisational factors affecting service accessibility, such as institutional communication practices, digital design choices, and the availability (or absence) of mediation and support mechanisms.

A distinctive feature of the città-IN application of the MG is its action-oriented dimension. Rather than limiting the MG to an ex-post evaluation tool, the project integrated it into an ongoing support and learning process. Through a dedicated physical help desk and on-site assistance activities, researchers actively supported immigrant parents in accessing digital school services while simultaneously identifying mediation gaps and testing informal and formal solutions. This dual role of evaluation and support aligns with the MG's emphasis on empowerment as a dynamic process and reinforces its potential as a tool for service redesign.

Overall, the application of the Mediation Grammar within the città-IN project demonstrates its flexibility and relevance beyond its original policy domain. By grounding the MG in the everyday experiences of immigrant families interacting with school services, the project contributes to refining the methodology and to empirically validating its capacity to reveal hidden inequalities, inform participatory redesign processes, and support the transformation of schools into more inclusive public service ecosystems. This application provides the analytical foundation for the assessment results presented in the following chapter and for the participatory and organisational insights developed in Chaps. 4 (Casarin and Karimi 2026 in this book) and 5 (Galluzzo and Bergaoui 2026 in this book).

2.5 Schools as Rights Interfaces: Concluding Reflections

This chapter has argued that public primary schools should not be understood merely as educational institutions but as strategic interfaces between immigrant families and the broader welfare state. In contexts marked by socio-economic vulnerability, high levels of migration, and school segregation, such as San Siro, the school becomes one of the first and most frequent points of institutional contact for newly arrived or structurally marginalised households. Through enrolment procedures, digital communication platforms, insurance payments, and access to supplementary services, families are required to interact with complex administrative, regulatory, and technical systems. These interactions shape not only their children's educational paths but also their own sense of competence and awareness of rights within the city.

By conceptualising schools as public service ecosystems, this chapter has highlighted how educational services are deeply interconnected with other domains of social life, including employment opportunities, income-related benefits, digital literacy, housing stability, and access to social support networks. The use or underuse of services such as pre- and after-school programmes and summer camps is not simply a matter of personal preference. It reflects structural conditions, including linguistic accessibility, information clarity, affordability, digital requirements, and the presence (or absence) of mediation and institutional support. When these dimensions are not adequately addressed, school services risk reinforcing rather than mitigating existing inequalities.

The città-IN project situates itself precisely within this tension. Building on the theoretical framework presented by Karimi and Concilio (2026, in this book), this chapter applies the MG to a local educational context to assess whether school services effectively enable the actualisation of rights. By focusing on language accessibility, information adequacy, and the real exercise of rights, the project shifts the evaluative lens from institutional performance indicators to user empowerment. The question guiding the research is therefore not only whether services are formally available but also whether immigrant parents are concretely able to understand, navigate, and benefit from them autonomously.

The action-research design adopted in San Siro reinforces this user-centred perspective. Through face-to-face surveys, participant observation, interviews, co-design activities, and a physical help desk supporting families in digital procedures, the project has combined assessment with intervention. This approach reflects a broader methodological stance: evaluating services is inseparable from engaging with the lived realities of those who use them. In this sense, the città-IN project does not treat immigrant families as passive beneficiaries of policy but as active interlocutors whose experiences provide essential knowledge for institutional learning and service redesign.

The following chapters of this book build directly on this foundation. Chapter 3, written by Karimi and Casarin (2026), presents the empirical results of the MG assessment, analysing empowerment profiles across the selected school services and identifying specific gaps in language accessibility, information adequacy, and

actualisation of rights. Chapter 4, by Casarin and Karimi (2026), broadens the lens to examine the role of intermediaries and third-sector actors in bridging the gap between families and institutions. Chapter 5 explores participatory evaluation and co-design practices developed within the local ecosystem, while Chap. 6 investigates the digital infrastructures underpinning school service access and their implications for inclusion.

Taken together, these chapters demonstrate that improving immigrant integration through schools is not solely a pedagogical challenge but an organisational, digital, and governance issue. If schools are to function as real gateways to inclusion rather than sites of cumulative disadvantage, their services must be designed and evaluated as rights-enabling infrastructures. The città-IN project offers one possible pathway toward this goal, grounded in empirical analysis, participatory engagement, and a systematic quality framework that can reveal and address empowerment gaps Comune di Milano 2024.

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