

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Exploring Migrant Integration Through Local Governance: A Mixed-Method Study With Local Administrators in Italy

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## ABSTRACT

Given the high concentration of ethnic and cultural diversity in Italy, various national policies have been implemented to foster migrant integration. However, local authorities play a crucial role, as they are directly responsible for translating policy frameworks into concrete practices and mediating between institutions, families and communities. This study employed a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, to examine how 86 local administrators (80.23% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 48.27$  years,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.48$ , range: 25–71) from different municipalities in the Emilia-Romagna region in Italy perceived and managed issues related to migrant integration within their local contexts. Findings revealed that administrators generally perceived diversity as a resource and actively promoted integration through education and community engagement initiatives. Persistent challenges included limited political participation and structural constraints in youth-focused policies, highlighting the need for more sustainable, coordinated and inclusive approaches. These insights emphasize that systematically monitoring and comparing local practices is essential for designing responsive, evidence-based integration policies that produce meaningful outcomes for diverse communities.

## 1 | Introduction

The increasing ethnic and cultural diversity characterising many contemporary societies represents one of recent decades' most significant demographic and social transformations, leading to more heterogeneous local populations than ever before (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021). Such rapid changes present opportunities (e.g., possibility of engaging in positive intergroup relationships; Christ et al. 2014) and challenges (e.g., perception of threat; Delanty 2008), calling for effective governance strategies to manage diversity to foster social cohesion, equity and ultimately support both integration and inclusion. These two aspects can be understood as closely interrelated and mutually reinforcing processes (Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx 2016). Integration unfolds through the interactions between individuals and the social environments they inhabit and is shaped by a combination of individual and interpersonal

factors involving both migrant and non-migrant actors (Berry 2005; Navas et al. 2007). Inclusion, in turn, captures the extent to which such integration processes are sustained and enabled by social systems, translating into effective opportunities for participation, recognition and access to social, civic and institutional domains, as well as the sense of belonging that may emerge from these processes (Ager and Strang 2008; Duden et al. 2025).

In response to these challenges, migrant integration policies at the national level have gained increasing importance as tools to support the inclusion of individuals with a migrant background (i.e., individuals born in a country different from their country of residence, or with at least one parent born abroad; European Commission 2023) into the social, economic and political fabric of countries (Bilgili et al. 2015). These policies are also important for migrant youth, who constitute a growing

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share of the European population (EUROSTAT 2024), whose adaptation outcomes, such as educational achievement (Ham et al. 2020), can be positively influenced by implementing effective integration measures. Recognising this, numerous monitoring tools, such as the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX; Solano and Huddleston 2020), have been developed to evaluate and guide the implementation and effectiveness of national integration policies. However, while national-level policies set essential standards and frameworks, their implementation and outcomes often depend on how these policies are translated into concrete actions at local levels (Schloten 2018) and on the specific characteristics of the local context itself (De Coninck and Solano 2023).

This gap between national frameworks and local implementation can be further understood through the lens of multi-level governance, which emphasises how responsibilities are allocated across different governance levels, with central authorities leaving local actors substantial room to shape policy outcomes in relation to their specific contexts (Kazepov 2010). However, local configurations cannot be simply viewed as variations of national standards or treated as an independent framework (Kazepov et al. 2022). Instead, local welfare systems have emerged as context-sensitive arrangements in which socio-economic and cultural conditions interact with a variety of public and private actors to provide welfare resources (Andreotti et al. 2012). These systems embody both vertical subsidiarity, devolving responsibilities from central to local bodies, and horizontal subsidiarity, whereby multiple actors cooperate in service provision, resulting in locally specific configurations of rights, resources and opportunities (Andreotti et al. 2022; Andreotti and Mingione 2013).

At the same time, local welfare systems are not without limitations and may not always offer the best solutions for every social issue (Kazepov 2010). The concept of local citizenship (e.g., Smart and Smart 2001) helps to explain one of these challenges, highlighting that access to rights and services often depends on one's recognition as part of the local community. As a result, migrants, may face restricted or unequal access to social, economic and political resources, making the role of municipalities crucial in promoting inclusive policies (Smart and Smart 2001). Despite growing recognition of the importance of their role, empirical research examining how local actors translate governance frameworks into practice remains scarce, particularly regarding context-bound policy implementation (Ahn and Kazepov 2025). Thus, it is necessary to understand what role and capacity local authorities possess in tailoring and enacting integration strategies within their unique social and demographic contexts to foster equity, inclusion and social cohesion for diverse populations. In light of this, the research question guiding the current study was to investigate how local administrators (i.e., elected municipal officials in charge of specific areas, such as welfare, education, migration or youth policies) in specific municipalities located in the Emilia-Romagna region in the North-East of Italy, selected for this study due to its high concentration of ethnic and cultural diversity (ISTAT 2025), perceived and managed issues and policies related to migrant integration within their specific micro-settings.

## 1.1 | National and Local Integration Policies in Italy

Italy has undergone significant demographic changes over the past decades, with the migrant population now representing around 8.9% of the total population (ISTAT 2025). Migration has been driven both by labour demand and humanitarian inflows (Bettin and Cela 2014), producing a heterogeneous distribution across the country. Migrants in Italy come from a variety of regions, mainly Eastern Europe (e.g., Romania, Albania and Ukraine), North Africa (e.g., Morocco) and Asia (e.g., China; ISTAT 2025). These multicultural dynamics have made integration a central concern, highlighting the need for coherent and effective policies. In this respect, according to the MIPEX, Italy ranks slightly above the European average, with an approach toward integration described as 'temporary' whereby migrants, although granted access to basic rights, continue to face barriers to long-term security and political participation (Solano and Huddleston 2020). While the national framework provides an overall picture of Italy's approach to migration, focusing exclusively on this level would risk overlooking key aspects of multi-level governance that are crucial in this context. Evidence from the Italian case further confirms that locally available resources, institutional capacities and actor networks significantly shape how policies are interpreted and enacted (Dömös and Tarrósy 2019; Ponzo et al. 2022). In this vein, examining regional and local dynamics, such as grassroots movements in Naples, Campania (Ferraro 2003) and community-building initiatives in Riace, Calabria (Driel and Verkuyten 2022), as well as other local initiatives and project (e.g., Lang 2024), reveals important nuances and innovative practices that cannot be fully captured nationally.

Within this broader national picture, the Emilia-Romagna region stands out as one of the most diverse areas in Italy. Migrants account for over 12.8% of the regional population, well above the national average and are distributed across municipalities characterised by different levels of urbanisation and population density (Regione Emilia-Romagna 2025). This diversity has turned the region into a laboratory of integration policies: with Regional Law 5/2004, Emilia-Romagna was one of the first regions that officially recognised migration as a structural component of its territory, introducing regulatory and evaluative tools for social integration policies targeting foreign residents (Regione Emilia-Romagna 2011). In recent years, the region has further developed initiatives (e.g., the 'three-year plan for the integration of foreign citizens'; Regione Emilia-Romagna 2022) and programs supporting linguistic education, labour market inclusion and intercultural mediation (Regione Emilia-Romagna 2019). These initiatives further highlight that, in Italy, integration governance is multi-layered: while national laws establish broad rights and obligations, regions and municipalities often translate them into concrete measures, tailoring interventions to the specific needs of their communities (Ambrosini 2021b), an interplay that underscores the importance of examining migrant integration not only at the national level but also through the lens of local practices (Andreotti et al. 2012).

### 1.1.1 | The Importance of Integration Policies for Young People

At the national level (9.7%; ISTAT 2025) and even more so at the regional level (16.11%; Regione Emilia-Romagna 2025), adolescents with a migration background represent a proportion that is higher than average, reflecting the younger age structure of the migrant population in Italy. At the same time, adolescence is a developmental period that, especially for youth with a migrant background (Crocetti et al. 2025), often attracts attention due to increased risks of school drop-out (Aina et al. 2015) and low school belonging (Maratia et al. 2025), engagement in risk behaviours (Koumantakis et al. 2023) and experiences of victimisation (Policek et al. 2021). These factors highlight the need for policies specifically tailored to their needs. Such policies should not only facilitate the integration of youth but also reduce the likelihood of negative developmental outcomes.

Comparative research indicates that in countries where integration policies are more egalitarian, migrant adolescents tend to perform as well academically as their non-migrant peers (Ham et al. 2020). However, national frameworks do not always promote integration and, depending on political and historical circumstances, may adopt more restrictive approaches that limit migrants' rights, access to services or opportunities for participation (Callens 2015). Within the Italian context, evidence points to the coexistence of shifting national policy orientations over time, often resulting in a fragmented integration framework and in diverse, and sometimes uneven, integration trajectories across groups and territories, with limited capacity to respond consistently to the needs of specific populations, including migrant adolescents (Caneva 2014; Dömös and Tarrósy 2019). At the same time, research on local governance in Italy shows that this restrictive and fragmented nature of national integration policies is often reflected at the municipal level, where integration initiatives tend to be project-based, unevenly resourced and highly dependent on local political orientations and administrative capacities (Dömös and Tarrósy 2019; Ponzo et al. 2022).

Given this variability, it is essential to examine not only the formal design of integration policies but also the conditions under which they are developed and implemented, as their effectiveness largely depends on how they are translated into practice at the local level (Schloten 2018). In this sense, several initiatives have been promoted in the regional context of the study (e.g., the 'School and inclusion project'; Regione Emilia-Romagna 2024) to foster the integration of migrant students by promoting intercultural dialogue among peers and by strengthening relationships between schools, families and local communities. These experiences highlight the importance of examining how local administrators perceive, implement and manage policies on ethnic and cultural diversity to identify effective strategies for supporting the integration of migrant adolescents.

## 2 | The Present Study

Given the high concentration of ethnic and cultural diversity in Italy, integration depends not only on national policies but also on local entities that translate frameworks into concrete practices and mediate between institutions, families and communities.

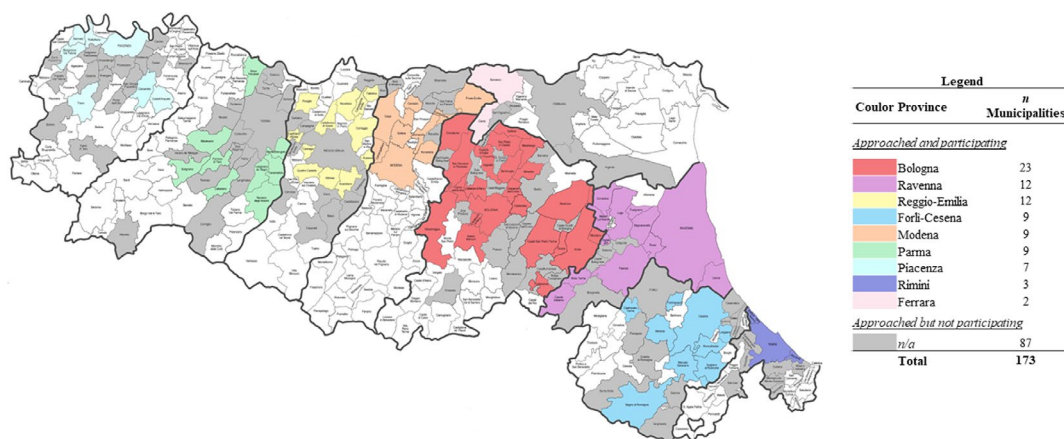
Thus, the present study employed a mixed-method design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, to examine how local administrators from different municipalities in the Emilia-Romagna region (1) conceptualised ethnic and cultural diversity and defined integration, (2) described existing projects and policies in favour of the integration of individuals with a migrant background and (3) identified policies specifically targeting migrant adolescents and future actions to be undertaken.

## 3 | Method

### 3.1 | Participants

Local administrators were selected from municipalities involved in the ERC-Consolidator longitudinal project IDENTITIES 'Managing identities in diverse societies: A developmental intergroup perspective with adolescents', conducted in the Emilia-Romagna region, Italy. The project targeted adolescents and the main actors in their social context, including local administrators. For this study, the focus was specifically on local administrators holding institutional responsibilities relevant to social services, focusing on migrant integration and youth policies. Based on these criteria, 173 local administrators with institutional responsibility in municipalities where at least one adolescent from the IDENTITIES project resided were identified and approached. Of these, 86, all born in Italy, completed the survey (80.23% female;  $M_{age} = 48.27$  years,  $SD_{age} = 11.48$ , range: 25–71 years). For an overview of the approached and participating municipalities, see Figure 1. The majority of participating local administrators held mixed portfolios, meaning they were responsible for two or more domains of interest (i.e., social services, youth policies and migrant integration; 60.47%), followed by those with specific responsibilities in social services (24.42%) or youth policies (10.47%), while the remaining 4.65% were municipality's mayors who directly oversaw these policy areas. Most participants had held their current office for 4 years or more (66.28%), while others had been in office for 1 year (12.79%), 2 years (11.63%), 3 years (3.49%) or less than 1 year (5.81%).

The 86 municipalities where the participating local administrators held office were characterised by relatively high levels of ethnic and cultural diversity in terms of the overall foreign population and the proportion of foreign adolescents. According to ISTAT, as of January 1st, 2024, the foreign population, defined as individuals without Italian citizenship, regardless of whether they were born in Italy or abroad, represented on average 11.89% ( $SD = 3.36$ ; range: 5.02%–21.13%) of the total population in the participating municipalities. A similar pattern was observed among adolescents aged 14–18, with foreign youth accounting for 11.71% of the overall adolescent population ( $SD = 4.64$ ; range: 2.98%–28.09%). To provide a comprehensive overview of the ethnic and cultural composition of the municipalities, the five most represented foreign nationalities were identified and aggregated. This approach allowed for the identification of the nationalities most frequently represented across the municipalities. The five most prevalent foreign nationalities were Romanian (19.80%), Moroccan (17.21%), Albanian (14.88%), Ukrainian (11.16%) and Pakistani (5.81%). A detailed overview of the



**FIGURE 1** | Territorial distribution of participating and non-participating municipalities. *n* = number of municipalities; *n/a* = not applicable. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/spol.12057)]

ethnic and cultural diversity for each municipality is reported in Table S1. These data reflect not only the ethnic and cultural diversity within the participating municipalities in this study but also are consistent with broader demographic patterns observed at both the regional (Regione Emilia-Romagna 2025) and national (ISTAT 2025) levels. In this vein, it should also be noted that the municipalities included in the study are located within a relatively prosperous regional context, as reflected by higher-than-average economic indicators compared to other regions (ISTAT 2023). Furthermore, they encompass a diverse range of settlement types, from highly urbanised areas with dense populations to small, rural municipalities characterised by low population density.

## 3.2 | Procedure

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Alma Mater University of Bologna (Italy) as part of the ERC-Consolidator project IDENTITIES 'Managing identities in diverse societies: A developmental intergroup perspective with adolescents'. Data collection took place between January and April 2024. A semi-structured interview, originally written in Italian, was developed specifically for the study and subsequently adapted into an online survey using the Qualtrics platform. Consent forms and the survey link were emailed to local administrators. In cases of nonresponse to the initial invitation, weekly reminder emails were sent, and follow-up phone calls were conducted 1 month before the end of data collection.

## 3.3 | Materials and Analytic Approaches

The study relied on two primary sources of data. First, statistical indicators from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) were obtained. Second, a semi-structured survey was completed by local administrators.

### 3.3.1 | Municipal Demographic Data

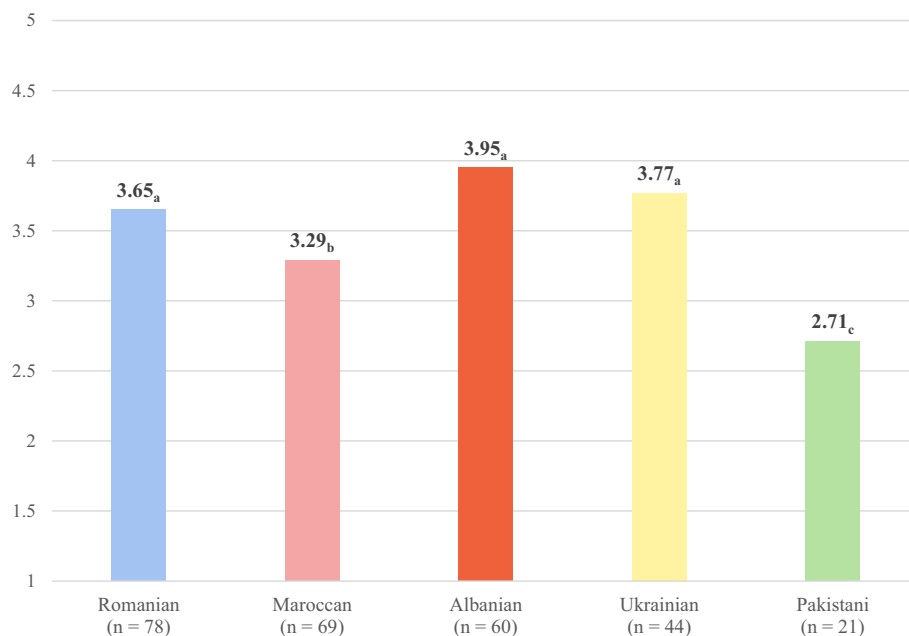
Municipal-level demographic data were retrieved from the official online database of the Italian National Institute of Statistics

(ISTAT; <https://demo.istat.it/app/?i=STR&l=it>). The indicators collected for each municipality provided information on their total and foreign (i.e., individual born in Italy or abroad without Italian citizenship), the overall number of adolescents (aged 14–18) and foreign adolescents, and the five most represented nationalities among the resident foreign population. These data were used to contextualise the study's municipalities and complement local administrators' responses. The most recent data extraction was conducted on July 3, 2025. Quantitative analyses of ISTAT indicators were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29.0).

### 3.3.2 | Semi-Structured Interview With Local Administrator

Local administrators completed a semi-structured interview consisting of demographic questions and a set of closed- and open-ended questions developed ad hoc for this study covering three main areas: (1) administrators' views on ethnic and cultural diversity and integration; (2) existing projects and policies supporting the integration of individuals with a migrant background, assessed through a set of items adapted from the Attitudes toward Migrant Integration Policies scale (AMIP; Maratia et al. 2024; Maratia and Crocetti 2024) and (3) policies specifically targeting migrant adolescents and future actions to be undertaken. The full interview protocol and the scale's reliability are reported in [Supporting Information](#).

Crucially, each quantitative item was followed by a qualitative prompt encouraging participants to elaborate on their answers or provide concrete examples. This mixed-method design allowed for a direct and meaningful connection between qualitative insights and corresponding quantitative responses, thereby enhancing the interpretive depth of the findings and addressing a common limitation in this type of research, where the two sources of data are often operationalised independently of one another (Castro et al. 2010). Qualitative data derived from the open-ended responses were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). This method allows for the systematic identification of themes and interpretative patterns across participants' narratives. The qualitative analysis was conducted inductively, without imposing pre-defined coding schemes, which ensured that themes emerged



**FIGURE 2** | Integration levels of the five most represented nationalities as reported by local administrators. Subscript letters indicated significant differences among groups as emerged from the Tukey post hoc ( $p < 0.05$ ).  $n$  = number of observations. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/spol.12057)]

directly from the data. Each response was carefully examined and assigned to one or more thematic codes reflecting its core content. The coding process was carried out collaboratively by the first and second authors, who independently reviewed and discussed the data to identify and define a coherent set of codes and themes. To ensure the consistency and accuracy of the coding, the third author subsequently reviewed the coded material, providing feedback and resolving any discrepancies through discussion with the other authors. This iterative and reflexive approach ensured the reliability and depth of the thematic interpretation. The final set of labels was incorporated into the SPSS dataset at the end of the recoding process. Data, analysis codes and outputs can be retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/BZ5RH>.

### 3.4 | Results

The following sections present results across the three main areas explored in the semi-structured interview. An overview of all codes, their *extended definitions* and *illustrative quotes* derived from the qualitative analyses is reported in Table S3. The total number of codes presented in each section may differ from the number of local administrators, as some responses were left unanswered or not labelled, while others were assigned multiple codes when different themes emerged.

#### 3.4.1 | Local Administrators' Views on Ethnic and Cultural Diversity and Integration

First, local administrators were asked to rate their perception of the level of integration of the most represented nationalities in their municipalities. While the most represented nationalities naturally vary across municipalities, responses were aggregated

based on the five most frequently represented in the overall sample, as previously reported. The scores (Figure 2) suggested a moderate-to-high perception of group integration. Tukey post hoc tests indicated that local administrators perceived the integration of Romanian, Albanian and Ukrainian groups more positively than that of Moroccan and Pakistani groups. The latter two also differed significantly, with the Pakistani group receiving the lowest perceived integration scores overall (all  $p < 0.05$ ).

In addition to rating the perceived integration of specific nationality groups, local administrators were also asked to indicate the extent to which they perceive ethnic and cultural diversity as a resource for their municipality. As shown in Table 1, results from this quantitative item indicated that the majority of local administrators perceived diversity as 'a lot' of a resource (40.74%), followed by those who considered it 'somewhat' (29.63%), 'very much' (25.93%) and 'only a little' (3.70%). Notably, no respondent indicated that diversity is not at all a resource.

To further explore their views, a series of follow-up qualitative questions invited administrators to elaborate on their quantitative responses by explaining why they viewed diversity as a greater or lesser resource, providing examples of both positive and negative integration experiences and offering a general definition of integration. Results from the first qualitative question (see Table 1) indicated that the most frequently emerging theme was the perception of diversity as an important *socio-cultural resource* (67.95%), capable of enriching the social fabric and promoting cohesion through intercultural exchange and the valorisation of differences. A second set of responses acknowledged diversity as a *material and future resource* (21.79%), emphasising its potential in terms of economic development, response to labour market needs and demographic opportunities for local areas. Finally, a mixed and critical view toward diversity also emerged, describing it as an

**TABLE 1** | Integrated overview of local administrators' quantitative ratings and qualitative insights on ethnic and cultural diversity and integration.

|                                                                                                                   |            |          |       | Can you provide us with concrete examples that, in your opinion, represent emblematic cases of good integration, on the one hand ... |    |    |    | ... and problematic integration, on the other hand? |    |   |   |                   |    | How would you define the term 'integration'? |    |   |   |                   |    |   |  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|----------|-------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|----|----|-----------------------------------------------------|----|---|---|-------------------|----|----------------------------------------------|----|---|---|-------------------|----|---|--|
|                                                                                                                   |            | ... Why? |       | Code <sup>a</sup>                                                                                                                    |    |    |    | Code <sup>b</sup>                                   |    |   |   | Code <sup>c</sup> |    |                                              |    |   |   | Code <sup>d</sup> |    |   |  |
|                                                                                                                   |            | <i>n</i> | %     | 1                                                                                                                                    | 2  | 3  | 1  | 2                                                   | 3  | 4 | 0 | 1                 | 2  | 3                                            | 4  | 5 | 1 | 2                 | 3  | 4 |  |
| Do you think that ethnic and cultural diversity could be a resource for the development of the Municipality of... | Not at all | 0        | 0     | —                                                                                                                                    | —  | —  | —  | —                                                   | —  | — | — | —                 | —  | —                                            | —  | — | — | —                 | —  | — |  |
|                                                                                                                   | A little   | 3        | 3.70  | 2                                                                                                                                    | 0  | 0  | 1  | 1                                                   | 2  | 0 | 0 | 1                 | 0  | 2                                            | 0  | 0 | 2 | 1                 | 0  | 0 |  |
|                                                                                                                   | Somewhat   | 24       | 29.63 | 5                                                                                                                                    | 15 | 6  | 11 | 1                                                   | 18 | 1 | 1 | 3                 | 5  | 15                                           | 2  | 2 | 1 | 14                | 7  | 0 |  |
|                                                                                                                   | A lot      | 33       | 40.74 | 0                                                                                                                                    | 21 | 6  | 16 | 3                                                   | 19 | 1 | 2 | 2                 | 3  | 15                                           | 3  | 2 | 2 | 18                | 4  | 4 |  |
|                                                                                                                   | Very Much  | 21       | 25.93 | 0                                                                                                                                    | 17 | 5  | 11 | 5                                                   | 16 | 4 | 0 | 7                 | 4  | 11                                           | 5  | 1 | 1 | 11                | 7  | 5 |  |
| Total                                                                                                             |            | 81       | 100   | 7                                                                                                                                    | 53 | 17 | 39 | 10                                                  | 55 | 6 | 3 | 13                | 12 | 43                                           | 10 | 5 | 6 | 44                | 18 | 9 |  |

Abbreviation: *n* = number of observations.

<sup>a</sup>1 = Unclear or incompatible resource, 2 = Socio-cultural resource, 3 = Material and future resource.

<sup>b</sup>1 = School and labour market integration, 2 = Language acquisition, 3 = Community, civic and political engagement, 4 = Access to and ability to use primary services.

<sup>c</sup>0 = No issue reported, 1 = Fragmentation in school and labour market, 2 = Language and communication barriers, 3 = Low community, civic and political engagement, 4 = Barriers to accessing and using primary Services, 5 = Cultural conflict.

<sup>d</sup>1 = Integration as assimilation, 2 = Integration as reciprocity and enrichment, 3 = Integration through community, civic and political engagement, 4 = Integration, basic rights and equal opportunities.

unclear or incompatible resource (10.26%), sometimes seen as hard to manage or uncertain.

The labels associated with concrete examples of positive and negative experiences of integration were largely parallel, indicating that the same themes could emerge as either facilitators or barriers to integration. For example, the theme of *civic, community and political engagement* emerged as the most frequent in both sets of accounts: in positive examples, it was described through active participation in social life, community networks and volunteering (50%), whereas in negative examples, through cultural or social isolation and disengagement from collective activities (50%). Similarly, the theme related to the *school and labour market integration* was positively described in relation to the presence, access, permanence and success in education and employment (35.45%), while in negative examples, it described fragmentation, school drop-out, irregular attendance, limited family involvement and difficulties in accessing or retaining jobs (15.12%). The theme of *language acquisition* (9.09%), including good proficiency in the local language and ongoing access to courses, was mirrored by *language and communication barriers* (13.95%), such as low proficiency and limited learning opportunities. Furthermore, the theme related to the *access to and use of primary services* (health, education, social services; 5.46%) was likewise contrasted with experiences of *barriers* in reaching or benefiting from these services (11.64%). In addition, the only elements emerging exclusively in the negative examples were

the theme of *cultural conflict* (5.80%), referring to situations in which divergent values, norms or worldviews were perceived as irreconcilable, and the category *no issue reported*, capturing cases in which participants stated that they did not perceive significant challenges in the integration process (3.49%).

Regarding the definition of integration, a first group of responses interpreted *integration as a reciprocal and enriching process* (57.14%), based on mutual recognition, peaceful coexistence and intercultural exchange within a framework of shared values. A second approach highlighted the significance of *community, civic and political engagement* (23.38%), conceptualising integration as active involvement in collective endeavours. Another set of responses conceptualised integration in terms of *access to fundamental rights and equal opportunities* (11.69%), emphasising the importance of the possibility and ability to enjoy the main services and resources. Finally, another theme referred to *integration as assimilation* (7.79%), defining it as a one-way process in which people with a migrant background must adapt to the norms and values of the host society.

### 3.4.2 | Projects and Policies in Favour of the Integration of Individuals With a Migrant Background

Moving to the second section of the interview, local administrators provided an overview of the projects promoted between 2021

**TABLE 2** | Local administrators' qualitative insights on the municipal project to foster integration.

| Regarding project/activities promoted by the Municipality of...in the last 3 years (2021, 2022, 2023), which project have you developed and promoted to foster the integration? |                   |    |    |   |    |    |    |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----|----|---|----|----|----|----|
|                                                                                                                                                                                 | Code <sup>a</sup> |    |    |   |    |    |    |    |
|                                                                                                                                                                                 | 1                 | 2  | 3  | 4 | 5  | 6  | 7  | 8  |
| 2021                                                                                                                                                                            | 33                | 10 | 5  | 2 | 5  | 8  | 8  | 22 |
| 2022                                                                                                                                                                            | 34                | 14 | 7  | 3 | 8  | 9  | 8  | 26 |
| 2023                                                                                                                                                                            | 34                | 11 | 8  | 4 | 10 | 8  | 10 | 29 |
| Total                                                                                                                                                                           | 101               | 35 | 20 | 9 | 23 | 25 | 26 | 77 |

<sup>a</sup>1 = Language and literacy courses, 2 = Educational support services, 3 = Job training, orientation and placement programs, 4 = Health and psychological care services, 5 = Financial and material support, 6 = Emergency response and first reception services, 7 = Information services, 8 = Community, civic and political initiatives.

and 2023, fostering the integration of individuals with a migrant background. Responses to the qualitative questions (Table 2) revealed a diverse range of practical initiatives covering structural and relational integration aspects. The most frequently mentioned area of intervention pertains to implementing *language and literacy courses* (31.96%) to promote language learning and proficiency. A second type of project reported concerns *community, civic and political initiatives* (24.37%), including the organisation of religious and festive celebrations, intercultural activities and social events. *Educational projects* (11.08%), *information services* (8.23%), *emergency response and first reception* (7.90%), *work mobility programs* (6.33%) and *health and psychological care* (2.85%) also emerged as projects to support the integration of migrants across different domains. Finally, a group of responses highlighted the provision of *financial and material support* (7.28%), including assistance with economic issues, housing and coverage of basic needs.

In addition, local administrators answered a set of quantitative items assessing the extent to which various integration policies across different domains had been supported within their municipality. They were also asked to indicate the degree of involvement of other local stakeholders and to report on any planned future changes in each policy domain. Results (Table 3) indicated a moderate level of policy implementation and other local authorities' involvement, while the expected future policy changes were generally rated as low-to-moderate.<sup>1</sup>

A series of follow-up qualitative questions prompted local administrators to provide concrete examples of the policies enacted, the actors involved and any planned future developments within each specific domain. Regarding concrete examples of integration policies, results (Table 3) indicated that the most frequently reported actions concerned the creation of *help desk services* (30.84%), designed to offer guidance, support and assistance in administrative procedures, especially regarding family reunion, health, permanent residence and access to nationality policies. These were followed by *job training, orientation and placement programs* (10.13%), *educational support services and cultural initiatives* (11.01%) and *language courses* (9.25%), mentioned particularly in relation to education and labour market mobility policies. Local administrators

also reported the *involvement of other actors* (e.g., public agencies, associations; 9.25%), especially within labour market mobility and health policies, as well as the allocation of *financial and material support* (5.73%) for family reunion, education and permanent residence policies. Additionally, *anti-discrimination support and awareness services* (7.05%), including dedicated listening and protection centres, public campaigns and awareness-raising events, and *political engagement initiatives* (3.08%), especially training and activities promoting active citizenship, were promoted within their respective policy areas. Notably, across all policy domains, but especially concerning those fostering migrants' political participation, there were cases in which *no concrete action* (13.66%) was reported, either because local administrators explicitly stated that they had not taken any measures to address the specific policy area or because the examples provided were not directly relevant.

Regarding the local entities and organisations involved in the implementation of these policies, the most frequently mentioned across all policy areas were *third-sector and voluntary associations* (61.11%), including cultural and religious associations, non-profit organisations, social movements, grassroots movements and other entities engaged in promoting well-being and community development. These were followed by *public* (e.g., services guaranteed by the state) and *private* (e.g., private agencies and organisations operating outside the public sector) *institutions and services in the areas of work* (12.39%), *education* (11.55%) and *health* (10.68%). Reports of the involvement of political organisations (4.27%), including political parties and civic lists, were less frequent but still present.

Furthermore, regarding any future changes in the implementation of integration policies, the themes that emerged most frequently for each policy area reflected the intention to ensure the *continuity and strengthening of existing initiatives* (36.36%), followed by the aim to *provide and implement additional services* (28.80%), *engage new figures* (20.45%) and *focus on specific segments of the population* (e.g., women; 6.06%). In some cases, *no change* was expected (8.33%), with local administrators explicitly stating that they did not foresee any concrete improvement or adjustment.

Finally, local administrators were asked to what extent the integration policies implemented at the municipal level aligned with those promoted at the regional, national and European levels. Results (Table 4) indicated that alignment was perceived to be strongest with regional and European policies, and somewhat weaker with national ones.

### 3.4.3 | Policies Specifically Targeting Migrant Adolescents and Future Actions

The last section focused on specific policies targeting adolescents aged 14 to 18 years, as well as on the difficulties encountered in their implementation, the strategies adopted to manage these difficulties, and the perceived effectiveness of these interventions.

Quantitative results (Table 5) on youth-targeted policies showed that relatively little attention had been devoted to initiatives specifically tailored to this age group. Notable exceptions were found in the areas of education and anti-discrimination, where policies were more often explicitly

**TABLE 3** | Integrated overview of local administrators' quantitative ratings and qualitative insights on different integration policy areas.

|                                   | How much does the Municipality of ... rate important to support policies to foster... |             | For each category proposed can you make some examples of concrete actions adopted in your Municipality? |    |    |    |    |    |   |    | To what extent have other local institutions been involved in implementing these policies? |    | Please indicate who has been involved |                   |    |    |    | For the current year, do you plan changes in the implementation of these policies? |    | If Yes, which ones? |                   |    |    |   |    |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|---|----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|---------------------------------------|-------------------|----|----|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|---------------------|-------------------|----|----|---|----|
|                                   | n                                                                                     | M (SD)      | 0                                                                                                       | 1  | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5  | 6 | 7  | 8                                                                                          | n  | M (SD)                                | 1                 | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5                                                                                  | n  | M (SD)              | 0                 | 1  | 2  | 3 | 4  |
|                                   |                                                                                       |             | Code <sup>a</sup>                                                                                       |    |    |    |    |    |   |    |                                                                                            |    |                                       | Code <sup>b</sup> |    |    |    |                                                                                    |    |                     | Code <sup>c</sup> |    |    |   |    |
| ... labour market mobility        | 61                                                                                    | 3.18 (1.09) | 1                                                                                                       | 0  | 4  | 23 | 0  | 0  | 0 | 0  | 9                                                                                          | 55 | 3.22 (1.18)                           | 17                | 1  | 5  | 0  | 14                                                                                 | 46 | 2.46 (1.19)         | 1                 | 5  | 6  | 2 | 0  |
| ... family reunion                | 62                                                                                    | 3.29 (1.06) | 4                                                                                                       | 18 | 0  | 0  | 0  | 0  | 0 | 5  | 0                                                                                          | 54 | 3.11 (1.14)                           | 6                 | 1  | 1  | 0  | 19                                                                                 | 46 | 2.30 (1.09)         | 1                 | 5  | 2  | 0 | 4  |
| ... education                     | 61                                                                                    | 4.25 (0.77) | 1                                                                                                       | 0  | 17 | 0  | 25 | 0  | 0 | 3  | 0                                                                                          | 55 | 3.93 (0.98)                           | 0                 | 19 | 0  | 1  | 29                                                                                 | 46 | 3.02 (1.31)         | 1                 | 11 | 8  | 2 | 3  |
| ... health                        | 61                                                                                    | 4.03 (0.75) | 1                                                                                                       | 22 | 0  | 0  | 0  | 0  | 0 | 0  | 12                                                                                         | 54 | 3.50 (1.14)                           | 2                 | 1  | 18 | 1  | 18                                                                                 | 47 | 2.98 (1.31)         | 1                 | 5  | 10 | 1 | 5  |
| ... political participation       | 59                                                                                    | 3.15 (1.05) | 13                                                                                                      | 0  | 0  | 0  | 0  | 0  | 7 | 0  | 0                                                                                          | 54 | 2.56 (1.11)                           | 2                 | 0  | 1  | 6  | 6                                                                                  | 45 | 2.71 (1.18)         | 1                 | 5  | 0  | 0 | 11 |
| ... permanent residency           | 58                                                                                    | 3.31 (0.98) | 1                                                                                                       | 13 | 0  | 0  | 0  | 0  | 0 | 5  | 0                                                                                          | 54 | 2.98 (1.14)                           | 0                 | 0  | 0  | 0  | 19                                                                                 | 44 | 2.41 (1.15)         | 2                 | 6  | 2  | 0 | 1  |
| ... access to Italian nationality | 59                                                                                    | 3.51 (1.10) | 4                                                                                                       | 17 | 0  | 0  | 0  | 0  | 0 | 0  | 0                                                                                          | 53 | 2.91 (1.20)                           | 0                 | 0  | 0  | 0  | 13                                                                                 | 44 | 2.57 (1.19)         | 2                 | 6  | 4  | 1 | 1  |
| ... anti-discrimination           | 58                                                                                    | 3.57 (1.09) | 6                                                                                                       | 0  | 0  | 0  | 0  | 16 | 0 | 0  | 0                                                                                          | 53 | 3.30 (1.21)                           | 2                 | 5  | 0  | 2  | 25                                                                                 | 45 | 2.87 (1.25)         | 2                 | 5  | 6  | 2 | 2  |
| Total                             | 55                                                                                    | 3.54 (0.65) | 31                                                                                                      | 70 | 21 | 23 | 25 | 16 | 7 | 13 | 21                                                                                         | 61 | 3.12 (0.85)                           | 29                | 27 | 25 | 10 | 143                                                                                | 43 | 2.67 (1.01)         | 11                | 48 | 38 | 8 | 27 |

Abbreviations: n = number of observations; M = means on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*); SD = standard deviation.<sup>a</sup>0 = No concrete action, 1 = Help desk services, 2 = Language and literacy courses; 3 = Job training, orientation and placement programs, 4 = Educational support services and cultural initiatives, 5 = Anti-discrimination support and awareness services, 6 = Political engagement initiatives, 7 = Financial and material support, 8 = Other actors' involvement.<sup>b</sup>1 = Public and private work institutions and services, 2 = Public and private educational institutions and services, 3 = Political organisations, 4 = Third sector and voluntary associations.<sup>c</sup>0 = No change, 1 = Continuity and strengthening of existing initiatives, 2 = Providing and implementing additional services, 3 = Focus on specific segments of the population, 4 = Engage new figures and local authorities and institutions.

designed for this population. A more in-depth exploration of the qualitative responses provided further insights into the types of policies implemented (Table 5), revealing that most of the initiatives for adolescents focused on *extracurricular and cultural spaces and initiatives* (45.10%), aimed at offering opportunities for artistic activities, cultural exchange and educational programs outside regular school hours, and *educational support services* (39.22%), such as the creation of spaces and moments for supervised study, tutoring, in-school integration. Other initiatives included *language and literacy courses* (7.84%), *financial support* (e.g., scholarships; 3.92%) and *job training, orientation and placement programs* to facilitate youth transition into the labour market (3.92%).

Regarding the challenges encountered in implementing these policies, the quantitative data (Table 6) indicated that while a big portion of local administrators reported no or limited difficulties (35.56% reported '*not at all*' and 17.78% '*a little*'), a significant share (42.22%) acknowledged encountering some difficulties, with a small minority reporting considerable challenges (2.22% reported '*a lot*', 2.22% '*very much*'). The qualitative responses (Table 6) indicated that the main difficulties encountered in implementing policies for migrant adolescents concerned *barriers to community, civic and political engagement* (e.g., difficulty involving the target group; 47.17%) and *resource, structural and sustainability constraints* (e.g., funding shortages; 32.08%), thus highlighting two distinct challenges,

**TABLE 4** | Local administrators' perception of the alignment of their municipal policies with those promoted at the regional, national and European levels.

|                                                                                                                                                                                         |                   | ... regional level |       | ... national level |       | ...European level |       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------|--------------------|-------|-------------------|-------|
|                                                                                                                                                                                         |                   | <i>n</i>           | %     | <i>n</i>           | %     | <i>n</i>          | %     |
|                                                                                                                                                                                         |                   |                    |       |                    |       |                   |       |
| <i>When considering the integration policies promoted at the local level in the Municipality of ..., to what extent do you believe they align with the policies promoted at the ...</i> | <i>Not at all</i> | 0                  | 0     | 5                  | 9.62  | 1                 | 1.92  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                         | <i>A little</i>   | 2                  | 3.85  | 13                 | 25.00 | 11                | 21.15 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                         | <i>Somewhat</i>   | 23                 | 44.23 | 26                 | 50.00 | 22                | 42.31 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                         | <i>A lot</i>      | 23                 | 44.23 | 8                  | 15.38 | 18                | 34.62 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                         | <i>Very Much</i>  | 4                  | 7.69  | 0                  | 0     | 0                 | 0     |
|                                                                                                                                                                                         | Total             | 52                 | 100   | 52                 | 100   | 52                | 100   |

Abbreviation: *n* = number of observations.

**TABLE 5** | Integrated overview of local administrators' quantitative ratings and qualitative insights on different integration policies specifically targeting adolescents.

|                                   | <i>Among the policies described above, which ones specifically targeted high school students (14–18 years old)? Please select all that apply</i> |              | <i>For each category proposed can you make some examples of policies adopted in your Municipality?</i> |    |   |    |   |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|---|----|---|
|                                   | Not selected                                                                                                                                     | Selected     | Code <sup>a</sup>                                                                                      |    |   |    |   |
|                                   | <i>N</i> (%)                                                                                                                                     | <i>N</i> (%) | 1                                                                                                      | 2  | 3 | 4  | 5 |
| ... labour market mobility        | 70 (81.40)                                                                                                                                       | 16 (18.60)   | 0                                                                                                      | 5  | 2 | 2  | 0 |
| ... family reunion                | 76 (88.37)                                                                                                                                       | 10 (11.63)   | 0                                                                                                      | 1  | 0 | 1  | 1 |
| ... education                     | 50 (58.14)                                                                                                                                       | 36 (41.86)   | 4                                                                                                      | 9  | 0 | 5  | 1 |
| ... health                        | 72 (83.72)                                                                                                                                       | 14 (16.28)   | 0                                                                                                      | 0  | 0 | 6  | 0 |
| ... political participation       | 79 (91.86)                                                                                                                                       | 7 (8.14)     | 0                                                                                                      | 0  | 0 | 4  | 0 |
| ... permanent residency           | 81 (94.19)                                                                                                                                       | 5 (5.81)     | 0                                                                                                      | 0  | 0 | 0  | 0 |
| ... access to Italian nationality | 73 (84.88)                                                                                                                                       | 13 (15.12)   | 0                                                                                                      | 1  | 0 | 2  | 0 |
| ... anti-discrimination           | 62 (72.09)                                                                                                                                       | 24 (27.91)   | 0                                                                                                      | 4  | 0 | 3  | 0 |
| Total                             | 563 (81.83)                                                                                                                                      | 125 (18.17)  | 4                                                                                                      | 20 | 2 | 23 | 2 |

Abbreviation: *n* = number of observations.

<sup>a</sup>1 = Language and literacy courses, 2 = Educational support services, 3 = Job, training, orientation and placement programs, 4 = Extracurricular and cultural spaces and initiatives, 5 = Financial and material support.

**TABLE 6** | Integrated overview of local administrators' quantitative ratings and qualitative insights on the difficulties in implementing integration policies specifically targeting adolescents.

|                                                                                                                                 |                   |          |       | What were they?   |    |   |   | How did you managethem? |    |    |    |   |   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------|-------|-------------------|----|---|---|-------------------------|----|----|----|---|---|
|                                                                                                                                 |                   |          |       | Code <sup>a</sup> |    |   |   | Code <sup>b</sup>       |    |    |    |   |   |
|                                                                                                                                 |                   |          |       | 1                 | 2  | 3 | 4 | 0                       | 1  | 2  | 3  | 4 | 5 |
|                                                                                                                                 |                   | <i>n</i> | %     |                   |    |   |   |                         |    |    |    |   |   |
| <i>Did you find any difficulties and/or criticism in implementing these policies for high school students (14–18years old)?</i> | <i>Not at all</i> | 16       | 35.56 | —                 | —  | — | — | —                       | —  | —  | —  | — | — |
|                                                                                                                                 | <i>A little</i>   | 8        | 17.78 | 5                 | 4  | 1 | 1 | 0                       | 4  | 3  | 1  | 3 | 0 |
|                                                                                                                                 | <i>Somewhat</i>   | 19       | 42.22 | 12                | 17 | 6 | 3 | 5                       | 7  | 7  | 7  | 1 | 2 |
|                                                                                                                                 | <i>A lot</i>      | 1        | 2.22  | 0                 | 3  | 0 | 0 | 0                       | 2  | 0  | 1  | 0 | 0 |
|                                                                                                                                 | <i>Very Much</i>  | 1        | 2.22  | 0                 | 1  | 0 | 0 | 0                       | 0  | 0  | 1  | 0 | 0 |
|                                                                                                                                 | Total             | 45       | 100   | 17                | 25 | 7 | 4 | 5                       | 13 | 10 | 10 | 4 | 2 |

Abbreviation: *n* = number of observations.<sup>a</sup>1 = Resource, structural and sustainability constraints, 2 = Barriers to community, civic and political engagement, 3 = Barriers to other actors' involvement, 4 = Language and cultural barriers.<sup>b</sup>0 = Lack of management, 1 = Extracurricular and cultural spaces and initiatives, 2 = Educational support services, 3 = Other actors involvement, 4 = Financial and material support, 5 = Language and literacy courses.

one rooted in relational dynamics, the other in structural limits. Additional barriers included difficulties in *involving other actors* (e.g., schools; 13.20%) and *language or cultural barriers* (7.55%) that hindered communication and effective service delivery. Local administrators were then asked to indicate how they had addressed these difficulties. Their answers showed that the main strategies to overcome such challenges were the creation of *extracurricular and cultural spaces and initiatives* (e.g., cultural exchange; 29.55%), the provision of *educational support services* (e.g., tutoring; 22.73%) and the *involvement of other actors* (e.g., families, schools; 22.73%). To a lesser extent, other approaches were also reported, such as the provision of *financial and material support* (e.g., scholarships; 9.08%) and the organisation of *language and literacy courses* (4.55%). Notably, in some cases, there was also a *lack of management* (11.36%), as local administrators explicitly stated that they either did not know how to address these difficulties or had not had the opportunity to do so.

Local administrators were also asked to assess the effectiveness of these policies. Results (Table 7) indicated that more than half of the respondents perceived these initiatives as 'somewhat' effective (52.27%), while 31.82% and 2.27% rated them as 'a lot' or 'very much' effective, respectively. Only a small portion expressed low levels of perceived efficacy (13.64%), while no one indicated that these policies were not at all effective. Qualitative responses (Table 7) further revealed that, in assessing the effectiveness of these policies, administrators mostly relied on *stakeholder engagement and feedback* (58.33%), including the degree of participation and satisfaction of adolescents. In addition, *educational outcomes and transitions* (25%), such as school retention, achieving diplomas and post-school pathways, were considered. In other cases, *no specific indicators* (16.67%) were used, suggesting that assessments were often informal or not collected systematically.

Finally, through an open-ended question, local administrators were asked to indicate what future changes were planned to facilitate the integration of individuals with a migrant background.

**TABLE 7** | Integrated overview of local administrators' quantitative ratings and qualitative insights regarding the perceived efficacy of integration policies.

|                                                                                                                                                            |                   |          |          | Which indicators have been considered to evaluate their efficacy? |   |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|---|----|
|                                                                                                                                                            |                   | <i>n</i> | <i>%</i> | Code <sup>a</sup>                                                 |   |    |
|                                                                                                                                                            |                   |          |          | 0                                                                 | 1 | 2  |
| <i>In general, how effective do you believe the policies/activities implemented for high school students (14–18 years old) have been up to this point?</i> | <i>Not at all</i> | 0        | 0        | —                                                                 | — | —  |
|                                                                                                                                                            | <i>A little</i>   | 6        | 13.64    | 1                                                                 | 0 | 2  |
|                                                                                                                                                            | <i>Somewhat</i>   | 23       | 52.27    | 1                                                                 | 4 | 6  |
|                                                                                                                                                            | <i>A lot</i>      | 14       | 31.82    | 2                                                                 | 2 | 5  |
|                                                                                                                                                            | <i>Very Much</i>  | 1        | 2.27     | 0                                                                 | 0 | 1  |
| Total                                                                                                                                                      |                   | 44       | 100      | 4                                                                 | 6 | 14 |

Abbreviation: *n* = number of observations.<sup>a</sup>0 = No indicators assessed, 1 = Educational outcomes and transitions, 2 = Stakeholder engagement and feedback.

The qualitative analysis of their responses (see Table 8) showed that planned future actions will primarily focus on reinforcing and expanding *community, civic and political initiatives* (48.78%) and *job training and orientation programs* (12.20%), as well as creating new *support services* (e.g., help desks; 14.63%), providing more *financial and material support* (9.75%), activating *language and literacy courses* (7.32%) and *involving new actors* (7.32%).

**TABLE 8** | Local administrators' qualitative insights on future municipal projects to improve integration.

| <b>In general, in your opinion, which further actions could the municipal administration undertake to improve the integration between Italian and foreign-origin individuals?</b> |          |          |          |          |          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <b>Code<sup>a</sup></b>                                                                                                                                                           |          |          |          |          |          |
| <b>1</b>                                                                                                                                                                          | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | <b>5</b> | <b>6</b> |
| 3                                                                                                                                                                                 | 5        | 20       | 4        | 6        | 3        |

<sup>a</sup>1 = Language and literacy courses, 2 = Job, training, orientation and placement programs, 3 = Community, civic and political initiatives, 4 = Financial and material support, 5 = Support services, 6 = Other actors' involvement.

## 4 | Discussion

This study found that local administrators in the Emilia-Romagna region in Italy generally perceived diversity as a positive resource and actively promoted integration through various initiatives, particularly in education and community engagement. At the same time, challenges persisted, including limited political participation and structural and relational constraints in youth policies. Overall, this study highlighted both the proactive role of municipalities and the need for more sustainable, coordinated and inclusive approaches.

### 4.1 | Diversity as a Resource? Local Administrators' Views on Integration

The findings on local administrators' perceptions of integration highlighted a nuanced way in which ethnic and cultural diversity is experienced at the municipal level. First, the moderate-to-high evaluations of specific migrant groups suggest an overall positive picture of their integration. At the same time, the lower scores attributed to Moroccan and especially Pakistani groups align with previous studies documenting the differentiated trajectories of migrant communities in Italy and Southern Europe (e.g., Finotelli and Ponzio 2018). These results may suggest that, while some national groups are perceived as more easily integrated due to shared linguistic, cultural or historical ties, others may be subject to enduring stereotypes, discrimination or structural barriers in education, employment and social participation.

In addition, as emerged from both quantitative and qualitative responses, the majority of administrators viewed diversity as a resource, either socio-cultural or material, underscoring a generally positive orientation toward migration at the local governance level. This result is consistent with research showing that municipalities, especially in regions like Emilia-Romagna, tend to adopt pragmatic and constructive narratives of diversity when addressing labour shortages, demographic decline or the need to foster intercultural dialogue (Ambrosini 2021a). From this perspective, migrant communities are not only framed as contributors to local social and cultural life but also increasingly conceptualised as developmental assets, capable of generating economic, demographic and social value for local contexts (Taylor 2010). Nevertheless, the minority of respondents who expressed mixed or critical views also point to the ambivalence

surrounding diversity, often framing it as a resource whose value remains uncertain or contested, echoing ambivalent integration discourses present in Italian public debate (Zanfrini 2019).

The thematic analysis of concrete examples of integration further illustrated how the same domains can function either as facilitators or as barriers depending on conditions of access, continuity and support. This duality reinforces the idea that integration is not a static outcome but a dynamic process, shaped by the interaction between migrants' resources and agency, institutional opportunities and the attitudes of the receiving community (Garcés-Masareñas and Penninx 2016).

Finally, the diverse ways in which administrators defined 'integration' reveal underlying tensions between more inclusive, reciprocal and rights-based perspectives and more assimilationist views. The predominance of the reciprocal and participatory definition is encouraging, as it aligns with intercultural approaches promoted also at the European level (European Commission 2020), at the same time, the persistence of assimilationist views (Berry 2005) suggests that local administrators do not share a single understanding of integration, but rather hold multiple and sometimes conflicting perspectives. These varied perspectives on integration underscore the importance of examining how such views translate into concrete policies and initiatives at the local level, shaping the strategies adopted to support migrants' integration.

### 4.2 | From Words to Action: Local Projects and Policies for Migrant Integration

The results regarding local projects and policy implementation highlighted the active role of municipalities in promoting migrant integration across multiple domains. First, local administrators reported a variety of initiatives between 2021 and 2023, ranging from language and literacy courses to educational support services, community and intercultural activities, help desks for administrative guidance, job orientation and placement programs and financial or material assistance. These initiatives reflect the sustained and active investment of the region over the years in supporting migrant integration, as documented by various official reports and regional evaluations (Regione Emilia-Romagna 2022).

Moving to policy implementation across different domains, results indicated a proactive tendency for municipalities to address integration challenges, especially those related to education and health. This proactive stance is further supported by qualitative responses, which highlighted concrete actions such as establishing help desks for administrative guidance, language and literacy courses, educational support services and cultural or intercultural initiatives. At the same time, the importance of promoting financial and economic support for migrants also emerged, helping them access resources, cover basic needs and improve their economic participation, an aspect that is comparatively less emphasised in tools such as the MIPEX (Koroutchev 2024). In line with multi-governance perspectives (Andreotti et al. 2012), these practices show how access to social rights, services and forms of belonging are not only defined by national frameworks but are actively produced and negotiated

at the municipal level through everyday policy implementation. However, political participation remains the area with the highest proportion of 'no concrete action', consistent with national patterns (Solano and Huddleston 2020), highlighting the need for further efforts to engage migrants in political life. This concern is further reinforced by the relatively low levels of planned future changes across policy areas, as reported by local administrators, despite the fact that sustainable integration requires both continuity in successful initiatives and flexibility to address evolving demographic and social dynamics (Garcés-Masareñas and Penninx 2016). These national and municipal similarities illustrate once again that, while local welfare systems can generate context-based and innovative policy responses, they cannot be understood as fully detached from the broader national framework, which continues to shape opportunities and constraints (Kazepov et al. 2022).

Qualitative responses further emphasised the crucial role of third-sector and voluntary organisations, which were cited as the most involved actors across policy areas, confirming once again their distinctive contribution in compensating for gaps in state provision (Lang 2024). This aligns with previous research underscoring the central role of the voluntary sector in shaping and sustaining local integration processes, particularly in contexts where municipal resources are limited (Aiken and Bode 2009). Public and private work, educational and health services were also engaged, though less frequently, in their respective domains.

Finally, local administrators reported that municipal integration policies were more closely aligned with regional and European initiatives than with national policies. This pattern indicated that municipalities often enact measures that are more ambitious or innovative than national directives (Ambrosini 2021b), reflecting a multi-level governance dynamic in which they increasingly function as key sites for constructing local forms of citizenship and welfare (Ahn and Kazepov 2025; Andreotti et al. 2012). Although national policies provide broad guidelines, municipalities often adapt or, at times, strategically depart from them to address specific local needs and constraints. Migrant integration, therefore, emerges not from linear top-down policy transfer, but from localised processes in which rights, recognition and access to welfare are shaped at the intersection of supranational, national and municipal governance (Andreotti et al. 2022). This dynamic can generate inconsistencies but also opens space for innovative, context-sensitive practices that enrich the broader policy debate (Kazepov et al. 2022; Schloten 2018).

#### 4.2.1 | Policies for Migrant Adolescents and Future Directions

Policies specifically targeting migrant adolescents show a clear focus on educational initiatives, reflecting the recognition that schooling and learning support are central to fostering integration in this age group (Ham et al. 2020). However, while municipalities have invested in these programs, local administrators have reported persistent challenges in their implementation, which point to a dual set of constraints. On the one hand, relational challenges, such as difficulties in engaging migrant youth and fostering civic, community and political participation,

emerged as the most frequently cited obstacle. These findings align with previous research, which highlights how integration efforts at the local level are often hindered by limited opportunities for meaningful participation and weak or fragmented connections between institutions and migrant communities (Dömös and Tarrósy 2019). On the other hand, structural and resource-related constraints, such as funding shortages and concerns about the sustainability of initiatives, were also prominently reported, reflecting the project-based and discontinuous nature of local integration policies documented in the Italian context (Ponzo et al. 2022). Overall, this result suggested once again a weak institutionalisation and fragmentation of youth policies in Italy, which often lead to short-term responses, limited resources and hinder the effective involvement of young migrants (Lanutti 2024).

Notably, the strategies adopted to address these challenges, such as the creation of extracurricular and cultural spaces, educational support services and the involvement of other local actors, largely rely on locally available resources and networks. This pattern aligns with existing evidence indicating that, in the absence of stable national frameworks and dedicated funding, municipalities often respond to implementation barriers through ad hoc, context-specific solutions (Dömös and Tarrósy 2019; Ponzo et al. 2022). At the same time, the presence of cases in which difficulties remained unaddressed points out the uneven capacity of local administrations, and local welfare systems more broadly, to cope with specific constraints, indicating that when policies' responsibility is shifted to the local level, disparities in institutional capacity and available resources can translate into challenges that are difficult to resolve (Andreotti et al. 2012; Kazepov 2010).

Furthermore, the assessment of policy effectiveness appears somewhat limited, as administrators mainly relied on informal indicators such as stakeholder feedback and participation, while more systematic, evidence-based metrics (e.g., tracking educational outcomes, school retention or post-school transitions) were less consistently applied. This suggests a need for greater attention to robust monitoring and evaluation practices to ensure that adolescent-focused initiatives and integration policies achieve their intended outcomes (Gregurović and Župarić-Iljić 2018). All together, these findings underscore that educational initiatives are central to adolescent-focused integration policies, but their success requires tackling relational and structural challenges alongside the active involvement of and negotiation with local actors (Fargues and Sredanovic 2025), underscoring the importance of conceptualising municipalities as complex local welfare systems (Andreotti et al. 2012).

Looking ahead, local administrators emphasised the continuation and expansion of existing initiatives, alongside the development of additional support services, engagement of new actors and targeted programs to address existing gaps. These planned actions reflect a recognition that enhancing the reach and impact of integration policies requires not only expanding services but also fostering greater participation of target groups, improving coordination among local actors, and ensuring sufficient financial resources, thereby guaranteeing that interventions are both responsive to community needs and capable of promoting meaningful inclusion (OECD 2018).

### 4.3 | Limitations

This study should be considered in light of some limitations. First, the research was conducted in a context characterised by relatively high ethnic and cultural diversity, where integration policies are consequently more structured and institutionalised. Thus, the findings may not be fully generalised to municipalities with lower diversity or less formalised integration initiatives. Examining how other local entities approach these issues, and whether they encounter similar challenges or employ comparable solutions, would be valuable, given that policy outcomes often vary according to local context (De Coninck and Solano 2023).

Second, our focus was primarily on local administrators, who play a central role in policy design and coordination. However, other actors, such as street-level bureaucrats, can also critically influence the implementation and effectiveness of integration policies, as highlighted in previous studies (e.g., Belabas and Gerrits 2017; Otmani et al. 2025). In addition, recent developments such as the digitalisation of administrative procedures related to these policies in Italy (e.g., access to citizenship; Trucco 2025) are reshaping interactions among different actors and may further affect policy outcomes. Therefore, future research should consider these different factors to fully capture the complexity of local integration processes.

## 5 | Conclusions

This mixed-method study shed light on how local administrators in the Emilia-Romagna region perceive ethnic and cultural diversity and translate these perceptions into concrete integration policies and practices. By examining local initiatives and projects, the study highlighted the dynamic interplay between policy design, implementation and community engagement, showing how integration is shaped through everyday governance processes at the municipal level. Findings indicated that migrant integration does not emerge from a linear top-down transfer of national or supranational directives but rather from localised and negotiated processes in which access to welfare, participation and recognition are continuously shaped across different levels of governance.

At the same time, the study revealed the coexistence of innovative practices and persistent structural and relational constraints, particularly in policies targeting adolescents. While municipalities play a proactive role in promoting integration, especially in education and community-oriented domains, they also face significant challenges related to limited resources, uneven institutional capacities and difficulties in engaging young migrants in civic and political life. These findings underscored both the potential and the limits of local action, highlighting how municipalities operate within broader national and regional frameworks that continue to shape opportunities and constraints.

Overall, these insights emphasise the importance of systematically monitoring and comparing local practices to understand better how integration and inclusion are enacted in context-sensitive ways. Strengthening mechanisms for coordination,

knowledge-sharing and evaluation across municipalities may enhance the coherence and effectiveness of integration policies, particularly for vulnerable groups such as migrant adolescents. Future research would benefit from longitudinal and comparative approaches across regions or countries to further explore how local governance arrangements, demographic change and political climates interact in shaping the evolving landscape of migrant inclusion.

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### Ethics Statement

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Ethics Committee of the Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna (Italy) and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

### Consent

Active informed consent was obtained from all local administrators prior to their participation in the study.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

Data, analyses codes and outputs will be made publicly available at the following link <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/BZ5RH> upon acceptance of the manuscript.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Delving deeper into intra-regional distinctions, correlation analyses to account for potential variations among the municipalities included in the study were conducted. Specifically, the relation between municipalities' policy implementation and two key contextual indicators, such as the percentage of general ( $r=0.105$ ,  $p=0.44$ ) and adolescent ( $r=0.143$ ,  $p=0.30$ ) foreign population over the total in each municipality, was examined. In line with other evidence (Ponzo et al. 2022), results did not yield any significant associations, suggesting that the degree of policy implementation was not systematically related to these demographic characteristics of the municipalities involved in the study.

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** spol70057-sup-0001-Supinfo.docx.