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articoli

Covid, distance education and families. The Italian case within the international survey on family support to learning processes

Covid, DAD e famiglie. Il caso italiano in un'indagine internazionale sul sostegno familiare ai processi di apprendimento

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Abstract

The COVID pandemic had countless repercussions on the family system, starting with the need to support young people in distance education training. Family and school realities have had to find new ways of relating with mutual overlap. Investigating how family members supported the learning of their children/grandchildren aged 6-16 was the aim of the international research activity coordinated by the University of Bath (UK). This contribution intends to account for the Italian data by exploring the possible relationships between the potential vulnerability factors of the pre-covid household and the activities that can be considered protective and supportive factors for households. The aim is not only to understand which competences and network systems have been activated in a period of exceptional gravity, but rather not to disperse, but on the contrary to enhance, those processes that have proved useful especially in fragile contexts.

Keywords: family; DAD; social support; international survey.

Sintesi

La pandemia di COVID ha avuto innumerevoli ripercussioni sul sistema famigliare a partire dalla necessità di supportare i giovani nelle attività di formazione in DAD. Le realtà familiari e scolastiche hanno dovuto trovare nuove modalità di relazione con un reciproco sconfinamento. Indagare come i membri della famiglia hanno sostenuto l'apprendimento dei loro figli/nipoti dai 6 ai 16 anni è stato l'obiettivo dell'attività di ricerca internazionale coordinata dall'università University di Bath (UK).Il presente contributo intende dar conto dei dati italiani esplorando le possibili relazione tra i fattori potenziali di vulnerabilità della famiglia pre-covid e le attività che possono essere considerate fattori di protezione e di supporto per i nuclei familiari. Non si tratta soltanto di comprendere quali competenze e sistemi di rete, sono stati attivati in un periodo di eccezionale gravità, quanto piuttosto non disperdere, ma al contrario valorizzare, quei processi che si sono dimostrati utili soprattutto nei contesti di fragilità.

Parole chiave: famiglia; DAD; supporto sociale; indagine internazionale.

[1] The paragraphs 1, 4.2, 6 are to be attributed to Silvia Panzavolta; the paragraphs 2, 4.3, 5.1 are to be attributed to Alessia Rosa; the paragraphs 3, 4.1, 5.2, 7 are to be attributed to Sara Mori.

1. Introduction

The pandemic COVID- 19 has caused a rise in pre-existing vulnerabilities and social differences (Bazzoli et al., 2021; Filandri & Semi, 2020). Schools were not prepared to deliver quality distance education, families were not equipped – both technologically and culturally – to play a role in teaching their children. Home spaces had to be reorganised, daily routines reconsidered and a new balance to be found in school-family relations. For both students and parents, the possibility of cultivating the social aspects that used to characterize daily life has also disappeared. The opportunities for interaction and relationships for students have also been reduced, although these are crucial aspects for motivation and emotional involvement in the learning process (Filosa & Parente, 2020). The difficulty of interacting and relating to others has become more pronounced, In this instance, distance education was introduced as a way to face the tremendous challenge of lockdown, an unexpected and totally new condition that "forced" (Trinchero, 2020) everybody – students included – to stay home. Several agencies pointed out that the Pandemic caused economic, cultural and educational gaps in families, as the 54th Report from Censis (2020) states. According to this study differences and inequalities increased in Italian families and in their capacity to scaffold their children. The same trend was observed in schools and social, educational exclusion was heavy. In April 2020, according to the study, only 11.2% of the 2,800 schools of the sample were able to reach the whole student community in distance education. More than 10% of students were left out, especially in the Southern part of Italy and in the Islands, with rates of 20%. SEN students were even more damaged since they are the ones who benefit the most from social interactions and face-to-face scaffolding. Another similar study, reaching the same conclusions, was done by Lumsa, Fondazione Agnelli and the University of Trento (Ianes & Bellacicco, 2020). In this study a total of 3,291 Italian teachers answered the questionnaire: 8.9% in nursery schools, 40.9% in primary schools, 23.3% in lower secondary schools and 26.9% in upper secondary schools / vocational training. 84.2% of them were represented by SEN teachers and only 15.8% by curriculum teachers. About 30% of respondents held the role of class coordinator or contact person for inclusion. As regards the geographical area, most of them came from Southern and Northern Italy (42.4% and 42.3%, respectively); the remaining 15.2% from the Centre. The study reported both technical and pedagogical difficulties in including SEN students. Firstly for the lack of activation due to 6 main factors: technical difficulties of families (37.7%), training deficiencies in teachers (28.3%), organisational deficiencies of schools (26.4%), school community conflicts (20.8%), lack of support of families (18.9%) and technical difficulties from the side of teachers (9.4%). Besides that, SEN students needed a pedagogical plan to be revised, which was not the case in most situations. Therefore, more than 1 student out of 3 was totally excluded, also because pedagogical objectives were not re-organized (10.2%).

A third report drawing on a survey by Indire (2020) to 3,774 Italian teachers found that the main causes for exclusion during the Pandemic in learning opportunities were socio-economic disadvantages (especially the fact of coming from migrant families) and being a SEN student. In primary and lower secondary school, students in the condition of socio-economic disadvantage were clearly the most exposed to exclusion together with SEN students. The Invalsi tests (Invalsi, 2021) took place at the end of the school year 2020-2021, still deeply influenced by the presence of COVID-19. It is the first standardised test since the outbreak of the Pandemic. They represent the first large-scale measurement of the effects on basic learning achieved (Italian, Mathematics and English), after a long period of suspension of lessons in presence due to the high number of sick people. Tests were administered to students in primary (ISCED-1), lower secondary (ISCED-2) and upper

secondary (ISCED-3). The report based on the analysis of the test described a scaring situation: while primary education has been able to maintain the attainment of pre-Pandemic, as for lower and upper secondary this is not the case: in all subjects, the greatest learning losses are observed among students who come from more poor socio-economic-cultural backgrounds, among whom the percentage high performing students also decreases. The equalisation effect of the school on this cluster of students (so-called resilient) is therefore almost cancelled.

Furthermore, there is strong evidence of educational inequality in Southern Italy regions in terms of the school's ability to mitigate the effect of socio-economic-cultural differences, both in terms of differences between schools and between classes. Drop-out rates, both implicit – meaning the insufficient development of necessary skills to enter the labour market – and explicit have also worsened, and socio-economic and cultural factors are crucial, once again.

In view of all this, it was considered interesting to examine these aspects in more detail in The International Covid-19 Impact on Parental Engagement Study (Icipes).

2. Pandemic era, families and cultural capital.

Systemic models of human development and family functioning (Lerner & Damon, 2006), form the conceptual framework on which this contribution is based. In addition, the following have been considered: family systems theory (Carr, 2015; Fiese et al., 2019), the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the family stress model (Conger et al., 2002) and developmental systems theory (Lerner & Damon, 2006). This contextualisation delineates the family as the social context that can most support or hinder personal development. Moreover, within the family context opposing forces may coexist more than in other social configurations. Within families, multiple functions and antithetical processes coexist (e.g. autonomy and solidarity, self-care and care for others, projects and uncertainty, openness and intimacy) that are not always easy to keep in balance within daily interactions (Buttorini, 1997). In modern families, the economic and organisational needs and work choices of the partners make combining family needs and work duties a complex task. In a longitudinal perspective, studies on different childcare arrangements have shown that "parents today have to work harder, expend more energy and perform much more difficult tasks than they did in the past. Stronger pressures come from work and family, and global culture and the 'liquid society' (Bauman, 2000) ask parents to be increasingly present and actively engaged" (Gigli, 2016, p. 9). Within this complex scenario, the different and changing Strategies identified by families have been disrupted by Covid 19 (Formenti, 2014; Contini, 2010; Corsi & Stramaglia, 2009; Formenti, 2008; Gigli, 2007; 2016). Interesting qualitative research by Lareau (1987) on family-school relations in white working-class and middle-class communities in the 1980s underlined that usually the social class lends parents unequal resources to comply with teachers' requests for family participation. Characteristics of family life (e.g., social networks) also intervene in family-school relationships. social and cultural elements of family life that support conformity with teachers' requests can be viewed as a form of cultural capital. The study suggests that the concept of cultural capital can be used to understand social class differences in children's school life history. This concept is still valid today. Within this complex scenario the different and changing Strategies identified by families have been disrupted by Covid 19 (Formenti, 2014; Contini 2010; Corsi &

Stramaglia, 2009; Formenti, 2008; Gigli, 2007; 2016). School closures exacerbated social class academic disparities (Goudeau et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has forced teachers and parents to quickly adapt to a new educational context: distance learning. Teachers developed online educational material while parents taught the exercises and lessons provided by teachers to their children at home. Families were faced with multiple difficulties in finding and learning how to use IT tools and then supporting their children in their studies. In many cases, this took place in cramped home environments. Finally, the work, and consequently economic, structure of many families changed during the pandemic. Economic problems did not favour the family climate and support for the children. Faced with complex, difficult events and sudden changes, functional families have been able to find different solutions aimed at re-establishing a new organisational balance, ensuring solidity and development of interpersonal relationships. But this has not been feasible for all families and in all settings (Horsley, 2020). In any case, the Covid-19 pandemic was a high-impact factor on families, and it will certainly change the functioning of European families that lived in a quiet historical period, where famine and other life-threatening events were not present to such a global extent. In this complex historical period, some research has highlighted a new challenge for education systems and policymakers. Schools in all word have the opportunity to not only help students catch up on unfinished learning from the pandemic but also tackle long-standing historical inequities in education (Goudeau et al., 2021) In order for this to happen, it is necessary to know and analyse in-depth the reactions of family dynamics during the pandemic. It is also useful to understand how social and economic differences affected the solutions identified in different cultural contexts. Against this backdrop, the international collaboration established between IUL, the University of Bath, and other international research centres aimed precisely to investigate how families around the world coped with these dramatic changes in children's schooling due to the pandemic. The research is based on the belief that only by fully understanding a phenomenon can effective solutions be found for the future.

3. The ICIPES International Survey: procedures, participants and questionnaire

The International Covid-19 Impact on Parental Engagement Study (ICIPES) was conducted by a consortium of more than twenty research institutes, under the coordination of the University of Bath (UK). The study objective was to investigate how families contributed to the education/teaching of their children/grandchildren during the Pandemic, with particular reference to the lockdown period. The age of the children considered varies from 6 to 16 years. On the whole, 4,658 questionnaires were collected in 23 countries and in 5 continents, thus providing a world-wide view of how the Pandemic impacted on families during the first period of lockdown as for schooling and education (Osorio-Saez et al., 2021) (Figure 1).

Country	Frequency	Percentage
Chile	1597	34.7
China	217	4.7
Colombia	94	2.0
Costa Rica	155	3.4
El Salvador	83	1.8

Ethiopia	171	3.7
Ghana	142	3.1
Honduras	246	5.3
India	54	1.2
Italy	517	11.2
Japan	159	3.5
Mexico	244	5.3
Pakistan	45	1.0
Sri Lanka	199	4.3
Tanzania & Zanzibar	58	1.3
Turkey	78	1.7
United Kingdom	191	4.2
United States	289	6.3
Uruguay	61	1.3
Total	4600	100.0

Figure 1. Continents and countries taking part in the ICIPES 2020 survey.

The study employed a semi-structured questionnaire, made up of closed- and opened-questions, the focus being caregivers' perception of their engagement during distance education, their efforts to supporting their children's learning, the blend between the time dedicated to scaffolding children learning and family life, and parents' confidence in using educational technology media (Osorio-Saez et al., 2021). The study considered some demographics such as the family household, the socioeconomic status, the parents' cultural background, the children's school achievement, the availability of devices so that significant correlations could be detected.

Relevant indicators were: the amount/quality of technologies for home for schooling; the school delivery model and their support; how parents co-designed teaching, by personalising the school offer drawing on their own ideas and experiences; the perception of parents and caregivers as to their own digital competencies, crucial to play a role in this phase.

The questionnaire closed-questions were structured with 5-point Likert scale (namely "never", "rarely", "sometimes", "often", "always") and on multiple choice, radio options ("yes"- "no"). The questionnaire was anonymous.

4. Methodology

4.1. Aims and hypothesis of this contribution

The goal of this contribution is to understand if there is a relationship between vulnerability factors in Italian families (as described in the pre-Pandemic era) and the activities they carried out with their kids, considering some activities as more school-oriented and therefore protective for learning processes.

The socio-economic index of the family and the caregivers' perception of their own parental competence in supporting their children at school were considered as factors of possible vulnerability: the goal is to understand how these indices have impacted on coping

patterns during the Pandemic (such as help seeking and networking with other parents to better support their childrens' learning) and on behavioural responses from parents in terms of leisure activities (such as meeting with friends online, proposing informal learning activities and spending time together offline).

4.2. Italian Participants

The Italian sample is made up of 517 caregivers who took care of children aged 6-16. The majority of the respondents (94.2%) are women (mothers or grandmothers) and 5.8% are male (fathers or grandfathers). As for the age of the respondents, half of them are aged 35-44, only 5.6% are under 34 and the remaining are +46, of which 0.4% are +75. As for the children's gender, 46.8% are female and 53.2% are male. The average age of the students is 9.7 years and the median is 10 years. As for households, 88.2% of the respondents live with the father/mother of the student whose experience they refer to; only 1.6% said they live with a different partner. Finally, 7.4% are lone parents.

About the presence of other siblings, 57.1% of the sample have one brother/sister, 27.9% are only children, and just a small percentage (12%) of children has two brothers (12%) or from 4 to 7 brothers/sisters (3%).

60% live in urban areas and 39.7 in rural areas. With regard to educational qualifications and employment, 30% of caregivers have a high school diploma and 35.4% have a university degree, 19.3% have post-university degrees such as masters and doctorates; while the rest have not completed compulsory schooling. 15.5% say they are housewives and over half (52.2%) have a managerial role. As for household monthly income, 44.3% declare it is below 2000 euros, 35% between 2000 and 4000 euros, 6.6% between 4000 and 9000 and 1.6% over 10,000. The median is in a range between 2000 and 2500 euros.

As for child support, 85.1% said they helped them in school support activities.

4.3. Research dataset analysis procedure

The analyzes[2] of the Italian dataset were carried out with the STATA program. The socio-economic index of the questionnaire is a standardised variable with mean 0 and variance 1, divided into four classes: "Low", "Medium-Low", "Medium-High", "High" which summarises the scores to the questions concerning the family monthly income and the level of education of the parents.

The parental competence index was created by calculating the average resulting from the scores to the items in question #25 concerning the perceived competence as for a series of activities to support their children in daily life, from school to play activities.

In order to understand the support that caregivers seeked from other parents for better supporting their kids, an in-depth analysis was conducted on items 4-5-6 of question #22, calculating the association through the Chi-square test. The Pearson correlation coefficient was then calculated for these three relations.

An in-depth analysis was then conducted on question #24 investigating what activities were carried out by parents with their children during the lockdown period: an analysis of the main components was conducted to underpin a possible hierarchical model among those

[2] For statistical analysis the authors wish to acknowledge the work of Giorgio Cecchi from the IUL University.

items. The results revealed four main components that accounted for more than 50% of the model variance. However, one item was found to be multidimensional, encompassing 3 different activities: online cultural activities, online social/game-based activities and offline activities. The latter were further investigated by searching for correlation with the socio-economic index and the perceived parental competence.

5. Results

5.1. Networking among families

A first significant association between the socio-economic index and the items on the activation of social resources (i.e. to follow other parents' tips on the social media; to get inspired by others' proposals; to use their friends' ideas) was found. A second significant association was found between the perceived parental competence index and the same item considered above.

The associations are significant for both indices on all three items: interestingly, while the socio-economic index increases, the seek for help from other parents decreases (Figure 2, 4 and 6); as the perceived parental competence index increases, the scores on the same items increase (Figure 3, 5, 7).

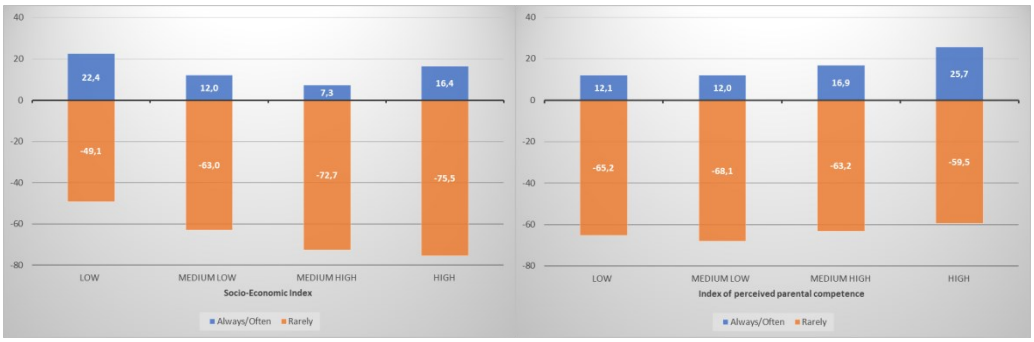

Figure 2 and 3. Association between Socio-economic Index and item "Follow on social media what other parents trying to do the same (X^2 (12, n= 444) = 46,524, p = 0.00) and between Index of perceived parental competence and the same item (X^2 (12, n= 444) = 27,002, p = 0.04).

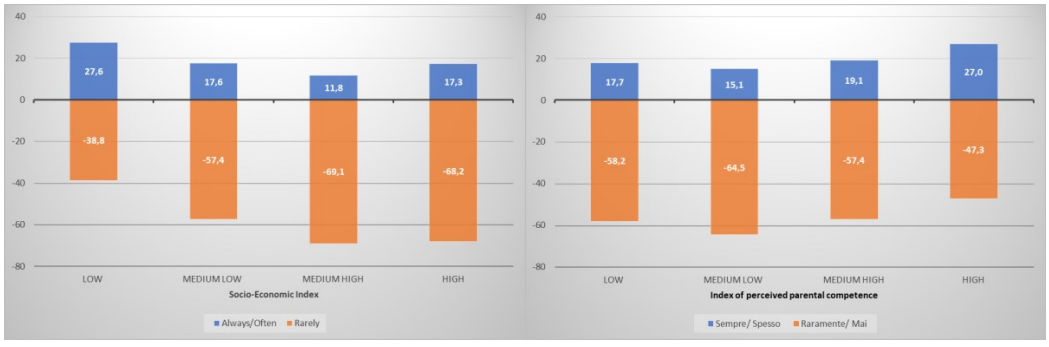

Figure 4 and 5. Association between Socio-economic Index and item "Finding on social media what other parents were doing and drawing inspiration from that" (X2 (12, n= 444) = 32,212, p = 0.01) and between Index of perceived parental competence and the same item (X2 (12, n= 444) = 29,324 p = 0.04).

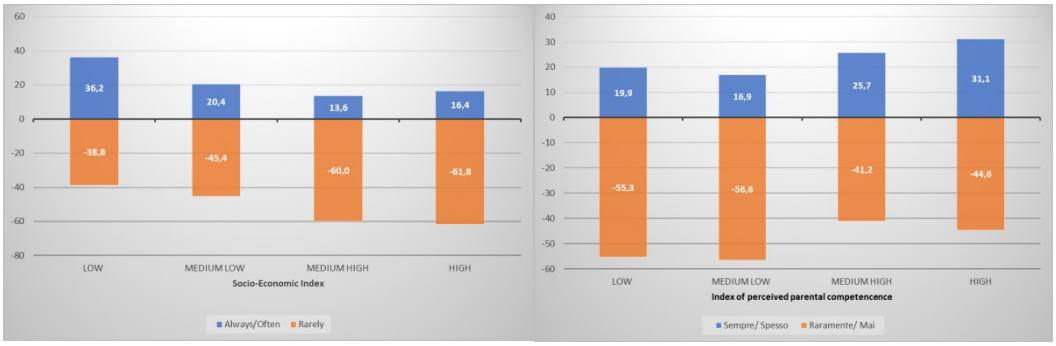

Figure 6 and 7. Association between Socio-economic Index and item "Get ideas from other friends through other means of communication (phone, whatsapp, etc.)" (X^2 (12, n = 444) = 46,524, p = 0.00) and between Index of perceived parental competence and the same item. (X^2 (12, n = 444) = 25,348, p = 0.13).

5.2. Leisure activities at home

Another aspect taken into account in the analysis was what leisure activities parents/caregivers organized with their children (Figure 8). Eating and cooking were interestingly the most selected options (80%), followed by discussing popular topics, watching movies and contacting friends using social networks (between 70% and 80% of the respondents reported having done so).

On this question an analysis on the main components was carried out. In Figure 8 the three main components emerged are explained and their single indicators given. The three components together explain 51.099% of the variance.

Components	Indicators
Online cultural activities	Visiting an online library together
	Visiting an online museum together
	Learned about something on the internet
Online social/game-based activities	Shopping online together
	Contacted friends or families by using the internet (Skype, FaceTime, WhatsApp)
	Played computer/videogames
	Interacted on social media together
Offline activities	Eating meal together
	Cooking a meal together
	Talking about things that are important for them
	Playing together in the garden
	Reading a book together
	Reading an ebook together
	Watching a film and discussing it together
	Singing together
	Created a piece of art on paper or using other materials
	Used technology to create or edit video, music

Figure 8. Three main components and indicators.

The above activities (online cultural, online social and offline) have been considered in relation with two indexes: the socio-cultural index (Figure 9, 11, 13) and the parenting competence perception (Figure 10, 12, 14).

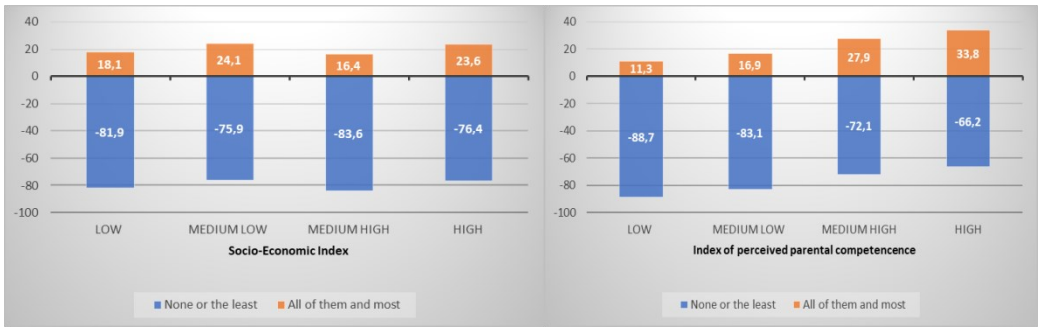

Figure 9 and 10. Association between Socio-economic Index and "Cultural activities online" (X^2 (9, n = 444) = 6,863, p > 0.5) and between Index of perceived parental competence and the same factor (X^2 (9, n = 444) = 26,206 p = 0.02).

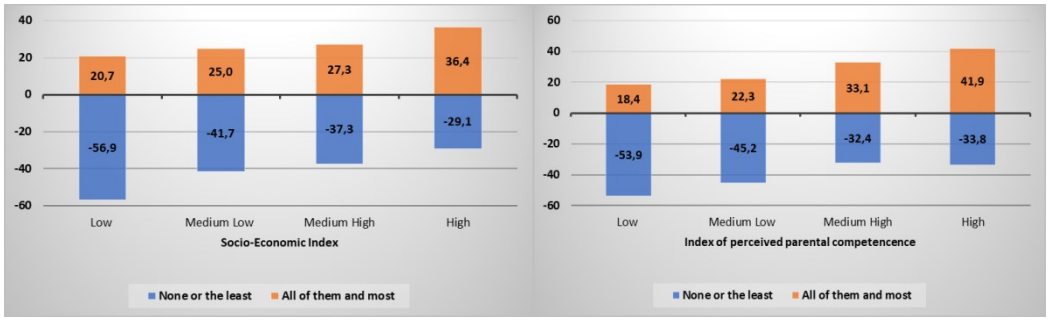

Figure 11 and 12. Association between Socio-economic Index and "Online leisure activities" (X^2 (12, n= 444) = 24,600, p = 0.012) and between Index of perceived parental competence and the same factor (X^2 (12, n= 444) = 29,602 p = 0.03).

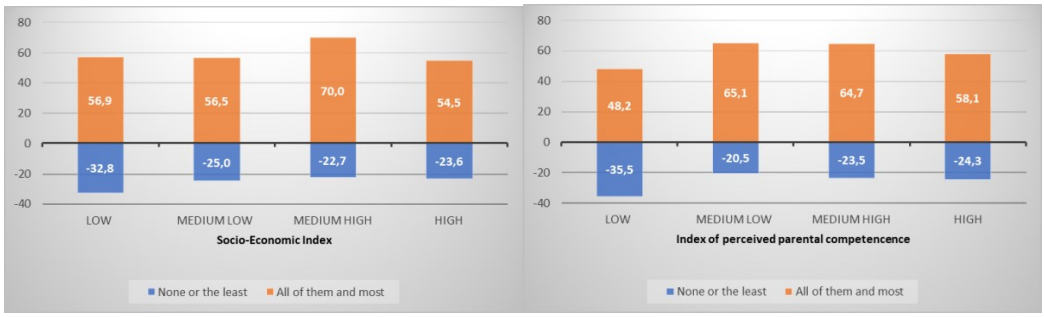

Figure 13 and 14. Association between Socio-economic Index and "Non-Online Activities Together" (X2 (30, n= 444) = 46,829, p = 0.026) and between Index of perceived parental competence and the same factor (X2 (30, n= 444) = 38,540,324 p > 0.5).

The socio-cultural background positively relates to leisure activities both online and offline. Online cultural activities, on the contrary, are not associated with it, and only one small percentage of caregivers offers this opportunity to their kids (Figure 9).

The index of perceived parental competence is, on the other hand, significantly and positively associated with both factors concerning online activities (cultural and social/game-based) but not with offline activities.

6. Discussion

As for online networking with other parents to find educational solutions, the analysis of data shows that parents with a higher socio-economic background are those who have more sought sharing occasions with others.

However, answers might have been conditioned by the questions themselves and they might be much less passive or rely on other sources and did not feel the need to seek for help. On the contrary, the perception of one's own parental competence is positively related to the search for information by asking others.

In this sense, the perceived parental competence acts as a protective factor which in the case of the socio-economic index may perhaps be compensated by the personal resources that the parents have.

As for leisure time activities carried out with children, the most chosen ones concern offline activities; the least chosen are online cultural ones. The latter relates to the perceived parental competence index, which is also positively related with online social/game-based activities. The socio-economic index is not related to online activities in general but rather to leisure – both online and offline – activities with the kids.

During the pandemic, many of the previous social networks had to be reshaped and reorganised and a set of new relationships recreated. New Social networks often provided social capital or how-to information, useful for solving everyday issues (Valente, 2010).

There is an extensive literature, which describes the roles of perceived social support in positively influencing self-efficacy, self-esteem, and resilience.

Overall, this analysis proves that when the socio-economic index is higher it acts as a protection factor and is associated with social/game-based activities with kids rather than help seeking in other parents. In addition, a protective factor such as the perceived parental competence index correlates with the amount of time devoted to online activities, encompassing game-based, cultural, and networking opportunities.

7. Conclusions

Social support is generally described as the availability of reliable people, who let us know that they care about us (Sarason, 1983). Social support can be analysed as support perceptions (perceived support) and supportive behaviours (received support). Perceived social support is the personal subjective appraisal of the availability and adequacy of resources and reactions provided by their social networks (Paykani et al., 2020). Received social support refers to objective appraisals of personal social connections and their consequent functions (Valente, 2010). Both can promote overall well-being as well as increasing resilient and proactive behaviours (Haber et al., 2007). Generally, social support may come from different sources, e.g. family, friends, partners, community ties, and colleagues (Hogan, 2002).

However, not everyone has the social and cultural tools to identify and exploit such social networks, so all those initiatives supporting families in complex situations have been functional. These initiatives were implemented through voluntary associations and there was no broad and shared planning.

What can be highlighted emerging from this study is that investments in economic support are crucial. In this sense, the Family Act, included in the National Resilience and Recovery Plan (https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/PNRR.pdf) goes in this direction, taking into account measures for the support to women's work and the reduction of gender gap in the labour and social market (it is worth noting that the majority of the respondents are female). The socio-economic index correlates with the perceived parental competence, which, in turn, acts as a protective factor for stress management and well-being. It also negatively correlates to functional coping skills and behaviours, such as help seeking.

Moreover, socio-economic index, as presented above, is found correlating, by the most recent studies on school attainment in Pandemic age (Invalsi, 2021), with the poorest students' learning outcomes, especially in secondary schools and in the Southern part of Italy. During the Pandemic schools have not been able is not able to mitigate the socio-economic gap, especially on "resilient students".

The risk is, therefore, that disadvantaged socio-economic students can be ever more disadvantaged also because of their family coping strategies in all domains (including educational and schooling ones).

These interventions will be necessary also in the post-pandemic phases because specific needs and shortcomings have been made explicit. Awareness of certain needs and potentials must and can be the starting point for a more aware and competent restart. This development can look at both formal and informal processes.

In this perspective, the development of networks among families could guarantee an informal support and a modeling opportunity for disadvantaged families to reframe their perceived parental competence, learning from others and relying on social capital as a source for improving their self-image. This could be an opportunity for mutual help and growth, of course.

From a formal and institutional point of view, the strengthening of territorial educational pacts and networks goes in this direction, guaranteeing mutual support among all educational agencies and adding value and potential within a system of triangulation between school, family, and territory.

Many support networks were born in an emergency situation, based on online social media. The future therefore promises a material realisation of these links through the presence and the transition from virtual to real or the construction of hybrid environments.

The study undoubtedly has its limitations: first of all, the sample is not representative. The conclusions drawn are therefore not generalisable. However, the results offer interesting insights into the developments and investments that our country could make in the post-pandemic period.

In the future, it might be interesting to compare the results from the analysis of socio-economic indices with data from other countries that participated in the study.

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