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Distance Education and Parental Role, in Italy. Evidence-Based Reflections from an International Survey, after the First Lockdown

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Abstract

This paper presents the analysis of the data from the *International Covid-19 Impact on Parental Engagement Study* (ICIPES) 2020, an international survey investigating the ways in which parents and caregivers were able to build capacity to engage with children's learning during the period of social distancing arising from the global Covid-19 pandemic. The survey was coordinated by the University of Bath and involved 23 partner countries, among which the "IUL- Italian University Line" representing Italy. The domains investigated were parental engagement; school support for parents and children; home-schooling and family life balance, and confidence in the use of technology. The pandemic has shown several obstacles that families had to face daily in their attempt to educate their children, especially in a period where no previous models could be taken as a reference point. Therefore, it represents a unique historical opportunity for researchers and policymakers to understand all the lessons learnt from this global emergency and work closely with families, to support them in engaging with children's learning. The Authors of this contributions, as well as the other partners worldwide, believe that school-family relations are far from being collaborative and supportive, especially in certain age levels, and that much needs to be done to co-design learning opportunities bearing in mind a more ecological vision, with formal, informal and non-formal learning occasions be intertwined and interconnected. In sight of the abovementioned framework, the analysis shown in this paper focuses on the Italian data set.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, ICIPES, school-family relations, distance education, parental engagement.

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Abstract

L'articolo sintetizza quanto emerso dall'analisi dei dati dell'*International Covid-19 Impact on Parental Engagement Study* (ICIPES) 2020, un'indagine internazionale volta a esplorare in che modo genitori e *caregivers* sono stati capaci di sostenere l'apprendimento dei bambini, all'interno delle relazioni educative, al tempo del distanziamento sociale causato dalla pandemia globale da Covid-19. L'indagine è stata coordinata dall'Università di Bath e ha coinvolto 23 Paesi partner, tra cui, in rappresentanza dell'Italia, "IUL-Italian University Line" – Università Telematica degli Studi. Questi i domini indagati: coinvolgimento dei genitori; sostegno scolastico a genitori e figli; equilibrio tra didattica a distanza e vita familiar, e padronanza delle tecnologie. La pandemia ha generato diversi ostacoli, che le famiglie hanno dovuto affrontare quotidianamente nel tentativo di supportare i propri figli, soprattutto in un periodo in cui nessun modello precedente poteva essere preso come punto di riferimento. Pertanto, essa rappresenta un'opportunità storica unica, per il mondo della ricerca e per quello della politica, per fare tesoro delle lezioni apprese dall'emergenza globale e lavorare a stretto contatto con le famiglie, così da sostenerle nell'impegno quotidiano di educare e istruire i propri figli. Gli Autori di questo contributo, così come gli altri partner, ritengono che le relazioni scuola-famiglia non sempre riescono ad essere collaborative e solidali, soprattutto in riferimento a determinate fasce di età, e che molto resti ancora da fare per co-progettare le opportunità di apprendimento, adottando una visione più ecologica, che includa occasioni di apprendimento formali, informali e non formali, intrecciate e interconnesse. In questa cornice, l'analisi, nell'articolo in oggetto, si concentra sul *data set* italiano.

Parole chiave: pandemia da Covid-19, ICIPES, relazioni scuola-famiglia, didattica a distanza, coinvolgimento genitoriale.

Introduction

The pandemic has progressively forced schools of every level to interrupt face-to-face lessons, substituting them with online lessons, and this happened worldwide, though with different timing (Dai, Lin, 2020; Viner, 2020; Xie, Yang, 2020). This has engendered some necessary changes both in curriculum content delivery and in lessons structure. The introduction of distance education was first of all "forced" (Trincherò, 2020) – this term indicating the impossibility to choose otherwise – and also very rapid and unexpected, as an emergency measure to react to the pandemic. In general, schools were not ready for this model of education delivery, neither were families. Parents had to rethink their spaces and daily routines and reconsider the balance in school-family relations. The 54th Report from Censis (2020), on the Italian society in 2020, described the pandemic as a cause of an increase in differences and inequalities among families: suffice it to say that in April 2020 only 11.2% of the 2,800 school leaders interviewed by the Censis Institute declared to have been able to include the whole student community in distance education activities. More than 10% of students were left out, especially in the Southern part of Italy and in the Islands, where more than 20% of students were excluded. Moreover, the Report states – in accordance with a study from LUMSA, Fondazione Agnelli, and the University of Trento – SEN students were the most fragile group suffering from this exclusion (Ianes, Bellacicco, 2020). Given this serious situation, schools and families, the most important ecosystems as for educating kids, had to redesign their relations in order to find a new balance and new forms of collaboration and mutual support. This unique situation is though very interesting when looked at with relational, emotional and cognitive "lenses" (Baranello, 2004), and when the analysis aims at understanding the system organizational levers that determine its development and maintenance.

Families were asked not only to rethink their role in education according to the age of their kids but also to perform several roles in scaffolding their learning, from technical support to methodological and content mediation. In cases of more kids per family, support had to be

increased in time and quality to accommodate different needs. This overload was to be added to the many housekeeping tasks, to the new working conditions – often from home – and to psychological stress, anxiety and uncertainty feelings characterizing this period.

This overload was even heavier due to the impossibility to make plans in relation to when schools would re-open (in Italy, the date of reopening was changed several times). At international level, many researchers thought that it was important to investigate the role and the feelings of parents in distance education during Covid-19. The objective was twofold: on the one hand, to have a picture at a national level and, on the other hand, to compare experiences of different countries where distance education was enforced because of the pandemic.

1. Families in the Pandemic Era

In order to outline the structure and the results of the investigation presented in this paper, it is useful to frame the construct of family according to the pedagogical perspective.

The conceptual framework informing this contribution is based on systemic models of human development and family functioning (Lerner, Damon, 2006), emphasizing multiple layers of ecological organization, nonlinear influence, and multiple, probabilistic determinants of family well-being. Corresponding works informing the present contribution draw on 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). Family is intended to be the environment that enhances or hinders personal development and where some opposite forces coexist more than in other social configurations. In fact, «freedom and responsibility, autonomy and solidarity, caring of Self and of others, projects and uncertainty, openness and intimacy, aggression and forgiveness, communication and silence, patience and resilience dialogue, trying to harmonize» (Buttorini, 1997, p. 406-411)⁵.

In these terms, family is a sort of “heaven” where all components can harmonize; actually, the quote tries to illustrate the multiple functions and processes taking place in families, studied by family pedagogy, even though it is hard to keep a relational balance in everyday interactions.

Before Covid-19, the need for combining work demands and family caring, tuning education objectives and distributing them between the partners, was already a great challenge in everyday life (Contini, 2010; Corsi, Stramaglia, 2009; Formenti, 2008, 2014; Gigli, 2007, 2016). Gigli well describes this effort, confirmed by the last ten-year works in family studies, which in a broader social scenario take into account historical changes as well. In order to play their role, she says, «parents nowadays have to commit more, spend more energy and perform tasks that are much more difficult compared to what parents used to do in the past. In fact, stronger pressures come from work and family, and global culture and “liquid society” (cf. Bauman, 2000) ask parents to be ever more present and actively engaged» (Gigli, 2016, p. 9)

Faced with complex, difficult events and sudden changes, functional families are able to find solutions to re-establish a new organizational balance, assuring solidity and interpersonal relations development. Covid-19 pandemic, which is still in place, is a high-impact factor on families, and it will surely change the functioning of European families that used to live in a peaceful historical period, where famine and other life-risk events were not present to such a global extent.

The impact of Covid-19, like loss of workplaces, school closure, lockdowns, extreme reduction of personal freedoms, interruption of socialization and social events, fear of contamination,

⁵ From now on, unless otherwise noted, all translations are the Authors', Editor's Note.

mass media *dramatic* – rather than *informative* – narratives have forced families, on a global scale, to enact passive and active coping strategies, and to use all social, group and personal resources they could rely on (Bonilla *et al.*, 2020; Fruggeri, 1999) in order to psychologically survive.

In this scenario, many researchers were interested in exploring ways and strategies through which families react to the needs for change in school-family relations, since parents had to actively engage in sustaining their children's learning. Many research works investigated the impact of Covid-19 on families. For example, a recent study carried out in Canada underlines how families felt very or extremely anxious about the period of confinement because of Covid-19 (Statistics Canada, 2020).

Another relevant study, by the *Center for Educational Research on Childhood and Families* (CREIF) of the Department of Educational Sciences of the University of Bologna, concentrated on the relations between parents (considering only those co-living during Covid-19) and on the changes imposed by Covid-19 on family routines. The study focused on new patterns, feelings, needs, resources and, more broadly, on the emotional climate of the family as described by parents (CREIF, 2020). In the first 48 hours, already 500 parents had answered and the convenience sample is made up of 800 people: this means parents were happy to talk and share their experiences. In this difficult period, families' voices were heard for many purposes, both for research interests and for scaffolding measures (Moore *et al.*, 2020, NAFSCE, 2020; Spinelli 2020).

Drawing on those studies, some researchers think that eventual family trajectories can be envisaged, once the pandemic will be totally over. An interesting possible trajectory is the model on family functioning with particular reference to child adjustment skills. The model by Prime, Wade and Browne (2020) assumes that Covid-19 pandemic will impact on child adjustment in hierarchical way: social disruption (social conflicts, job loss, social isolation, etc.) will impact on subsystems, such as families, engendering a series of consequences, such as psychological distress, parenting stress and mental health symptoms, having, in the end, a detrimental impact on parents' wellbeing. All these outcomes will affect the pre-Covid-19 family functioning, where three main dimensions are in place: beliefs – that is what are the expectations of the family subsystems – communication and organization – that is the way the family subsystems work. There are three main family subsystems: namely, the marital subsystem, the sibling subsystem, and the parent-child subsystem. The three of them would be affected in terms of family resilience and well-being.

As a result, the child would experience important changes in his/her functioning in all main domains: his/her emotional awareness, behaviour, academic progress and relations with peers.

The model takes into account pre-existing family vulnerabilities, such as social marginalization, economic disadvantages, caregiver/child mental and physical conditions, relational dysfunctioning as well as mitigation factors, such as family coping styles, communication patterns, functional parenting, supporting social relations, and education agencies.

Because of the pandemic, and the subsequent school closure, families were faced with a new, unexpected challenge: home-schooling their children. Despite their age, every child needed attention, support and guidance. That's why great interest is and was dedicated to the high impact Covid-19 has had on everyday life for families: on April 9 2020, UNESCO (2020) counted 193 countries having closed schools down and estimated that 1.57 billion children and young were having distance education or were simply at home, that is about 91% of the entire school population. Many efforts – by governments, educational agencies, schools, associations, libraries, etc. – were devoted to the mitigate the effect of Covid-19 on family distress, such as school-family partnerships, psychological support projects, free entertainment provision, distance learning initiatives, and so on. All effectors aimed at mitigating the impact of Covid-19 on family functioning, especially for those that pre-pandemic were in at risk conditions, and contrasting psychological suffering, digital divide, social isolation, etc. (Hodges, Kerch, Fowler, 2020; Xia, 2020).

However, despite all those support initiatives, family engagement in children's learning was challenging all over the world. In this scenario, this paper will comment on the *International Covid-19 Impact on Parental Engagement Study* (ICIPES), with particular reference to the Italian dataset.

2. The ICIPES International Survey: Objectives, Structure, and Methodology

The *International Covid-19 Impact on Parental Engagement Study* (ICIPES) is the result of the collaboration among more than 20 research institutes, coordinated by the University of Bath (UK), and aimed at investigating how parents, grandparents and other family members supported the learning of their children/grandchildren aged 6-16 during lockdowns due to the Covid-19 pandemic. A total of 4.658 questionnaires were collected from 23 countries of 5 continents participated in the survey (see Fig. 1): Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Tanzania-Zanzibar as for Africa; China (Mainland, Hong Kong, and Macao) and Japan, as for the Far East; Pakistan and Sri Lanka, as for the Indian region; the United States as for Northern America; Mexico, Costa Rica, Honduras, and El Salvador, as for Central America; Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Peru, Uruguay, as for South America; Belgium, Italy, Spain, Turkey, and the United Kingdom, as for Europe.

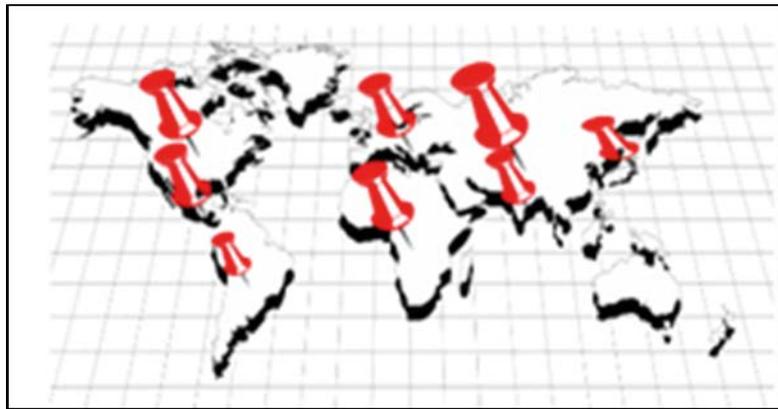


Fig. 1 – Continents and countries taking part in the ICIPES 2020 survey.

2.1. Research Tool

A semi-structured questionnaire was employed with closed- and opened-questions, investigating caregivers' evaluation of their engagement during distance education, the efforts in supporting their children's learning, the balance between learning scaffolding and family life, parents' perception as to their confidence and skills in using ICTs (Osorio-Saez *et al.*, 2021). Some context variables – such as the family socioeconomic status and its living arrangements, the parents' level of education, the children's academic career, the number of usable devices at home – were also investigated in order to search for significant correlations. Therefore, the survey investigated: usable devices at home for schooling; the educational organization and support provided by the school; the educational practices designed by parents/caregivers during the first lockdown, as for both formal learning and leisure activities; parents' perception of their skills regarding the use of ICTs and their role at this stage.

The closed-questions provided answer items based on 5-point Likert scales – where 1 was the lowest score, and 5 the highest (i.e., “never”, “rarely”, “sometimes”, “often”, “always”), and on multiple choice, radio options (“yes”/“no”). The questionnaire was anonymous.

2.2. *The Study Procedures*

The survey was created in English by the University of Bath and then translated and adapted into the official languages of the participating countries. The “IUL – *Italian University Line*” research group was in charge of translating the questionnaire into Italian and adapting it to the national context. After this, the survey was back-translated into English by the University of Bath to verify its comparability with the other versions and small adjustments were made. In the period June-July 2020, at the end of the first lockdown, the survey was administered via private and public channels by all participating partners. The University of Bath managed the international database and shared it with each participating institution.

3. *Aims and Hypothesis of the Study*

The present contribution aims at deepening the role of Italian parents/caregivers in the activities carried out with their children during the first lockdown, namely how parents supported their children during distance education and leisure time. In analysing the results, the authors expected to find some significant association between variables, such as parents’ teaching strategies and their level of confidence with children’s age groups or the family socio-economic background and the caregivers’ level of education. It is also intended to identify parents’ behaviours useful to propose thematic on which reflecting respect to family dynamics in this period. It is assumed that the age of sons/daughters and the parents, the gender and the level of education of parents had an impact on the support given to children, even in this period. It is intended, however, to explore other variables investigated by the questionnaire with respect to the support given to children. It is also intended to outline what aspects linked to the perception of one’s parenting role may be linked to the type of support given to children in school. It will thus be possible to outline interventions to support parenthood in such a delicate period.

3.1. *Italian Research Dataset Analysis Procedure*

The analyses of the Italian dataset included in-depth descriptive analyses and contingency tables with variables concerning the socioeconomic background index - covering information such as the respondent’s average monthly household and employment), level of education, and the students’ age.

The analysis is twofold: on the one hand, a descriptive analysis is provided, regarding aspects considered as particularly relevant – such as family engagement (i.e. the time dedicated to home-schooling, the type of scaffolding to children, etc.), and the support received from the school.

Furthermore, composite indicators were created by considering the arithmetic mean of the answers to questions regarding the parental role during the pandemic, with regard to “perceived parenting competence” and “perceived competence in supporting children’s learning”. This made it possible to use contingency tables to capture the association between those variables and the ones concerning parents’ and children’s anagraphic data. Finally, a classification tree using the Gini index was developed to verify the homogeneity in data clustering, in order to identify possible respondents’ profiles and obtain useful information to deepen the research scope.

3.2. *Italian Participants*

The Italian sample is made up of 517 parents/grandparents, children aged 6-16; 94.2% (487) of the respondents are women (mothers or grandmothers) and 5.8% (30) are dads or grandfathers.

Half of the respondents are aged 35-44, only 5.6% are under 34 and the remaining are over 46, of which 0.4% are over 75. The respondents' children are female in 46.8% of cases and male for the remaining 53.2%. The average age of the students is 9.7 years and the median is 10 years.

Concerning the family situation, 88.2% of the respondents stated they live with the father/mother of the student whose experience they refer to and only 1.6% stated they live with a different partner who is not the father/mother of their child. Finally, 7.4% of participants declared they are single 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%).

4. Results

It is showed before descriptive results and then association between variables and the classification tree to identify a profile of Italian parents.

4.1. Descriptive Analysis

As for the caregivers' engagement, the majority of them (85.1%) reported having provided continuous and intensive support (Chart 1).

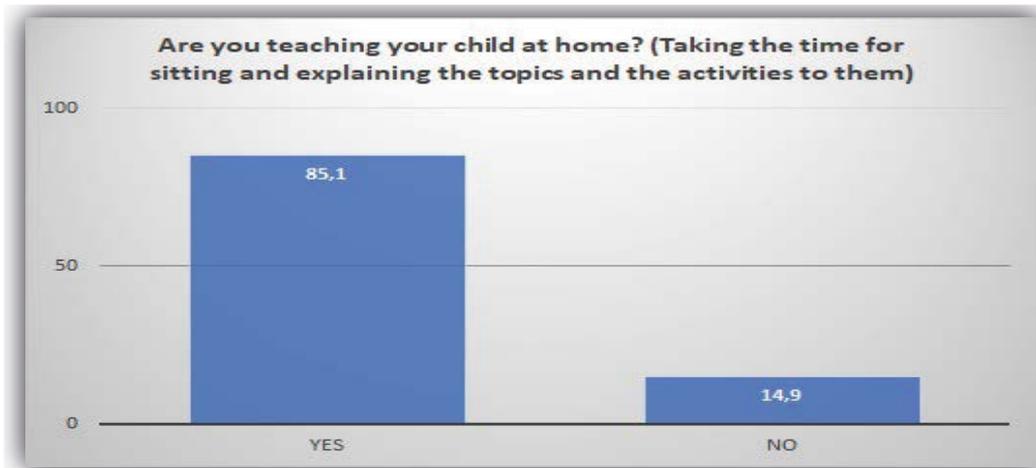


Chart 1 – Time spent with children for distance education.

47% of them checked the learning plan provided daily by the school. As for the frequency of the communications from the school, 30% received indications only once a week, with a median value of 2-3 times per week. In some cases, no indications were given (0.3%) or were seldom provided to families (2.6% received the learning plan only once a month and 1.4% every 2 weeks).

The number of hours per week dedicated to home-schooling (see Chart 2) was quite high: 55.9% of caregivers spent between 11 and 20 hours per week teaching their children, 11.4% more than 20 hours and 3.9% more than 30 hours. Only a moderate percentage (28.9%), therefore, was engaged for less than 20 hours per week.

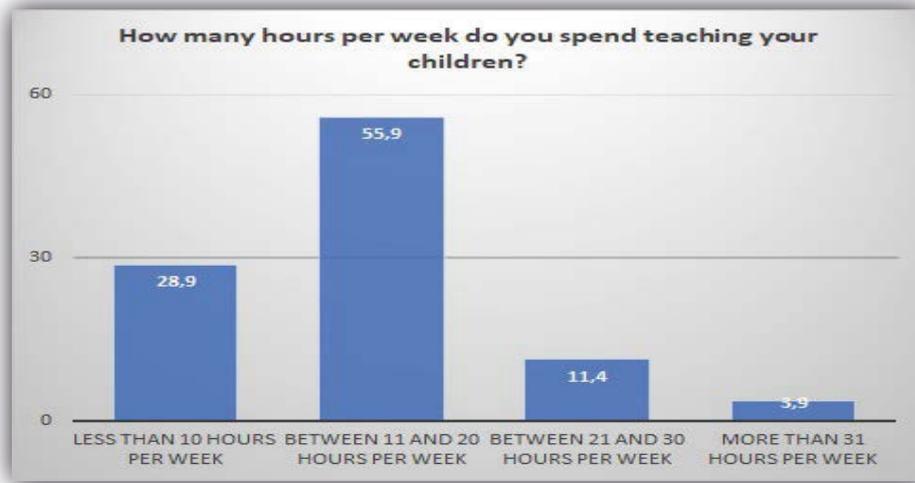


Chart 2 – Hours per week devoted to teaching their children.

During these hours, caregivers played an “instrumental” role (i.e. parents handle school communications by checking email, blogs, and/or the school website); 47.58% stated they performed this function every day, 28% did it often (with a cumulative percentage of 75.4%), whilst 14% did it occasionally and 10.6% did it rarely. Only 4.6% declared they did not need to do that, maybe because their children could do it on their own.

Caregivers also engage in supplementing the learning plan received from the school: almost half of the respondents (48.4%, considering those who always did it and those who did it often) enriched the proposals coming from the school with personal ideas, thus showing a certain willingness to co-design the curriculum. The rest of them (53%) stated that they played that role occasionally and only 25.3% did it rarely or never.

Moreover, following tips from other parents on social networks was not a common option: only 15.3% declared they always or often did it and only 18.6% used suggestions of other parents as an inspiration.

This trend confirms, once again, the parents’ orientation to draw on personal beliefs rather than copy others’ ideas; 35% declared they used personal experiences, past models and specialized websites (37%) to get further guidance (see Chart 3).

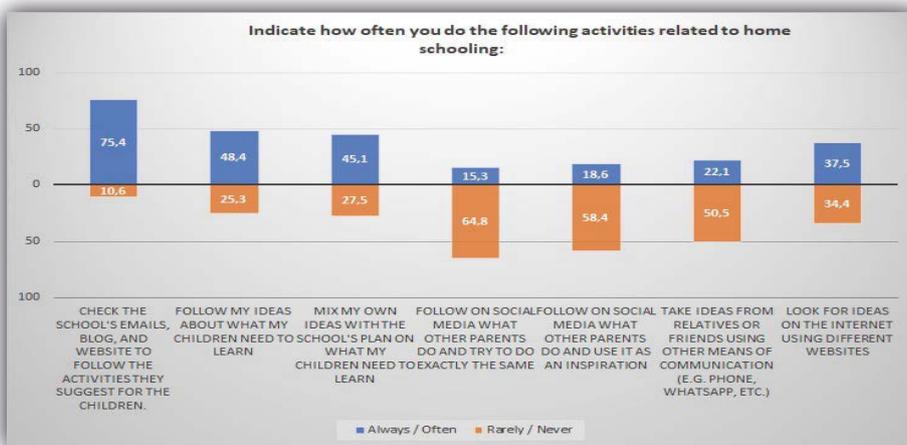


Chart 3 – Parents’ efforts in distance education.

As for the preparation parents performed, 32.7% of parents reported they did something to better support their children and 58.6% organized a weekly schedule, so that their scaffolding turned out to be very structured.

A relevant percentage of the respondents (45.8%), in addition to this scaffolding, had to work from home at the same time, whilst only 32.3% did not work or rarely did it. Worth noting that families' efforts, in about one third of the cases (31%), were aimed at organizing their working time in a different way so to help their children during the day and work at night.

The latter pattern does not apply to half of the respondents (52% of cases said they never or almost never did it). Another strategy parents used was to ask older children to help their younger siblings, thus applying peer education opportunities – a strategy implemented by 23% of the respondents. However, the majority could not count on this additional help, maybe because siblings were not available or were not able to support others (see Chart 4).

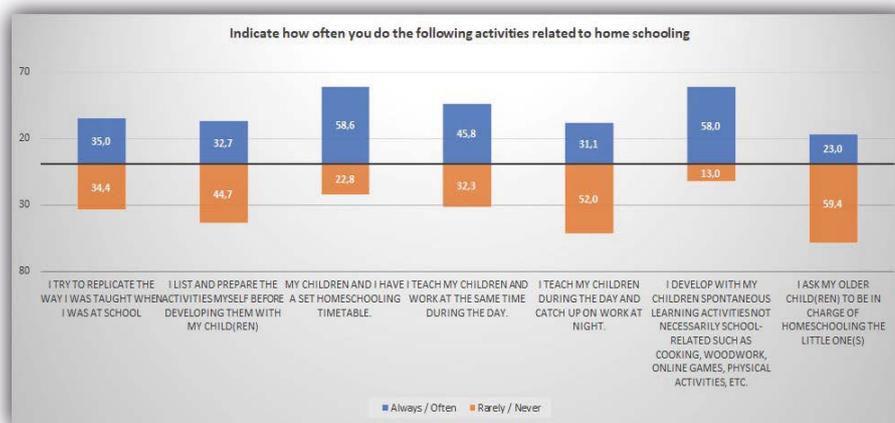


Chart 4 – Methods used by parents to help their children.

One question investigated what leisure activities parents/caregivers organized with their children (see Chart 5). 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).

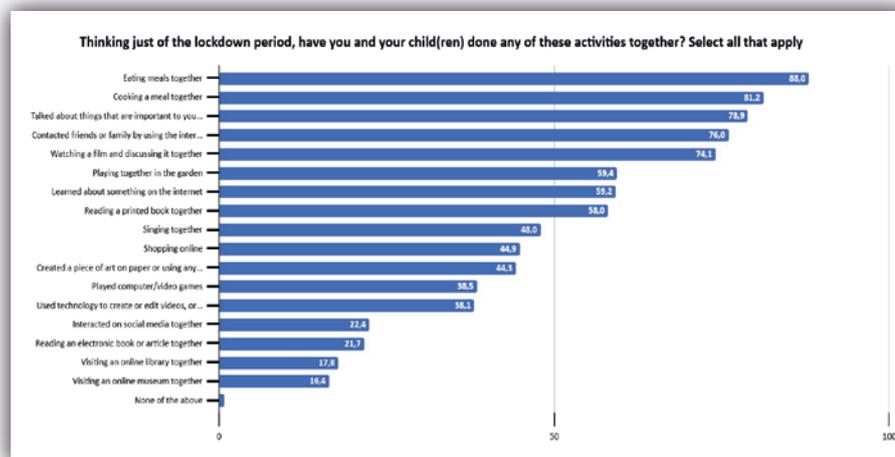


Chart 5 – Leisure activities parents carried out with their children.

4.2. Association between variables and the classification tree

As for expected association, the authors of this contribution assumed that the types of activities parents carried out would significantly relate to the age of their children. Nevertheless, this expectation was not confirmed by the chi-squared test (see Charts 6, 7, 8 and 9).

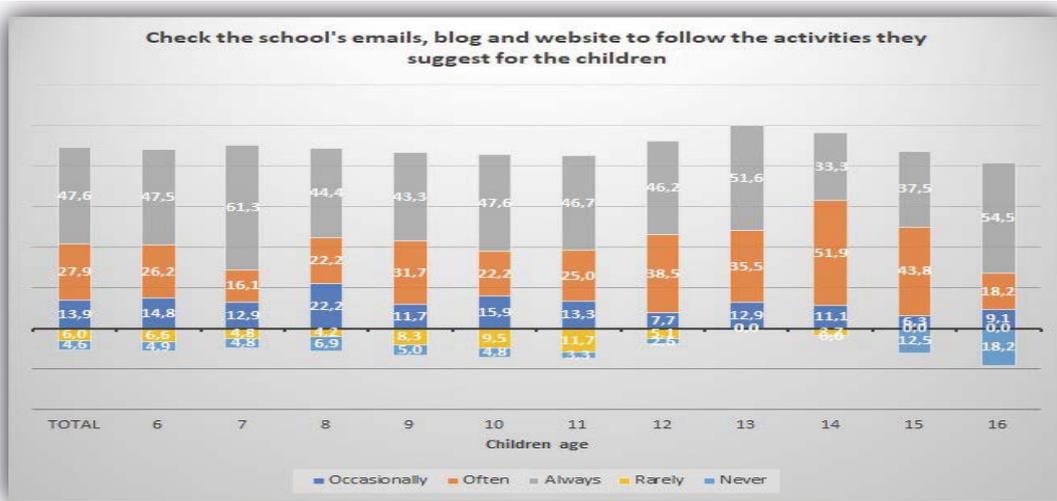


Chart 6 – Association between activities carried out [Check the school's emails, blog and website to follow the activities they suggest for the children] and age of children ($\chi^2(40, n = 502) = 44,976, p > 0.05$).

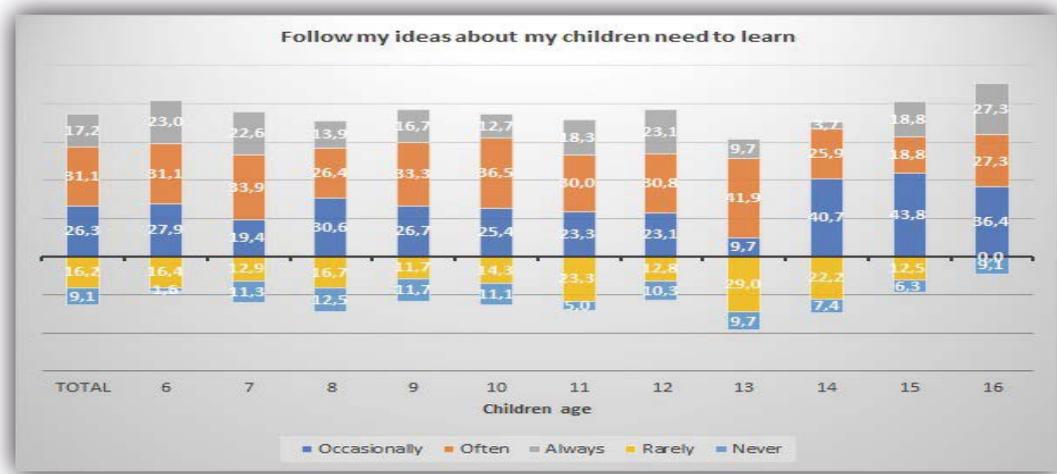


Chart 7 – Association between activities carried out [Follow my ideas about my children need to learn] and age of children ($\chi^2(40, n = 502) = 38,474, p > 0.05$).

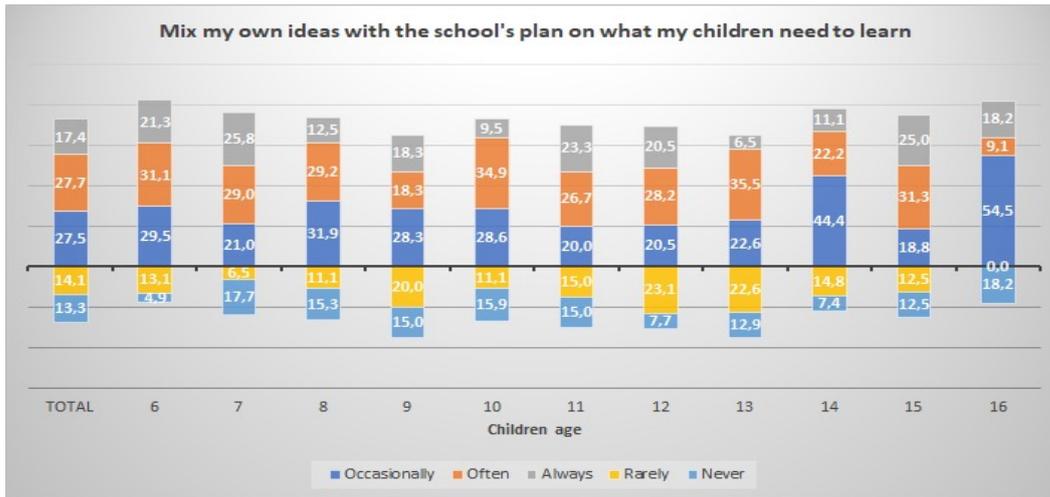


Chart 8 – Association between activities carried out [Mix my own ideas with the school’s plan on what my children need to learn] and age of children ($X^2(40, n = 502) = 44,121, p > 0.05$).

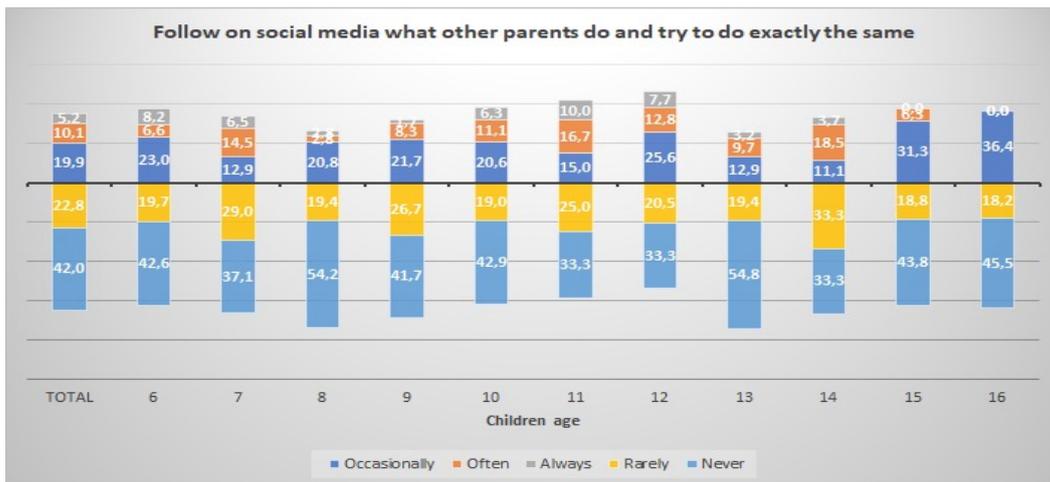


Chart 9 – Association between activities carried out [Follow on social media what other parents do and try to do exactly the same] and age of children. ($X^2(40, n = 502) = 38,806, p > 0.05$).

Overall, it is worth noticing that almost all parents, regardless of the age of their children, carried out technical tasks, such as checking emails and websites, and that only a small percentage of them said not having done so when children are 15-16-years old.

A relevant difference occurs concerning how active parents are in creating new opportunities for their children, apart from those designed by teachers; in fact, the more the children are older the lesser the parents create new tasks. Other constant trends, regardless of children’s age, are: parents not taking others’ ideas, parents’ approaches to get prepared for scaffolding their children and parents engaged in leisure activities with them, beside formal learning ones (see Charts 10, 11, 12, and 13).

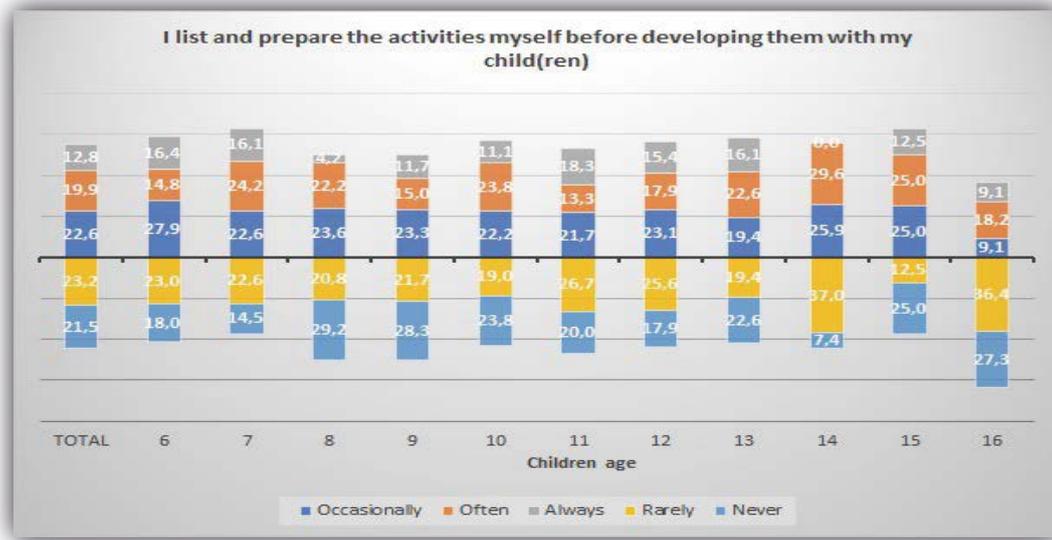


Chart 10 – Association between parents’ activities [I list and prepare the activities myself before developing them with my child(ren)] and age of children. ($\chi^2_{240, n = 502} = 32,474, p > 0.05$).

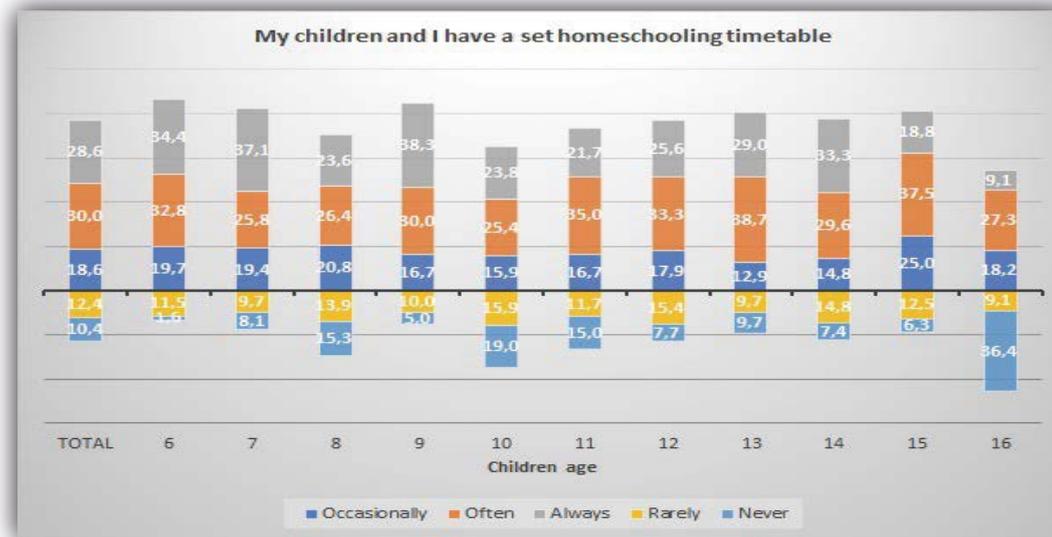


Chart 11 – Association between parents’ activities [My children and I have a set home-schooling timetable] and age of children. ($\chi^2_{240, n = 502} = 36,719, p > 0.05$).

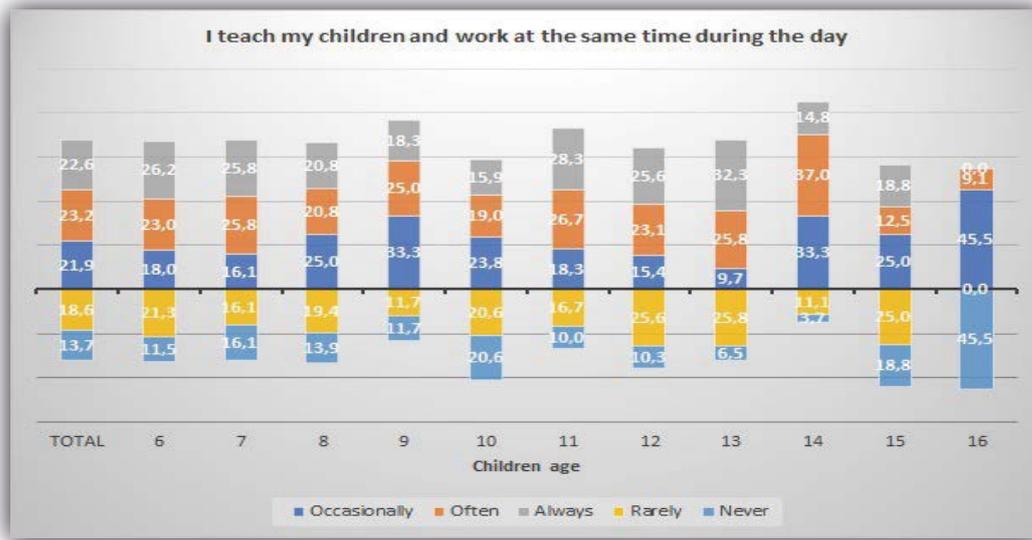


Chart 12 – Association between parents’ activities [I teach my children and work at the same time during the day] and age of children (X240, n = 502) = 49,179, p > 0.05).

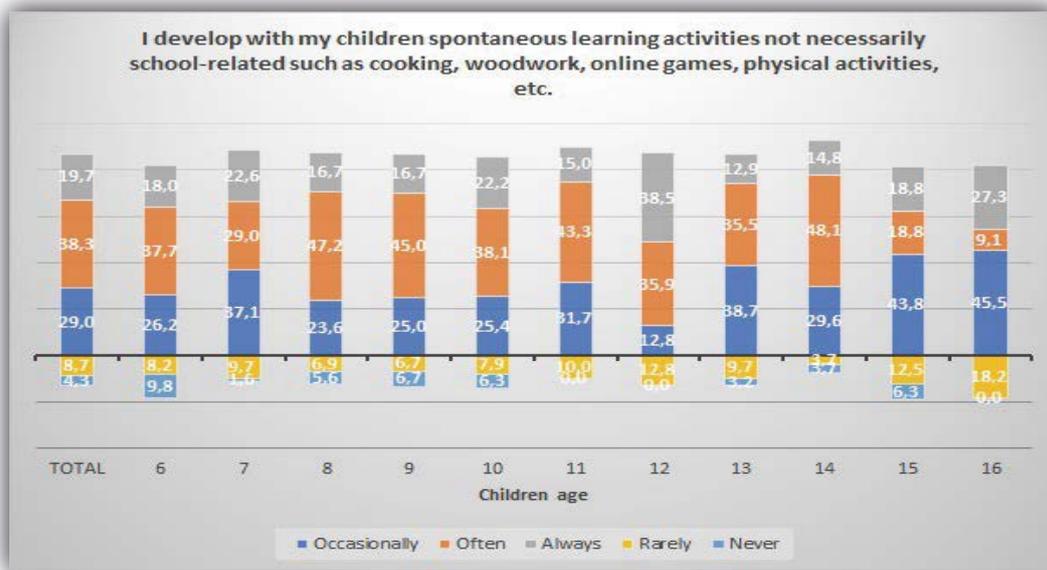


Chart 13 – Association between parents’ activities [I develop with my children spontaneous learning activities not necessarily school-related such as cooking, woodwork, online games, physical activities, etc.] and age of children (X240, n = 502) = 44,384, p > 0.05).

The two aspects that significantly correlate with the age of children are: the amount of time spent on scaffolding (see Chart 14) and the frequency of indications received from teachers (see Chart 15). As expected, those decrease significantly with age: in fact, when children are aged 6, 60% of parents declared to be engaged with children from 11 to 20 hours per week, and when children are aged 13+, the amount of time decreases to less than 10 hours.

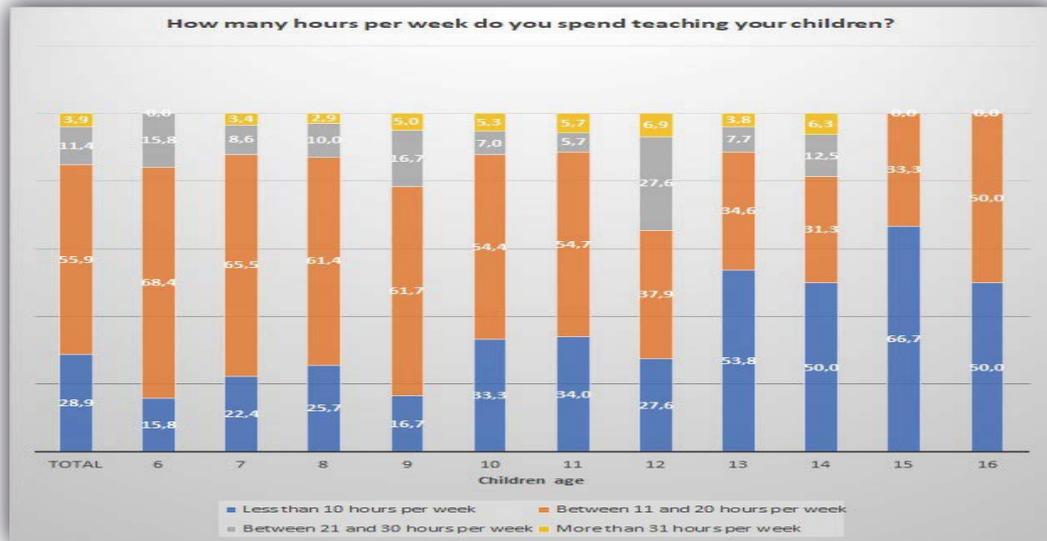


Chart 14 – Association between parents’ effort in hours and children’s age ($X^2_{230}, n = 502 = 47\,935, p = 0.02$).

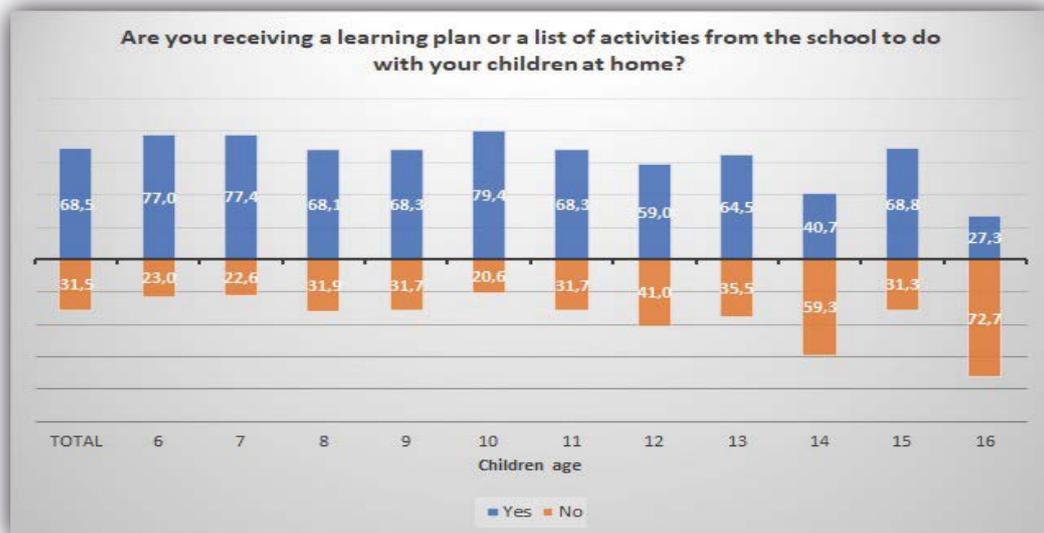


Chart 15 – Association between parents’ tasks and children’s age, $X^2(10, n = 502) = 27,995, p = 0.02$.

Another statistically significant relation is the parents' level of education and the types of activities carried out in leisure time. Simple activities, such as cooking together, were interestingly found to be meaningfully associated with playing together in the garden ($X^2(10, n = 502) = 17,880, p = 0.05$), whilst other activities, such as "learning about something on the Internet" are not fully associated with children's age ($X^2(10, n = 502) = 16,142, p = 0.09$; see Chart 16). No meaningful associations were found between the listed activities and parents' the education level ($p > .05$).

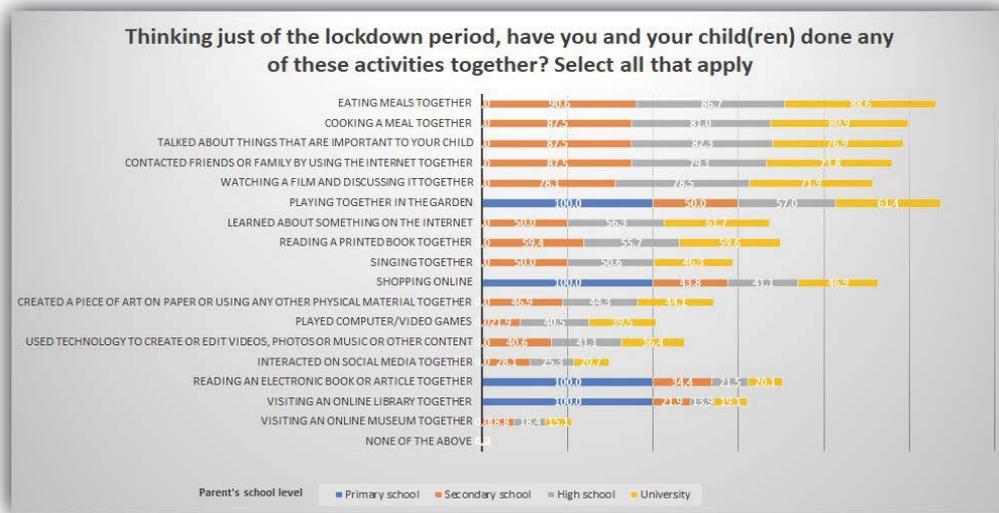


Chart 16 – Activities carried out with children and parents' level of education.

As mentioned above, two indexes of parents' perceived competence were created: the first one concerning the overall parental role (composed by items such as "play online with children", "solve technical problems", "find websites to support learning activities", "learn new stuff to stimulate curiosity") the second one regarding the educational scaffolding in distance education (composed by items such as "help children in their homework", "check emails", "download materials to support learning", "share information with the school").

Worth noticing that the perceived competence concerning the general parental role does not significantly correlate with the family socioeconomic status nor does it with children's age.

On the contrary, the ability to provide support to children varies based on the family socioeconomic status (see Chart 17), and with children's age (see Chart 18), but does not with the educational background of parents.

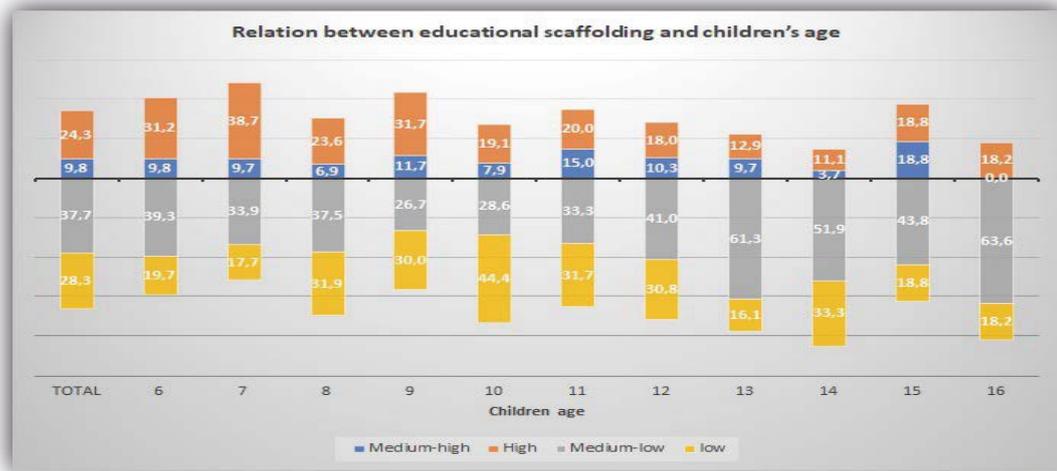


Chart 17 – Relation between educational scaffolding and children's age, $X^2(30, n = 502) = 45,277, p = 0.03$.

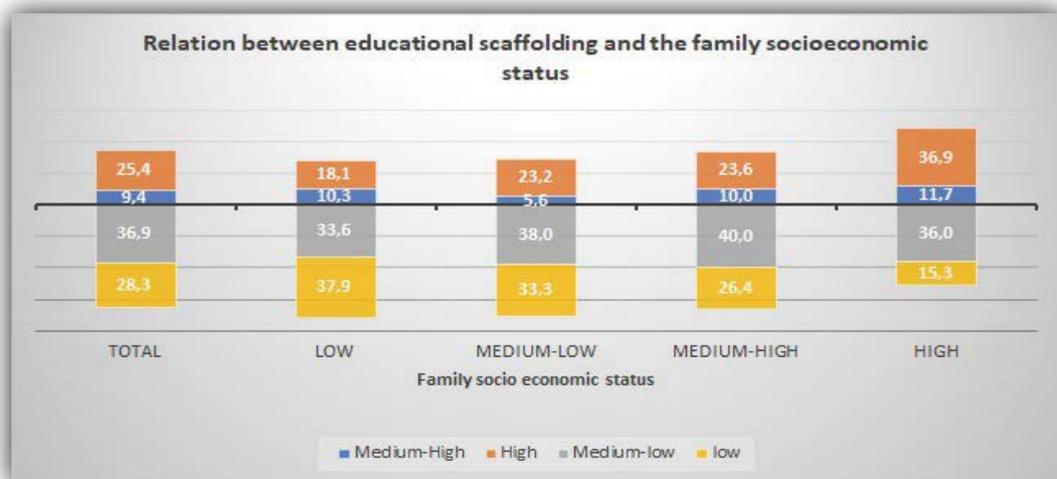


Chart 18 – Relation between educational scaffolding and the family socioeconomic status, $X^2(30, n = 445) = 23,274 p = 0.00$.

Besides a classification tree was created in order to consider as independent variables the age of parents (organized in classes), the parental competence index regarding school, the overall parenting competence, the socio-economic index and the level of education of the parents and, while the hours spent in teaching children was considered as a dependent variable (see Chart 19).

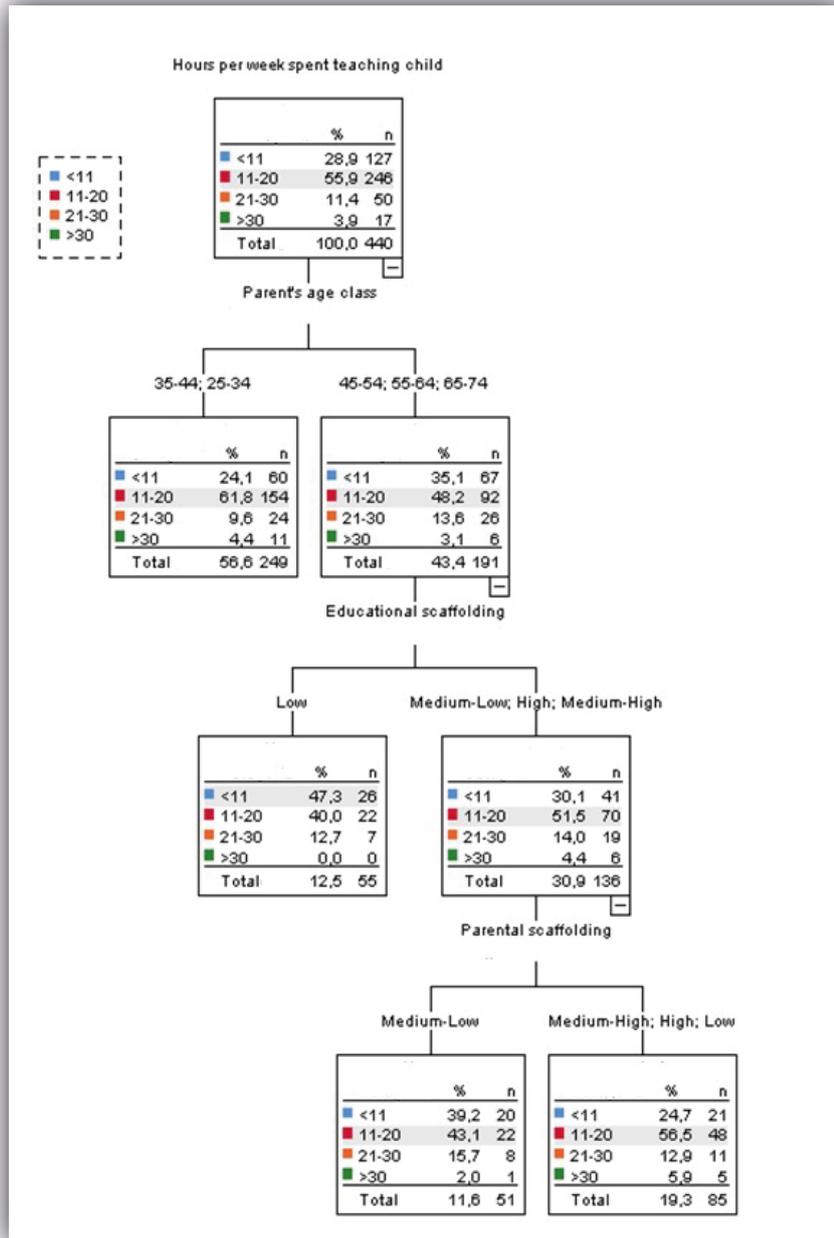


Chart 19 – Classification tree.

The first split organized the most effective clustering of variables, that is the age of parents, as follows: the class comprising parents aged 25-34, the class comprising parents aged 35-44 and the class comprising parents under 25 and over 44. This means that parents aged 25-44 have a similar behavioral pattern as far as time spent teaching their children, differently from young parents (aged under 25) and older parents (over 44). The second step of the tree is the parental competence in teaching children. As in the previous analysis, the clustering is based on homogeneous behaviours.

The third step clusters consistent behaviours as for the overall parenting competence. In this case the analysis found two clusters, the one comprising those having a low-medium competence and the one comprising a high level of competence.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the Italian dataset was important to understand the role of parents in this unique historical period, where unexpected requests and pressures have been loaded on families. This scenario was common to all involved countries in the study, allowing a broad and rich overview on this phenomenon.

School-family alliance – as recommended by the Italian MoE document (DPR no. 235 of November 21, 2007) titled *Guidelines for family participation and educational collaboration* – is still in its initial stage in Italian schools. In fact, as the students' age progresses, families are ever more disengaged as for their children's school life. This study seems to highlight a positive attitude in parents towards taking part in educational activities and curriculum development, thus better contributing to their children's learning experience. That is why studies as such can provide policymakers and schools with important information to enrich and enhance students' learning opportunities, especially as for informal and non-formal education, to complement formal education activities designed by teachers and school authorities, based on MoE recommendations. One of the most relevant pieces of evidence of this study is that caregivers concerned with distance education are mainly women (mothers and grandmothers), that is 94% of the sample. The time per week dedicated to scaffolding their children was impressive; time that women had to add to their working time from home and to housekeeping (only 15% of female respondents said they did not work during lockdown).

Another interesting result is that the type of scaffolding provided was not just a technical one but had some original traits. Parents designed learning activities on their own in order to enrich or integrate the learning plans proposed by teachers. Therefore, if on the one hand families had to provide constant, technical support to their children, following teachers' indications, on the other hand they played an active, creative role that nobody had ever requested so far to such extent.

Results also show some interesting features of inter-family dynamics: distance education support is provided in parallel with working from home. As for leisure time, the most frequent activities parents did with their children were hands-on (i.e. cooking) or social activities (chatting online). Devices were mainly used for socializing with friends and other relatives and for education: ICTs are less used for leisure activities since families preferred to spend time on manual tasks or on "analogic" communication. Siblings were not able to help that much: if this may seem an expected outcome, one could wonder how families with more children could cope with all distance education requests, since there might have been different needs and tasks to be performed.

Concerning extra-family interactions with peers, it turned out that parents were not keen to ask for help or take ideas from others; drawing on their own capacities and resources (personal experiences, previous models, etc.) seem to be a preferred option. This is an interesting result, highlighting a sort of “parental loneliness” within the Italian scenarios. Peer tutoring and networking, in order to get support for them or their children, are less common in Italy compared to other cultures. As for the perceived competence in helping their children, it turned out that it is inversely related to children’s age and directly to the socioeconomic background. Both associations confirm our hypotheses: the younger the children, the greater the support needed, though considering the content that is more accessible to parents, based on their previous knowledge.

In line with this, as the family’s socio-economic background increases, so does the perception of competence that parents have with respect to the support they can provide to their children. This is a relevant fact since school should promote social equity and it is not totally assuring that, neither in face-to-face nor – and worstly – in distance schooling.

The classification tree also confirms that there is a different behaviour in the responses of parents aged 25-44 years, compared to those who are older than 45 years or younger than 25. There is also a relevant difference between the group of parents who are characterized by low perceived competence in teaching their children and those who perceive themselves as highly competent: the former spent significantly less time supporting their children in their learning in this period.

The analysis found extremely homogeneous groups, explaining specific behavioral patterns: parents who perceive themselves as slightly competent spend less time teaching their children during the pandemic.

Conclusion

Our research confirms that the Covid-19 pandemic and its subsequent impact on family functioning have required parents’ commitment in teaching their children: several schooling demands were charged on families, invading their relational space and modifying it and this has highlighted the need for a new family-school educational “alliance” (D’Addelfio, Vinciguerra, 2021). This study also accounts for the cognitive and emotional overload parents encountered in this period due to the fact that parents were asked to play a twofold role: the one of mother/father and the one of teacher/tutor (Santagati, Barbanti, 2020).

The study also points out some trends requiring further attention: first, the preponderant role of mothers in supporting their children learning. This is in line with studies showing that – despite fathers having been found more engaged in family management in recent years, in Italy – childcare and housekeeping remains predominantly female tasks (Carriero, Todesco, 2016). This study also confirms how persistent gender-based task division is in Italian families, even during the lockdown period (Rania *et al.*, 2020). The data therefore confirm the need for providing more support to working mothers, particularly in this period; there is a need for strengthening networking among parents, in order to better support and help children; there is a need for enhancing and guiding home-schooling, particularly when socioeconomically disadvantaged families are concerned, not only in terms of devices but also in terms of parental competences.

Another interesting result is that there are differences in families as for perceived parental competence in teaching children: according to this “self-efficacy” index, the time spent in learning activities changes. The lower the perception of competence, the little the time spent in school-related tasks, regardless of education level and socio-economic background. This data points out the importance of parents’ self-efficacy in their educational scaffolding role and how

the pandemic has forced them to play roles that have weakened the overall family well-being and demanded more efforts to respond and to cope with the difficult situation (Prime, 2020).

The pandemic has highlighted the role of the school in social mobility (Ballarino, Bernardi, 2020; Brunetti, 2020). This study highlights the need for a new school-family “alliance”, because parents’ ability to support their children’s learning cannot be given for granted. Therefore, when designing family support plans in teaching children in emergencies, parents’ self-efficacy in teaching their children should be considered since this variable is associated with the quality and the time of the support provided. The study confirms our assumptions, but it highlights an additional variable that turns out to be decisive in the support given to children: the level of competence perceived by parents towards their role.

This study has some limits: results cannot be generalized since it is based on a convenience sample and it was employed to gather information from contexts that are extremely different. In addition to the analysis described in this paper as for the Italian dataset, one future direction could be focusing on open-ended answers.

To sum up, conclusions can be made in two dimensions. As for the educational dimension, this study shows that pandemic implications on school-family relations cannot be considered as limited to present times but they will have consequences on future educational scenarios as well. Research can therefore provide indications and suggestions to implement intervention measures and functional strategies to support students and their families in a sort of technology-enhanced, hybrid-schooling scenario (Rivoltella, 2020).

The other dimension is the family functioning itself: family resilience, parents’ self-efficacy in supporting their children learning and gender-based family task distribution should be reconsidered, especially in this challenging phase of pandemic, having a strong impact on caregiver well-being and therefore on child adjustment as for the academic progress. Moreover, peer groups, such as self-help or support groups, are not very widespread in Italy.

This study highlights how, even in this pandemic, parenting support groups could be a sustainable solution to support parents through the sharing of both emotional and management of their daily lives. Parental support groups could also respond to the “parental loneliness” that emerges from the study results.

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