

The Parental Representations about their Children First Literacy Acquisition: A Case Study in a Small Italian Town

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Within a socio-cultural approach (Cole, 1996), the issue of relationships between school and family has received attention from in different sections of educational psychology (cf. Marsico, Komatsu & Iannaccone, 2013). In this academic field, we want to provide a contribution to the further analysis of the boundary crossing between school and family spaces. In particular, the present paper focuses on the parental representations of children’s literacy acquisition during the first primary grade. The corpus of data consists of sixteen interviews with low and high social class parents living in a small town in Italy. The issues addressed in the interviews concern parental ideas about children’s literacy, the type of help they provide to children’s homework, and the use of school practices within the family context. The interviews are analysed through an inductive method within a socio-cultural perspective, in order to highlight how the issue of first literacy development is considered relevant particularly by parents who are not fully literate. The findings highlight the connection between positive parental representations of first primary grade school and literacy development. Participant parents agree that the main value of school education is to make acquaintances with very different people, and to develop good social skills.

FRAMEWORK AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The socio-cultural approach inspired by the pivotal work of Cole (1996) has given a specific attention to the relationship between school and family from diverse sectors of research in the field of educational psychology (Arcidiacono, 2013; Marsico, Komatsu & Iannaccone, 2013; Pontecorvo & Arcidiacono, 2014). Within this theoretical framework, the present paper aims to clarify specific aspects of parental representations of their children’s literacy acquisition during the first school grade. This will provide a contribution to the further analysis of the boundary crossing between school and family spaces.

Studies conducted within the language socialization paradigm (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1989, 1994) and the sociocultural approach (Cole, 1988; Cole & Cole, 1989; Rogoff, 1981, 1990²) have emphasized how ideologies and values (concerning collaboration, individualism, time setting, work, community and self) are deeply rooted as culturally relevant ways of family attitudes toward literacy (Heath, 1983). In fact, parents are the first educators of their children since they are responsible for their initial socialization to written language. Within

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² Since Rogoff (1990) important contribution to children’s *Apprenticeship in Thinking* through behaviors and social interactions, offered by their parents and by other familiar roles, was really heuristic within the socio-cultural framework, felt that we had to quote it in our text. But given that our paper focuses on the parents’ attitudes toward schooling, and not on the parents’ behaviors, we are not exposing the Rogoff approach in details, even though we appreciate it.

an ecological perspective, other studies (for example, Epstein³, 2001) have shown how much the parents' support is relevant in the literacy acquisition process. Parental involvement in reading-related activities with their children outside of school is strongly related to children's reading performance (Nye, Turner & Schwartz, 2006). In addition, when parents manage and coordinate the different environments (including home, school and community) in which their children learn, they affect children's literacy achievement over time through children's feelings about literacy (Dearing, McCartney, Weiss, Kreider & Simpkins, 2004).

The above-mentioned framework emphasises how school affects the everyday life of families early on, also through parent-children conversations about learning and homework. In fact, the involvement of parents is an indicator of individual positions expressed in relation to their visible ecosystem, at the edge of their psychosocial space (Lewin & Cartwright, 1951; Zittoun, Valsiner, Vedeler, Salgado, Gonçalves & Ferring, 2013). In particular, the focus on the question of homework is relevant in Italy as homework occupies one third of the children's after school time (Izquierdo, Kremer-Sadlik, Fatigante, Arcidiacono, Gutiérrez, & Pontecorvo, 2006), leading to many children even staying at school until late afternoon (Tonucci, 2003). Extensive research on the everyday lives of eight middle class families in Italy (Giorgi, Pontecorvo, Monaco & Arcidiacono, 2009) has shown that 34% of the daily time spent by children at home is devoted to homework. The study has offered insights into our understanding of educational behaviours shared by parents and addressed to their children within the homework frame (Pontecorvo, Liberati & Monaco, 2013). Within the same culture, Italian teachers expect and promote parents to be aware of their children's development and learning. Consequently, they think (often without saying it explicitly) that families should support children in the school tasks and take on the responsibility of their progress in school. From a sociocultural perspective, the activities of parental help with the children's homework could be seen as an occasion to better analyse family interactions as a whole, since they offer natural opportunities for having positive moments, good sharing, transmission of values and moral behaviours, even though they may also solicit stress and other negative emotional effects.

An important methodological contribution about this topic comes from a paper (Iannaccone & Arcidiacono, 2014) in which the authors, through reviewing different studies, have underlined a plurality of linguistic competencies and cultural peculiarities to be recognised as mostly present nowadays in Italian schools. The essay suggests that it would be better to use ethnographic methods to study the school-family concrete intersections that take place in collective meetings or in individual encounters (with a single teacher and a single parent): the latter being much more frequent in the Italian school tradition⁴. Due to our interest in homework and school-related activities connected with children's literacy processes, we particularly focus on the parental expression of representations about the first literacy acquisition of children entering into primary school.⁵

³ For a critical review of this theory, cf. Boulanger, Larose, Larivée, Minier, Couturier, Kalubi-Lukusa & Cusson (2011).

⁴ We are referring to the former individual encounters that happen, at least in Italian schools, in collective and public places (of the school). Otherwise, we are aware that other informal encounters can happen in the corridors of the school or during accidental meetings outside the school (especially in small towns or villages).

⁵ In this paper we are not exposing the development of early literacy from the beginning until the end of first grade (this will be the topic of a further paper), not what happens in the children's move from home (departure) to school (arrival).

In this way, we intend to focus on a temporal dimension: the acquisition of literacy is conceptualized as a developmental continuum, with its origins in the early life of a child, rather than an all-or-nothing phenomenon that begins when children enter into the primary school. How parents expose their children to literacy, even in pre-school learning, is important for the later development of reading and writing: the home environment is an important setting for the acquisition of literacy knowledge, because children have unique literacy opportunities at home such as observing literacy activities of others, engaging in joint reading and writing activities with other people, and benefitting from teaching strategies used by family members (Carroll, 2013; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Different studies, since the seminal one of Heath (1983) were done more recently (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Robins & Treiman, 2009) and have shown that children are exposed to inputs on certain aspects of writing during the conversations with their parents, even before the beginning of formal instruction in reading and writing and the production of anything resembling conventional writing. For example, young children can learn about some of the graphic features of writing (Ganapole, 1987; Treiman, Cohen, Mulqueeny, Kessler & Schechtman, 2007), the alphabet (Evans, Show & Bell, 2000) and even specific words (Aram, 2006; Aram & Levin, 2004) through different experiences of their everyday family lives. Very young children can also be socialized to other non-verbal graphic texts as shown in other specific research (Teubal & Guberman, 2014). However, we are aware of the existing difference between what parents do and their attitudes: for this reason, we consider that parental speech plays a role in this process, as it can indicate similarities between spoken and written language, as well as differences between writing and drawing. More particularly, Robins and Treiman (2009) have offered some insights into the environmental input that may help children to develop an understanding of the nature of written language. The findings of their study show that children's speech about writing offers insights into their understanding of writing's nature, supplementing the information on children's understanding of writing which is available through other means.

These aspects suggest a general knowledge about issues concerning parental ideas about children's literacy, the type of help they provide to children's homework, and the use of school practices within the family context. However, the study of the parental representations of children's literacy acquisition during the first primary grade can benefit from a specific socio-cultural analysis of how the issue of literacy development is relevant, especially by parents that are not fully literate. As this is the main objective of our research, we propose a study on different parental representations⁶ linked to social class membership as indicator of how parents share the idea that school is a central experience to socialize children coming from different environments. Our research question is the following: How parents' representations of the children's early literacy acquisition process are related to different social classes? Our hypothesis is that low⁷ social class parents create a *particular* representation of the early literacy achievement of their children - specifically, they want children to be successful in writing and reading from the very beginning of their school attendance, since parents fear their children will never become fully literate, as they never were by themselves and are resistant to changes.

RESEARCH

⁶ The concept of representation is intended here as perceptions related to the parents' sense of efficacy (Bandura, 1997) that guides their choices by considering the outcomes they believe will likely follow from their behaviours (for further details, see Eccles & Harold, 1996; Arcidiacono, 2016). However, we intend to re-situate this concept with respect to a cultural perspective, emphasizing the psychosociological ecosystem (Boulanger, 2018) that appears significant to the individual.

⁷ As it is customary in the Italian context, the terminology *high* and *low* is preferred to *working class*.

Procedures and participants

Our methodological position is oriented towards a qualitative analysis of participants' representations of school-family issues. We have chosen to employ an inductive procedure (Arcidiacono, 2015) in order to highlight how the issue of first literacy development is considered relevant by parents, especially those who are not themselves fully literate. Accordingly, we have decided to exclusively focus on two sets of interviews addressed to the parents of two classrooms of first grade in a small town in Italy.

This paper presents a selection of a corpus of data related to two classrooms, which we have observed along the whole first grade in a public school. The two classrooms (hereafter, A and B) have the same numbers of pupils (n=22), even though they have a different composition. In A there are ten extra-European children, while in classroom B there are only three. In both classrooms there are two pairs of parents with a mixed nationality, with one Italian⁸. The families involved in the two classrooms were forty-four in total. For this study we have selected only the Italian ones for a total number of eight participants (in one case the interviewed parent was the father, while in all the other cases it was the mother). The parents accepted to be interviewed within the framework of a large research project conducted by the first author of this paper about the writing development of children enrolled in first grade. Teachers also were interviewed by the research team and observations of classroom activities were done after each series of children's interviews. Classroom A was observed for a whole school week because of the large presence of foreign pupils⁹. The goal of the observation was to collect data on the teaching methods and children's behaviour in the classroom. In classroom B, only the language teacher was observed for one day, three times in the year. Three teachers of the main subjects such as Language, Mathematics, History and Geography composed the main team of the two classrooms, while the other subject matters such as English, Sciences, Art, Music, Sport and Religion were attributed to the main three teachers, with a variety of matching.

In this paper we exclusively focus on two sets of parents' interviews with the researcher. In order to explore the aim of our study, we offer some examples which attempt to consider the above-mentioned hypothesis (about representations of literacy by the low social class parents), coming from behaviours inspired by the political action of the Italian Minister of Education in the years 2001-2006 (the ministry - Mrs Letizia Moratti - proposed a law allowing the possibility to get into primary school at the age of five instead of six). A survey connected to this change has indicated that the parents who asked for this possibility were coming in most cases from low social classes. This indication seems to us relevant, although no specific studies about deeper reasons for the parents' choice have been done. For this purpose, the present paper intends to investigate the representations of parents coming from different social classes regarding the early literacy acquisition process of children attending the same public school.

Data Collection

We have carried out semi-structured individual interviews with a total of eight Italian parents, repeated twice, at beginning and at the end of the first grade school year of their children. Participants were divided in sub-groups by considering the combination of the level of

⁸ This is not an "artificial" condition determined by the researchers. Instead, it is representative of the participant group.

⁹ This setting was used by the teachers in school settings in which pupils' interaction was fostered.

instruction of both parents (middle school, high school, university degree) with the types of job (distinguished in high, middle and low level)¹⁰. This step has been included in order to fulfil two conditions: to identify eight parents from four families, out of the group of parents participating in the large project; to maximise the differences of social class (four parents located at the highest level, and four parents at the lowest one). In order to compose the sub-groups and to analyse the transcribed interviews, an independent control rate was done¹¹. Only two cases were problematic: in the first case we found the use of the word “meaning” that seemed to be a word used by highly educated parents¹². However, since the context of use resulted non-pertinent, we finally assigned it to the low group; the second case concerned the presence of a popular discourse dominated by the idea that the respect toward the others is the main task of the school education, without any reference to literacy development. We also assigned this case to the low social level group, because it seemed to be a discourse reproducing a current media claim that was very frequent during last year in TV public debates. We intend to underline that the categorization into different social levels is related to our specific groups: the two classrooms have a large social distribution from the lowest level of manual labourers and housewife mothers, to a high socio-economic level in which mothers are secondary school teachers and fathers are professionals (e.g., working for insurance company). Notwithstanding these large social differences, all children are attending the same public school and receive the same education and instruction, since Italian public school is well estimated by common people of diverse social strata¹³.

The two sets of interviews followed a semi-structured guide including different sections¹⁴. In the beginning, general information about the parents’ social class and the family composition was collected. Afterwards, different aspects related to school experiences and first literacy, learning acquisition, first school day, parents’ ideas about school, languages spoken at home, and recommendations about the first year of school of their children were examined. For the purpose of the present paper, the section of the first interview has been considered for the analysis which concerns parental ideas about school and includes the following questions: A) “For you, as parents, what is important for your child to learn in the first grade?”; B) “What would you wish for your child during his/her first year of school?” During the second interview, different issues concerning the first year of school were recorded, *a posteriori*. More particularly, in this paper we are referring to the following question: C) “In your opinion, how was the school year of your child? Did it match your expectations?”

The choice of families and the selection of the specific questions/answers are related to the goal of the paper and are the results of a synoptic analysis conducted by the researchers to identify potential interesting elements evoked by the participants during the interviews and offering insights about the phenomenon under study. All the interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed according to the system elaborated by Jefferson (1985), with the introduction of some adaptations to enhance readability. In this paper the excerpts of interview will be

¹⁰ These criteria have been inducted through a first synoptic view of the data at our disposal. Moreover, Italian national surveys have shown that these two criteria (instruction and job) have to be combined to establish the social class membership.

¹¹ Cohen’s kappa=.80 (n=6, value indicating the number of coding options that were taken into account for the categorization under study).

¹² The issue comes from the interpretation of the answer that uses a technical word like *meaning*.

¹³ In Italy, catholic families sometimes prefer religious private schools, particularly when children do not reach good learning results.

¹⁴ Cf. the annex for the interview guide.

presented without particular symbols related to the transcription, as the goal of the study does not imply any need for specific elements connected to the prescriptions of conversational analysis. Only contextual elements, added by the transcriber in order to facilitate understanding, will be provided to the reader between brackets.

In selecting and proposing the analysis of data, our design is organised as follows in Table 1:

Selected families*	Category	Type of question
Family 1 (Francesco)	High level	A); C)
Family 2 (Simone)	High level	B)
Family 3 (Andrea)	Low level	A); C)
Family 4 (Thomas)	Low level	B)
* We identify the responding parents with the pseudonyms given to his/her child		

Table 1: Participant families, categories and type of data. The table refers to a selection of four families (8 parents, 16 interviews = two per participant).

Qualitative Analysis of the Selected Interviews and Results

In the presentation of data, we account for discursive evidences offered by parents of different social classes during the two sets of interviews. We present excerpts of first interview's answers from the high social level parents ("Francesco" and "Simone" families) related to the three selected questions (A, B and C). Afterwards, some accounts from the low level families ("Andrea" and "Thomas") are presented with respect to the same questions. The same order is followed for the second set of interviews.

First set of interviews

Concerning the parents of high social class families, the first interview we propose involved the mother of Francesco (MF¹⁵). The question asked by the researcher (R) and the participant's answer are reported below:

- R: *for you, as parents, what is important for your child to learn in the first grade?*
 MF: *apart to read and write, that are the essential points, for me the school and the first grade, that is the first step, is a societal matter, (a matter of) rules to learn to live together. For me it is important that my child could learn to read and to write, although I can teach him to do it at home, but (the most important) it is to live together (in the school as community). The rules that are basic for the social life have to be learned at school and (children) start to learn it at school, they start at the first grade. Consequently, to begin to assimilate these rules, for sure not in a rigid way, is to start to educate (children) to live together that is fundamental. And during first grade this is more crucial than in other grades... during pre-school education the child is more within a playful dimension, here (in the first grade) he/she can start to interact more seriously, in a more engaged way. They (children) live together, the reading, the writing, mathematics calculations they can learn even individually. School is important because is the first piece of the society. To*

¹⁵ MF is Francesco's mother. She is 40 years old, she has graduated but she is unemployed. Francesco's father is 40 years old and he is an employee in the public administration.

start consciously this type of trajectory related to their ages, this is the fundamental aspect of the school and of the primary school.

Concerning a question regarding what is important for her child to learn in the first grade, MF says that, “apart to read and write, that are the essential points,” she could teach Francesco to learn literacy at home because “school is needed for the rules about living together.” Although she is recognizing the relevance of learning to read and to write, MF attributes a social function to the school (and particularly the primary school), as “the first piece of the society.” Other participants¹⁶ (the mothers of the families of Riccardo, Simone and Sofia) have emphasized the central role of the school as place to create opportunities for a first “mental concentration,” but also the relevance of improving spaces of socialization and respect towards the others, particularly children and adults coming from diverse cultures. This feeling is perceived as something to be maintained, as a wish for the children over the course of the school year. For the upper social class, the conditions and results of school-family relation are the continuity. The answer of Simone’s mother (MS¹⁷) to the question B is underlining this aspect:

R: *what would you wish for your child during his first year of school?*

MS: *to be happy, to keep the pleasure to learn new things, to be curious.*

However, in the answers of low social class parents the mood is slightly different. In the intervention of Andrea’s mother (MA¹⁸) about the question A what is considered as important during the first school year is reported as follows:

R: *for you, as parents, what is important for your child to learn in the first grade?*

MA: *in my opinion, firstly to behave in a proper way, to listen the teachers, to write, because he is a little bit slow, so I say to him to listen carefully the teachers, to behave in a proper way, practically everything. If they start properly from the beginning maybe they will progress better, otherwise, if the situation is unclear, they need to know how to do everything, although they are very young, but finally it is like that, that they need to start, little by little. I think to the fact to learn to write, also to read, finally everything that is connected to the first grade, because everything has to be done now. He needs to behave properly, I mean with the teachers, with the peers, practically with everybody.*

Andrea’s mother underlines the need to behave properly and to obey the teachers as the main points to be considered as relevant during the first year of school. MA is moving from a general, social level to a specific one, connected to her child (“he is a little bit slow”), and she is referring to the critical need of learning to behave properly from the beginning. Previous studies (e.g., Bélisle, 2006; Boulanger, Larose, Grenier, Saussez & Couturier, 2014) have shown that low social class parents expect schools to make discipline and to educate children’s behaviour. While parents expect that school will educate children, teachers consider this as a parental incorrect attribution of responsibility. The school should elaborate mainly instructional matters. By

¹⁶ For practical reasons and lack of space, the related excerpts of all the participant families are not reported here.

¹⁷ MS is Simone’s mother. She is 34 years old and she is a high school teacher. Simone’s father is 38 years old and he is an insurer.

¹⁸ MA is Andrea’s mother. She is 43 years old and she is a housewife. Simone’s father is 48 years old and he is a railway employee.

consequence, teachers refuse that parental attitude. As reaction, teachers reply that this is a case of parental delegation of responsibilities to the school and implies and sustains discontinuity.

Another participant from the low social class level is Thomas' mother (MT¹⁹). During the interview related to the wishes for the child during the first year of school she offered the following indications to question B:

R: *what would you wish for your child during his first year of school?*

MT: *it is that he could learn to read and to write because this is extremely important, that he can understand, as we try to say to him, that this is his job. It is the most important thing he should do.*

The mother of Thomas underlines the importance of learning to read and to write. Referring to the child, she indicates that "this is his job." MT begins by underlying the relevance of reading and writing as the main tasks of the school. From this perspective, parents have to educate the behaviour while the school needs to instruct children. Here, we can observe the opposite of what the other parents (from the lower social class) suggested about the responsibility of behaviour. However, the issue is still based on a complementarity, implying compartmentalization and discontinuity, and ending up in controversy concerning who is responsible for what. Even though it is not possible to separate strictly teaching from education, we could assume a distinction between general education and specific instruction.

Concerning the question B of the first interview, the answers highlight a difference between the social classes of the parents: the high-class parents wish for their child to keep the enthusiasm (Francesco's mother), the creativity (Riccardo's mother), the possibility of staying quiet and serene (Simone's mother), or to be happy and curious²⁰ (Sofia's mother). Concerning the low social class, Andrea's mother wishes her child to be successful in school, whilst Mattia's mother refers to the wish that her child goes on to always be better or improve. Thomas' mother wishes for the child to learn to read and write, because this is considered as very important. Finally, high intellectual expectations in social class focus on the child's academic development (as a potential sign of interiorization of the ethos of the upper social class). On the contrary, the "academic" domain seems to be considered from a practical point of view (e.g., to get a job or to solve behavioural problems) in the expectations of lower social class parents.

Second set of interviews

By the end of the school year, we conducted a second set of interviews including questions about the children/parents experience of the first grade classroom. For the purpose of our study, we have selected the following question C: "In general, how was the school year of your child?" Was it as you expected?"

Considering the high social class parents whom we selected with respect to the first set of interviews, Francesco's mother has indicated that for the child it has been very hard to accept the school rules and duties, despite the fact that the final results have been very good. In her

¹⁹ MT is Thomas' mother. She is 31 years old and she is a housewife. Thomas' father is 35 years old and he is a public worker.

²⁰ These statements have reminded us the Steve Jobs' final speech addressed to young people about the relevance of being hungry and foolish.

answer, she emphasises a distance, a discontinuity, as it is shown in the following extended excerpt.

R: *In your opinion, how was the school year of your child?*

MF: *it has been very hard, not because of somebody's responsibility, but because it is hard to put Francesco on the right way, it has been a mess, how can I say... it has been not natural. I mean he (Francesco) is very free, so to force him it was against his nature, although at the end it was effective. Me too, I am aware, the teachers also perceived a change, a progress. Francesco changed, he is growing up. I was a bit disappointed, but we needed to accept it. It has been very demanding for him. It has been almost a physical effort for him. Afterwards, I knew his excellent results, even the teachers said it. It has been a very hard year for him, but the results are good, not only related to the acquisition of school subject matters, but in a broader sense. Francesco was asked to be part of a group he did not know before, because he did not attend the pre-school; so his integration was good, he started to consider the classmates as his friends. He built friendships since he felt the need to be part of a group. My concern was not on his capacity to learn, no doubts about it, but more on the socialization skills: new teachers, a new context, so finally I have to recognize that we are very very satisfied, everybody, us (the parents), the teachers and himself.*

R: *Did it match your expectations?*

MF: *I was expecting, in a naïve way, fewer difficulties, probably because the experience with our older daughter was easier. But as I know Francesco, it was predictable. Indeed, I had difficulties because toward Francesco I am very protective, much more than toward his sister. Then, his constant playing with hands was a trouble for me. Will be everything ok with him? Then, checking the context, talking with some teachers, and with a friend of mine who is a teacher in another primary school, I was quite relaxed. I was so excited at the beginning and finally it has been necessary to work a lot, but the result has been good, so no problem at all.*

Francesco's mother is aware of the difficulties encountered by the child at the beginning of the school year, although she recognizes that her son, at the end of the year, obtained some good results. However, she realizes that in order to achieve these results, the child has had to give up certain aspects of his personality. She emphasises the success, the personality and the development as the ethos of the upper social class. Other participants have underlined that their children were "very peaceful and adapted to the school" [Riccardo's mother], that "the school year [...] was very positive [...] [children] have done very difficult topics in mathematics" [Simone's mother], that the child "has grown up [...], she has understood the personal differences [...], she knows how to read and to use cursive writing [...], she is autonomous" [Sofia's mother].

Concerning the low social class parents, Andrea's mother [MA] considers the positive experience for the child and the parents as well: "the year was very good [...], the experience was positive for him and for us." By the end of the year, we addressed to her the same question C. MA's answer is reported below:

R: *In your opinion, how was the school year of your child?*

- MA: *I will say that it was very satisfactory. The transition from pre-school grade to the primary school has been more demanding than expected, especially because of homework, but he (Andrea) was quite, happy every time.*
- R: *Did he match your expectations?*
- MA: *I was expecting, related to the experience at the pre-school level, that he (Andrea) will react differently. And finally it has been positive, both for us and for him. I was scared because he is rather shy. But finally, even the teachers said that although at the beginning of the year he was too much chatting, now there are no problems. And you can see his progress even in the relationships with others.*

Andrea's mother expresses her satisfaction with the child's easy transition from kindergarten to primary school, although the new assignments required a lot of work. Even the initial shyness of Andrea seems to have been overcome ("you can see his progress even in the relationships with others"). Other participants have underlined similar interesting elements. It is the case of Mattia's mother: "Well, I did not expect that he was so good in mathematics"; or Gabriele's father, affirming that "the year was very good both for learning and sociological (he means social) reasons", also because his child "attended a private infant school before entering the first grade and thus he knew already how to write"; or Thomas' mother, referring that "he (the child) was well without any problem of integration." These elements seem to us particularly interesting because they allow to go beyond the models of Eccles and Harold (1996) and of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) on motivation and parental engagement: while these authors focus on the fact that the initial parental expectations are the key factors for the child's success, here there is a rupture in this circularity. This effect permits to reconstruct the parental expectations, looking towards the future (Boulanger, 2016, 2018).

These representations are evaluations of the first school year and indicate positive experiences from the point of view of the parents who were discovering how their children face the beginning of a new practice, namely the initiation into a former system of learning, of being with others and of literacy acquisition and socialization processes. A possible theoretical avenue coming from this result concerns the way these experiences function as possible feed-backs in bringing novelty in the parental representations (intended not as entities, but as cultural processes). These aspects will be discussed in the final section of the paper, as indicators that can contribute to better understand the boundary crossing between school and family spaces, and as suggestions for theoretical innovations in educational contexts. In fact, our results can be considered in the light of the assumption that high levels of family involvement promote children's positive feelings about learning, which in turn leads to better literacy performance throughout primary school (Calidoni & Cataldi, 2014). This positive pattern should be significantly notable for low class children whose parents are less educated. In other words, family involvement continues to make a difference in children's learning and development across different socioeconomic and thus cultural groups.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In our investigation, we expected different cultural attitudes toward first grade results due to social class memberships: what we found was new on the side of high social class parents that appreciate the children's enthusiasm to learn. This is connected to a competence motivation as critical factor in lifelong learning, and an attitude that would be useful for all students, independently from their social class. Considering the different questions addressed to the

parents, starting from question A of the first interview, it is possible to find differences in the educational attitudes of the two subgroups. In fact, the high social class parents consider that the main goal of the school is to socialise children and to educate them on social rules. In their view, children's literacy could also be reached at home. The low social class parents consider that school is the central institution allowing children to become fully literate. These differences are more evident when parents answer the question C of the second interview: the high social class parents wish for their children to keep and increase enthusiasm, creativity, joy and serenity towards school and learning life. The low social class parents indicate more concrete issues, for example the possibility of making progresses in children's actual and future school achievement (in particular, future short-term as opposed to long term of higher social class).

Our analyses suggest that our initial hypothesis has been only partially verified. Indeed, it is evident that parents of the two social classes tell a rather different story of the educational expectations they have for their children. In fact, high social class parents agree with the relevance of their children's enthusiasm and steady motivation for learning; they even wish for them to keep a positive attitude towards the educational career, perhaps in a projection toward long-life learning. On the other hand, low social class parents expect that their children quickly master literacy skills and continue to reach school good results they have already achieved during the first grade. In addition, we would like to stress what is common to families' social representations: they are all very satisfied with school activities and they pay attention to the instrumental learning of reading, writing and computing. In addition, they positively value the self-regulation processes and the development of good social behaviours of their children.

In the context we have observed, families attending the same school are not acquiring larger educational attitudes by participating in collective meetings organized by the teachers. However, we must underline commonalities concerning all the interviewed parents: they consider the school as the most important context for acquiring positive social skills, in particular learning to accept different ways of being, both for the pupils and for the teachers. In fact, it seems that parents belonging to different social classes, and perhaps living usually in a rather separate social milieu, consider that the public school can give children a valuable opportunity to meet different people and to respect diversity. This issue involves many perspectives, such as diversity in social lives, or in various cultures and languages people are using²¹. Notwithstanding this large gap, all the families agree that school education is central to learn social skills and to accept diversity. In our case, the primary classrooms we have observed are characterized by the presence of children of thirteen different countries. It is interesting to note that at the end of the year, all the parents were recognizing the positive value of considering exposure to diversity as an opportunity, especially for their children living now within a multicultural context.

A summary of the representations that emerge from the interviews we have conducted is presented synthetically in the Figure 1, as an attempt to show in an iconic way the differences and the similarities we have found through the analysis of the parental answers. We also would like to stress that we had interviewed each parent in two different moments of the school year: at the beginning and at the end (a five months' interval). Although our survey revealed the representations of eight parents, interviewed individually, the similarities and the differences we have observed allow us to attribute the findings to different social class membership. It

²¹ This issue also reminds us to the possibility that culture provides a range of cultural mediating devices (tools or signs that are present at school, as well as in the family context) to the developing child in specific activity contexts. A detailed view of this perspective of mutual interweaving by which culture and person are related is presented by Cole (1996).

remains that all the families have in common a very positive attitude toward school learning and teacher's behaviour, particularly concerning the development of social skills in their children. In this sense, family involvement determines the promotion of positive a feeling about literacy and school issues.

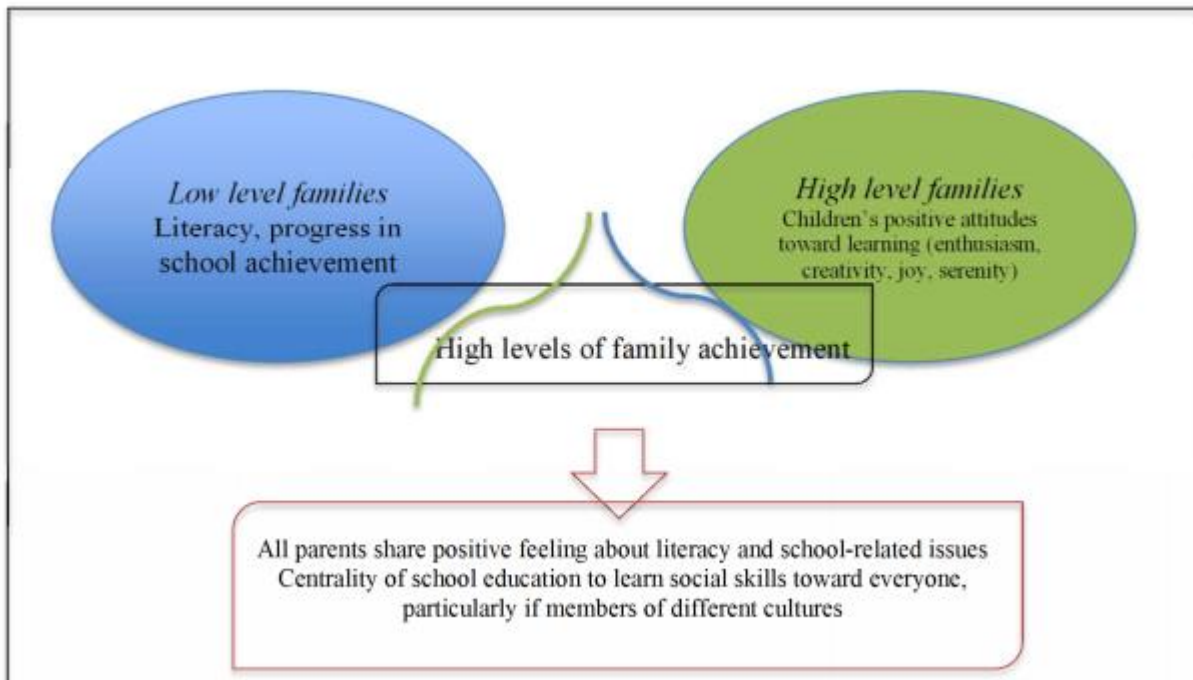


Figure 1: Outcomes in terms of parental representations by social class

During the final interviews, all the parents showed a very encouraging evaluation of teachers and schools activities. They expressed recommendations for future first grade parents that emphasise the positive value of their experiences as parents of children that have entered into the first grade. Their statements about the role of school and their ideas about the children's gains (in terms of learning at school and at home) have produced results in terms of parental representations, inasmuch the past experiences have made them confident, as concerns future school attendance of their children. By observing the parental representations about school experiences of their children, we have found that, during the first grade year, parents state an increased trust in school and high expectations for their children's future achievement. As children progress through the elementary school years, the educational expectations that parents hold for them evolve. Policy makers have to take into account the evidence that individual and specific components of parental involvement, such as reading to children and checking homework, are linked to positive educational outcomes. The area of the boundaries between school and families takes a place at least in two conditions: firstly, when school is considered and evaluated by the parents, individually or in group (as it was the case in this paper); secondly, when the school enters as a topic in family conversations (Arcidiacono, 2013; Pontecorvo, Liberati & Monaco, 2013). Obviously, another important boundary area could be offered by verbal interactions in different collective encounters between parents and teachers that should be studied effectively with ethnographic and conversational tools (Iannaccone & Arcidiacono, 2014).

These aspects contribute to a deeper understanding of the boundaries between the two socialization contexts of school and family: social and cultural perspectives in psychology and

education are the fundamental lenses through which the lessons learned by parent representations' accounts can provide a further understanding of learning processes and cultural dynamics in human and social sciences. We are convinced that the identification of similarities and differences between parental representations of school (from within different social classes) could be a useful step in keeping in mind the inter- and trans-disciplinary dimensions, which generate local and general conditions of knowledge production. However, the comparative stance is always a very problematic issue: in our case, it is surely driven by the US specific socio-cultural approach (Cole, 1996) that was activated by the repeated reading of the transcribed interviews (firstly, independently and then by confronting our interpretations until reaching a full agreement on the categorization of the protocols, according to the differences and similarities we found).

Accordingly, the implications emerging for policy makers, practitioners, and researchers are crucial in creating systematic, developmental and comprehensive approaches to family involvement, although families' busy work schedules are a challenge to this involvement (Arcidiacono, Klein, Izquierdo & Bradbury, 2010). As family involvement is more likely to be sustained when the community reinforces it, peers are particularly valuable as a source of support. Their efforts can create opportunities for parent-to-parent sharing and learning about workable strategies. Consequently, research and policy makers²² can articulate these involvement processes sustained by parents' representations in order to create the conditions that necessarily concern the boundaries between the school and family from a less school-centric perspective.

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²² We are referring here to individuals (usually members of the board of directors) who have the authority to set the policy framework of an organization, such as schools.

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Annex 1: Interview guide

First interview

General information about the family

- Firstly, I would like to know a bit more about your family. Who are the members?
- Where are you from?
- In case you are coming from abroad, from how long are you in Italy?
- Which was the main reason of your coming?
- Do you plan to remain in Italy or you are planning to go somewhere else, or back to your country?

Primary school

- Your child was attending the kindergarten in this town?
- If yes, which one? Which was the reason to choose this kindergarten? How long he/she was attending the school?
- Which was your experience as parents?
- Where he/she has learned to write?
- Is there a moment of the kindergarten experience that was particularly meaningful for you?
- It has been a positive experience? Any difficulties? And for the child?

First school day

- Do you have experience with the first grade? (e.g., with other children)
- Do you know other children attending this school at the time your child started to attend it?
- Do you know other parents?
- Why have you chosen this school?
- Could you tell me about the first day of school of your child?
- How was your child feeling? And you as parents?
- Did he/she match your expectations?
- What do you remember about your first school day?
- Does your child speak at home about his/her classmates?
- What he/she likes more about school?

Parents' ideas about school

- For you, as parents, what is important for your child to learn in the first grade?
- Let's imagine being in front of two classes: one composed by children coming from different cultures and one monoculture. Do you think that the teacher will teach in the same way?
- Do you feel that school education includes your culture or are there aspects that the school does not include?
- In your opinion, a child aged 6 speaking two languages will learn to read and to write more easily or difficulty than a child speaking one language?

Languages spoken at home

- Which language is spoken at home? In case of more than one language, when the first and the second? And the child?
- At home, do you have materials (books, newspapers) in your language? (in case of other languages than Italian) And your child is using this material? Are you teaching him/her to write in your language? (in case of a language other than Italian) Are you planning to do it? And why?

Final section

- What would you wish for the teachers?
- What would you wish for your child during his/her first year of school?

Second interview

Information about the first year of school

- In your opinion, how was the school year of your child? Did it match your expectations?
- Is there some learning that surprised you, in a positive way? Something your child learned and that was unexpected for you?
- What do you think about his/her capacity to write?
- Are you checking him/her while writing?
- How do you evaluate the way he/she is writing?
- Do you think he/she likes to write?
- Does he/she write only to do the homework or even for other activities?
- During the first school year did you help him/her to accomplish the writing homework?
- Is there some homework that is more difficult for him/her?
- During the year, did you discussed with other parents about school learning topics?
- Now that your child is able to read and to write, do you think he/she is more interested in reading texts in your language? (for foreign children)
- Which are the recommendations for other parents of children that will attend the first class here during the next school year?