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Attitudes and Practices of Parents: Disadvantage and Access to Education

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This article focuses on different ways in which socially disadvantaged parents engage with their children's educational experiences, and provides evidence of the role they play in opening or narrowing their children's access to education. Disadvantaged parents are usually associated with weak or difficult educational trajectories for their children, because of their lower level of economic, cultural, and social capital. Nevertheless, this association does not operate as an automatic mechanism. Indeed, against a backdrop of persisting inequalities, research data show a plurality of intraclass and intragroup dynamics, with disadvantaged parents having diverse ways of avoiding blaming processes, saving dignity, and acting as proactive agents for their children's educational career.

INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on the different ways in which socially disadvantaged parents engage with their children's educational experiences, how they interact with the ways in which school systems function, and how these affect their children's access to education.

Disadvantage as used here refers to the effects that parental low-skilled jobs, low educational attainment, and/or immigrant background have in school-based social interaction (Laureau, 2002). School staff often blame these characteristics for, and associate them with, weak or difficult educational trajectories for children. Nevertheless, this association is simplistic and does not operate as an automatic mechanism, but depends on how parents try to manage their children's school experience, on features of the institutional setting, and on the local context in which parents are embedded. There is a large amount of statistical evidence about the relationships between family backgrounds and children's school experiences (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Irwin 2009). In this article we analyze the complex interactions between social structure and individual agency, focusing on meanings and practices emerging from the actions and interactions of parents, children, and school staff at the transition from lower to upper secondary education and training within specific disadvantaged local contexts.

This article is based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collected by the GOETE research project: the survey's data sample comprises 3,290 parents of students attending the last year of compulsory education in 2011. These parents come from seven of the eight

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countries covered by the GOETE research project: Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, and the Netherlands.[1] The data were collected in three different cities in each country. The cities were selected with the aim of including different socioeconomic and urban conditions within each country. The main sampling unit was lower secondary schools; the sample was stratified according to the level of (socioeconomic) disadvantage within the school and its catchment area in order to achieve a "best probability sample design" that would enable comparability (Lynn, Häder, & Laaksonen, 2004).[2] Questionnaires were distributed to students through in-class surveys, which have the advantage of efficiently achieving high response rates, and parental questionnaires were distributed at the same time for completion at home.[3] Fieldwork research was conducted only in relation to lower secondary schools located in socially deprived areas (three cases per country) that had participated in the survey previously. The main objective of the fieldwork research was to generate dense, qualitative, empirical material in twenty-four case study school environments across the eight GOETE countries. The research methods used in the fieldwork included semistructured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, involving students, parents, school staff, and external experts.[4]

After discussing a theoretical framework for the factors and interactions regarding parental involvement, this article describes, through the empirical data, the attitudes and expectations of disadvantaged parents regarding their children's educational careers and how they position themselves and negotiate with their children, schools, and school representatives to improve educational opportunities for their children.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION AND INTERACTION WITH SCHOOL

The scientific literature extensively acknowledges the importance of the family as a key factor in pupil achievement and adjustment in schools. In this perspective, parental involvement appears to be the core concept for investigating under what circumstances and to what extent parental involvement develops, knowing that it positively influences the attainment of children and, more generally, the orientation of children toward education.

Parental involvement could be intended as both a spontaneous and a supported engagement (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Gorman, 1998). This means that we find some parents being active on their own according to their specific conditions, values, and motivations, while others show a weak or absent involvement (always depending on specific conditions, values, and motivations) and therefore have need of empowerment, in view of the general, increasing institutional demand for stronger participation from families.

Parental involvement can take diverse forms and involve a range of actions and attitudes: from good parenting in the home (including a secure and stable environment), intellectual stimulation, parent-child discussion, good models of constructive social and educational values, high aspirations relating to personal fulfilment and good citizenship, to contact with schools to

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[1]The United Kingdom was not included in this analysis due to relevant data not being fully reliable.

[2]In each city, six schools were selected.

[3]To ensure equivalence in the data sample and for the purpose of the statistical analysis, the data were weighted such that each country is equally represented (14.3% per country).

[4]Interview quotations are selected by indicating widespread positions and actions, emerging as typical from the case studies.

share information, participating in school events and activities, participating in the work of the school and in school governance (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003).

Even if the educational system asks for more involvement, expectations on how involvement should be based on formal rules are not neutral: schools and teachers are generally selective in defining the qualities of "normal families" (Laureau & McNamara Horvat, 1999). In particular they often seem oriented toward a middle-class set of behavioral norms and styles of communication, and on a difference between good rhetoric and real home-school relationships, which appear to be adversarial and based on rights and power (Bastiani, 1993; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). The ambivalence of the call for participation addressed to families also results in public discourses in which the lower classes and their culture are labeled as a problem rather than a resource that the wider society should value and on which schools can build (Reay, 2006; Weis, 2008). Furthermore, there seems to persist among teachers a deficit model view of lower-class parents, who are seen both as "problems" and as weak (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

Obviously, parents are far from being a homogenous group: they are differentiated according to social class, ethnicity, gender, and educational experiences. Frequently, we see that transversally to each of these main variables there is a significant (intraclass/group) diversity (Gorman, 1998; Irwin, 2009). Moreover, the factors acting as barriers to parental involvement appear to be complex: there are individual and family factors (parents' beliefs about parental involvement, parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement, parents' current life contexts, and class, ethnicity, and gender); child factors (age, learning difficulties and disabilities, gifts and talents, and behavioral problems); parent-teacher relationship factors (differing goals and agendas, attitudes, and used language); and societal factors (historical, demographic, political, and economic issues) (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). According to Desforges and Abouchaar (2003, pp. 85–86), parental involvement is strongly related to family social class and to the mother's level of education (the higher this is, the greater the involvement), it decreases and changes forms as children get older, it is strongly influenced by the child (children play an active role in mediating between parents and schools) and by the child's attainment (the greater the attainment, the more involvement), and it is influenced to some degree by the parents' ethnic culture.

There is a good knowledge of key elements and dimensions through which parental involvement develops and influences the educational horizons of children. It is interesting to examine interpretations that have been proposed within the literature with regard to how those factors play a role and interrelate, whether some of them are more relevant, and whether it is permissible to think about parents and children in terms of automatisms, as regards orientations and behaviors concerning education and schooling.

Research has led to a better understanding of many aspects and mechanisms involving the above-mentioned relationships and issues. However, quantitative and qualitative approaches have generated diverse images of family-level processes, and their articulation with broader structures of social inequality. Through quantitative research, causal processes are carefully measured in relation to extant patterns, but "we cannot 'see' social action and thus the family remains a kind of a black box in respect of crucial socialization processes. Here, general patterns are clear, but family processes somewhat opaque" (Irwin, 2009, p. 1124). On the other hand, qualitative research and interpretive studies provide an insight into salient cultural processes in action and interaction (Irwin, 2009; Mehan, 1992) and permit one "to see in vivid relief family contexts, micro-level interactions and the different meanings and interpretations people bring to bear. Here, family processes are in focus and relatively clear, yet their fit with

broader patterns is often opaque" (Irwin, 2009, p. 1124). An improvement in the understanding of the reproduction of inequality seems to be necessarily connected to a positive dialogue between quantitative and qualitative studies. And it seems necessary to pay appropriate attention to the extent socialclass division permits life chances to be predicted; to inter- and intraclass diversity and interrelations; and to the way class, ethnicity and culture, race, and gender combine with each other, according to an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1991; Jones, 2003; Weldon, 2008).

Bourdieu's theorization and studies (1984), based on the renowned ideas of habitus, field, and practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), provide powerful and sensitive tools for the investigation of social reproduction of inequality, and have been widely taken as fundamental starting points and the conceptual background for many quantitative and qualitative analyses, putting dense and relevant concepts of social and cultural capital at the center of the research.

Social inequalities arising from social class are diffusely seen as persisting, and school can also be viewed as a location in which the reproduction of inequalities takes place (Desforges & Abouchaar 2003; Ingram, 2011; Lareau & McNamara Horvat, 1999; Reay, 2006; Szalaj, 2011; Weis, 2008). However, the relation between social class and inequalities under the perspective of parenting in education is neither linear nor emerging as a deterministic fate that exclusively depends on economic differences, but is also mixed with and influenced by aspects of ethnicity and race. This is why, reflecting on race, class, and cultural capital in the family-school relationship, Lareau and McNamara Horvat (1999) talk about "moments of social inclusion and exclusion," stressing the dynamic and multidimensional character of this interaction.

There are few doubts that disadvantaged classes encounter greater difficulties in their relationship with the educational system. Parents from the working class and minorities are more likely to have problems producing good effects on their children through their involvement. This could be due to the cumulative advantage that benefits middle-class and upper-class families, and native-born citizens (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006). They may experience restricted resources (in terms of information and economic means) with respect to their desires and to what is expected from the school; they may feel incapable of promoting the "sense of entitlement" that seems to be fostered by middle-class parents (Lareau, 2008); they may feel incapable of keeping up with the knowledge and standards implied in educational codes, which trace a much more—both explicitly and implicitly—middle-class profile of values and identities (Dahlstedt, 2009; Reay, 2005, 2006). Working-class and non-native culture are viewed as deficient; this causes difficulties for working-class and non-native students in negotiating an acceptable identity within schools. According to Ingram (2011) "the very idea of being educationally successful and working class is problematic, as success has been argued to be dependent on the abandonment of aspects of a working-class background" (p. 187). This could destabilize their habitus and put it in tension between two conflicting fields, creating a double bind. Another barrier for disadvantaged parents in their relations with the educational system and, in particular, with schooling regards their perception of an invitation from teachers or schools as only formal and/or suspicious (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Szalai, 2011). This element contributes to the idea of a school environment that lacks equal opportunities for all, particularly when combined with weak or absent specific training for teachers on social class, which may not even be considered a relevant concern within

schools (Reay, 2006). A related perception is that in schools with a high representation of minorities, teachers have the view that parents of "problematic" pupils are insufficiently involved in their children's educational careers (Szalai, 2011, p. 26). These processes intensify the problematic relationship of working-class families and minorities in regard to education (Reay, 2006; Szalai, 2011; Weis, 2008), even if some minority students sometimes develop an advantaged position due to their not having a low social-class profile (Tomlinson, 1997).

Although this picture is real and is shared among scholars, working-class and non-native families are not homogeneous and develop forms (and effects) of parental involvement that are not unequivocal.

According to Gorman (1998), working-class parents show diverse and complex orientations toward schooling, and if we distinguish *class as culture and identity* from *class as an economic phenomenon*, we see how classes (expressly working classes) are internally differentiated (Irwin, 2009).

In short, we confront differentiated and nondeterministic dynamics that characterize the interaction with and among various social fields (and key factors such as class, ethnicity/race, and gender), revealing the importance of the material contexts in which families are embedded (Irwin & Elley, 2013).

According to Lareau and McNamara Horvat (1999), who give parental involvement in education an ongoing, nondeterministic nature:

> the empirical work on social reproduction, despite the original theoretical richness of Bourdieu's writing, has not sufficiently recognised three important points. First, the value of capital depends heavily on the social setting [or field]. Second, there is an important difference between the possession and activation of capital or resources. That is, people who have social and cultural capital may choose to activate capital or not, and they vary in the skill with which they activate it. Third, these two points come together to suggest that rather than being an overly deterministic continual process, reproduction is jagged and uneven and is continually negotiated by social actors. (p. 38)

In the next paragraphs we will provide evidence about parents' hopes and expectations regarding their children's educational futures and about the role of parenting in opening or narrowing access to education.

PARENTS' HOPES FOR THEIR CHILDREN'S FUTURE: IDEALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND INTERGENERATIONAL ISSUES

In the GOETE survey, parents were asked about their aspirations and expectations regarding their children's next transition after finishing compulsory education. While aspirations may capture what they *hope* will occur, expectations could be considered as realistic aspirations (Jacob & Wilder, 2010). The great majority of parents (89.7%) would like their children to remain in full-time education after finishing compulsory education and 84.8% think they will actually do this. Even though this applies most to educated parents and parents with higher socioeconomic status, education is considered a very important factor by a large majority of parents in all social classes (see Table 1). For instance, there is a difference of 17.7% between the aspirations of the most educated and least educated mothers', but the proportion of the latter remains considerable, nearly 80%.

TABLE 1

Differences Between Parents' Wishes and the Actual Possibility of Their Child Staying in Full-Time Education by Mothers' Level of Education[a] and Parents' Employment Class (ESeC)[b]

Mothers' level of education[c]	Proportions of parents that would like their child to remain in full time education		Proportions of parents that think their child will actually remain in full time education	
	%	No.	%	No.
Tertiary	95.1	976	94.2	969
Secondary	90.9	1,306	84.5	1,215
Basic	77.4	449	71.7	412
Parents' employment class				
Upper	97.5	551	94.6	585
Upper middle	95.2	516	89.6	485
Middle	92.1	578	86.2	541
Small employer and self-employed occupation	94.4	173	91.2	168
Lower and routine occupation	84.2	717	76.7	652

[a]National educational levels have been converted to ISCED (1997) levels. Therefore, basic levels refer to 0 to 2; Secondary levels refer to 3 and 4; Tertiary levels refer to 5 and 6.

[b]The ESeC index (European Socio-economic Classification) was re-coded in the following categories: Upper class (Large employers, higher managers/professionals); Upper middle class (Lower mgrs/professionals, higher supervisory/technicians); Middle class (Intermediate occupations); Small employer and self-employed occupations (regardless of the sector); Lower (Lower supervisors and technicians, Lower sales and service, Lower technical) and routine occupations.

[c]The table presents only cross analyses with the mother's level of education There are two reasons: firstly, for a long time literature has shown that parents' aspirations regarding their children's school experiences are strongly related to the mothers' level of education; secondly, the great majority of respondents are mothers and results of cross analyses with the education of the mother and father are in most cases very similar.

The great majority of parents not only desires that their children remain in full-time education after finishing compulsory school, but they also would like them to remain in education for a long time. Indeed, educational aspirations across the sample are very high: about two out of three parents would like their child to achieve tertiary education and just under three out of ten would like (upper) secondary education. Only 7% restrict their aspirations to lower-secondary education.

Again, a more detailed analysis of socioeconomic background shows that higher educational aspirations for their children are more likely to come from the most educated mothers and those in the upper and middle classes (see Table 2).

However, the significant percentage of lower-class parents and less-educated mothers who hope that their children will achieve at least an upper secondary education diploma shows to what extent the *idealization* of higher education has developed in countries involved in the survey: Germany, Finland, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Slovenia.[5] Lower-class

[5]Educational aspirations are similar in all GOETE's countries, with the exception of France and Germany, the only countries in the sample where desired proportions of secondary education are higher than those for tertiary education. France and Germany are, together with the Netherlands (where, on the contrary, parents have very high educational aspirations), the countries with the highest stratification of the educational systems, where routes towards higher educational levels are less permeable (Allmendinger, 1989).

TABLE 2
Highest Level of Education That Parents Would Like Their Children to Achieve by Mother's Level of Education
and Parents' Employment Class (ESeC)

	Basic	Secondary	Tertiary	No.
Mothers' level of education				
Tertiary	2.3	12.5	85.2	983
Secondary	5.0	36.2	58.8	1,408
Basic	14.3	42.9	42.8	572
Parents' employment class				
Upper	0.9	19.7	79.4	567
Upper middle	2.7	24.4	72.9	544
Middle	5.8	26.7	67.5	629
Small employer and self-employed occupation	7.7	21.9	70.4	186
Lower and routine occupation	10.8	40.6	48.6	869

parents are constrained in their aspirations and practices because of lower levels of economic, cultural, and social capital. However, for their children's education they seem to have accepted the common public discourse in a so-called "knowledge society" (Castells, 2000), and formal education qualifications seem to have overtaken work-based routes to successful working-class employment, pushing toward mid- or long-term educational careers (Irwin & Elley, 2011).

The fieldwork permits a deeper understanding of the meanings that lower-class parents give to their children's future education career and also the ways in which they interact with their children.

For example, in the words of an Italian working-class father, it emerged that a high-school diploma is extremely important in his vision of a successful future for his child, revealing a change in his perception compared to his own life: "If I think of my son … if I think of his future, this is what I see: in today's world, the high-school diploma is an obligation, it has replaced the middle-school diploma and probably it's now not enough to gain a secure and stable position."

In the narratives that recount hitches, obstacles, and surprises, the parents' representations of their children's future education career emerge more clearly. The first example, in this regard, concerns a dispute between parents' and their child's educational aspirations at the end of compulsory school.

The Case of Nina

Nina is a fifteen-year-old girl interviewed in one of the Slovenian case studies. Talking about her transition to upper secondary school, Nina said that at the time of choosing, both her parents (her mother is a housekeeper and her father is a printer who holds a relatively secure position) and her teachers were very displeased about her wish to attend a vocational training institute to become a florist. Although based on Nina's intrinsic interest, her parents saw this option as a degradation of her chances. They pressured her, trying to avoid her possibly regretting her decision later, worrying that in the future she would be dissatisfied that she was "just a florist." As Nina pointed out in the interview, "[my parents] said I am able to finish grammarschool, that it

would be a pity to choose a three-year vocational program [and that] grammar school could open more opportunities for me." Thus, against her wishes, she finally went to a grammar school.

The story of Nina shows that her parents had plans and strategies for their daughter's future. Although these were marked by vagueness, they exercised agency by going after long-term educational aspirations for their child, even if this meant not taking into account her preferences.

The story of Nina also reveals that her parents agree to the widespread opinion—especially in countries with a less-stratified educational system (Allmendiger, 1989)—that maintains a vocational training course as a second-class option.[6] On the other hand, considering the lower entrance requirements and the wide confluence of students with lower socioeconomic status, migration or ethnic minority background, and/or problematic school careers, vocational training is seen as a sort of failure, not only in middle-class families. The statement of an Italian single mother illustrates how unenthusiastic lower-class parents' view of vocational training courses can be in countries where stratification of the educational system is low:

> My daughter's plans are not so good. She would like to become a hairdresser.… I disagree with her plans because this means dropping out of school and attending a vocational training course where there is a concentration of young people who don't like to study … young people who failed in school. Thus we have chosen a vocational training institute in which it is possible to study as both a hairdresser and a health-care assistant. In this way, after the two years [necessary to take a hairdresser qualification] she could continue and achieve a high-school diploma, becoming a health-care assistant.

Moreover, parents' aspirations about their own children's educational success in higher education could originate also from a veritable intergenerational mandate within families, according to which the child has to succeed where the parents failed. In other words, a child's success in education becomes a family project. This mandate is clearly expressed by a Polish father: "[In education] I wish he would get more than I did."

A French mother confirms this view when asked about her daughter's educational aspirations: "She has to push more than her mother. I stopped at the end of lower secondary education, but she has to go beyond. That is quite normal."

In order to push their children's commitment in school activities, some people explicitly devalue their professional position, due to their negative or short school experience. From a gender perspective this also means that mothers would like their daughters not to fall into the same pattern they followed and instead encourage them to enter the world of work with secure and well-paid jobs. In this regard, the view of Julia's mother is emblematic. She talks about her attempts to support Julia in succeeding in her apprenticeship and her aspirations that her daughter would come back to education, at least in a vocational training course, remembering her own negative experiences in school and in the labor market.

The Case of Julia

Julia is a German student who attended a lower secondary school; her educational career included several changes and stressful events and was marked by low grades. At the time of

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[6]In less stratified educational systems, there are no dead-end tracks and tracking begins at a later age.

the interview she was performing her obligatory annual vocational placement in a bakery where her mother works. Though she had a key role in bringing Julia to the same bakery shop for her vocational training, Julia's mother told her that she would like her to continue with her education in order to achieve better professional prospects. Her hope that her daughter would get a better job than her own is attributed to the strain of her own work, the low wage, and the fear that Julia will only get low-paid jobs in that field and will be dependent on social benefits when she retires.

Educational success is also a priority among some immigrant families. For example, a Moroccan mother, employed in a cleaning company, who has lived in Italy for about twenty years, stated that for her and her husband: "To succeed in school is the most worthy thing. It's important that our daughter finish upper secondary school and obtain the diploma. Then she could choose what she wants, with fewer problems."

At the same time, for immigrant families, school success may produce a retrospective justification of the same migration project, which in many cases has caused a drop in status for parents (Gans, 2009). However, they are aware of direct or indirect discrimination that would have to be faced. Therefore, in pushing their children's commitment in school to achieve the best position in the labor market, immigrant parents advise them that they might have to prove they have better qualifications for a job compared to native-born applicants. In this regard a student from immigrant background in a Dutch case study stated: "My mother tells me 'you should work very hard and be better than your Dutch classmates, so that you can prove that you have better qualifications; then they would not discriminate against you.'"

The examples reveal that the children's school experiences make sense in relation to the parents' history and the family project. The parents' short and often troubled educational trajectories could become a resource to motivate their children, being used as a counterexample of what their children should not do if they want to succeed socially and professionally.

PARENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN CHILDREN'S EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND THEIR INTERACTIONS WITH SCHOOL STAFF

Studies abound that have illustrated the ways in which upper- and middle-class families mobilize their resources, via a variety of strategies, to assure their children's success in the education system (Ball, 2003; Devine, 2004). The role and efforts of lower-class families and parents from immigrant backgrounds, however, have been little studied.

Indeed, a deep-rooted image among teachers has often depicted these families as problematic —and sometimes hostile—in their relationships with school (Lahire, 1995; Laureau, 2002; Reay, 2006). Due to the cultural inadequacy of such families, they are used as scapegoats to explain their children's failure in school. The blaming of parents' deficiency or indifference to support their children in their school experience seems to be a common feature in all countries involved in the GOETE project (du Bois-Reymond et al., 2012).

However, the survey data suggest a different image of parents, far from that depicting lower-class parents as absent and uninterested in their children's school experience. For example, two indirect indicators of parental involvement in education are the frequency of discussions taking place at home about children's school experiences and their future educational career.

Regarding the first indicator, parents generally talk to their children about their school experiences quite regularly: every day (64%) or at least weekly (26%). As regards the second indicator, 12% of all parents talk with their children about their future education on a daily basis, a majority (42%) discusses these issues weekly, 30% monthly, and 16% less than once a month.

Daily conversations about a child's future are substantially more frequent among less-educated parents and lower-class families, while there are many similarities in the frequency of discussions about a child's school experiences. In short, the survey data reveal an image that is very different from the view that depicts lower-class parents as uninterested in their children's school experience.

The blaming game played by teachers is not the only constraint that parents with lower economic, cultural, and social capital have to face in their interactions with schools. An often-underestimated difficulty is associated with institutional barriers concerning the actual functioning of school systems. Without making any generalizations, the case of Ron is an example of how the school system could be perceived by lower-class parents as obscure and hostile. Ron's parents are vigilant and engaged in their child's school experience. However, they are hesitant in front of the "rules of the game" that they do not manage very well, especially when they are pitted against school staff (Lareau & McNamara Horvat, 1999).

The Case of Ron

Ron is an eighteen-year-old Dutch youth who accumulated a three-year delay attending a special school for students with learning and mental problems. He lives with his parents and sister in Rotterdam. His father works in a hospital as an administrative employee. His mother (who is Surinamese) attended lower vocational school and is now a housekeeper with a short work experience. After a lower secondary vocational qualification (VMBO) in trade and administration, Ron chose a vocational school for business management, in agreement with his parents, who advised him to choose a sector with safer labor market prospects: "First of all you must have a stable basis." Talking about his school career, Ron complains about continuously being put in low streams by teachers who, in his opinion, underestimate his capacities. He considers the first-year curriculum of vocational school almost identical with what he had learned in his former school. He protested, but educational staff didn't listen to his arguments. They prevented him from entering a higher level (MBO 3), judging him not good enough and accepting the judgment of his former VMBO school, which advised a lower level (MBO 2). In the beginning, his parents tried to intercede with educational staff, keeping in close contact with Ron's school. They explicitly asked to have him admitted at a higher level and thus with one year less to go. But the MBO school refused, due to the advice of the VMBO school, although formally a higher entry was possible. Ron's parents accepted the verdict without further resistance, surrendering to what the school told them and complaining that they did not know enough about the education system to foresee the consequences of the transitions in his educational career.

The variable specialization levels and transition possibilities that distinguish all the GOETE education systems, reaching greater complexity in the more selective and differentiated

systems (e.g., Germany, the Netherlands, and France), de facto reduce parents' capacity for agency in relation to their children's educational trajectories. Ron's parents are not the only ones who have experienced these types of difficulties. Parents from immigrant backgrounds, who do not have previous experience with local school systems, also believe they do not have enough familiarity with the organization. They complain that there are too many choices, which differ between schools and even change on an annual basis. Thus, when difficulties occur in a child's educational career, parents may experience frustration due to their inability to help them effectively, because of their low resistance against school judgments. This suggests that problems and difficulties faced by lower-class families in interactions with the school depend not only on their lack of cultural and social resources but also on institutional barriers concerning the actual functioning of schools, which they often perceive as obscure and hostile.

The institutionalized face-to-face meetings between parents and school staff should increase mutual knowledge. However, meetings are usually short and always occur at school (youth workers and social ones), namely a space that is familiar to just one set of actors involved in the relationship, and is regulated by specific codes and practices that are well understood only by the educational staff. Therefore, the relationship inevitably becomes *asymmetric* and parents can often view school meetings with teachers as a summons in which they have to face negative judgment about their child's school experience.

Other narratives mention frustrating communications with the school and complex cooperation mechanisms between school and parents. First, they highlight the language issue: whoever is not fluent with the language of the resident country puts off autonomously contacting school staff when needed. They worry about being blamed for not being willing to learn the language or integrate into society. Second, they worry because their children are often advised to study at vocational schools or to apply to schools in their own areas, which in general have a high percentage of migrants.

Interviews reveal that working-class and migrant parents try to actively support their children's educational experience through different means. Family in general and mothers in particular appear as the main source of support for the majority of the students. They have various ways of helping their children with schoolwork. Local case studies indicate that a common way is to offer help with homework, say with particularly challenging homework or regularly supervising it when it is done. However, lower-class parents and those from immigrant backgrounds frequently say they lack the skills required to monitor homework. Thus, it is more common that they push their children to complete homework, rather than ensure the work's correctness.

When parents feel they are less effective in supervising their children's academic performance, they often use the popular strategy of seeking help from older siblings, relatives, and friends, rather than from professionals (such as social workers or psychologists).

The findings also reveal that parents can be active in a supportive sense, by taking on the role of *door openers*, advocating on behalf of their children. The case of Jonathan offers a good example of effective parental resistance to a school judgment through real pressure on school staff when they were making a decision regarding his next education transition. Unlike Ron's parents, Jonathan's mother stretched the "rules of the game" in the school system, encouraged by her son's emerging enthusiasm about concrete educational aspirations.

The Case of Jonathan

Jonathan is a sixteen-year-old living with his mother in a French city. His mother used to work as a secretary. After months of unemployment, she has recently taken a training course in accountancy to enlarge her skills. Jonathan's educational trajectory was filled with gaps, affected by a years-long parental conflict culminating in divorce. He started to appreciate school during his last years of lower secondary, after he switched to a new school and moved in with his mother. As his mother said about this last change of school: "It is the first time that my child told me he was comfortable with teachers and other pupils." In this new school, his grades slowly improved. However, the teachers still recommended that he attend a vocational school, due to the many gaps in his previous educational path. Jonathan disagreed, as he felt confident about rapidly recouping the lost time. He wanted to go on to the general course and obtain a master's degree to become a computer engineer. He discussed this aspiration with his mother's new partner, an information technology technician. Jonathan's mother actively supported her son's wish and opposed the staff's advice. She wrote a letter to his teachers explaining his professional plans and the hard work he intended to do in order to succeed in general upper secondary school. Finally, the school council accepted his choice and authorized him to attend a general course.

A key strategy characterizing parents' engagement with their children's educational trajectories also concerns the choice of a suitable school, combined with *avoiding strategies* of schools located in disadvantaged areas that are negatively perceived (Broccolichi & van Zanten, 2000). Indeed, in many countries parents avoid sending their children to schools that have gained bad reputations due to a high percentage of migrant or socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

Among lower-class parents the possibility of avoiding school zoning is not widely known. Their wish is for a careful, effective school with a safe learning environment and committed and helpful teachers. However, they confront a lack of knowledge about how education systems work and, at the same time, a lack of time and networks to get more useful information. Moreover, they also have economic constraints in managing home-school distance. As the more prestigious schools are usually placed outside the districts inhabited by working-class families, enrolling their children in those schools necessitates transport costs not always affordable for these families.

As a result, these processes have in some cases contributed to reinforcing ethnic segregation, leading to the appearance of the so-called "migrant schools," marked by a bad reputation. Some working-class parents pursue resistance strategies against the risk of social segregation. For instance, a student talks about his parents' wish to enroll him in the neighborhood school, even if it has a bad reputation due to the large presence of students with immigrant backgrounds: "My father wasn't reluctant but my mother really didn't want me to attend another school. She thinks that if everybody does that, the place will become a ghetto.… If everybody leaves, the school will close and it is definitely not a good idea."

As suggested by van Zanten (2007), the interview displays also an "active loyalty" attitude. Some parents living in disadvantaged neighborhoods are involved in local associations aimed at improving local educational services. They cooperate with schools by organizing, for example, workshop activities concerning social and professional skills such as sports, cooking, dance, juggling, and carpentry. At the same time, together with educational staff, they work to improve

the school-family relationship and actively fight against segregation through the increase of formal and informal events (family parties, drama representations, concerts) that actively involve families.

CONCLUSION

The attitudes of parents toward their involvement in their children's school experiences reveal —in an inverse relation to social position—high levels of aspirations, expectations, and interest. It is a sort of *idealization* of higher education, generated by a widespread perception of the increased relevance of education if their children are to obtain "a good start in life" and better social positions in the future.

At the same time, as widely emphasized in the literature, the GOETE survey data show that the expectations of lower-class and immigrant/minority families are lowered in terms of duration of education in comparison with middle-/upper-class families, while fieldwork confirms that parents place diverse emphases on education's relevance and that lower-class and immigrant/minority families face greater barriers in accessing and achieving the desired education for their children.

In the face of barriers, the way parents are able (or unable) to open up access to education and its implied future opportunities for their children takes different forms. This confirms that their involvement in their children's school experience does not correspond to a deterministic mechanism derived from a homogeneous group. Research has drawn attention to interesting divergences among disadvantaged parents, whose action is characterized by internally differentiated cultures, identities, capacities, and strategies that relate to the difference and interplay between possession and activation of resources.

Thus, against a backdrop of persisting inequalities, the survey and fieldwork describe a plurality of intraclass and intragroup dynamics, with disadvantaged parents having diverse ways of avoiding blaming processes, saving dignity, and acting as proactive agents for their children's educational career, even though they are perceived as deficient when confronted with school codes, representations, and standards.

These dynamics are based on varying amounts and types of resources, but also on the emerging relevance of culture, language, and identity as elements to be observed in terms of their effects, when analyzing the consequences and constraints of social inequalities.

Opportunities and constraints obviously are not established and managed only on an individual basis, but are strictly connected to structural factors and processes. In particular, our research clearly evidences how parent-school relationships are embedded in the local context, and the importance of the institutional devices and behaviors adopted by schools in managing the educational trajectories and needs of pupils.

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