

The family-school relationship in primary education. Parents' perspectives in the age of "the minimal self"

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As many scholars in different disciplines have highlighted (Lasch, 1979; Lipovetsky, 1983; Giroux, 2004; Pulcini, 2009; Mayo, 2014;), Western societies are experiencing a phase of socio-anthropological upheaval driven by the social and economic effects of neoliberalism. The question arises: are these changes affecting the relationship between schools and students' families? And if so, in what way?

This article begins with a brief summary of what we mean when we talk of "socio-anthropological change" in this context, before going on to explore the perspectives – in regard to the school-family relationship – of what is an increasingly heterogeneous group, namely the parents of children in primary education. How do the parents of today experience this relationship? What expectations and beliefs inform their conception of it?

The (still-ongoing) study described in this article was initiated in large part to address questions such as these. A key phase of the research carried out so far comprised the administration of semi-structured interviews with Italian parents of primary school children. The results discussed here are based on 101 interviews administered in 2017 and 2018 with a total of 103 parents from various towns/provinces in northern Italy (Lombardy, Veneto, Trentino-Alto Adige). The participants (all volunteers) were selected using a snowball sampling method. The study was intended, ultimately, as an examination of experience (Polkinghorne, 1989) in that it sought to achieve a faithful representation of what the participants expressed. We decided this was best served by a naturalistic paradigm and a phenomenological-eidetic approach whereby, in order to apprehend the true qualities of things, the researcher's personal theories are set aside. The analysed data paints a mixed picture, with a range of different parent "types" who, in one sense or another, are looking for support to allow them to better fulfil their role as a parent.

Keywords: changes in society, the family and the outlook of individuals; parents' beliefs and expectations; parents' and teachers' educational responsibilities; new forms of teacher-parent alliance.

An "anthropological" mutation: the minimal self and the loss of the future

In societies such as ours, the vacuum left by the political sphere has been filled by a self-referential market that bypasses the institutions of politics (absorbing them in the process). Individuals and communities alike are left vulnerable to the reification of a manipulative mass consumerism that, in turn, feeds a narcissistic form of individualism and the flight into a sort of private panopticon, to borrow the imagery of Byung-Chul Han (2016). The characteristics encouraged by this

kind of narcissism are effecting what Christopher Lasch – writing in the late 1970s – described as an "anthropological mutation" (1979), a shift in our culture and society, in our very nature as humans, that has heralded a new phase of pure individualism:

A new phase of individualism is established: as authoritarian capitalism gives way to a hedonistic, permissive capitalism, this narcissism represents the emergence of a model of the individual that – in terms of its relationships with itself and its body, with other people, with the world, with time itself – is unlike anything we have seen before (Lipovetsky, 1995, p. 55).

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The market society makes the bonds that hold us together more fragile. Even our most intimate relationships revolve around the individual. The postmodern self has become a "narcissistic self", a "minimal self" (Lasch, 1979). A self that is:

[...] entropically enclosed in the self-referential circuit of its own desires [...] and [that is] incapable of organized forward thinking. Hedonistic and narcissistic, it is defined by a "process of personalization" that frees it from its bonds: deprived of the vital dimension of – even a purely conflictual – engagement with the other, it is left emptied out by the disturbing loss of its future (Pulcini, 2009, p. 32).

Naturally, the consumer society peddles a convenient alternative: invest in your present selves, look to the self for the meaning of your existence. The future – in which we would traditionally invest our hopes and plans for life – is all but eclipsed. The immanence of the present and the absence of the future shorten the distance and smooth out the distinctions between the generations and their respective roles.

The adults immersed in today's "liquid society" – and the unbearable craving for approval that goes with it – go to great lengths, not to guide their children but to keep pace with them, to master their indecipherable language and ape their behaviour and their fashions in the hope of looking, and thinking, young (Pietropolli Charmet, 2018; Lasch, 1979).

Theirs is the task of bringing up the next generation "properly" in a society of spectacle, so often carrying this responsibility alone, guided by the wish to protect their charges on the journey to adulthood through a world that they do not themselves understand and that devours their hope for a better future for their children. The roles they adopt, with respect to their children, have become vicarious, the protective function of parenthood distorted in such a way that it prevents young people from acquiring experiences of the world and their own capacities. Rather than present their children with barriers, prohibitions and rules, they themselves end up dealing with any obstacles that lie in their way.

As such, young people find themselves on a vague and endless path, with entry into adulthood – in today's society – delayed apparently indefinitely (Segalen, 2002). Real, "grown up" adulthood – with the promise of economic independence and, thus, freedom and autonomy – is barred to them (Gaudet, 2005).

Whether globally or locally (at least in Italy), the delocalized market has entrusted a significant portion of labour to new technologies and has no place for these young people. The neoliberal society is committed to a process of universal commodification including that of the structures – from schools to hospitals – that we rely on to preserve our dignity and equity of opportunity. As neoliberal policies eat away at the institution of public education – the space in which new generations were given the opportunity to build a future – they heap all responsibility for self-realization, whether in society or through work, on the individual, on their talent, competence and endeavour (Lipman, 2019; Hursh, 2015). Like lambs to the slaughter, young people are offered up to the increasingly remorseless forces of the labour market, a market characterized by ever more precarious and short-term working conditions, in which meaningful opportunities for them to realize their plans and aspirations are in desperately short supply. The affective experience that all this entails, for our young people – but also for our adults – is acutely painful to process, the most painful there is according to Pietropolli Charmet, "the death of the future" (2014).

In the futureless age heralded by the emergence of consumerist capitalism, the commodification of our lives and the consequent "anthropological" mutation that has led us to the culture of narcissism have robbed adults of solid points of reference. The fragility of social and relational bonds, combined with political and social upheaval (the decline of the welfare state, the pervasive menace of terrorism and environmental collapse, etc.) and the loss of economic certainties (precarious working conditions), feeds the insecurity of the adults exposed to the tide of narcissism: without an external context that validates and supports the duties of the parent, they are left alone in their responsibility for bringing up the next generation. Who is to shoulder the responsibility for educating our young people, for guiding them towards a greater autonomy? The adults in our society, naturally, and in particular parents working in tandem with teachers. It is they who are tasked with presenting the world to younger generations.

This responsibility is not arbitrarily imposed upon educators: it is implicit in the fact that the young are introduced by adults into a continuously changing world. Anyone who refuses to assume joint responsibility for the world should

not have children and must not be allowed to take part in educating them (Arendt, 1954, p. 158).

Responsibility for education (here the terms "educate" and "education" are used in their broadest sense to refer as much to the way young people are brought up, their moral and social education so to speak, as to the cultivation of knowledge and skills that we might normally associate with the formal school setting), is the responsibility that one generation takes on in respect to the generations that follow. It is on this inter-generational pact that the (historical) continuity of the world is founded.

In this individualistic world, devoid of future, the pact between generations has been cast aside; the adults of today struggle to assume their responsibilities, including the responsibility to educate. In the past, this obligation was fulfilled by – predominantly authoritarian (Baumrind, 1971) – adults who had been raised with a sense of "social duty" (Lipovetsky, 2002) in a world of certainties, with fixed points of reference to transmit to younger generations (i.e. religion, ideologies, socioeconomic structures, the structures and roles in our personal and family lives). The norms presented by adults to young people were founded on a communal vision of the world informed by religious convictions, a shared sense of purpose and a common understanding of social roles.

The situation today is radically different. The world is no longer stable; norms have lost their meaning. What world, then, are the adults of today to present to younger generations? What are we asking them to take responsibility for? We are facing an epoch-defining transition, one which marks a key point of departure in the history of Western societies.

The challenge of bringing up children "properly": a study with "contemporary" parents

In this socio-economic context, what relationship is there between the two institutions primarily entrusted with raising children, the school and the family? With parents and teachers tasked with the "proper" education and upbringing of a generation of young people who, even in their first years of life, are offered a "huge array of potential identities other than those presented by their mothers, fathers and relatives or embodied by their teachers" (Lancini, 2019, p. 310), *are the interactions between parents and teachers changing?* How do

parents envision and understand the roles and duties each party is expected to take? How do they experience the school-parent relationship? What expectations and beliefs inform their conception of it? In today's society, what does it mean to educate? Whose job is it?

To address these questions, the researchers determined to explore the views and experiences of a group of adults who, on a daily basis, face this challenge to bring up – in the broadest sense, to educate – the next generation, namely parents. Conducted over 2017 and 2018, our study was designed primarily with a view to arriving a faithful representation of what the parents expressed (Moustakas, 2004), in this sense effecting an examination of experience (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 45). We decided this was best served by a naturalistic paradigm and a phenomenological-eidetic approach. Eidetic empirical research is interested in the meaning of an experience from the perspective of the subject insofar as it reveals the essential components of the phenomenon the subject is describing. In order to apprehend the true qualities of things, the researcher's own personal theories must also be set aside.

Furthermore, by adhering to the Husserlian principle of "fidelity to the phenomenon" (Husserl, 2002, p. 52), the researcher is able to make methodological choices that are appropriate both ethically and politically: ethically in terms of the duty to contribute to enhancing our quality of life by adding to our knowledge, and politically in the sense of the research being of social value. For education research, this means attempting to explore a given phenomenon using a rigorous methodology that offers access to the sort of reliable data required to develop a robust theory that, in turn, can form the basis for future actions (Sorzio, 2005).

Semi-structured interviews provide an intersubjective situation in which to explore the world of "the other" and, given that the participant's thoughts and actions are narrated, how they interpret their world and their actions and relationships. This qualitative study was designed to explore the experiences and beliefs held by a group of key observers, namely parents (specifically parents of primary school students, a group that is increasingly heterogeneous in its make-up), in respect to the education and upbringing of their children, and their own relationship with the other agent entrusted with the education of young people, the school.

To date, we have administered 101 semi-structured interviews involving 103 Italian parents in various towns/provinces in northern Italy (Lombardy, Veneto and Trentino-Alto Adige). The selection of participants (who all volunteered) was not predetermined, insofar as they were identified through chance personal acquaintances with parents of primary school children in various towns/provinces in the regions of Lombardy, Veneto and Trentino-Alto Adige (snowball sampling).

The participants (57 mothers, 46 fathers, with both the child's parents present in two cases) were typically aged between 30 and 50, with at least one child in preschool or primary school education. The interviews lasted on average around 50 minutes, and began with the request: "Tell me about the first time you met your child's teacher". With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each participant received a copy of the transcript of his or her interview.

Two researchers analysed the collected data in their original form (Silverman, 2001), first separately and then together, with an inductive process of codification. After reading the descriptions to get a sense of them as a whole, the researchers went through the transcripts to identify units of meaning relating to the participants' experiences of education and the school-family relationship. Each unit was summarized in a short description and attributed a label, to produce a coding system. Due to the large number of labels, the coding system itself was then subjected to a separate analysis with a view to reorganizing and summarizing the key themes, and reaggregating the emergent categories into macro-categories.

The perspectives of parents of primary school children. Data analysis

The analysis of the data gave rise to five macro categories, with two relating to the people involved in the school-family relationship (i.e. *parents* and *teachers*), one to the institution (*school*) and the other two to the basic means of generating and nourishing this relationship (*communication processes*) and its purpose (*educational alliance*).

Each of these macro-categories is presented below, in the form of a brief overview in the case of the first four, and in more detail in the case of the last – the "educational alliance" – which focuses on the relative roles of the parent and teacher in taking (shared) responsibility for the education of their children/students.

1. Parents today

The first macro-category, which we have titled *Parents today*, reveals a heterogeneous grouping of individuals that it is difficult to reduce to "ideal type" categories.

[The "parents" label] covers a large range of actual cases: there's the super-interested parent who knows everything about the school, who checks the website and reads the letters [...]; there's the opinionated parent who always has something to say, to all the teachers, to the head teacher, even the caretaker, to everyone basically. There's the parent who [...] brings their child to school and picks them up at the end of the day; there's the parent who just sends their child on the bus, so you never see them, or even know what they look like. There are all sorts of parents. All different, from a cultural perspective, too (IG81M/104).

The picture that emerges, then, is one of a very varied group: parents who delegate, those who interfere, those who like to challenge what they see, those who struggle to form a relationship with the school (often due to difficulties with the Italian language), those who work with it effectively.

Whatever the characteristics of the parent, however, theirs is never an easy role. The participants in the interviews emphasize how complex it can be to manage the life of the family, particularly when both parents are in employment. Today, in Italy, we find multiple figures supporting parents in the performance of this role. Alongside the traditional, hired babysitter, for instance, we find grandparents and even older siblings providing an analogous service.

The difficulty of finding a balance between work, school and family can have a negative impact on the parents' capacity to involve themselves in the life of the school, a function that – albeit the separation of male and female roles is not what it once was – is largely entrusted to the child's mother. The relationship with the school is seen by these parents as important (only one participant expressed a preference not to be involved IG24P/34). For them, it is manifested most prominently in celebratory events, institution-led activities and volunteering opportunities. In particular, many parents have emotional memories of their child's first day at school, which represents a significant moment in

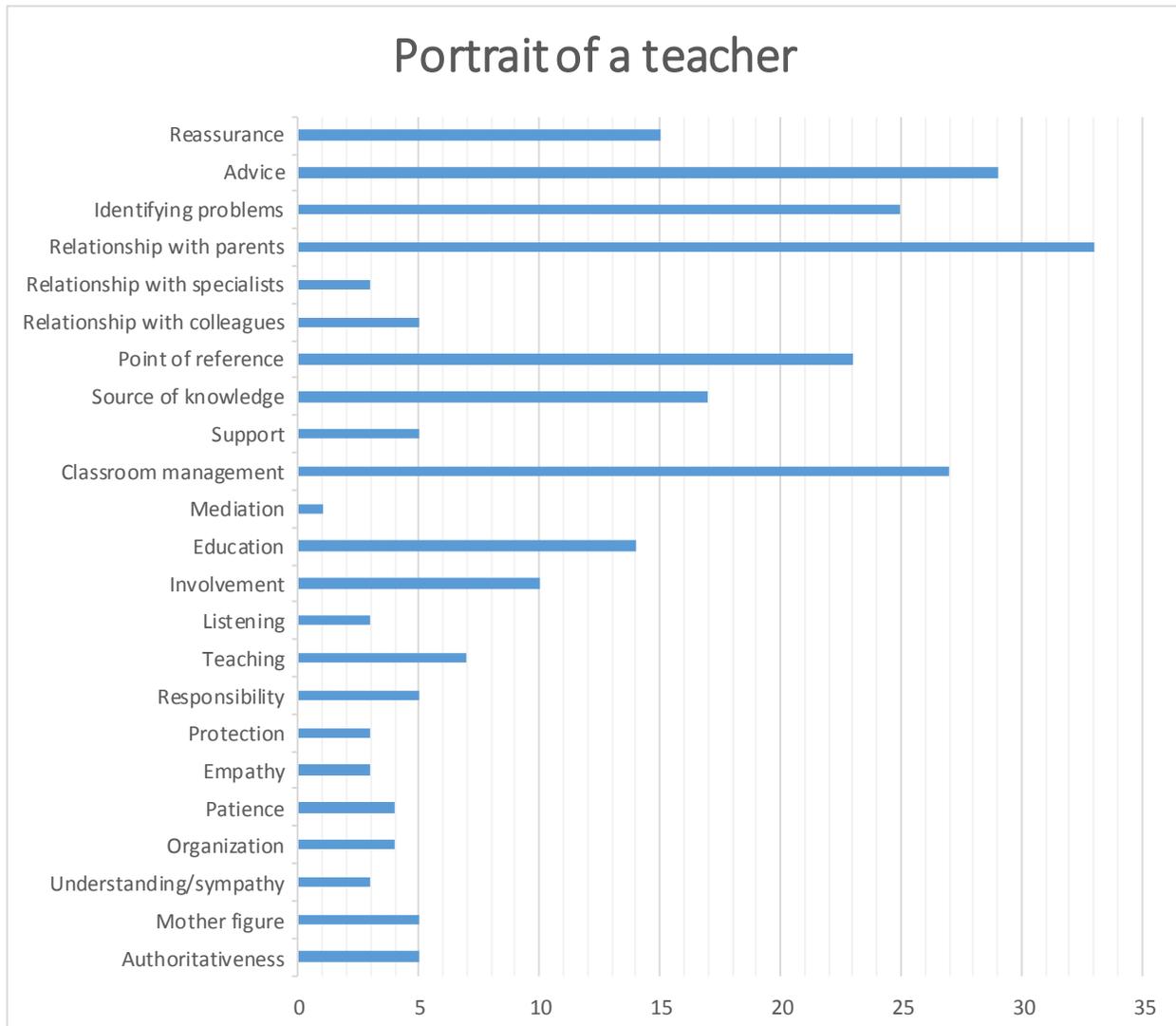
the life of all members of the family, young and old alike.

2. Portrait of a teacher

In the analysis of the interview transcripts, the role of the teacher emerged as a key area of interest. In effect, the parents paint a vivid portrait of what they expect of their children's teachers, one that touches on every aspect of their person that might play a part in adequately performing the complex functions inherent to their role (Teachers' Standards – Department for Education, 2011). These include both professional competences and personal qualities, from authoritativeness and patience in how they manage their classrooms, to

attentiveness in their interactions with children, colleagues and other professionals (psychologists, classroom assistants, doctors) and, most importantly, an ability to nurture the relationship with the parents themselves.

The chart below reveals the frequency with which certain desirable aspects of the teacher's make-up emerged in the interviews with the parents. It offers an interesting snapshot of the parent's perspective, particularly in relation to the five aspects that are mentioned with greatest frequency. In first place, we have the ability to nurture the parent-school relationship (33 mentions), followed by the capacity to provide



advice (29) and to manage the classroom effectively (27). In the classroom, they should be quick to identify any problems that arise (25), and provide a "point of reference", in the sense of a figure to whom students and parents can turn to in the first instance.

The parents of today expect teachers not only to see to their children's education, but also to address their (the parents') own needs:

I think the teacher really has to make the effort, because they are definitely the first person that can win the parent over [...] it's mainly up to the teacher (IG97M/86).

Cultivate the atmosphere in the classroom to encourage participation and improve the relationship with the parents. Work with the children and the parents in parallel, because one affects the other (IG93M/44).

[Teachers should provide] support, rather than just teach, in the sense of being helpful where it is needed most, something that is important for both the kids and us parents, because it means you know who to turn to (IG57/168).

The parents openly acknowledge that they are looking for a person they can turn to for support, whom they can look to for advice or as an example as they engage with the challenges of parenthood.

3. The school system

For the parents, the interviews offered a chance to reflect and, consequently, to give expression to the societal changes in which they find themselves immersed. These changes are also felt in the context of the school, an institution whose function has become increasingly complex. The ways families operate have changed and the array of family configurations (heterosexual, same-sex, non-Italian, separated parents, stepfamilies, etc.) with which the school is required to interact brings with it a similar variety of experiences and understandings of what it means to bring up or educate a child, all of which the parents, teachers and children are required to negotiate in one way or another.

In the participating parents' experience, the institution of the school – despite sinking in a sea of centralized bureaucracy, and suffering a crisis of prestige in today's society – appears better placed than ever to deal with the complexity of childhood experience, and provides parents with a greater range of options, with the right to choose where to enrol their child (introduced in Italy few years ago) singled out in particular as a positive.

My husband and I went to the schools, to the open days, because I believe that the opportunity

for the parent to go and see the classrooms first hand and speak to the teachers directly is really a positive thing [...]. It used to be that you sent your child to the closest school, the local school. Now, you are free to enrol your child a bit further away, because you are allowed to choose [...] and weigh up alternative options for their education (IG57M/58-62).

However, in the experience of the interviewed parents, schools seem to have less time than ever to dedicate to its relational duties, as well as having less money to spend and facing difficulties in recruitment that leave them struggling to have suitable teaching staff in place at the start of the school year.

We can't carry on like this, when you think of all the problems children have today. We need more teachers, smaller classes. I understand that the government is trying to save money, but we're talking our children's future (IG33P/28).

These parents make demands of the school, but they also express their faith in it by entrusting it with their children for such a significant portion of their young lives.

My children are the most important thing in my life, so I care about them and everything that affects them, including their school (IG7P/38).

There are two basic roles that the institution of the school is tasked with fulfilling: offering a safe space in which children can grow as they learn how to learn; and providing some form of socialization, thus assisting and supporting the parents in their own duties.

One feature of the contemporary school-family relationship that the parents find disturbing is the increase in money-related requests issued by the school. With funding for education decreasing in response to both the financial crisis that has gripped the Western world and the "soft" transition to a more neoliberal model of education, students' families are increasingly being asked to help compensate for the resulting shortfalls in school budgets.

Additionally, many parents recognize, in their relationship with the school, the key role performed by the "class representative" – a parent who sits on the class councils along with teachers and, usually, the head teacher – who offers an important point of contact, a go-to figure, so to speak, in regard to numerous issues.

4. Communication processes

This macro-category encompasses the various communication processes in which the various

figures in the school-family relationship (students, parents, teachers, senior management) are engaged.

There can be no relationship without communication (Watzlawick et al., 2011), and the interviewed parents emphasize the importance of good communication in their own interactions with teachers and the school. For them, the relationship with their children's teachers, and through them with the school, can only truly mean something if it is based on processes of communication that are themselves founded on a sense of trust. This communication is not confined to formal encounters (2 or 3 meetings over the year). It also takes the form of an ongoing, informal dialogue (in person when dropping off/picking up the children, and by phone and email), such that the parents are kept up to date – in real time – with what is happening at the school and with their children's learning, growth and socialization. The parents want to feel involved in the life of the school, to participate – in some form – in their children's experiences.

The majority identify direct meetings as the most satisfactory and informative mode of communication, and would like the school to offer greater flexibility and more time for arranging to speak to teachers.

If you ask me, meeting with the teacher in person is still a good way of communicating with them, because if you aren't able to explain things by talking, it can be difficult to make sense of the way things work in the classroom. At times, parents will tend to get the wrong idea about the teacher's actions, and a direct conversation helps avoid misunderstandings (IG27P/8).

As this parent suggests, the communication process is one that can easily go wrong. All it takes to compromise the inherently delicate relationship between parent and teacher/school (Dusi, 2012) is an ambiguous expression, a "funny look" or minor misunderstanding (the "je-ne-sais-quoi" or "presque rien" of Jankelevitch, 1987).

When a teacher is good at their job, they should be able to open your eyes to things that you, as a parent, wouldn't be able to see otherwise [...], however if they don't approach certain issues in the right way, with tact, you can feel you are being criticized as a parent, and take offence. There's a fine line, and both parties need to be aware (IG33P/38).

A few of the parents, a minority, report experiencing feelings of frustration and anger following a meeting with their child's teacher in which they felt they had been judged in some way inadequate.

Alongside the inherent delicacy of traditional forms of communication, new opportunities for misunderstanding have been introduced by the use of WhatsApp groups, which are set up by parents as a convenient way to share information, for instance about homework or announcements from the school. These groups are very common but they can be a source of misunderstandings and conflict not only between the families and the school, but also between the families themselves.

With the WhatsApp groups, it's easy to get the wrong end of the stick. [...] the chat can be a double-edged sword. It means you can always keep up to date, but you do need to handle it carefully (IGP7/34).

School is also an important subject in the parents' conversations with their children. Driven by a desire to feel involved in their children's development, they try to prize information from them about what is going on at school, how their day has gone, and so on.

5. The educational alliance

We have singled out the fifth macro-category, which we have termed *The educational alliance*, for a more in-depth account. It is of particular interest because it focuses on the partnership between the two key institutions of the school and the family, their respective roles and the boundaries between them, and how these define and give structure to their relationship, starting with the parents' understanding of what it actually means to educate, in the widest sense. The macro-category covers four areas:

5.1. *What it means to "educate"*

5.2. *The figures involved in education processes*

5.3. *Parents' & teachers' roles*

5.4. *Partnership*

Regarding point 5.2, we wish only to highlight that the input of grandparents, siblings and other family members (aunts, cousins etc.) and members of the wider school staff (e.g. school management, etc.) was specifically recognized as being important.

We will be giving greater attention, in this paper, to the other three areas: i. What it means to "educate"; ii. Parents' roles & teachers' roles; iii. The family-school relationship: parents' expectations and experiences.

i. What it means to educate.

Before presenting the results from this category, a semantic clarification is needed: naturally, the interviews were conducted in Italian. Participants were asked what they understood by the term

educare, which we have tended to translate with the English term "educate". It is worth noting however that the two words are not direct synonyms. Indeed, the Italian *educare* (and *educazione*) is used particularly (if not solely) in relation to what we might describe as the provision of a "proper" upbringing, whatever that implies. In terms of educating, as we understand the term in English, it is therefore concerned largely with moral and social education (of young people in particular).

The parents, then, were asked to explain what they understand the word *educare* to mean. What does bringing up/educating their children consist of?

In their understanding, and in their recounted actions, the participants appear largely to associate *educazione* with the transmission of rules, a process of socialization (79 interviews out of 103).

What the family does, teach the rules, what is right and what is not, how to behave. IG12P/42

Educating means passing on the rules, you need to live in a way that is respectful to others. IG22P/26

Very few of the participants brought up the emotional connotations of the term or the question of self-realization. One father who did, expressed it as follows:

To educate means to give your child the means to be independent, to bring out the best in a person, help them to develop what they are capable of and guide them towards a state of autonomy. IG16P/30

Their responses can be summarized under headings as follows (presented in descending order in terms of how frequently they emerge in the interviews). To educate (*educare*) means:

i. Teaching [children] to respect the rules.

ii. Passing on a set of values to younger generations.

iii. Guiding the child on the path of self-education, in discovering his or her own talents and in reaching a state of autonomy.

For the majority of the participants, to educate means to teach their children the rules that will enable them to become active members of society, to pass on the values that will guide them through life. An understanding of the act of educating as a way to help the child cultivate his or her own attitudes does emerge, but only as a secondary concern.

The prevailing attitude towards the idea of education/*educazione* among the participants reflects what we might call a traditional understanding of the concept, the social function of

education with its focus on norms and learning the rules that enable us to live alongside each other.

With 25% of interviewees asserting that parents themselves are lacking in education and are thus incapable of educating others, in the sense of passing on norms and rules (for instance they are inclined to defend their children to an unreasonable degree and instead censure their children's teachers), and in light of what the literature suggests in regard to the "evaporation" of the figure of the father (Recalcati, 2011), who has traditionally embodied the norms governing relationships within the family, this adhesion to the traditional conception of education is rather surprising.

It seems reasonable to suggest that there is a dissonance between the beliefs and convictions parents hold in regard to the responsibility for educating their children and the way this responsibility is actually enacted, i.e. traditional structures may survive in deeply held convictions (as highlighted by Lasch in 1979), but there is a strong divergence between thought and action that is indicative of a society that asserts the right of the individual to a sort of narcissistic self-determination and self-realization.

This points to the difficulty faced by adults in shouldering their educative duties, a struggle and source of insecurity that the interviewed parents are quick to identify and that translates into a profound educative malaise, a shortcoming in the way we raise our children, as has been identified in the field by a range of teachers, family therapists and academics (i.e. Ulivieri Stiozzi, 2014; Scabini & Manzi, 2005; Segalen, 2002; Lasch, 1979).

ii. The roles of teachers and parents in the education of young people

If education primarily means, and is enacted in, the transmission of rules/socialization, whose job is it to do this? Accounting for the variations in the way the parents express their ideas, we find two basic positions emerging.

a. The first sees a clear distinction between the roles and duties of the two educative actors: a child's upbringing, its moral and social education, is the responsibility of the parents and family. Bringing children up "properly" is the parent's job:

It is the parent's job to educate their child, and bring them up, shall we say, within the basic values of our society. The school should only offer support; it isn't responsible for this sort of education. IG36P/34

While academic instruction, the cultivation of skills and abilities and a desire to learn are the responsibility of the school. These parents are concerned that the school prepare their children for higher levels of schooling and the competitive world of work.

It's up to the teacher to make sure the child learns. I could teach, but I don't know the methods. The teacher does. IG9M/38

b. For other participants, the relationship between parents and teachers – in regard to the child's education – is defined by co-responsibility. Both have a duty to educate younger generations.

I don't think there is a big difference, insofar as I believe that teachers and parents are concerned, first and foremost with the child's well-being. IG81M/43

A teacher is responsible for [a child's] education and upbringing just like a parent. IG16P/48

We can see, then, that for many of the participants, the school-family relationship is one based on collaboration, with the task of educating shared between parents and teachers.

Undoubtedly, in human, behavioural terms, education is more the responsibility of the parents, while their "academic" education is more the teachers' responsibility. However, today, with children probably seeing their teachers more than they see their own parents, teachers and parents really need to work as a team. IG39P/34

I wouldn't make a clear separation. There needs to be synergy. Where the work of one party ends, the work of the other begins. The school can't provide the education the family should provide, and vice versa. It is only by working together that we will end up with a whole "individual". IG50P/30

It should be noted that even the parents who made a clear distinction between the roles of the two institutions did recognize that bringing up children *today is a very complex process* and that parents cannot be expected to manage it on their own.

Everything is changing, and bringing children up properly is getting more difficult. I can give a precise answer. My wife and I, we find a way to give the best ... if you ask me, *in a liquid society, there isn't a prescribed way to educate your kids, so there's no recipe to follow.* IG77P/28

In one way or in another, then, they expect the school to support the work of the family in educating/bringing up the child, and to operate consistently with the family's educative preferences.

The school and the family need to work collaboratively, and they need to make decisions together because the family knows the child and can help the school with his or her education, while it is the job of the school to teach, *but also to carry on the work of the family in bringing the child up.* IG36P/50.

These responses offer a glimpse of the changes in effect: where, in the past, parents acknowledged the role of the school as a guide to norms and educative models that extended into the realms of the family and society, today *they take ownership of the responsibility to educate their children before going on to ask the school to support their actions.*

iii. *The family-school relationship: parents' expectations and experiences.*

Taken as a whole, our analysis of the data leads us to the conclusion that, from the perspective of these parents, establishing a relationship of trust and collaboration with their children's teachers is of great importance, mainly for two reasons:

1. Effective dialogue with their children's teachers provides perspective and a more complete picture of their child's personality, abilities and social competences.

2. A relationship of trust is essential if both parties are to collaborate in providing the child with a complete and coherent education/upbringing.

In terms of their interactions with their children's teachers, the parents expect such encounters to offer:

a. the chance to *engage with a professional* (this criterion emerges in the majority of interviews) and discuss with them what the best approach and methods might be for supporting their children in their development and education;

b. information that will help them to help their children with their school education, and with dealing with the demands of school, in such a way that they (the children) can successfully become full members of society;

c. *reassurance and support* from the school/teachers in bringing up their children, especially in regard to challenging behaviours and phases of development.

The literature indicates that, of all aspects of parental engagement, *parental expectation* is the one that is "most highly associated with both improved academic achievement and behavioural outcomes" (Jeynes, 2018, p. 152). As a recent Israeli study has also suggested (Addi-Racah & Grinshtain, 2019), the primary "expectation", which is understandably shared by the parents interviewed

in our own research, is to be able to put their children in the hands of professionals.

Given the challenges inherent in taking responsibility for education and upbringing, can the parent-school relationship really offer a source of support and an opportunity for the parents themselves to learn? During the interviews, the parents were prompted to provide evidence of whether, in their experience, their relationship with their children's schools and teachers offered them a meaningful opportunity to learn something. The analysis of the interviews – particularly the responses to the questions: Is an encounter with the school and teachers a learning opportunity for the parent? Do you feel you have learned something new from your interactions with the school (e.g. in respect to parenting skills or your role in the education of your child)? – reveals that these encounters are experienced by the parents variously¹ as:

- *learning experiences, in terms of both personal development and developing the capacity to educate others;*

- *opportunities to learn about or get to know their child better;*

- *opportunities to receive encouragement and support;*

- *a chance to learn about how their child's school education is being delivered (approach to homework, subjects, methods, etc.);*

- *a missed opportunity and/or a negative experience.*

Increasingly, then, for parents, the relationship with the school offers an invaluable opportunity to talk to someone with expertise in educational processes, and to develop their own capacities as parents, modifying their approach in light of the specific needs and characteristics of their child, whom – with the benefit of the teacher's experience – they are able to get to know better.

For some parents, the encounter with the school is still a negative experience marked by frustration and a sense of wasted time. It is here that the teacher can benefit from professional skills that can break down what is one of the primary barriers to parental involvement/engagement (Hamlin & Flessa, 2018; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). There is still much work to be done. Teachers (in training and in service) feel poorly equipped to share the duty to educate that forms the focus of their collaboration with their students' parents (Thompson et al., 2018).

¹ The answer are presented in descending order in terms of how frequently they emerge in the interviews.

The search for a new educational alliance?

The social and economic landscape fostered by extreme (neoliberal) capitalism, and the attendant shift – achieved with the blessing of policy makers – from a welfare-based system to an inherently individualistic approach, has given rise to a more fluid set of life circumstances. These, in turn, generate a sense of insecurity, suffering and fragility in the adults of today (Kaës, 2013), who – struggling to build deep and lasting connections – form couples that are increasingly precarious (Naldini et al., 2012) and prone to a narcissistic, self-centred form of parenting (Ott & Murcier, 2011; Korff Sausse 2007).

In a context that has been conditioned by relational and economic-cultural dynamics engendered by the marketization of society (Brenne & Theodore, 2002) and the attribution of responsibility to the individual (Deneault, 2018), and by the establishment of new family configurations, we ask: have these changes also had an effect on the parent-teacher relationship? By exploring the perspectives of the parents themselves, is it possible to discern, at the "micro" level, an echo of the transformations – from the processes of narcissistic individualization to the increased sense of insecurity generated by the restructuring of society and the economy along free-market principles – that the literature has identified, at a more "macro" level, in the school-family relationship? What forms does the parent-teacher relationship take today?

Understanding such changes, and in particular their effect on the relationship between the institutions and principal agents involved in raising and educating young people today, is the focus of a (still-ongoing) study that attempts to examine this relationship from the perspective of the parent. As part of this study, 101 interviews have been conducted to date. Our analysis of the data collected paints a mixed picture featuring (much as the participants themselves highlight) a range of different "types" of parent and a shifting, increasingly multistranded, relationship between family and school. According to these interviews, parents and children alike are changing, along with the context in which they live (see section 3. *The school system*) In a society affected by this "anthropological mutation", the task of the teacher is – as many of the parents point out – more challenging than ever.

Yet despite these changes, the understanding of what it means to be a parent appears essentially unchanged. For the majority of the participants, to educate – in the broadest sense – means to transmit

to their children the rules that will allow them to become full, active members of society. We might hypothesize that, overall, a *normative notion of the family* persists in the minds of these parents, and that this may be linked to the average age of the sample but also to the fact that "social arrangements live on in the individual, buried in the mind below the level of consciousness" (Lasch, 1979, p. 51). Deep down, then, it appears that these parents are still in thrall to the normative figure of the father (Brannen & Nilsen, 2006, and *supra*). Yet their beliefs and conceptions are no longer supported by the way they bring up their children on an everyday basis. There is a discontinuity between theory and praxis in their actions as parents that reflects the battle between a conservative attachment to the traditional values of the family and figure of the father (which has been with us for centuries) and the neoliberal inducement towards greater individualism and the attendant social responsibility loaded on to individual parents to raise their children in a world that operates on a principle of "free" competition (Cuconato, 2017).

Parents complain of increased numbers of children at school with behavioural and relational problems, a phenomenon they associate with the inability of an increasing number of adults to perform their educative duties. This shortcoming is attributed, in part at least, to the presence in the societal context of multiple models, all of which, to some extent, prioritize some variety of self-realization, which frequently takes the form of narcissistic projection on to one's children.

In any case, the task of raising children in today's society is a difficult one that, in the opinion of almost all of participants, cannot be left entirely to the parents. In an unpredictable world, deprived of the support once provided by religion and grand ideologies, and uncertain about the best way to bring up their children, the vulnerable parents of today are searching for guidance and figures who can help them understand how to best carry out their duties while protecting their children's rights and enabling them to fulfil their potential.

It would appear that these parents have been caught off guard by the ongoing process of "anthropological" mutation, and the transition from the traditional culture of family and society to the neoliberal vision of today. We have then, a group of adults that, in some sense, have been abandoned in the face of an unpredictable world for which they no

longer have the keys, keys that they could then pass on to their children.

Today's parents are exposed to powerful forms of socio-cultural pressure: on the one side, the intensive parenting model whereby they have to be involved constantly in the lives of their children, or risk being considered inadequate (Shirani et al., 2012); and on the other, the neoliberal narrative which insists that an educative strategy predicated on competition is the valid option if children are to demonstrate their value (and indirectly that of their parents) to the world and thereby find a place (of success and security?) in society.

To summarize, while it appears to be taken for granted that teaching, in the sense of "academic" or "school" learning, is the job of the school and the teachers, when it comes to the moral and social education of the child, parents are looking to join the school in a sort of educational alliance, and this for two reasons: first, because the task of raising children, educating them in this sense, is a complex one that parents cannot actually manage to do successfully on their own; and second, because they – lost along the way, and deprived of the sources of guidance and models they might once have relied on – want somebody to work with, to discuss things with, somebody they feel is supporting them. As one mother explains,

to some extent, we expect the *complete package* from our schools. Which is to say, not just that they pass on knowledge but also that they teach [children] how to live, how to behave, along with that knowledge. And they are doing it. IG9M/34

At sea in the storm of modern life, these current parents are in need of solid points of reference and guiding norms that might inform their actions and allow them to adopt a new version of the role of parent. A role that would reconcile the power of the maternal instinct with the obligations of the law in such a way that they are able to pass on the legacy of their socio-cultural heritage – of their own experience – illuminated by their hope for the future. As such – paradoxically – while on one hand we find parents approaching their children's education with the mentality of the "customer", on the other, they are also demanding that the school support them in their role as parent. In a sense, what the parents of today expect from their children's schools and teachers really is the *complete package*.

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