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# *The Interplay between Child Educational Poverty and Family Relationships: An Italian Project Based on the Family Impact Lens*

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## **Abstract**

Educational poverty concerns children's access to educational resources. Families are recognized as crucial subjects for accessing to them. Hence, to contrast educational poverty, family-based interventions are advisable. This article describes the first Italian project adopting the 'Family Impact Lens', a family-focused approach to policy and practice. It was applied as a model for the monitoring and the impact evaluation of the project 'Open Doors', aimed to contrast educational poverty in an Italian marginal neighbourhood. A theory-based participatory methodology was deployed: both monitoring and evaluation were intended as accompanying processes of the project, leading the operators first to share the theoretical model and subsequently to assess their ability to apply it in their work. The Italian project intended to strengthen family and social educational relationships of children by acting on the 5 guiding criteria of the Family Impact Lens. This article reports the path carried out during the first year, consisted of a survey on 140 families, a questionnaire addressed to 42 educators, and 4 metaplans including all the different typologies of operators involved in the project. Results point out some first operational guidelines for improving the adherence to the Family Impact Lens in the next two years of the project.

Keywords: educational poverty, family impact, social intervention.

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## **1. Introduction**

Educational poverty concerns children's access to educational resources. Families, the first agencies of socialization and education, are crucial subjects for access to these resources. Hence, to contrast educational poverty' risk factors, family-based interventions are advisable, as literature points out (Morris et al., 2008). This article describes the first Italian project based on the 'Family Impact Lens', a family-focused approach to policy and practice, born in the US (Bogenschneider et al., 2012). It was applied as a model for the monitoring and the impact evaluation of the project 'Open Doors', aimed to contrast educational poverty in an Italian marginal neighborhood. Although this approach can be considered as a theory-based evaluation, it converges with participatory ones, since the partners of the project were lead from the beginning to share the theoretical model and subsequently to gradually conform their way of work to the model and contemporary to self-assess this compliance: the Italian project, indeed, intended to strengthen the family and social educational relationships in which the children participate by acting on the 5 guiding criteria of the Family Impact Lens. This article reports the path carried out during the first year, consisted of a survey on 140 families, a questionnaire addressed to 42 territorial educational figures, and 4 metaplans including all the different typologies of operators involved in the project. Results point out some first operational guidelines for improving the adherence to the Family Impact Lens in the next two years of the project.

## **2. Educational poverty and family relationships**

The concept of educational poverty (Checchi, 1998; Allmendinger, 1999; Allmendinger, Leibfried, 2003) is understood as a level of education that is considered to be unacceptably low in a society. The notion was initially developed in the context of general poverty research, was then linked to Amartya Sen's capability approach and has since been reinforced by multidimensional poverty research (Brandolini, D'Alessio, 1998). This multidimensional framework sees education as a separate functioning in addition to health, social relations, labour market status, housing and economic resources and as a crucial resource for inclusion in the labour market (and other life domains), regarding it both as a factor that positively affects the ability to achieve results and as an integral aspect of personality and social identity. Save the Children (2014) defined educational poverty as 'the deprivation, for children and adolescents, of the opportunity to learn, experiment, develop and freely improve skills, talents and aspirations'. Also in this definition we can find a

strongly ‘multidimensional’ construction in reference to the UN Convention on the Rights of Children and Adolescents (1989) and the theory of social capabilities, which is viewed as a cultural and ‘reflective’ resource, necessary for personal fulfilment and the achievement of full citizenship.

Contrary to research on educational inequality that mainly concerns the inequality of opportunity, studies on educational poverty focus on the inequality of conditions. This means that, as Allmendinger (1999) theorized in his original theory on educational poverty, educational poverty necessitates a real social policy and not just the creation of conditions of fair competition for all social groups in the process of achieving education. At the end of the 1990s, Checchi (1998) adopted the capability approach of Amartya Sen (1999) to understand how to observe and intervene in the problem of educational poverty. Dealing with the capability and life context approach means referring to models of personalization of welfare services (Needham, Glasby, 2014). These involve the establishment of social programmes aiming to enhance and activate the resources of individuals and their networks, primarily family ones (Andersen, 2007; Stiglitz, Sen, Fitoussi, 2009). According to the 2030 objectives defined by Save the Children, all children must be able to learn, experiment, develop skills, talents and aspirations and to have access to quality educational provision. It is also necessary to eliminate child poverty to encourage educational growth.

According to Saraceno (2016), considering the link between educational poverty and the family, job insecurity must be countered. Parents should have a good job in terms of income and work-life balance. It is also necessary to think about innovative benefits to bear the cost of children and foster social inclusion (Save the Children, 2015). In the late 1990s, in fact, in the United Kingdom and the United States, many studies had already begun to show the greatest effectiveness of interventions for children based on the involvement of their family networks (and not only on a single person) in the fields of education, health or law (Wenger, 1994; Kemp, Whittaker, Tracy, 1997; Morris, Burford, 2007). Such evidence helped to promote the emergence of whole-family approaches to social policies and practices (Morris et al., 2008; Tew et al., 2015). The effort involved the implementation of programmes based on a holistic and contextualized view of the users and their needs. Therefore, the family-centred practices that have been developed aim to take charge of the entire family unit, regardless of the type of area in which they are carried out, providing interventions based on the actual needs of the family (Allen, Petr, 1996; Donati, 2012; Carrà, Bramanti, 2017; Carrà, 2019).

The family level appears to be strategic: studies on interventions based on resilience to educational poverty (Alivernini, Manganelli, Lucidi, 2017) have emphasized that having positive and educational parenting styles, family cohesion and a stable family structure and living in a challenging environment

can be protective factors for children regarding the effects of educational poverty (Benzies, Mychasiuk, 2009; Kiernan, Mensah, 2011). At the same time, community social support, educational figures outside the family, such as teachers, school counsellors and sports coaches, and the neighbourhood can be positive resources for children (Alvord, Grados, 2005) through the activation of intervention programmes for families (Benzies, Mychasiuk, 2009). Thus, it is necessary, firstly, to create centres of aggregation for families so that they can experience healthy relational networks and, secondly, to support parental difficulties and stimulate the active participation of families so that they do not settle on the request for mere forms of welfarism (Nanni, Pellegrino, 2018).

Proving to be in tune with this perspective, the 'Con i Bambini' Italian foundation, in 2016, launched a call for tender with the aim of preventing national child educational poverty through local family-centred interventions. The municipality of Novara won a fund with the 'Open Doors' project, promoted in partnership with public and private nursery schools and day care services, the parish, the local family free clinic and counselling centre, the centre for families, associations and social cooperatives.

The Family Studies and Research University Centre of the Catholic University of Milan entered the project as a partner with the mandate to monitor the achievement of the goals and to evaluate the impact of the actions carried out within the Open Doors project. The characteristics of the project excluded the possibility of resorting to counterfactual approaches (Argentin, 2017), considering also that none of the actions did not provide experimentations of protocol of intervention. The specific reason why the Family Impact Lens approach was adopted are explained below. Both processes (monitoring and impact assessment) were led according with a participatory approach, acknowledging that participatory evaluation entails to be developed hand in hand with participation in planning.

### **3. The choice of the family impact approach**

In line with TBE (Theory-based evaluation) approaches, the methodologies used for monitoring and impact assessment of the Open Doors project have been based on a well-defined theoretical model, the Family Impact Lens, which hypothesizes what are the conditions that can lead to the achievement of expected results. This approach, however, converges with the more explicitly participatory ones (Palumbo, Torrigiani, 2009; Plottu, Plottu, 2009): indeed, the specific objectives, the strategies to achieve the objectives, the definition of the expected results, and the indicators to measure them have been shared from the outset with all the stakeholders who have taken on the

role of real protagonists in the evaluation process. In this sense, evaluation has been intended as an accompanying process of the project, leading the partners first to share the theoretical model and subsequently to increasingly approximate their work to the model.

The theoretical model adopted in the Open Doors project takes root in the line of studies on welfare and social policies, considering the complexity of the contexts where social policies are applied, with a careful look at the relationships between people, needs, and solutions (Bertin, 2015; Prandini, 2013). In this perspective, as mentioned above, the literature on educational poverty has emphasized the importance of intervening in relations and educational contexts, among the so-called whole-family approaches (Morris et al., 2008). Hence, the family appears to be an essential relational context in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of interventions and policies.

Generally, family-based approaches considered family relationships as a ‘mean’ to be relied on, in order to increase the effectiveness of an intervention on a child. Nevertheless, some studies call for not only child outcomes, but also family outcomes to be analyzed (see, e.g. Epley et al., 2010), since good family relationships are the condition for an effective intervention on a child provides long lasting effects. Along these lines, the family impact model has been developed in the United States since 1976 by the Family Impact Institute, which appears to meet this requirement through strong arguments based on a wide background of empirical research and field trials, showing the close interconnection between personal and family well-being and the necessity of implementing policies that explicitly address the family (Carrà, 2019).

The model aims to improve a family focused approach in services and to test how much and how the various interventions of public policy and operators’ practices modify – positively or negatively – the living and welfare conditions of families in their different structural forms and socio-economic conditions, facilitating a virtuous and circular dialogue between policy makers, operators and researchers. In this model, the effectiveness of programmes depends on their ability to promote and protect some aspects of the family dimensions. These are defined by the Family Impact Institute’s scholars ‘principles’. This definition must not be misled because it is not about theory-based criteria: on the contrary, five principles are strongly evidence-based, derived from an extensive review of research and studies in the international context (Bogenschneider et al., 2012; Belletti, Bramanti, Carrà, 2018). To avoid misunderstanding, in this study the word ‘principle’ will from now on be substituted by ‘guiding criterion’. Family Impact Institute’s research showed that children wellbeing is connected not generically with their families wellbeing, but specifically with some conditions of their families, which have been categorized in five aspects, that, as mentioned above, have been found to

have a strong empirical evidence in many research and meta-analysis (Bogenschneider et al., 2012), so that policymakers and social operators have to consider them as a benchmark in planning, intervention and assessment.

Five guiding criteria are: 1) to acknowledge and support families' responsibility in responding to their needs (Hawkins, Ooms, 2012), 2) to foster the stability of the relations in facing critical events (Hawkins, Ooms, 2012), 3) the protective function of family relationships (Miller et al., 2000; Walsh, 2002), 4) to respect families' diversity (McGoldrick, Ashton, 2003), attributing value and meaning to cultural differences ('relational reason') (Donati, 2008), and 5) to actively involve families in civil society and to promote families' networking (Walsh, 2002; Dunst, Trivette, Hamby, 2007). These five guiding criteria, although not intrinsically innovative as they are widely shared by the most advanced services, enjoy the support of multiple empirical data and can therefore be defined as evidence based. Thus, the Family Impact Lens model suggests that, even in the context of interventions in educational poverty, it is necessary to intervene for and with families, complying with all the five criteria mentioned above.

#### **4. Some data on educational poverty in Italy**

In Italy, children's educational poverty is strictly linked to their family's conditions; in particular, large families (with three or more children) are over-exposed to this problem, especially one-income families (Saraceno, 2016). Educational poverty in this sense is mainly hereditary and largely concerns families that are also affected by traditional socio-economic poverty. From a relational point of view, these families can be formed by uneven, recomposed and disordered nuclei, with a lack of family social networks and parenting skills that are not always adequate (Nanni, Pellegrino, 2018). Furthermore, economic poverty is accompanied by the difficulty of accessing adequate educational resources in the territory that are sufficiently integrated with one another. The territory may be missing or fragmented in terms of the coverage of services for children, full-time schools and canteens, creating negative effects on children's cognitive abilities and skills.

Students from a low socio-economic background are twice as likely to be low performers, implying that personal or social circumstances are obstacles to the achievement of their educational potential (indicating a lack of fairness) (OECD, 2012). Across the OECD countries, almost one in every five students does not reach a basic minimum level of skills to function in today's societies (indeed, many are effectively excluded). In Italy, a third of the under-15s who live in 20% of the most disadvantaged families do not reach the minimum levels



of skills in mathematics and reading, while fewer than 10% are 15-year-olds with difficulties living in families with higher socio-economic and cultural levels (Save the Children, 2017).

Cognitive poverty in Italy may also be associated with the migrant origin of parents: 38% of 15-year-olds who are the children of migrants and parents who were not born in Italy (first-generation migrants) do not reach the minimum skill levels in mathematics (40% in reading) compared with 27% for second-generation migrants or boys born in Italy to foreign parents (22% in reading). The figure drops to 20% for 15-year-old non-migrant students (18% for reading). Piedmont, the Italian region where the Open Doors project, the subject of this article, is located, is positioned at a good level on the Educational Poverty Index developed by Save the Children (IPE), being ranked the third-best region of Italy after Lombardy and Friuli-Venezia Giulia. However, the coverage of day care and supplementary services for children, public or affiliated, is still insufficient even in this region (Save the Children, 2018).

## 5. Methodology

As mentioned above, a participatory model of monitoring and impact assessment entails to be developed hand in hand with participation in planning. The whole process has developed reflexively.

1. Five workshops were organized with the partners of the project to write up the executive plan. At the beginning of each workshop, the Family Impact Lens (FIL) approach was presented as the suitable framework to take into account in designing every single action of the project. In this phase, the participants were guided in drawing up the actual goals of their activities in the light of the FIL model and in identifying the indicators (with their verification sources) to assess the attainment of the goal based on the methodology of the logical framework.
2. In the initial phase of the project, a short questionnaire was administered to a sample of families in the neighbourhood (N = 140) to take a snapshot of the zero-time situation, with the intention to repeat the survey at the end of the project. The aim of this survey was 1) to provide some fundamental socio-cultural characteristics (family composition, nationality, family members' age and schooling; participation in local institutions; self-evaluation of parental skills, perceptions about their economic situation 2) to gather information on socialization of families in Sant'Agabio district measuring initial bridging social capital of the families (i.e. referring to the relationships that families have with other families) in terms of both structural dimensions (number of families in

contact; time spent with other families, width and density of families' network of relationships) and qualitative dimensions (trust, reciprocity and cooperation between families) (Carrà, Moscatelli, 2019) and 3) to analyse whether families use the services delivered by Open Doors' partners. The self-administered questionnaire was distributed by the volunteers of the parish, the teachers of the schools (day care and preschool) and the psychologists of the centre for families: all of them were available to support families in completing the forms.

3. An exploratory survey of operators (N = 42) was carried out at the presentation conference of the project, addressing all the day care and nursery school teachers involved in the project. The aim of the brief questionnaire was to explore the sensitivity towards/comprehension of the Family Impact Lens approach after a general introduction to the model. The questions consisted of prioritizing the guiding criteria of the Family Impact Lens as they are implemented in socio-educational actions. Secondly, for each criterion, it was necessary to state which actions could be taken to promote an improved impact on the family.
4. To consolidate the Family Impact Lens approach and to apply better the 5 guiding criteria in the different fields of work involved in the project (parish, day care and nursery schools, family free clinic and counselling centre, centre for families), 4 metaplans were set up with 50 participants at the end of the first year, chosen from among the volunteers, day care and nursery school teachers, midwives and psychologists) engaged in the project activities. The metaplans had two analytical objectives: first, to engage operators in a self-assessment of the project at the end of the first year; second, to accompany the participants in deepening their knowledge of the Family Impact Lens and to identify areas for improvement and new activities to be implemented to meet the 5 guiding criteria. At the beginning, a short resume of the theoretical framework of the project, the Family Impact Lens was made by the facilitator and a poster with a list of the 5 guiding criteria was hang up in the room; they have been used as starters for the discussion; secondly participants were required to write on a post-it up to a maximum of 3 reasons why their activity in the project should be strengthened and what could be developed in the future to tune more fully with the five guiding criteria; thirdly everyone was requested to read and stick their post-it in correspondence to each guiding criterion; finally a debate was opened about the elements emerged.

## 6. Results

### ***6.1 Families' social capital and socio-cultural features***

A snapshot of families in the neighbourhood at the beginning of the project was taken through a self-administered questionnaire, focused on few socio-cultural dimensions and families' social capital. It was completed by 140 parents, contacted mainly via day care centres and nursery schools (about 80%). In 80% of the cases, the respondent parent was the mother. The results point out that the families involved mainly have 2 children, but there is a significant number of families with more than 2 children. In 70% of the cases, the youngest child is 0-3 years old. With respect to schooling, 77% of the parents have a mid-level educational qualification (lower-middle school diploma or baccalaureate).

In 46.6% of the families, at least 1 parent is not Italian, even if he/she has been living in Italy for over 12 years. Families generally seem to have a fragile economic situation: in about 58% of the cases, the respondents stated they have a certain difficulty in making ends meet. Regarding the families' attendance of the services, most of them rarely or never go to the parish, to the centre for families or to the family free clinic and counselling centre. The latter is the most used by the families, as about 30% of them visit it 'sometimes'.

The participation of the respondent families in the local associations is very limited: 76.1% declared that they do not belong to any association, 4.2% attend sports groups and 3.5% attend religious groups. In addition, 2.8% carry out social and/or health activities dedicated to children, the elderly, the disabled, fragile families, migrants or the sick.

As regards bridging social capital, only 27% of the sample are in contact with 3 to 10 families, while the remaining 73% stated that they are in contact with fewer than 3 families. Furthermore, they do not spend much time together (one-third reported very little and 30% reported some hours every month). Nevertheless, while families' networks are not large, they are quite dense (47.4% of families know each other). On the whole, the structural social capital (width, density of network and time spent together) is low-medium: only 19.8% have high values and 40.5% have average values while the remaining 39.7% have a low score: the network between families is quite scant and poor. Analysing the qualitative social capital (Carrà, Moscatelli, 2019) between families (trust, reciprocity and cooperation), it emerges that the sample stands at medium-low levels (respectively 51.2% with average values and 35.7% with low values). Only for the item 'exchange of information' (which is part of cooperation) is the average higher ( $M = 3.22$ ); this indicates that the support between families is mainly informative. In contrast, there is a low level of trust ( $M = 2.37$ ). Such

data suggest that relationships between families are not very intimate and warm but rather pragmatic.

Regarding auto-perception about parental skills data show that parents have found more difficulties than they thought during parenthood ( $M=2.48$ ) and they have a lack in self-efficacy.

### ***6.2 Exploratory survey of the operators involved in the project***

Through the 42 questionnaires relating to the operators' priority agenda, the ranking of the Family Impact guiding criteria for the socio-educational interventions were identified. 'Responsibility' was indicated in the first place, followed by the criterion of 'family relations' and, in third place, 'stability'. The other two criteria did not in fact emerge as important aspects in which to intervene, signalling a need for improvement. For each criterion considered as a priority, the following actions were indicated for families:

With respect to 'responsibility':

- To promote the parents' awareness of the importance of their educational role for the growth and well-being of their child;
- To promote the pact of responsibility between different educational agencies;
- To promote parental skills to avoid delegating educational tasks to institutions.

With respect to 'family relations':

- To facilitate the growth of healthy family ties to promote children's well-being and their future departure from the family;
- To accompany people in creating trusting family bonds in which they can express their difficulties;
- To make families aware of the irreplaceable value of family ties.

With respect to 'stability':

- To help families to pass critical moments, focusing not only on one member (the father or mother) but on the household;
- To assist families that are experiencing negative events to prevent them from feeling lonely and abandoned.

### ***6.3 Metaplans***

The metaplans involved teachers, educators, psychologists and volunteers from the Parish of Sant'Agabio, the Arcobaleno day care centre, the Ricca and Sulas nursery schools, the centre for families and the family free clinic and counselling centre. As stated above, each metaplan produced a collection of observations, attached by participants to the Family Impact Lens guiding criteria. All the metaplan sessions were recorded, typed up, and analysed, so as

to dispose of a more detailed explanation of the content of each post-it. The main results, organized according to the five criteria of the Family Impact Lens model, are synthesized in Table 1 and described below more analytically.

TABLE 1. *Main results from the four metaplans with professionals.*

Guiding criteria	Actions started with the project but to be strengthened	Aspects to be developed with future project actions
Family responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To support parents in acquiring the parenting role</li> <li>• To promote parents' educational skills</li> <li>• To develop an educational alliance between services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To engage families in simple and concrete activities to improve the responsibility in the community and to amplify the bridging social capital</li> <li>• To co-plan with community stakeholders to make them more responsible</li> </ul>
Family stability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To ensure continuous social and educational services for families</li> <li>• To monitor family well-being over time (through the family free clinic and counselling centre)</li> <li>• To promote group meetings for parents (in the nursery schools or parish) to help the socialization of the problems and to provide opportunities to give and receive continuous support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To communicate adequately to parents the problems related to their child (especially for serious diagnoses)</li> </ul>
Family relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To guarantee the psychological and emotional well-being of families</li> <li>• To promote networking and interdisciplinary teams to address families' multidimensional needs</li> <li>• To value intergenerational relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To transmit parenting skills to mothers and fathers of children with innovative interventions</li> </ul>
Family diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To provide the professionals with intercultural training</li> <li>• To pay attention to the issue of disability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To work on health prevention with foreign mothers</li> </ul>
Family engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To involve fathers and grandparents in laboratories</li> <li>• To improve the ability to address the families' needs</li> <li>• To strengthen the networking of the services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To identify new methods to engage the most fragile parents and to include them in supportive networks</li> <li>• To enhance informal open places to intercept frail families that have not turned to the services</li> </ul>

### *6.3.1 Family responsibility*

With regard to family responsibility, all the focus group participants stressed the importance of continuing to support parents in fulfilling their role, especially when it comes to respecting the rules. 'We [educators] sometimes observe the adult's difficulty in saying "no" to the child. See the effort to establish what can be done and what cannot be done' (educator). This is also possible through the promotion and development of the parents' educational skills. To strengthen the parental responsibility, the focus group participants declared that it is important for parents and operators to plan small daily activities and routines jointly, especially for the 'Open Doors' project actions. The importance of enhancing the educational alliance with families emerged from the nursery school teachers: 'Informing and sharing the school rules and the responsibilities with parents through a continuous dialogue is a task that we always try to do' (educators). The local family free clinic and counselling centre referred to the importance of continuing to working on health, the equitable distribution of loads and the care of the child.

The focus groups pointed out some aspects to be encouraged: the main point is the implementation of simple and concrete educational activities to prompt a new community responsibility. The aim is to respond to the needs of the neighbourhood and amplify the bridging social capital.

### *6.3.2 Family stability*

To give the families stability, it is essential to offer the users ongoing support. In this sense, the family free clinic and counselling centre and the centre for families are a monitoring point for families' well-being, as they give continuous and free services. In addition, the focus group participants stated the importance of promoting group meetings in nursery schools to socialize the problems between parents: these are opportunities to give and receive continuous help. 'The presence of a relationship of trust allows them to have support. [...] It's important to increase relationships of empathy' (educator). With the same aim, the existence of informal groups in the territory is essential. They are composed of parents from the parish who give support to others who live in particularly critical life situations: 'we help families with problems ... a person who has lost his job' (parishioner). Non-institutionalized open places (for examples parks and green areas of the neighbourhood) could become an important resource to facilitate mutual help between families.

Finally, some aspects to be encouraged emerged from the focus groups: the development of communication skills for nursery school teachers to indicate children's problems that they have observed to the parents (especially in cases of serious diagnoses).

### *6.3.3 Family relationships*

To ensure the well-being of family relationships, the focus groups reaffirmed the importance of psychologically reinforcing families and of reassuring them on a human and emotional level. They underlined the need for professionals to work in a network and in a multidisciplinary team to meet the multidimensional needs of families. The group was confirmed as a privileged intervention tool for interacting with parents. An innovative aspect that emerged both from the day care centres and the nursery schools is the involvement of grandparents and the extended parental network in taking charge of families. Alternative ways of conveying parenting skills to mothers and fathers remain to be encouraged.

### *6.3.4 Family diversity*

With respect to family diversity, the teachers reported the difficulty of integrating different educational styles. ‘Some Arab mothers did not want their daughters to participate in activities of bodily expressiveness, or some Nigerian mothers reinforce the physical behaviour of male children’ (educator). To understand and value cultural differences better, the teachers suggested creating some specific laboratories.

The nursery schools reported the importance of maintaining attention not only to cultural differences but also to the issues of child disability (as another variation of the criterion of diversity). According to the members of the parish, to intercept and involve people of different cultures and religions, it is essential to establish a team of multicultural volunteers. This could ease the design of actions respecting and enhancing the cultural specificities of each household.

All the participants in the four focus groups reported that future actions should include the intercultural training of professionals and volunteers. The family free clinic and counselling centre also stressed the need to work on health prevention with foreign mothers and to find new practices to involve them.

### *6.3.5 Family engagement*

All the participants in the four focus groups highlighted that networking between educational agencies is definitely the element that most eases the families’ engagement. The ‘Open Door’ project represents an opportunity to implement networking, but – at the end of its first year – it still appears to be an aspect to be strengthened. Collaboration between services could be the right strategy to engage the most fragile parents.

Teachers and volunteers from the parish specifically stated that the involvement is obtained by offering services that can respond to families’ needs: ‘we have many moments of meeting with families [...] on various issues

concerning the different periods of growth of the child' (educator). Parents can be involved by 'creating situations or contexts where children are mainly involved: this could be the opportunity to make a small community' (volunteer).

Volunteers from the parish, teachers and professionals from the family free clinic reported that they wished to create open informal spaces close to the parish and services: these could provide supportive meeting places, intercepting families that would not turn to services spontaneously.

## **7. Discussion**

Based on the survey data, most of the families have scarce relational and economic resources and a number of children greater than the average Italian figure per woman, which appears to be 1.32 (ISTAT, 2019). Families generally have a mid-level educational qualification, that, is medium-low cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). This is confirmed by the medium-low score of structural family social capital of the sample (Carrà, Moscatelli, 2019): the data therefore indicate weak and instrumental relationships. The access to services is very limited, as is the presence in participatory social spaces (for example associations): the chances of accessing stimulating educational environments outside the family (which already appears to be a context with few cultural and relational resources) are therefore scarce. Hence, in line with the literature (Save the Children, 2014; Sánchez-García et al., 2019), all these elements suggest the presence of families in a state of educational poverty or at least exposed to this risk. The zero-time picture painted by this narrow, but nonetheless indicative survey, suggest that Open Doors project should aim to enlarge families' networks and to increase levels of trust between families. Another important challenge is that of families' capabilities, considering that few of them seem able to take advantage of the services located in the neighborhood.

The Family Impact Lens approach training path has enabled professionals and policy makers to bring out the multidimensional needs of the families taken in charge and not only those of the minors, considering educational poverty as a problem that can be addressed more easily through the protection and maintenance of primary and secondary socialization contexts (Flanagan, 2002; Garelli, Palmonari, Sciolla, 2006). In the Novara project, this was possible thanks to the attention paid to the micro level of educational relationships (for example within the family, within the school contexts, etc.) and the meso level (that is, the relationship between different institutions): two dimensions that are the basis for the establishment and maintenance of a true educating community (Orlando, Pacucci, 2005; Napolitano, 2015). The care of the meso and micro dimensions has allowed the 'Open Doors' project to focus on the family in the



planning and monitoring phases, overcoming the logic of individual intervention (Day et al., 2009) and strengthening the aspects underlined by the five guiding criteria of the Family Impact Lens. In this regard, the results that emerged from the focus groups and the exploratory survey revealed some central and transversal themes for taking charge of families in educational poverty or exposed to this risk.

Firstly, co-planning with families is an important strategy to involve and to give them responsibility, intervening in the real and most felt needs of people and making them feel competent. These aspects refer to what Rappaport (1987, 2002) called empowerment: the possibility of democratic participation, exercising direct control over their own lives, starting from the enhancement of the abilities already possessed by individuals. The possibility of having spaces that stimulate reflexivity and ideational imagination can be precious for those who live in contexts without spaces of expression and capacitation (Taylor, 1977). As for the well-being of family relationships, the involvement of the broad family network (grandparents) emerged from the focus groups, moving in the direction of overcoming the difficulties experienced by parents. In fact, more and more families are not so large, but they have more extensive and lasting intergenerational ties and grandparents have become an important asset for parents (Bengtson, 2001; Dykstra, 2010). Especially in post-modern societies, characterized by a long transition of seniority (Bordogna, 2007), grandparents can still be a resource (Carrà, 2001; Bramanti, Meda, Rossi, 2018), especially in the presence of relationally poor families like those of our sample. The involvement of the father figure, as the data analysis showed, is also linked to the transformations of the family structure in the current society: the diffusion of a model in which both mother and father are engaged in the labour market encompasses the mutual commitment of both parental figures in domestic tasks and childcare (Miller, 2010; Dermott, 2014; Mazzucchelli, Bosoni, 2018). The absence of the father in the educational and socialization contexts, reported by some operators, can be seen as an element of fragility that needs to be tackled and to take into particular consideration. The opportunity to involve fathers in family tasks also refers to another criterion of the Family Impact Lens model: that of stability. To prevent children from being exposed to family instability, it is important for the parental figures to be strengthened in their tasks and educational roles from the earliest stages of children's development (Knox et al., 2011). In addition, transversally to the focus groups and the exploratory survey, it emerged that stability, in the case of families in educational poverty or exposed to this risk, is protected by offering constant and continuous services (such as those made available by schools, parishes and counselling centres) within which families can establish trusting relations. This means that social operators (social workers, psychologists, educators, etc.) must

support families without replacing them from the perspective of an extended full educational co-responsibility (Fustini, 2007), in which the protagonists are not only parents and schools but also associations, civil society and politics. In particular, greater networking appeared to be necessary between the centre for families and the family free clinic and counselling centre. In addition, new collaborations between the third-sector association and the other services in the project should be implemented. The last transversal theme emerging from the focus groups is the Family Impact Lens criterion of diversity: the importance of developing intercultural skills and practising a ‘relational reason’ (Donati, 2008) within family services is confirmed. This is essential for knowing the educational styles of other cultures to avoid a misinterpretation of the behavioural patterns of children and parents, which could reinforce the inequality between families (Williams, Jackson, 2005). The survey showed that there are network resources, with differentiated characteristics between the immigrant and the Italian population, which must be activated and reinforced (engagement). For this reason, the actions must continue to work on the diversity of the targets (family members with special needs – like a disability – or immigrant families) and on the involvement of the community in the planning, realization and evaluation of the interventions, perhaps guarding and structuring meeting places and open informal spaces close to services. As regards the aspects for possible improvement, the communicative level of the project can be improved as well as the visibility of the implemented practices with respect to online communication to reach the beneficiaries better. This is important for the purposes of family involvement, as emerged from the focus groups.

## **8. Conclusion**

This study describes the first Italian implementation of the ‘Family Impact Lens’, a family-focused approach (Morris et al., 2008) to policy and practice, born in the US (Bogenschneider et al., 2012). It was applied as a model for the monitoring and the impact evaluation of the project ‘Open Doors’, aimed to contrast educational poverty in an Italian marginal neighbourhood. Firstly, the concept of educational poverty was explored, despite being aware of the not-always-univocal interpretation of the concept (Hannum, Liu, Alvarado-Urbina, 2017). Secondly, the Italian situation in recent years regarding child poverty and possible intervention strategies was described. Then, after presenting the model of the Family Impact Lens (Bogenschneider et al., 2012), the study proceeded by presenting how this approach has been applied to the issue of child educational poverty.

During the first year of the project, through the workshops, the exploratory questionnaire and the metaplans, all the educational agencies of the territory have not only co-designed interventions but also co-analysed the most important and specific aspects in which to intervene for families in child educational poverty, adapting a general approach (the Family Impact Lens) to a specific problem. Based on the results – following the methods suggested by the Family Impact Institute (Ooms, Preister, 1988; Gross, Bogenschneider, Johnson, 2006) – specific checklists (sets of items) will be developed to promote all the five guiding criteria in the different areas of intervention, healing the weaknesses found in the exploratory survey. In this way, every operator (volunteer, teacher, educator, psychologist, etc.) will be able to use a tool to monitor the results of his or her actions according to a whole family approach in the delivery of ‘Open Doors’ services. In addition, at the end of the third year of the project, the questionnaire for families will be administered for a second time to compare ex post data with those collected ex ante to study the changes that the adoption of Family Impact Lens will have effected about the use of the local services and bridging family social capital.

In conclusion, the Family Impact Lens has proved to be an effective approach to stimulate a reflexive process between all the stakeholders of the project, encouraging them to adopt family-centered model in their work with children, and to assess results achieved in the light of 5 guiding criteria. At the end of the project, all the checklists developed could be assumed as guidelines for operators working with families in order to contrast educational poverty. Moreover, through the participatory model adopted, the process of monitoring and evaluation, has strengthened the network of local services, activating synergistically social workers, psychologists, volunteers and policy makers to reduce and prevent educational poverty through the adoption of a single and shared intervention approach, the Family Impact Lens. This has contributed to contrast the ever-greater fragmentation of services (Pavolini, 2002), which weakens the response to families’ needs (Prandini, 2013). The different local services were stimulated to work not only with the same people but also with the same value orientation. If results will continue to be promising for the whole during of the project, this hopefully should promote the dissemination of the Family Impact Lens in other fields of policy-planning and intervention (Fasanella, 2012).

With regard to the limitations of this work, it should be noted that it reports the first-year results of a three-year project. Future research could indicate whether the Family Impact Lens model, with all its tools, can improve the operators’ capability (Sen, 1999) to alleviate children’s educational poverty by actively involving their families. Participants heterogeneity was also a critical aspect during the research, maybe choosing to focus only on the childhood

operators would allow to work better on their needs. Finally, it is necessary to highlight the impossibility of conducting a longitudinal survey on families, but it will only be possible to observe if there has been a change over time on families in the neighborhood. Moreover, three years are few to detect an effective change over time that would require much more extensive investigations. It would be desirable for future call to dedicate much more funds to family impact assessment.

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