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The long lasting effects of inequalities and poverty among children. The Italian case[1]

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Abstract

Inequality starts at birth, originating in the parent's health, education, economic and social resources and impacts on an individual life chances over the life course, as testified by a large international literature. This impact may, however, be counteracted by social and education policies addressing children from a very early age. After a review of the literature and of comparative data, this paper analyzes the impact of poverty on children's health and cognitive outcomes in Italy, discussing them in the light not only of the severity of child poverty in this country, but also of the scarcity and uneven distribution across regions of health and early childcare and education services.

Key words: poverty, children, welfare, education, health, Italy
Jel: I14, I18, I24, I28, I32,I38

Introduction

Family origin is still to a large degree a destiny, even in democratic societies. Not only it determines to a large degree the life chances, the constraints and opportunities one encounters while growing up and becoming an adult, via social and cultural capital, as well as family income. It also shapes from start, in some case even already in the fetal phase, a child's chances to develop his or her own capabilities as well as his/her health throughout the life course.

Inequalities among children tend therefore to become inequalities among adults. Although one cannot totally rule out the role of genetic differences/inequalities and of their intergenerational transmission as an explanation of social inequality among adults (see e.g. Herrnstein & Murray,1994, Jensen, 1996), there is a substantial body of research that points to social, not genetic, factors which impact both on child development and on children's life chances. This impact is particularly negative on the bottom end of the social stratification, in so far it affects all the dimensions of an individual's life chances. This impact is multifold. It concerns survival at birth, infant mortality, health throughout the life course, cognitive development, as well as social opportunities and outcomes.

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Inequalities among children, therefore, particularly those affecting those who happen to enter the world at the bottom of the social scale and in very disadvantage situations, pose issues of social justice and democracy in a more radical way than those experienced by adults. As Ermisch, Jäntti, Smeeding (2012, p. 10) state in their introduction to an edited volume that explores the weight of the parental transmission of life chances, "parental SES may be associated with any stage or outcome of the development process, and any outcome at an earlier life stage may be related to later outcomes all the way up to adulthood. For example, parental education or income may be related to birth weights in the birth year, or to test scores and socioemotional behavior in early childhood, which, in turn, may be associated with various outcomes at any of the subsequent developmental stages up to adulthood." The good news is that the severity of this problem differs across developed countries and that much might be done to mitigate it, no only addressing inequalities among parents, but with specific measures addressed to children which might prevent, or mitigate, some of the worse consequences of being born and growing up in disadvantaged circumstances (e.g. Smeeding, Erikson, Jäntti eds. 2011, Ermisch, Jäntti, Smeeding eds 2012).

In this paper, based on a multidisciplinary literature, I will focus on the impact of being born unequal, and particularly at the bottom of social stratification, in the area of health and cognitive development. Before concluding, I will focus specifically on the Italian case.

Being born unequal: the crucial first 1000 days

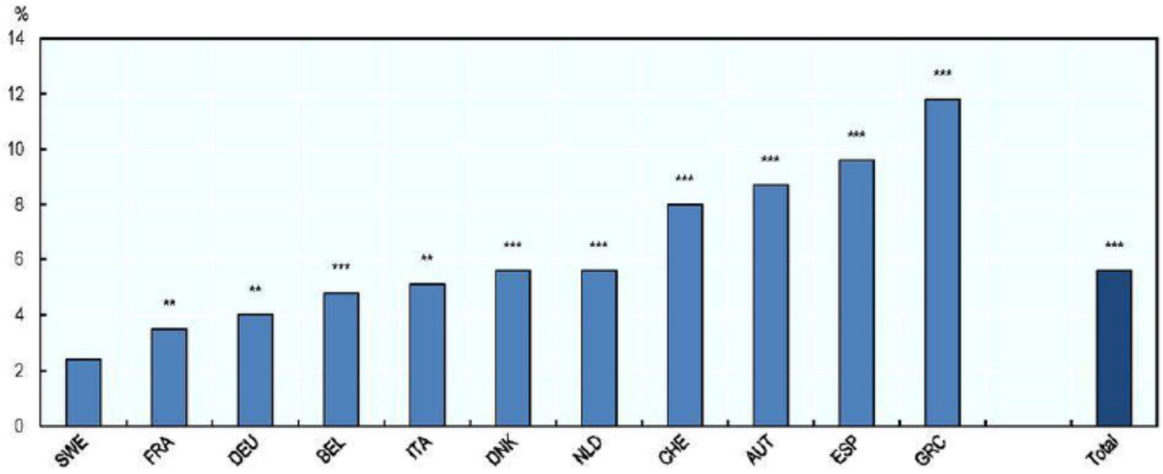
As synthetized in a recent OECD (2018) report on (failed) social mobility in developed countries, health and epidemiological research indicate that parents influence the health of their children already before they are born through their own health endowment, health behavior and socio-economic status. First, parents transmit not only their genetic, but their own, largely socially shaped (see e.g. Marmot 2015), health capital endowment to their children through biological channels. In particular, mothers from more disadvantaged households are more likely to influence the child's outcomes negatively via poor maternal health because they are more susceptible to contagious diseases, to have poor nutrition and receive less care during pregnancy. Second, parental health behavior during pregnancy (nutrition, smoking, drinking, pre-natal care, exposure to toxins) affects children through what has been called (e.g. Barcker 1998) "fetal programming": the process whereby a stimulus during a critical period of development (in utero) has lasting or lifelong effects, which can be latent for many years.

Both the transmission of the parental health endowment and the mother's health behavior and exposure to health risks during pregnancy influence the probability of pre-term birth, low child birth weight. For example, Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) found that in the US the risk for poor relative

to non-poor children was 1.7 times as high for a low birth-weight birth, 3.5 times as high for lead poisoning, 1.7 times as high for child mortality and 2.0 times as high for a short stay hospital episode. A medical study on the impact of poverty on brain development (Luby et al. 2013) found that poverty was associated with smaller white and cortical gray matter and hippocampal and amygdala volumes. The effects of poverty on hippocampal volume were mediated by caregiving styles (support/hostility) and by stressful life events.

In turn, being born with a chronic illness at birth and birthweight is associated with educational outcomes, thus with one of the most important pre-requisites for employment outcomes. The controversy whether (bad) health is a driver of poverty or the other way around (see e.g. Deaton vs Marmot) is well known and probably not fully solved one way or another. Yet, when looking at children, the evidence is strong that poverty is a likely driver of bad health, which in turn may become a driver of poverty also in adulthood. Health status during childhood, in fact, has long lasting effects on health during adulthood. According to Casey and Paxson (2008), for instance, prenatal and childhood health are good predictors both of health and economic status at 42. Analysis from 11 OECD countries (OECD 2018) shows that suffering from a chronic illness during childhood increases the risk of reporting bad health in adulthood in all countries, except Sweden, even after controlling for adult socio-demographic characteristics, such as education, employment status, marital status, age and wealth quintile (Fig. 1). The coefficient for the impact of early childhood conditions is highest in some Southern countries (Spain and Greece), lower in France. The impact of childhood health is more important than other socio-demographic and labor market variables in adulthood, but plays less role than having low education.

Fig. 1 the impact of childhood health on poor adult self-assessed health status



Note: the results show the probability of having poor or fair self assessed health at current adult age on whether respondents reported a chronic illness at age 10. Estimates are from a limited probability model.

Source: OECD 2018, fig. 5.2 at p. 238, based on Sharelife data

Economic difficulties can contribute to the impaired physical and mental health of children also after birth and while they are growing up. Because of lower housing costs, poorer families, in fact, might live near to sources of pollution. Exposure to harmful enviromental factors such as pollution, violence and stress have been linked to poorer infant health. A recent study also found that children coming from lower income households had differences in brain surface area in comparison with higher income families (Noble et al. 2015). At the same time, children with poor neo-natal health born to more educated families are more likely to overcome their initial health shortcomings than those from less educated families. Studies examining especially the association between the mother's socio-economic status and their children's health have confirmed the importance of maternal education (Currie and Moretti 2003, Cutler and Lleras-Muney 2010, Sassi ed. 2015).

Overall, the first 1000 years of life, including the *in utero* period, seem to mark crucially and to some degree irreversibly, individual life chances, through the mediation of health first of all, but, as I discuss in the next paragraph, also through the quality of the relational, interactive experiences marking this period. For this reason, there is a growing awareness that early intervention is necessary not only targeting children, in particular through nutritional and early education programs, but also targeting parents, through parenting support measures. The framework developed by the World Health organization together with Unicef and other institutions is an example of this (WHO 2018).

The impact of inequality on cognitive development

The link between childhood social disadvantage and lower levels of cognitive development and educational attainment has been a matter of substantial theoretical debate in the educational, sociological and health literature (for critical overviews see e.g. Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Lee & Burkham, 2002; Machin, 2006; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993). Although explanations may differ concerning the emphasis they put on which is the specific mechanism that activates this link (for an overview see Fergusson, Horwood, Boden 2008) – constraints deriving from material circumstances, parental, and particularly mothers' caring and interaction styles (e.g. Bradley 1995), genetics, inefficacy of the school system, they all start from the evidence that family income is a strong and consistent predictor of multiple indices of achievement, including standardized test scores, grades in school, and educational attainment (e.g. Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Mayer, 1997, Duncan and Brooks-Gun 2000, Bradley 2002). The income–achievement gap is already present by kindergarten and accelerates over time (e.g. Heckman 2006, Evans and Schamberg 2009, Bradbury et al. 2012) in all the countries studied, although there are cross country differences. Bradbury and his colleagues, for instance, document that, among the four countries they studied, differences are generally larger

in the United States and the United Kingdom than in Canada and Australia, the United States showing the greatest cognitive differences by parental SES of all four countries. The longer the duration of childhood exposure to poverty, the worse achievement levels become. Duncan, Brooks-Gunn and Klebanov (1994) found for the US that being poor in the first four years of life is associated with a nine points difference in the Wechsler preschool and primary school scale of intelligence compared to the non poor. Being intermittently poor during the same period reduced the difference to 4 points (see also Blau 1999).

Together with duration, also depth of poverty is important, with children living in households below the poverty threshold achieving test scores substantially lower than children living in household above the line. Again, the first childhood years are very important. Duncan et al. (1998), for instance, estimated that a

$10,000 increment to income averaged over the first five years of life for children in low-income families was associated with a 2.8-fold increase in the odds of finishing high school. This estimated effect was much

larger than the corresponding estimated effects of increases in income measured later in childhood, confirming the crucial impact of early childhood experiences. On the opposite end of the income scale, better off parents are better able to offset their children 's weak cognitive skills. A study in the US, while confirming that income gaps in cognitive test scores emerge early and persist overtime, also found that low achievers with high income parents were more likely reach tertiary level education than children's of low income parents (Reeves and Howard 2014). A study performed in the UK reached similar findings (McKnight 2015) suggests that it is not only a matter of income, but also of education. Children appear to benefit from their parents' higher education, improving their cognitive skills by age ten.

Investigating what are the mechanism, in addition to health conditions and possibly genetics, that link income to cognitive development, it has been found that both home environment and quality of out of the home child care are important. Linver, Brooks-Gunn, & Kohen (1999,2002) for instance, found that a variety of family factors, including maternal distress, authoritarian parenting, and low levels of cognitively stimulating activities, mediated the link between low income and poorer educational outcomes. On the contrary, early maternal investment has a positive and persistent impact on the child's cognitive development (Del Bono et al. 2016). The importance of the interplay of income and parenting styles is indirectly confirmed by studies on adopted children (e. g. Teasdale and Owen1986), which found that the IQs of these children was predicted by the social class standing of both their biological and adoptive fathers, thus indirectly disconfirming the pure genetic explanation.

Other studies have found that often pre-school and school services are of worse material and educational equality in the neighborhoods inhabited by low income groups and that teachers in the have lower expectations concerning the performance of their pupils than children in better off neighbourhoods, in total contrast with the "Pigmalione effect". For example, Ma and Wilkins (2002) found that school climate, as measured by expectations of academic success, was related to outcomes in science achievement in adolescents. Also, Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, and Bradley (2002) reported that kindergarten teachers had lower quality interactions with pupils in schools with higher mean levels of poverty. Phillips et al. (1994) found that the quality of early childhood education was also related to SES, with centres in lower SES areas providing fewer and lower quality learning experiences. On the positive side, research has also found that good quality early child care, good after school programs that incentive the learning skills and cognitive development of children have a positive impact particularly on the educational outcomes of children coming from low income households (e. g. Dumas and Lefranc 2012, Bingley and Westergård-Nielsen 2012, Del Boca, Martino. Piazzalunga, 2017, Biroli et al. 2018)

Overall, as Fergusson, Horwood, Boden (2008, p. 288) state on the basis of their findings of a longitudinal study on a cohort of children from birth until age 25, "the presence of pervasive relationships between socioeconomic status at birth and childhood material, cognitive, family and school factors. These correlations clearly suggest the presence of large variations in the mix of individual, family, economic and school conditions experienced by children from different social strata."

This awareness has prompted support for initiatives targeted both to disadvantaged parents, and particularly mothers, and to their children, starting from pregnancy. These initiative, promoted also by WHO and Unicef in their recommendations (WHO 2018), include a wide range of measures, including parental styles (such as talking and reading to children from birth) that stimulate brain development, as well as the offer of good quality early child care.

Studying the performance in international test scores of children belonging to different socio-economic background, researchers find a confirmation of these socially structured inequalities in cognitive development. Perrons and Pollin (2010), studying the PISA results, found that on average children belonging to households in the lowest income quartile exhibit a 83 point difference in math competences compared to those who belong to the highest quartile. Jerrim and Micklewright (2012) study changes

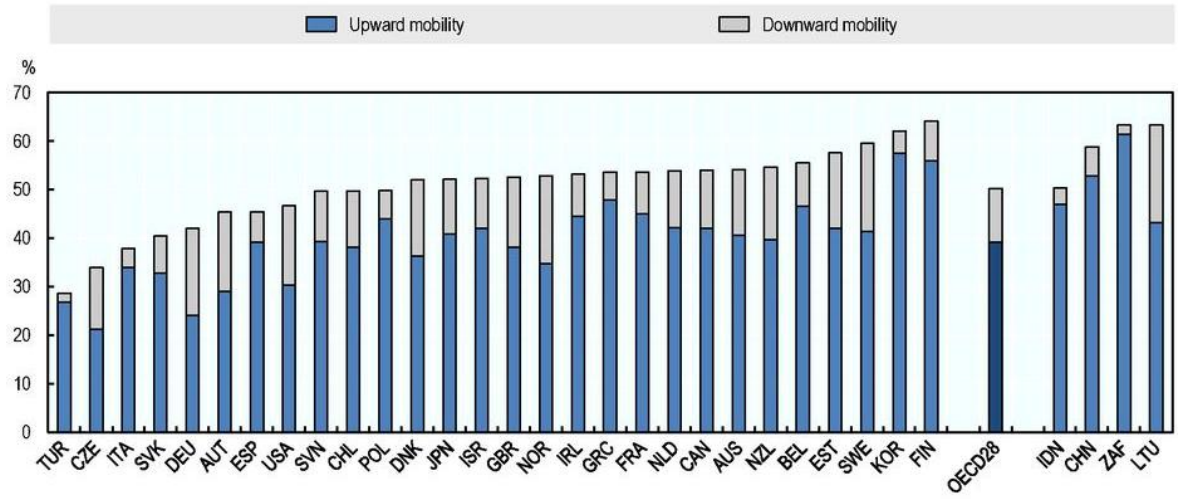
in the relation between family background and scores in two internationally standardized achievement tests taken at ages ten and fifteen, respectively, for a number of countries studied. They find a striking similarity in the relationship between test scores and a measure of family cultural and socio-economic

background—the number of books in the home—at both ages in all countries. The relationship seems stronger at age 15 than at age ten in England and Scotland.

There are, in fact, important cross-country differences in the degree and persistence of socially structured cognitive gaps. Perrons and Pollin found among the countries with lower differences not only countries such as the Northern European ones. Finland, Sweden, Denmark, The Netherlands – which have comparatively low levels both of poverty and of income inequality - but also some Eastern European countries, such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Croazia, which have higher level of poverty, but a comparatively low level of intergenerational persistence of low education. This last, as suggested by a study based on EU-Silc data (Grundiza and Lopez-Vilaplana 2013), is an important driver of the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

As a recent OECD (2018) study shows, developed countries differ substantially in the intergenerational transmission of educational level, with Italy, Spain and the United States among the countries with lower absolute intergenerational educational mobility, without having, as Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, an upper secondary system that offers a good entrance in the labour market (fig. 2). Low intergenerational educational mobility means that children with low educated parents are very likely to become low educated adults (see also Fergusson, Horwood, Boden 2008), thus also more exposed to poverty risks in adulthood, after having experienced them while growing up. Analogously, children of better educated parents are highly likely to become well educated parents themselves. The OECD report (2018) has called this phenomenon sticky floors and sticky ceilings. Fig. 3 graphically represents how this stickiness varies in intensity across countries.

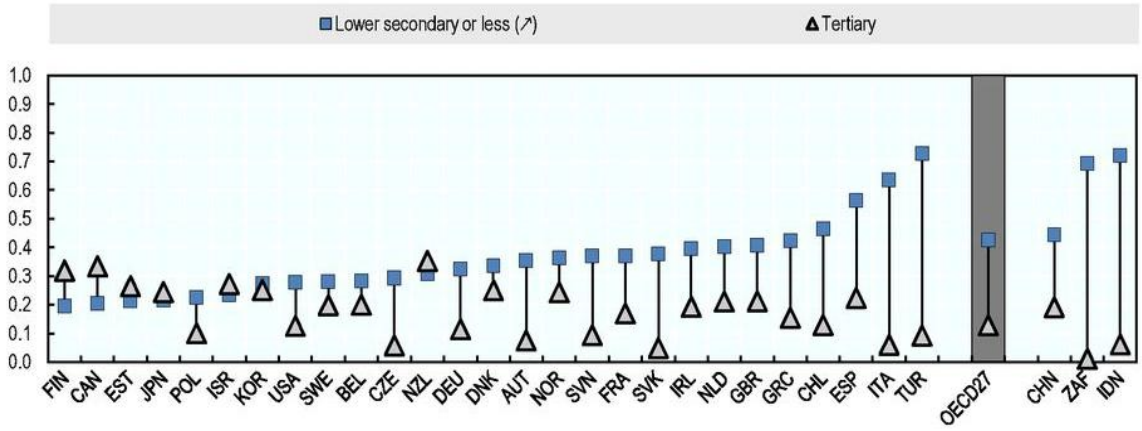
Fig. 2 Absolute educational mobility. Latest available year .Percentage of 25-64 years old non-students whose educational attainment is higher (upward mobility) or lower (downward mobility) than that of their parents



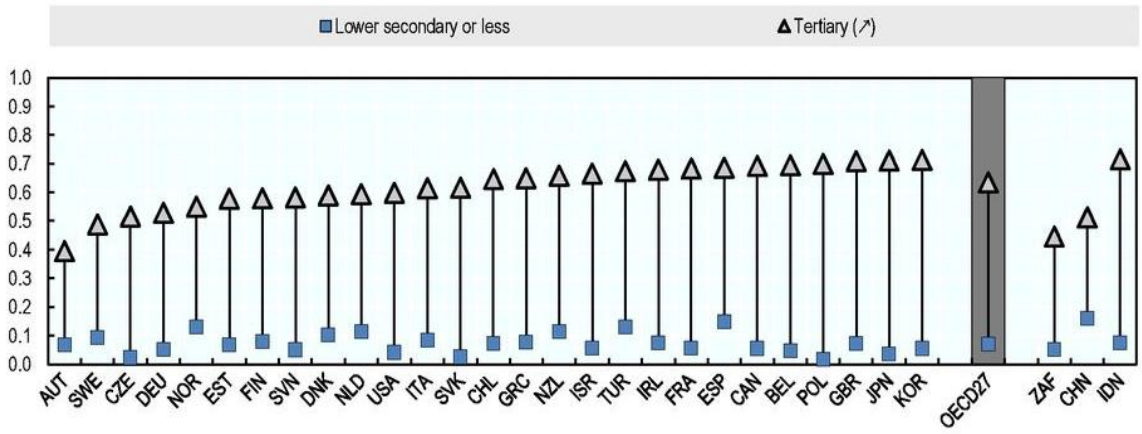
Source: OECD 2018, fig. 5.7, p. 248

Fig. 3 Sticky floors at the bottom and sticky ceilings at the top

A. Likelihood of educational attainment if neither parent has attained upper secondary education



B. Likelihood of educational attainment if at least one parent has attained tertiary education



Source: OECD 2018, fig. 5.10, p. 251.

In the light of these findings on the impact of being born and growing up at the bottom of the redistribution scale, it is particularly worrisome what has happened with the 2008 crisis. A substantial body of research indicates, in fact, that within Europe, low income households have suffered the most because of the Great Recession (e.g. Cantillon, Goedemé, Hills eds, 2019, Ólafsson, Daly, Kangas and Palme, 2019. And in the majority of the countries the impact has been particularly severe on children (Cantillon, Chzhen, Handa eds. 2017).

The Italian case

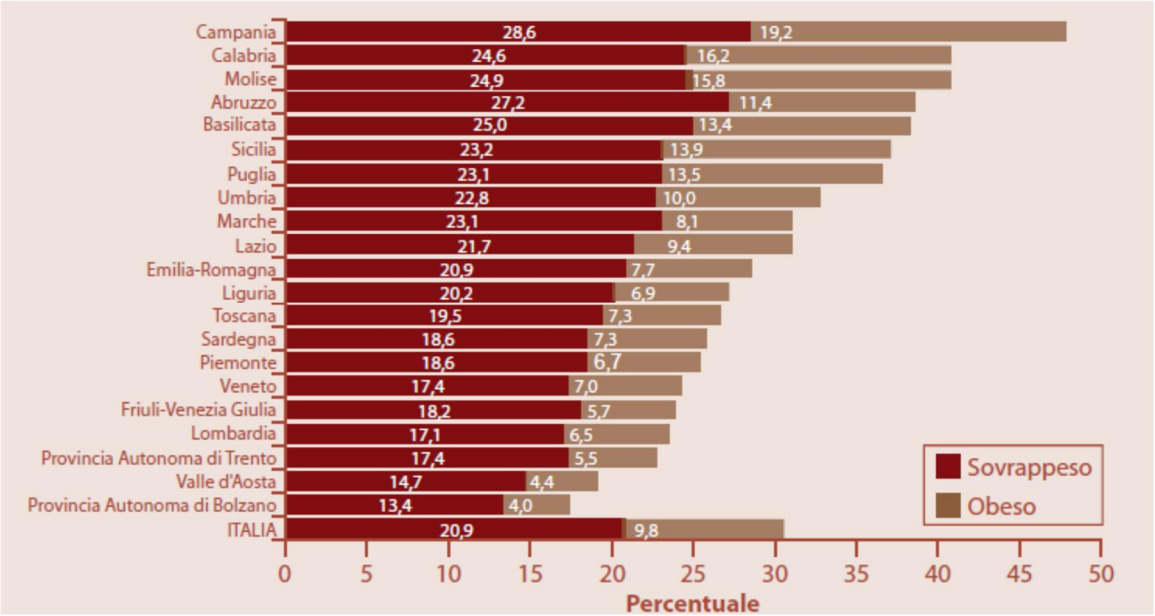
Italy is one of the developed countries where since the mid-nineties children's poverty has started to increase and the incidence of poverty is greater among children than among the adults (and the old) (European Commission 2009, Saraceno 2014). The causes of this phenomenon are multiple: high

unemployment or sub-employment rates among men and in-work poverty, particularly in the South, where poverty is concentrated, comparatively low women's employment and activity rate, particularly in the South and among low educated women/mothers, a fragmentary and little generous family policy Saraceno 2014). The result is not only a high concentration of poverty in the South, but also among large household with (three or more) dependent children and, more recently, among foreign households. Things have worsened with the 2008 financial crisis (Natali and Saraceno 2017), also because Italy, as shown in fig.4 above, was among the countries more severely hit, the low income groups suffered more and where recovery started later and is slower (Ólafsson and Stefánsson 2019). Children's anchored poverty worsened considerably after 2010, peaking to 32,6% in 2013, up from an already high 24,7% in 2008. Data are even worse, and still increasing, with regard to absolute poverty, which reached 9.% in 2013, up from 4.9% in 2008 and increasingly constantly also in the subsequent years12,6 % of all underage children in 2018, compared to the already high 8, 4% of the entire population. The percentage is much higher for children with a migrant background.

Research on the impact of being born and growing up poor in Italy is very recent and relatively scarce. The most systematic studies are those promoted, on the one hand, by the Istituto superiore della Sanità among primary school children, on the other hand by Save the Children, with the support of a scientific committee. They are in line with what is known from the international literature.

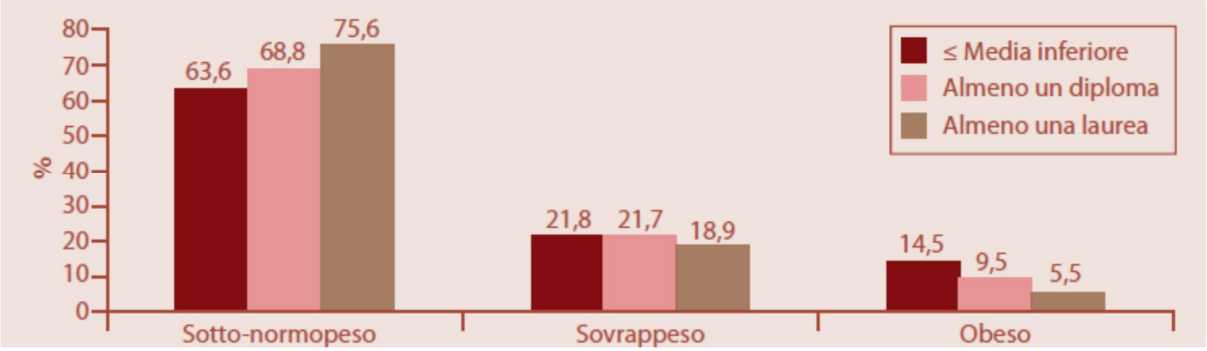
With regard to the impact of poverty on chances at birth, the evidence is indirect, but worrisome. The geographical gradient in infant mortality, in fact, overlaps with that of poverty, with a 2,9% infant mortality in the Northern regions, and a 3,8% in the Southern regions. The study by the Istituto Superiore della Sanità (2016) monitoring the health of children attending primary school finds that inequalities in parental income and labour position affect inequalities in exposure to children's illnesses and health risks. Everything else equal, however, a crucial role is played by parents', particularly mother's education. This is particularly evident with regard to obesity, as shown in fig. 4 and 5.

Fig. 4 Overweight and obesity among 8-9 years olds in the Italian regions. 2014



Source: Istituto Superiore della sanità 2016, fig. 2

Fig. 5. Weight status of 8-9 years olds by parents' education. Italy 2014



Source: Istituto superiore di Sanità 2016, fig. 5

Based on survey data on children's parents, the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (2016) found that children of poor and low educated parents (particularly mothers) eat less fruit and vegetables and do not eat breakfast regularly; They are also less «active» physically and practice sport less often than their better off contemporaries, particularly if they live in the South. There are also gender differences, with girls being less active and practicing sports less frequently than boys. In this perspective, girls living in poor households suffer from a double deprivation. The survey, instead, did not find differences between autochthonous and foreign children in these behaviors that are relevant for a child's health, once controlling for income and education.

Own elaboration of data of the ISTAT 2013 survey on health show that children living in poor households are highly likely not to be followed regularly by a doctor, even if in Italy the National health service is universal and the general practitioner (a pediatrician in the case of children under 12) is free. This risk is much higher if, in addition to be poor, children live in the South. About 32% of 0-3 years old living in poor households have not been seen by a doctor in the previous 12 months at the national level, ranging from 29% in the North-East to 34% in the South and Isles, notwithstanding each child at birth is assigned to a doctor who should regularly check on his/her growth. It means that their health is not monitored properly and there is no possibility of prevention, o early intervention. The percentage of children living in poor households who never see a doctor during a year increases with age, involving 45% of the 4-6 years old at the national level, 50% in the South, 55% in the Isles.

Scores on an international cognitive test (PISA) document the impact of household income inequalities. 36% of 15 years old children whose household is in the first income quintile do no achieve the minimum competencies in math and reading, compared to respectively 10% and 7 % of their contemporaries in the fifth quintile (Save the children 2015). Also in this case, there is a regional gradient overlapping the poverty one. Foreign children are the worse off, with 42% of children of first generation parents not reaching the minimum competencies both in math and in reading compared to respectively 19% and 15% of Italian born children. Low socio-economic status combines with lack of «local» cultural capital. A recent cross national test including all pupils from elementary to secondary high school performed by the Ministry of education (Invalsi 2019) arrived at similar findings. It also found that differences among student in the same classroom are greater in the South than in the Center-North, suggesting that in the South the school is less able to compensate family-linked inequalities.

Attendance to early child care seems to have a positive effect on low income children's cognitive development throughout adolescence (Save the Children 2015). A recent study on children in the 45-54 months age bracket found that there were differences in their cognitive, relational and mobility capabilities depending on whether they had previously attended a nursery school, as well as on their family background (Save the Children 2019a). The study of five cohorts having attended early child care when under 3 found that the positive impact lasted throughout adulthood, affecting various dimensions, such as emotional skills, employment, electoral participation, in addition to school completion. But the likelihood that children from low income households attend such a service from a very early age is very reduced, for various, interacting, reasons: cultural models concerning the proper care of very young children, lower labour market participation among low income and low educated mothers lower availability of these services in the very regions where there is a higher

concentration of children's poverty. Kindergarten attendance, in fact, is almost universal in Italy for children 3 to five years old and kindergartens, defined *scuole dell'infanzia* (infant schools) are part of the universal school system, although quality is uneven across the country and in the Southern regions kindergartens often operate on a half day basis only. Both coverage and attendance of nursery schools for the under three years old, on the contrary, is limited, involving 24,2% of 0-2 years old children at the national level in 2016, thus nine points below the 33% coverage set as a goal for all EU countries (Openpolis 2018, Save the Children 2019a, 2019b). Coverage is also very uneven across regions. Center-Northern regions, although not always reaching the 33% coverage, are much nearer to it than the Southern ones, some of which do not even reach 10% .

Coverage - taking together public and private nurseries - is to a large degree linked to women's labour force participation rates. Thus, regions with a high incidence of child poverty are those where the offer of early child care and education is lower. Regional differences in the provision on these services, therefore strengthen the risk of a Matthew effect in their use, particularly when they are not universal (e.g. Pavolini et al., 2018). Not only, in fact, in Italy education is a selective determinant for women's, and particularly mothers', labor force participation. And high educated mothers, are also more inclined to choose an institutional, professional, service over other forms of informal or family (grandparental) care for their very young children. The presence of these services is also lower in the poorer regions Although recently nursery schools, analogously to what had happened before to kindergartens, have been formally integrated in the overall system of basic schooling, their scarcity and the presence of fees (although on a sliding scale) supports the persistence of an image of these services not as a universal right of children irrespective of their mothers' working status or as a social assistance service for particularly problematic families. This image is particularly detrimental for the likelihood that low income children attend such a service.

In order to interrupt this vicious circle, it is not enough, and possibly even somewhat demeaning, to encourage low income/low educated mothers to get a job, thus being forced to reduce their mothering time and to shift it to the (more cognitively efficacious) child care services, as suggested for instance by Esping Andersen (2002) and implicit in much social investment literature (for a critique, see Saraceno 2017). It is necessary, in my view, to dis-implicate formal early child care from the mother's working status and from their image as a mainly work-family conciliating means, focusing on their role as a means to strengthen children's equal opportunity rights, not in competition, or alternative, to, rather as an integration of parental/maternal care and education. This cultural change, together with an enlargement of the offer of good quality nursery schools seems to me not only more respectful of low income/low educated mothers, but also fully coherent with the finding that together with early formal, non-family childcare and education also parenting quality is important for the emotional and

cognitive development. Low income low educated parents, therefore, rather than being considered inefficient for the development of their children, should be supported in developing their parenting capabilities. In this perspective, in the Italian context, there are interesting local experiences working with (low income, also migrant) mothers of new born children. One of such experiences – the Centro per la salute del bambino - has been promoted by a child psychiatric, Giorgio Tamburlini, based on his clinical experience. While being a strong supporter of early attendance to a nursery school, Tamburlini is also a strong supporter of home visits and mothers groups to help parents, and particularly mothers of infant children to develop care and relational attitudes and practices supporting child development from the beginning: reading, music, gymnastics, play, "responsive feeding" and so forth (see e.g. Tamburlini 2013, 2014 and http://www.csbonlus.org/).

A holistic approach to child development, not exclusively focused on formal education, is important not only for the emotional and physical wellbeing, but also for cognitive development throughout the process of growing up. Confirming what is known in the literature, the cited Save the Children study (2015) found that also participation in extracurricular activities has a positive impact on cognitive development. Yet, participation in extracurricular activities – sport, music, visiting museums, going to a theater or cinema and so forth – are much less widespread among low income children than their better-off contemporaries. It is a matter of income, of course, but also of the (affordable) availability of this kind of activities in the neighborhood or in the school itself. In this perspective, all other things equal, for a low income child where he/she lives makes a huge difference with regard to the possibility to fully develop his/her cognitive potential and capabilities. Living in city which is well endowed with a well early child care services, where elementary schools operate full time and enrich the school curriculum with extracurricular activities free of charge or financially affordable, where safe play grounds and sport centers and associations are easily accessible also for the less privileged, offers chances of development and curricular enrichment throughout the growing up process that are absent, or scarce, in less endowed locations. Again, the availability of these resources at the local level is very uneven across regions and municipalities, but also within cities, with the poorer regions, municipalities, neighbourhoods having fewer of them.

Strengthening the developmental chances of low income children appears a particularly crucial goal in a country, like Italy, where, as shown in a previous paragraph, the intergenerational transmission of the educational level is comparatively strong and overall intergenerational mobility comparatively low, while the intergenerational transmission of inequality is high (see also Franzini and Raitano 2013). A study of the impact of the family background on the career path of Italian men (Raitano and Vona 2013) has found that an additional year of parental education increases sons' weekly wages by 11.7% after twenty years of experience and that 71% of this effect emerges during the career.

According to the authors, this results from the interplay of a glass ceiling effect, due to the complementarity between parental education and son's abilities, and a parachute effect, associated with family labour market connections. The data shown above on the association between household income and child cognitive development, as well as health, suggests what may be the mechanisms underpinning the complementarity between parental education and son's abilities. Weakening at least the link between parental education and children's abilities for those belonging to low income households and have low educated parents, through early child education and sustained educational support throughout the process of growing up, therefore, would partly weaken the intergenerational transmission of inequality.

Concluding remarks

Granting children adequate economic and material resources, supporting their parents' employment and wages level is, of course, of utmost importance in contrasting children's poverty. 34% of children living in a jobless household, but also 16,2% of those living a single earner household were in absolute poverty in 2018. The figure dropped at 3,9% if they lived in a two parents dual earner household, indicating the crucial importance of supporting mothers' employment. Other needs of poor children need however to be addressed as well, in order to grant them equal opportunities in developing their capabilities, both by supporting parental skills and by enlarging access to non-family-linked developmental resources. Italy is lacking on both counts, given the high incidence of children's poverty and the scarcity of good quality developmental resources available in particular to children living in the poorer areas. There are exceptions, of course. But only very recently "education poverty" –with regard both to the provision of education resources and to cognitive under-development - has entered the political agenda, with a special fund allocated to initiatives in the field. They remain, however, experimental, and therefore transitory.

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