

# Parents' expectations regarding the choice of secondary school and future employment for students with Specific Learning Disabilities

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## Abstract

*The literature on parents' expectations on school choice and future employment of students with Specific Learning Disability (SLD) is somewhat limited. This study explored the point of view of parents of adolescents with SLD concerning the criteria for school choice in the transition to high school and the representations of the skills attributed to their son/daughter. Two hundred-and-two parents of students with a certification of specific learning disabilities took part in the study. They completed the following questionnaires online: Parents' coping, Efficacy and Resilience attribution, and Questionnaires on the school choice and the future employment. The results revealed that the parents' educational qualification contributed to the expectations of future employment and career interest of their son/daughter. Furthermore, parental involvement supported the expectations regarding the intrinsic employment and the choice of a developmental school, which was sensitive to the growth of their son/daughter. These findings highlight the possibility of encouraging a better school choice and future employment for children*

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*with SLD by having a better understanding of the role of parental expectations and student characteristics.*

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## 1. Introduction

In the decision-making process related to school and professional choices, the beliefs, expectations, and representations of parents concerning educational issues are closely associated with the individual differences of students (Brostrom, 2002; Lent, Lopez, Lopez, & Sheua, 2008; Ginevra, Nota, Soresi, & Gati, 2012). However, the focus on decision-making factors in students with Specific Learning Disability (SLD) is still relatively limited (Giorgetti, Andolfi, & Antonietti, 2015). SLD includes various conditions having a neurobiological basis that are characterized by substantial deficits in acquiring academic skills, particularly those associated with written or expressive language (American Psychiatric Association – APA, 2013).

The specificity of SLD – namely, the impairment of the instrumental skills to read, to write, and/or to calculate – has implications on academic tasks and often makes school transition more demanding (Giorgetti, Andolfi, & Antonietti, 2016). School transition is indeed in itself a personal experience of changes in roles and environmental conditions that is relevant to school inclusion and that is associated with both expectations and stress due to the changes in cognitive, emotional, and social demands (Ioannidi & Gogaki, 2020).

The role of environmental factors for a successful school transition, such as the availability of books and a proper place to study, has already been discussed (Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000; McGee, Ward, Gibbons, & Harlow, 2004; Van Rens, Haelermans, Groot, & Maassen van den Brink, 2018). Parental involvement is crucial in the transition as well. Parents enforce the rules, check on homework, discuss the schoolwork, and monitor their son/daughter's social life and academic progress. Family support is also linked to achievement following the transition. Both school and family can create and keep an environment for reinforcing and renewing children's academic motivation (McGee *et al.*, 2004; Van Rens *et al.*, 2018). Hence, the collaboration between educators, principals, family, and the school community is important for a successful school transition (Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000).

Considering all the potential stressors already mentioned, the transition to a higher form of education is a challenge for students with SLD and their parents (Craig, Operto, De Giacomo, Margari, Frolli, Conson *et al.*, 2016). In this respect, the coping mechanisms, defined as how people try to manage traumatic events or stressful situations in daily life (Sica, Novara, Dorz, & Sanavio, 1997), is crucial in this process. In the context of parental stress,

coping is defined as the psychological reaction due to an imbalance between the demands of being a parent and the perceptions of the individual's parenting role (Bender & Carlson, 2013). There are two types of coping responses (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984): emotion-focused (e.g., seeking emotional and social support, positive reinterpretation, acceptance) and problem-focused (active coping, including planning, suppression of competing activities, restraint coping, and seeking instrumental support). Nordin and Husain (2020) measured psychological distress and its association with the coping skills in parents of children with SLD. Results showed that all participants used problem-focused coping (i.e., planning, suppression of competing activities, restraint coping, and seeking instrumental support). Moreover, more than a half of the sample also used emotion-focused coping (i.e., seeking emotional support, positive reinterpretation, acceptance, and turning to religion) and only a few participants used less useful coping mechanisms (i.e., behavioral disengagement, mental disengagement, and substance abuse). The results of the study showed that problem-focused coping removed or reduced the cause of the stressor, whereas emotion-focused coping reduced the negative emotional responses (i.e., fear, anxiety, depression) related to stress, giving a temporary relief from the emotional disturbance, but without solving the problems (Penley, Tomaka, & Wiebe, 2002).

Students with SLD tend to experience school as the cause of their greatest difficulties, which can have repercussions on social reputation, isolation, and socio-relational discomfort (Armstrong & Humphrey, 2009). They may develop forms of emotional distress, which result in learned impotence, low levels of resilience, and high levels of school distress (Neil & Christensen, 2009). In this regard, the perception of self-efficacy is relevant, as it concerns the belief of people to be able to achieve specific results (Bandura, 1997). Students with higher academic self-efficacy perceive themselves as having the psychological, emotional, and behavioral resources needed to manage academic situations (Solberg, Howard, Gresham, & Carter, 2012). As a result, they apply efficient learning strategies (Cera, Mancini, & Antonietti, 2013) and experience less academic stress and psychological/emotional distress (Solberg *et al.*, 2012). Unfortunately, self-efficacy is low in students with SLD (Armstrong & Humphrey, 2009; Magenes, Cancer, Curti, Monti, Antonietti, & Traficante, 2021).

Furthermore, students with SLD are reported to have low levels of resilience (Neil & Christensen, 2009). The concept of resilience, defined as

the ability to cope with negative moments in life and to turn them into an opportunity for growth and learning, is relevant in situations of risk of possible dropout, clinical implications (i.e., anxiety and depression), and negative school experiences (Giorgetti *et al.*, 2015). The literature supports the notion of reduced self-efficacy and resilience in students with SLD, but what do parents think when considering their child? The perspective of parents of students with SLD, if it involves their resources, is a protective factor for the achievement of a positive life experience and for students' scholastic commitment (Wang & Eccles, 2012; Lombardi, Traficante, Bettoni, Offredi, Giorgetti, & Vernice, 2019).

As expected, the perspective of parents of students with SLD is influenced by the concern to find a school environment that is supportive of the child's special needs, that provides safety and security, and that encourages their personal and social growth, as well as their acquisition of skills and the development of their academic potential (Bagley, Woods, & Woods, 2001). In previous studies on school choice (Woods, Bagley, & Glatter, 1998), parents appeared to be focused on the policies and practices affecting academic achievement by considering the teaching methods, setting, strategies for monitoring students' progress, and homework policies. Parents also chose schools based on the facilities available that they considered appropriate to their child with SLD and chose a school that did not place too much emphasis on the academic aspects of schooling (Bagley *et al.*, 2001).

School choice is fundamental to promote employability. Many factors were found to be associated with the employment of young adults with SLD, including personal (age, gender, educational level, and positive attributes) and family (parental involvement and expectations, socio-economic level, and parents' education) factors (Harun, Che' Din, Mohd Rasdi, & Shamsuddin, 2020). Whiston and Keller (2004), in their comprehensive review of the literature, found that the career of young adults with SLD is influenced by the parental characteristics, such as occupation and socio-economic status. Higher parental education was found to contribute to the children's transition outcomes. Parents with a low education were found to be less involved in their children's educational experience, which will indirectly influence the child's transition outcomes, including engagement in employment (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000). More specifically, parents with a low level of education showed limited career ambitions for their children with SLD (Lindstrom, Doren, Metheny, Johnson, & Zane, 2007). A recent study showed that young adults whose parents were involved in low

salary jobs showed limited career interest as compared to those with parents characterized by professional occupations (Harun *et al.*, 2020). Our study was thus aimed to explore the parents' role in school choice and future employment of students with SLD in more detail with the attempt to fill in the knowledge gap.

## 2. Aims

The aim of the present study was to explore the factors involved in the school choice of students with SLD during the transition to high school. More specifically, the main goal was to explore the point of view of parents of students with SLD in order to investigate: (I) Personal resources that parents use to cope with their child's SLD; (II) Parents' representations of their son/daughter's skills; (III) Parents' expectations of their son/daughter's educational and professional future; (IV) Parents' actions and strategies to direct school choice.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Participants

Participants who voluntarily took part in this study were parents (i.e., mother or father) with one daughter or son diagnosed with SLD who was attending the last year of the first cycle of secondary school and was asked to choose the next level (second cycle of secondary school)<sup>4</sup>. A total of 202 parents (87.7% mothers and 12.3% fathers; mean age = 47 years,  $SD = 4.73$ ) participated in the study. SLD was diagnosed according to the Italian guidelines, which are in line with the international criteria and procedures approved by the national consensus conference, which included the main scientific societies operating in the country.

Parents were asked to report, besides demographic data, their son/daughter's diagnosis of SLD and when it was made, and the positive vs. negative consequences of the diagnosis in school. Parents were excluded

<sup>4</sup> The Italian school system is organized in pre-primary school (kindergarten school: 3 years; ages 3-5), primary school (5 years; ages 6-11), first cycle of secondary school (3 years; ages 11-14), second cycle of secondary school (5 years; ages 14-19), which is divided in three alternative paths: High, Technical, and Vocational school. The vocational branch of secondary school is composed of courses tailored to train students' specific skills relevant to professional profiles and is organized in two levels: basic (2 years) and specialized (3 years). Compulsory education extends from 6 to 16 years, that is, from the beginning of primary school to the second year of the second cycle of secondary school.

from the sample if other diagnoses than SLD were reported (excluding Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, ADHD).

Since not all the participants completed the entire survey, the number of participants considered in the analyses was not consistent throughout all measures.

### 3.2. Procedure

Participants were invited to respond to a questionnaire posted on an online platform specifically developed for surveys. The access was granted through a link to the online questionnaire posted on the website of the Learning and Educational Psychology Centre of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan and of the Italian Dyslexia Association (AID). Informed consent was obtained from all the participants volunteering to take part in the study. The possibility of abandoning the study at any time without explanation was granted. The ethics review board of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan approved this study.

### 3.3. Survey measures

Parents completed an online survey, which included the measures, as described in the sub-sections below.

#### 3.3.1. Parents' coping

The original version of the Brief-COPE questionnaire (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989) was translated and validated in Italian by Sica and collaborators (Sica *et al.*, 1997) and subsequently a new version of the tool was proposed, which was also validated for the Italian language (COPE-NVI: Sica, Magni, Ghisi, Altoè, Sighinolfi, Chiri *et al.*, 2008). It consists in a self-report multidimensional inventory to assess the different ways in which people respond to stress. The original version of Brief-COPE was adapted to specifically assess the parents' reaction to their child's SLD diagnosis. The questionnaire (Tab. 1) contains 11 items, rated on a 4-point Likert scale (ranging from *Completely disagree* to *Completely agree*).

Table 1 – *Factor Loadings of the Parents' Coping Questionnaire*

	Item	Factor		
		Acceptance Coping	Avoidance Coping	Management Coping
4	I've been trying to see it in a different light	<b>.784</b>	.043	-.082
10	I've been trying to find something good in what has happened	<b>.690</b>	.098	.054
6	I've been trying to figure out how to handle this in the best possible way	<b>.272</b>	-.241	.239
3	I've admitted to myself that I can't control the situation	.194	<b>.558</b>	-.126
11	I've been looking for solutions to get rid of the problem as soon as possible	-.010	<b>.555</b>	-.155
5	I convinced myself that nothing has happened	-.013	<b>.540</b>	.183
9	Basically, I gave up handling the situation	-.158	<b>.527</b>	-.056
7	I have limited the amount of effort to control the situation	.105	<b>.522</b>	.140
1	I took note of what was happening and accepted the fact that the situation cannot be changed	-.145	.123	<b>.651</b>
8	I have accepted the fact that has happened	.249	-.080	<b>.572</b>
2	I focused on managing the situation by not getting distracted by other thoughts	.051	-.059	<b>.555</b>

*Note:* Highest factor loading for each item indicated in bold.

### 3.3.2. *Efficacy attribution*

The original version of the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE), consisting of 10 items, aims at assessing the broad and stable sense of personal competence to deal effectively with a variety of stressful situations (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995). The Italian version (Pierro, 1997) of the questionnaire is composed of 17 items to evaluate various components of self-efficacy, including magnitude, strength, and competence in behaviors. The original questionnaire was adapted to assess to what extent the parents attribute each efficacy component to their son/daughter (Tab. 2). This version includes 10 items, which participants were asked to rate on a 4-point Likert scale (ranging from *Not at all true* to *Exactly true*).



Table 2 – Factor loadings of the Efficacy Attribution Questionnaire

	Item	Factor	
		Perseverance	Management of difficulties
9	When my child can't find the solution to a problem, he/she can ask for help from those around him/her	<b>.667</b>	.076
7	My child remains calm in facing difficulties because he/she can count on people's (family, friends) help	<b>.636</b>	-.001
1	My child can solve problems if he/she tries hard enough	<b>.625</b>	.102
8	When my child is faced with a problem, he/she can usually find several solutions	<b>.591</b>	-.191
3	My child achieves the proposed objectives	<b>.518</b>	-.097
6	My child can solve most problems if he/she invests the necessary effort	<b>.477</b>	-.085
2	If someone opposes my child, he/she can find means and ways to get what he/she wants	<b>.352</b>	-.262
5	Thanks to his/her resourcefulness, my child knows how to handle unforeseen situations	-.034	<b>-.908</b>
4	My child can deal efficiently with unexpected events	.013	<b>-.902</b>
10	If my child encounters a difficult situation, he/she can handle it	.341	<b>-.504</b>

Note: Highest factor loading for each item indicated in bold.

### 3.3.3. Resilience attribution

This construct was assessed through an adaptation of the Resilience Scale (Wagnild & Young, 1993), which is aimed at identifying the degree of individual resilience, considered a positive personality characteristic that enhances individual adaptation. The original version of the scale was transformed to investigate the parents' attribution of resilience to their son/daughter and consists of 10 items (Tab. 3). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale from *I disagree* to *I agree*.

Table 3 – *Factor loadings of the Resilience Attribution Questionnaire*

Item	Factor loadings	
	Attribution of Intrinsic Resilience	Attribution of Extrinsic Resilience
4 My child is determined	<b>.912</b>	-.186
5 My child is interested in things surrounding him/her	<b>.598</b>	.095
6 Believing in himself/herself helps my child to overcome difficulties	<b>.540</b>	.036
8 When my child faces a difficult situation, he/she can find a solution	<b>.452</b>	.355
2 Having completed a task makes him/her proud	<b>.395</b>	.008
7 The effort required by school commitment makes sense for him/her	<b>.385</b>	.307
10 Normally my child accepts what happens to him/her	-.126	<b>.778</b>
9 My child has enough energy to do what he/she has to do	.068	<b>.554</b>
3 My child is comfortable with him/herself	.304	<b>.483</b>
1 My child gets away with it in one way or another	.340	<b>.393</b>

*Note:* Highest factor loading for each item indicated in bold.

#### 3.3.4. *Questionnaire on parents' beliefs about future employment*

The instrument was built *ad hoc* by taking inspiration from scales developed by a national training and career guidance agency (AFOL). It is a 9-item self-report questionnaire (Tab. 4) to assess how parents perceive the possibility of future employment based on chance, determination, personal resources, and commitment of their son/daughter on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*I strongly disagree*) to 4 (*I strongly agree*).

Table 4 – *Parameter estimates of factor loadings of Questionnaire on Parents' Beliefs about Future Employment*

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Standardized factor loadings</i>
1. Intrinsic Employment	1. Expertises and abilities	8.727
	2. Qualifications	3.696
	4. Commitment	9.395
	6. Determination and Motivation	10.550
	8. Ability and Willingness to adapt	8.002
	9. Ability not to get frustrated if it's hard to find a job	6.055
2. Extrinsic Employment	7. Help offered by someone	5.463
	5. Recommendations	5.126
	3. Luck	3.994

3.3.5. *Questionnaire on parents' expectations of the educational objectives of the school*

The self-report questionnaire aims at assessing which are the criteria parents had in mind when they chose the appropriate type of secondary school for their son/daughter. The questionnaire (Tab. 5) includes 11 items, each reporting a statement to be endorsed on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*I strongly disagree*) to 4 (*I strongly agree*).

Table 5 – *Factor loadings of Questionnaire on Parents' Expectations of the Educational Objectives of the School*

<i>Item</i>	<i>Factor loadings</i>		
	<i>School Development</i>	<i>LD School</i>	<i>Well-being School</i>
7 Have a purpose; especially educational and thus promote the development of a good general preparation	<b>1.038</b>	-.045	.074
5 Develop relational as well as cultural or professional skills	<b>.405</b>	.088	-.180
6 It does not involve many disciplines in which you would be penalized or would be in difficulty because of the learning disabilities	-.007	<b>.680</b>	-.012

4	Stimulate the acquisition of skills that can compensate for the weaknesses related to the learning disabilities	.034	<b>.651</b>	-.005
10	Allow getting excellent grades despite the learning disabilities	-.009	<b>.575</b>	.191
3	Request a commitment commensurate with your possibilities	-.090	<b>.538</b>	-.227
9	Does not require study time at home that prevents the performance of other activities	.036	<b>.512</b>	.019
11	Achieve training objectives aimed at the integration in the working world	.060	<b>.381</b>	-.039
1	Enhance your capabilities	-.040	-.063	<b>-.764</b>
2	Propose arguments close to your interests	.080	-.013	<b>-.722</b>
8	Ensure your overall well-being	.181	.206	<b>-.469</b>

Note: Highest factor loading for each item indicated in bold.

### 3.3.6. Questionnaire on characteristics of the school context to which parents pay attention

This instrument is a self-report questionnaire assessing which characteristics of the school context the parents paid attention to when they decided the school their son/daughter would attend the next year. It consists of 10 items (Tab. 6) to be rated on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*I strongly disagree*) to 4 (*I strongly agree*).

Table 6 – Factor loadings of Questionnaire on Characteristics of School Context to which parents pay attention

Item	Factor loadings		
	Personalized Context	Relational Context	Pragmatic Choice
4 Have a personalized learning program	<b>.770</b>	-.007	-.031
3 Have a good tradition of welcoming and integrating students with learning disabilities	<b>.727</b>	-.014	.157
8 Have specialized professional figures able to cope with learning disabilities	<b>.710</b>	-.117	.026

6	Have teachers endowed with human sensibility	.054	<b>-.836</b>	-.060
5	Have classes with a good relational climate	-.059	<b>-.718</b>	.219
9	Apply customized assessment criteria	.396	<b>-.538</b>	-.063
7	Are equipped with teaching aids	.179	<b>-.430</b>	.140
2	Are attended by other students with learning disabilities	.236	.169	<b>.655</b>
1	Are easy to reach	-.078	-.102	<b>.591</b>
10	Are known for personal previous experiences	.025	-.193	<b>.497</b>

*Note:* Highest factor loading for each item indicated in bold.

## 4. Data analysis

### 4.1. Outline of the analyses

Descriptive statistics of the individual characteristics of the respondents and of their sons/daughters were computed as a first step.

Exploratory factor analyses (EFA) were conducted to examine the structure of the questionnaires. The suitability of the data for EFA was assessed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity and the maximum likelihood estimation was computed. If multiple factors emerged, we used the criterion of eigenvalue bigger than one and the oblique rotation. Factor loading  $> .30$  was the criteria to keep single items (McNeish, 2017). The scores of the subscales, corresponding to the factors extracted, were calculated through the mean of the scores of the items. Since EFA on the questionnaire on the parents' beliefs about the employment had already been previously conducted, a confirmatory factor analysis was carried out specifically in this case.

To assess possible differences in the scores of the scales, depending on the personal characteristics of the respondents, educational variables, and clinical histories of the students, a series of ANOVAs were run. The homogeneity of variances assumption was checked using Levene's Test: All the assumptions can be accepted. Post-hoc comparisons (contrast analyses) were performed to the data. A Scheffé test was applied for multiple comparisons.

Pearson's  $r$  coefficients were computed to analyze correlations between scores within the same scale. Spearman's rho coefficients were computed to assess correlations between the scales. All the analyses mentioned before were carried out by using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), Version 26.0.

Finally, Path analysis models were tested, using the Maximum Likelihood estimator method, with AMOS.

#### *4.2. Sample characteristics*

Almost all parents (95%) who took part in the study lived in Lombardy (northern Italy), whereas a small percentage lived in other Italian regions. As for the marital status, 87.7% were married and 12.3% were single or divorced. In terms of education, 19% of the entire sample had achieved a secondary school certificate, 7.2% had professional certificates, 45.3% a high school diploma, and 28.5% had been awarded with a bachelor's degree or higher form of education.

According to the diagnoses reported, 82.2% of the sons/daughters of the respondents were affected by Developmental Dyslexia (DD), often occurring in comorbidity with Dysgraphia (45.5%), Dysorthography (45%), and Dyscalculia (52%); 9.9% also had a diagnosis of ADHD.

The sons/daughters of the parents who filled in the questionnaires were 65.1% males and 34.9% females and most of them (86.1%) were enrolled in state schools, while 13.9% in private schools. In terms of types of schools, 39.6% of students attended high schools (62.3% for science, 16.9% for human sciences, 14.3% for arts, 3.9% for classics, and 2.6% for languages); 28.2% attended technical schools (24.1% tourism, 24.1% mechanical, 14.8% graphic, 9.3% construction, 5.6% chemical, 5.6% electronic-electrotechnics, 5.6% computer science, 5.6% design, 3.7% agriculture and agribusiness, and 1.9% transport-logistics), and 32.2% vocational schools (29.6% gastronomic, 29.5% socio-sanitary, 13.6% technical maintenance, 11.4% commercial, 11.4% industrial-handicraft, and 4.5% agriculture and rural development).

#### *4.3. Factor analyses*

##### *4.3.1. Parents' coping*

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) statistics (.65) and Bartlett's test of sphericity were statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 336.007$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The EFA led to extract the three-factor solution, which accounted for 38% of the

variance (Tab. 1). Item 6 should have been excluded since it did not fit well with the components as it had all the factor loadings lower than .30 in all factors but instead was maintained for its similar saturation in all factors. The first factor, named "Acceptance Coping", consisted of 3 items related to positive reframing, planning, active coping, and expected positive psychological outcomes. These items share the notion that the respondent attempted to identify something good in the situation. The second factor, named "Avoidance Coping", was loaded by 5 items related to behavioral disengagement and the effort to avoid dealing with a stressor. This factor concerns the limitations to control the situation by neglecting and escaping the problems. The third factor, named "Management Coping", consisted of 3 items underlying the acceptance of the situation and preventing distractions by the thoughts of other individuals. These items are focused on managing the situation effectively. The descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the subscales based on the three factors are shown in Table 7.

Table 7 – *Descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the scales*

<i>Questionnaire</i>	<i>Scale</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Med</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Asymmetry</i>	<i>Curtosis</i>	<i>Cronbach's alpha</i>
Parents' coping	Acceptance Coping	177	3.01	3.00	.64	-.71	1.09	.61
	Avoidance Coping	172	1.79	1.80	.53	.50	.16	.66
	Management Coping	175	3.12	3.00	.58	-.47	.83	.62
Efficacy attribution	Perseverance	178	2.78	2.71	.50	-.107	.78	.79
	Management of Difficulties	177	2.59	2.67	.64	-.172	-.95	.87
Resilience attribution	Intrinsic Resilience	177	2.95	3.00	.51	-.31	.96	.77
	Extrinsic Resilience	176	2.81	2.75	.54	-.29	.81	.72
Parents' beliefs about future employment	Intrinsic Employment	171	3.33	3.33	.42	-.29	-.36	.74
	Extrinsic Employment	176	2.69	2.67	.61	.09	-.08	.59

Parents' expectations of school's educational objectives	School Development	180	1.37	1.25	.41	.51	-1.35	.62
	LD School	165	3.01	3.00	.50	-.48	.50	.73
	Well-being School	174	2.70	2.67	.62	-.26	-.22	.72
Characteristics of school context to which parents pay attention for decision-making	Personalized Context	174	3.07	3.00	.69	-.60	.10	.82
	Relational Context	171	3.21	3.25	.56	-.47	.56	.82
	Pragmatic Choice	174	2.53	2.67	.68	-.23	.28	.64

#### 4.3.2. Efficacy attribution

KMO statistics of sample adequacy was .85 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 682.952$ ;  $p < .01$ ). The EFA induced to extract two factors, explaining 47.46% of the variance. The first factor, named "Perseverance", consisted of 7 items and was related to achieving objectives and to counting on people's help; these items concern the ability to keep calm in facing difficulties and in investing the necessary effort to find solutions to problems. The second factor, named "Management of Difficulties", consisted of 3 items, which are focused on handling unforeseen and challenging situations in an efficient way (Tab. 2). The descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the GSE scores are indicated in Table 7.

#### 4.3.3. Resilience attribution

The KMO value was .85, meeting the criterion of  $KMO \geq .60$ . The Bartlett's sphericity test was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 512.706$ ;  $df = 45$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The EFA induced to extract two factors, explaining 42.3% of the total variance. The first factor consisted of 6 items and was named "Attribution of Intrinsic Resilience" since it focused on motivational boost and self-esteem to overcome difficult situations; these items refer to believing in oneself, to finding solutions, keeping the interest high, and being determined. The second factor consisted of 4 items and was labeled "Attribution of Extrinsic Resilience", related to "energy" and "self-control" in facing contingent situations. It concerns the acceptance of what happens and in getting away with it (Tab. 3). The descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the subscales are again shown in Table 7.



#### *4.3.4. Questionnaire on parents' beliefs about future employment*

The two-factor model obtained in a previous study with EFA (Giorgetti *et al.*, 2016) was tested on our sample using a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), with six items loaded by the “Intrinsic Employment” factor (employment based on qualifications, commitment, and expertise) and three items saturated by the “Extrinsic Employment” factor (employment based on recommendations and luck; refer to Tab. 4 for more details). Fit indices were assessed to evaluate the fit of the model. Chi-squared statistics and the degrees of freedom, the comparative fit index (CFI), and the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) should exceed .90 (Bentler, 1990), while the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) should be less than .08 (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). The fit indices indicated that the two-factor structure was an acceptable representation of the scale ( $\chi^2 = 54.823$ ;  $df = 26$ ;  $p < .001$ ; CFI = .904; TLI = .866; RMSEA = .08; SRMR = .06). Each item was loaded significantly by the specified factor, with errors lower than .001. Table 4 reports the parameter estimates of factor loadings of the nine items. The descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the subscales are described in Table 7.

#### *4.3.5. Questionnaire on parents' expectations of the educational objectives of the school*

As the KMO statistics of sample adequacy was .77 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was 404.886 ( $p < .001$ ), data were suitable for the EFA. The EFA led to extract a three-factor solution accounting for 44.04% of the variance. The first factor, “School Development”, consisted of 2 items focused on the attempt to choose the kind of secondary education promoting the development of a good general preparation as well as cultural and professional skills. The second factor, “LD School”, consisted of 6 items related to the notion that education should stimulate the acquisition of skills and compensate weaknesses associated with SLD; Items share the goal of social integration and commitment commensurate to students' possibilities. The third factor, “Well-being School”, consisted of 3 items related to enhancing the capabilities and proposing interesting subjects, thus increasing the well-being of students (Tab. 5). These items have in common the expectation that school should propose interesting subjects for SLD students and ensure their well-being. The descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha coefficients are indicated in Table 7.

#### 4.3.6. *Questionnaire on the characteristics of the school context to which parents pay attention*

The KMO value was .82 and the Bartlett's sphericity test was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 668.580, p < .001$ ). The EFA suggested the extraction of three factors, explaining 54.7% of the total variance. The first factor, which was named "Personalized Context", consisted of 3 items related to the presence of a personalized learning program and specialized professionals. These items are focused on the choice of a school granting a good tradition of welcoming SLD students and of proposing personalized learning programs. The second factor, called "Relational Context", consisted of 4 items related to the relational climate and human sensibility. This factor stresses the importance of a good interpersonal climate in class. The third factor, consisting of 3 items, was named "Pragmatic Choice" and was focused on personal previous experiences, knowledge coming by other SLD students attending the same school, and the fact that the school was easy to reach (Tab. 6). The descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha coefficients are described with more detail in Table 7.

#### 4.4. *Differences among groups*

Gender, both of parents and students, failed to produce significant differences in all measures.

In terms of parent's qualification, the main effects were significant for acceptance coping ( $F_{(2, 167)} = 3.48, p = .03, \eta^2 = .64$ ) and intrinsic employment ( $F_{(2, 162)} = 5.70, p < .01, \eta^2 = .86$ ). Parents who had a first cycle-secondary school certificate ( $M = 2.75, SD = .81$ ) showed a lower level of acceptance coping than parents with a second cycle-secondary school diploma ( $M = 3.09, SD = .55$ ) or a bachelor's degree ( $M = 3.07, SD = .66$ ). Parents who had a bachelor's degree or higher qualification ( $M = 3.47, SD = .39$ ) were more confident of the fact that future employment could depend on their son/daughter's personal characteristics than parents with a first ( $M = 3.38, SD = .36$ ) or second cycle-secondary school diploma ( $M = 3.23, SD = .43$ ).

Furthermore, there were significant effects of the kind of school attended by the son/daughter on perseverance ( $F_{(2, 177)} = 4.63, p = .01, \eta^2 = .78$ ), attribution of intrinsic resilience ( $F_{(2, 176)} = 5.11, p < .01, \eta^2 = .82$ ), attribution of extrinsic resilience ( $F_{(2, 175)} = 3.71, p = .03, \eta^2 = .68$ ), school development ( $F_{(2, 179)} = 4.05, p = .02, \eta^2 = .72$ ), and LD school ( $F_{(2, 164)} = 11.52, p < .01, \eta^2 = .99$ ). Parents of students attending high school ( $M =$

2.91,  $SD = .51$ ) ranked a higher score in the attribution of perseverance than parents of students attending technical ( $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = .55$ ) and vocational ( $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = .40$ ) schools. As for the attribution of intrinsic resilience, parents of high school students ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = .47$ ) showed higher levels than parents of technical school ( $M = 2.84$ ,  $SD = .54$ ) and vocational school ( $M = 2.86$ ,  $SD = .52$ ) students. Finally, parents of high school students ( $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = .51$ ) showed a higher attribution of extrinsic resilience than parents of students attending technical ( $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = .60$ ) and vocational ( $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = .50$ ) schools. Parents of students attending technical schools ( $M = 1.23$ ,  $SD = .38$ ) were found to be less interested in the criteria for school choice based on personal development than parents of students attending high school ( $M = 1.42$ ,  $SD = .41$ ) and vocational schools ( $M = 1.43$ ,  $SD = .42$ ). Furthermore, parents of students attending vocational schools ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = .44$ ) showed a higher preference for LD schools than those of high school ( $M = 2.84$ ,  $SD = .51$ ) and technical school students ( $M = 2.96$ ,  $SD = .47$ ).

In terms of the time of SLD diagnosis (prior Grade 3 vs. after Grade 3 of primary school), ANOVAs revealed significant effects on acceptance coping ( $F_{(1, 176)} = 4.35$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $\eta^2 = .55$ ), management coping ( $F_{(1, 174)} = 5.40$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta^2 = .64$ ), management of difficulties ( $F_{(1, 176)} = 4.56$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $\eta^2 = .57$ ), attribution of extrinsic resilience ( $F_{(1, 175)} = 8.00$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .80$ ), well-being school ( $F_{(1, 173)} = 4.97$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $\eta^2 = .60$ ), and pragmatic choice ( $F_{(1, 173)} = 7.90$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .80$ ). According to Scheffé post-hoc comparison, parents of SLD students had higher levels of acceptance ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = .65$ ) and management coping ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = .53$ ) when the SLD diagnosis was made after the third grade. Parents also showed higher levels of the management of difficulties ( $M = 2.51$ ,  $SD = .69$ ) and of extrinsic resilience ( $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = .56$ ) following students' third-grade diagnosis. Finally, parents resulted more interested in the school choice based on pragmatic criteria ( $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = .64$ ) and personal development ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = .58$ ) when the diagnosis was made after the third grade.

Considering the consequences of the SLD diagnosis (positive vs. negative), ANOVAs highlighted significant effects on the attribution of perseverance ( $F_{(1, 115)} = 12.87$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .95$ ), management of difficulties ( $F_{(1, 116)} = 4.14$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $\eta^2 = .52$ ), attribution of intrinsic resilience ( $F_{(1, 115)} = 6.17$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .69$ ), and attribution of extrinsic resilience ( $F_{(1, 114)} = 11.16$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .91$ ). As revealed by Scheffé post-hoc comparison, parents of SLD students who considered positive effects of the diagnosis had higher levels of perseverance ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = .41$ ), of the management of

difficulties ( $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = .59$ ), and of intrinsic ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = .50$ ) and extrinsic resilience ( $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = .44$ ).

#### 4.5. Correlations

##### 4.5.1. Correlations within scales

The relationship between parents' coping subscales were tested (Tab. 8). Acceptance coping was moderately positively correlated with management coping, whereas no correlation was found between avoidance coping and the other coping subscales. The efficacy attribution based on perseverance and management of difficulties were strongly positively correlated with each other.

Table 8 – *Correlations between scales of Parents' coping, Resilience attribution and Questionnaire on parents' beliefs about future employment*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Acceptance coping	–								
2. Avoidance coping	.088	–							
3. Management coping	.204**	-.054	–						
4. Perseverance	.084	-.198*	.137	–					
5. Management of Difficulties	-.012	-.008	-.120	.609**	–				
6. Intrinsic resilience	.190*	-.116	.047	.617**	.600**	–			
7. Extrinsic resilience	.052	-.014	-.041	.619**	.615**	.610**	–		
8. Intrinsic employment	.325**	.006	.189*	.234**	.078	.215**	.147	–	
9. Extrinsic employment	.047	.003	.007	.004	-.056	.012	-.042	-.005	–
10. School development	.287**	.005	.210**	.170*	.059	.199**	.059	.309**	.023

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

In terms of the resilience questionnaire, the intrinsic and extrinsic subscales resulted in being strongly positively correlated with each other as well. No correlation was found between intrinsic and extrinsic employment subscales of the questionnaire on parents' beliefs concerning future employment.

The three subscales of the questionnaire about parents' expectations of the educational objectives were strongly positively correlated with each other, as well as the three subscales of the questionnaire about the characteristics of the school context.

#### 4.5.2. Correlations among scales

The examination of the statistically significant correlation coefficients led to identify the following relations (Tab. 8 and 9).

Table 9 – *Correlations between scales of Questionnaire on parents' beliefs about future employment, Questionnaire on parents' expectations of the educational objectives of the school, and Questionnaire on the characteristics of the school context to which parents pay attention*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Intrinsic Employment							
2. Extrinsic Employment	-.005						
3. School Development	.309**	.023					
4. LD school	.208**	.165*	.306**				
5. Well-being School	.144	.083	.209**	.459**			
6. Personalized Context	.142	.152	.227**	.501**	.679**		
7. Relational Context	.167*	.065	.420**	.420**	.535**	.578**	
8. Pragmatic Context	.107	.043	.172*	.377**	.876**	.446**	.454**

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

Parents' coping based on acceptance was (a) moderately positively correlated to the attribution of management skills, (b) weakly correlated to

the attribution of intrinsic resilience to the son/daughter, (c) strongly correlated to the beliefs that future employment could depend on intrinsic features, and (d) moderately correlated to the idea that the selected kind of secondary school should promote the development of personal skills. Behavioral disengagement (avoidance coping) was weakly negatively correlated to the attribution of perseverance. Management coping was (a) weakly positively correlated with the view that future employment involves personal skills and (b) with the preference for pragmatic criteria in choosing the secondary school and (c) moderately correlated to the belief that the chosen school should encourage the development of personal skills.

The attribution of perseverance to the son/daughter was (a) strongly positively correlated to the attribution of both intrinsic and extrinsic resilience, (b) moderately correlated to the parents' beliefs that future employment could depend on intrinsic features, and (c) weakly correlated to the choice of the secondary school allowing the development of personal skills. The attribution of management skills was strongly positively correlated to the attribution of intrinsic and extrinsic resilience.

The attribution of intrinsic resilience was (a) moderately positively correlated to the belief that future employment could depend on intrinsic reasons and (b) with criteria for selecting a school that fosters the development of personal skills. No significant correlation between the attribution of extrinsic resilience and subscales belonging to other instruments emerged.

The opinion that future employment could depend on personal characteristics was (a) strongly positively associated with criteria for school choice based on personal development, (b) moderately correlated to attention to SLD, and (c) weakly correlated to the relational climate. Beliefs on extrinsic reasons for employment were weakly positively correlated to the importance of a school that pays attention to SLD.

All the criteria for the choice of the type of secondary school to be attended correlated positively to all criteria for the selection of the specific school.

#### *4.5.3. Path analyses*

Two models of path analysis were tested. As a first step, all the subscales of Parents' coping (acceptance coping, avoidance coping, and management coping), Efficacy attribution (perseverance and management of difficulties), and Resilience attribution (intrinsic resilience and extrinsic resilience) were included as predictors of the intrinsic and extrinsic employment in the first

model and as predictors of School development, LD School, and Well-being School in the second model. As a second step, the models were simplified, eliminating the scales and subscales that did not contribute significantly in predicting the dependent variables.

Figure 1 – *Path analysis model depicting the influence of Perseverance and Acceptance Coping on Intrinsic Employment*

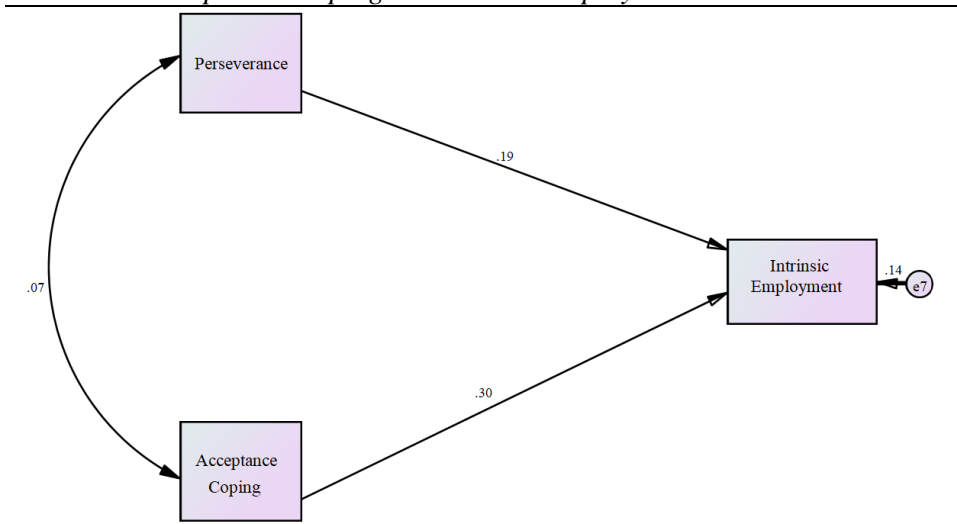
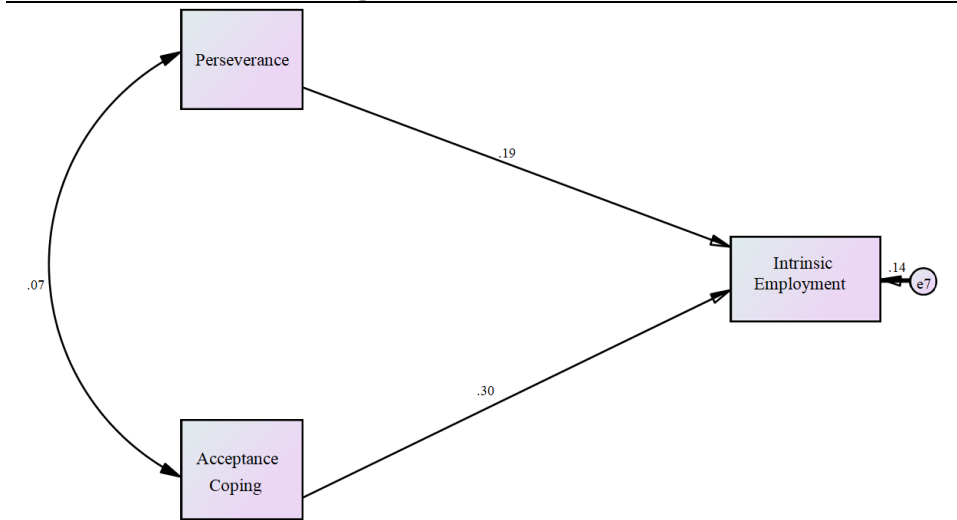


Figure 1 shows the final version of the first model where perseverance and acceptance coping were not correlated with each other but positively related to intrinsic employment with standardized regression weights of .19 to .30, respectively, and explaining 14% of the variance. Extrinsic employment was not represented because it was not explained by any of the independent variables.

Figure 2 shows the final version of the second model, where acceptance coping was positively related to both intrinsic resilience and management coping, and all the independent variables were positively related to school development, with standardized regression weights ranging from .15 to .23 and explaining 13% of the variance. LD School and Well-being School were not represented because they were not explained by any of the independent variables.

Figure 2 – *Path analysis model depicting the influence of Intrinsic Resilience, Acceptance Coping, and Management Coping on School Development*



## 5. Discussion

The aim of the present study was to explore which factors were shown to be involved in the school choice of SLD students in the transition to secondary school, considering their parents' expectations and opinions. The following factors were extracted using the EFA and later used in the analyses. As three-factorial scales, the following factors were taken into consideration: parents' coping ("Acceptance Coping", "Avoidance Coping", and "Management Coping"), parents' expectations of the educational objectives of the school ("School Development", "LD School", and "Well-being School"), and the characteristics of the school context to which parents paid attention ("Personalized Context", "Relational Context", and "Pragmatic Choice"). As two-factorial scales, instead, the following variables were considered: efficacy attribution ("Perseverance" and "Management of Difficulties") and resilience attribution ("Intrinsic Resilience" and "Extrinsic Resilience"). The results of the confirmatory factor analysis on the questionnaire concerning parents' beliefs about future employment showed that a two-factor structure had a reasonably good fit to the data. Intercorrelations among the subscales within each questionnaire, ranging from .59 to .87, confirmed the convergent validity of the questionnaires adopted. Thus, we can conclude that the questionnaires



devised to investigate the topics in question were adequate to highlight systematic patterns of parents' beliefs concerning the skills attributed to their son/daughter, the criteria employed to choose the secondary school as well as the expectations of future employment.

Parent's educational qualification was found to modulate the style in coping with the SLD and to contribute to the expectations of future employment and career interest of their son/daughter. More specifically, parents with a lower level of education appeared to react to the SLD of their son/daughter in a less efficient way. In addition, the results highlighted that parents who had been awarded with a bachelor degree or a higher level of education were more inclined to think that future employment could depend on their son/daughter's characteristics. It is likely that education contributed to acquire parental resources, which led to think that personal engagement is effective in addressing life problems, both in adulthood and in youth (Fantuzzo *et al.*, 2000; Lindstrom *et al.*, 2007).

An effect of the type of secondary school attended by the student also emerged. Perseverance and resilience were higher in parents of high school students as compared to students attending technical and vocational schools. Therefore, parents' belief that their son/daughter could face difficulties in specific school tasks and activities was higher in the most demanding type of secondary school, i.e., high school. Parents of students who attended vocational schools showed a higher preference for a school focused on the needs of students with SLD and on personalized teaching methods, suited for the characteristics of students with SLD, that did not emphasize assessment and grades. These associations between school type, the attribution of skills to their son/daughter, and the decision criteria concerning school choice can be explained by the fact that the most demanding school type was selected for students who were indeed the most skilled, whereas the less demanding school type was chosen for students who were less ready to face academic challenges. Another possible explanation is that the low vs. high level of trust in their son/daughter's resources induced parents to choose a school type which was appropriate for them in terms of fostering a facilitating vs. challenging approach.

The levels of acceptance, management coping, perseverance, and the attribution of extrinsic resilience in parents were higher when the SLD diagnosis was made after the third grade of the primary school (namely, later than the earliest recommended developmental stage), highlighting the importance of a diagnosis that allows children and parents to familiarize with the manifestations of the disorder and with the teaching and

compensatory measures that support a positive school motivation, whereas it can encourage the development of lower levels of resilience, self-efficacy, and coping in students. This is not necessarily in contrast with the need to receive an early diagnosis, but it shows that the temporal proximity between the diagnosis and the school choice stimulated a more elaborated attitude in parents.

The consequences of the diagnosis (positive vs. negative) showed that parents of students with SLD who reported positive effects attributed higher levels of efficacy and resilience, consistently with the findings by McGee and colleagues (2004). This result can be explained by the fact that family support should reinforce and support students' academic engagement and motivation.

The examination of the statistically significant correlation coefficients led to test two path analysis models. In our findings, perseverance and acceptance coping were positively related to intrinsic employment. Thus, the link found was supported by parental involvement and expectations. More specifically, as already previously demonstrated, closer relationships between parents and children had more influence on the students' future employment (Harun *et al.*, 2020). Finally, the positive relationships between school development and acceptance coping, attribution of intrinsic resilience, and management coping can be explained by the parents' desire to find a school environment that was responsive to students' special needs. Parents were aimed in providing a safe environment for their children, encouraging their personal and social growth through teaching methods and strategies that could monitor students' progress (Woods *et al.*, 1998; Bagley *et al.*, 2001).

## 6. Conclusions

The present study explored the parents' expectations for their SLD son/daughter's choices of an appropriate secondary school and future employment. Our findings confirmed that parents' educational level contributed to the expectations of future employment and career interest of the students with SLD (Fantuzzo *et al.*, 2000; Lindstrom *et al.*, 2007). More specifically, parents who were awarded a bachelor's degree or higher level of education reported that the individual characteristics of their son/daughter could influence the choice for their future employment. Parents with a lower level of education should thus be given the opportunity to better understand

the importance of personal resources and the effort in determining school achievement and future employment of their children.

This study contributes to highlight the importance of the positive effects of a SLD diagnosis on the attribution of efficacy and resilience, which are crucial for a successful and motivated school experience (McGee *et al.*, 2004). Communicating the diagnosis to parents is an important step that can influence future decisions about their son/daughter. It is crucial that parents learn to not perceive the SLD as a hindering factor for school achievement, but rather as an opportunity to better focus on the students' strengths during the process of school choice. Hence, professionals should help parents to understand how to manage the limitations of their sons/daughters in order to better support their development.

Overall, a general implication of these findings is that parental involvement in the process of school choice is associated with the expectation of intrinsic employment and with the choice of a school that supports personal development and social growth. Our study suggested that a higher level of self-efficacy reported by parents is a protective factor for a successful school choice and future employment of students with SLD. Research has shown that parents' expectations can be changed by appropriate interventions (e.g., Villani, Caputo, Balzarotti, & Riva, 2017) and that they are linked to the students' perception of their parents expectations (Boerchi & Tagliabue, 2018; Boerchi, D'Urso, & Pace, 2019).

Despite the interesting results emerging from this research, there are some limitations behind the findings that should be addressed. First, the investigation was conducted on a sample that was not representative of the Italian population since we only recruited parents of students with SLD during the process of secondary school choice. In future studies, it could be fruitful to replicate the research on larger and more heterogeneous samples, in terms of degree and school type. Furthermore, the lack of control on demographic and social variables, such as socio-economic status, the literacy environment index, and the family structure (Grigorenko, 2001), may represent another limitation to generalize the results obtained.

A future step might be to carry out a longitudinal assessment, which could be relevant to verify the change of parents' representations concerning school choice and future employment of their children.

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