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When Inclusion Relies on Families: Capital Mobilisation and Private Support for Students with SLD in a Formally Inclusive System

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When Inclusion Relies on Families: Capital Mobilisation and Private Support for Students with SLD in a Formally Inclusive System

Giovanna Zanolla & Elisa Geronimi

Abstract: This article examines how families of students with Specific Learning Disabilities and, in some cases, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder navigate the Swiss education system in the Italian-speaking region of Ticino. Drawing on six in-depth interviews with mothers and informed by Bourdieu's theory of capital, the study analyses how families mobilise economic, cultural, and social capital to address perceived limitations in school-based support, particularly through private tutoring. Despite formal commitments to inclusive education, participants describe institutional support as insufficient in terms of intensity, continuity, and individualisation. The analysis highlights ambivalent patterns of home–school communication and shows that access to individualised support often depends on families' capacity to mobilise resources. While these strategies may be effective at the individual level, they point to processes through which educational inequalities may be reinforced by unequal access to capital. The article concludes by discussing implications for inclusive education policies and support provision.

Keywords: Educational inequality, specific learning disabilities, parental advocacy, inclusive education

1. Introduction

Educational inequality remains one of the most persistent and structurally embedded features of contemporary schooling, and a central concern within the sociology of education. While socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, and residential location have been widely examined, comparatively less attention has been paid to special educational needs (SEN) as an axis of educational inequality within sociological research. This relative neglect is partly due to the lack of systematic and reliable data, particularly in administrative sources, which often fail to capture the complexity and scope of these conditions (Farquharson et al., 2022). As a result, less is known about how educational inequalities linked to SEN are experienced and managed in everyday school-family interactions.

This article focuses on a specific subset of SEN: specific learning disabilities (SLD), including dyslexia, dysgraphia, dysorthographia, and dyscalculia (OECD, 2007). These conditions, which often co-occur with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), can substantially affect students' academic trajectories and well-being. Students with SLD tend to experience lower academic achievement, greater anxiety, reduced self-esteem, and social difficulties compared to their peers (Mammarella et al., 2016; Nelson & Harwood, 2011; Schwartz et al., 2019), and these challenges often intersect with broader social inequalities linked to family background.

In this context, parental engagement often extends beyond attending meetings or supporting homework. It can involve navigating diagnostic pathways, advocating for accommodations, and sustaining communication with school staff. Families with higher levels of education and cultural capital are frequently better positioned to provide such support and to assert their children's educational rights (Burke & Hodapp, 2016; Calarco, 2018; Summers et al., 2005). These dynamics align with Lareau's (2011) concept of *concerted cultivation*, whereby middle-class parents actively manage their children's educational experiences through the mobilisation of institutional knowledge and communication skills.

A substantial body of research on these dynamics comes from neoliberal education systems (Leslie et al., 2024, 2025; Nevill et al., 2023), where families are increasingly responsibilised and expected to compensate for institutional shortcomings (Burke et al., 2022; Hamilton, 2016; Rose, 1999). Switzerland, by contrast, formally embeds inclusive education in policy frameworks and sustains relatively high levels of public trust in state schooling (Neuenschwander, 2020). Yet, even in this context, the burden of navigating support systems often falls on families (Pastore et al., 2020), suggesting that inclusive policy frameworks do not necessarily prevent private compensatory strategies.

While grounded in Ticino, this article contributes to international debates on how formally inclusive systems can produce stratified access to support when institutional provision is experienced as discontinuous, uneven, or insufficiently specialised. Drawing on six in-depth interviews with mothers of students enrolled in lower and upper secondary schools, diagnosed with SLD and, in some cases, ADHD, and who had actively sought private educational support, the article addresses the following research questions:

- What motivates families to seek private specialised support despite the officially inclusive education system in Ticino?
- Which forms of capital (economic, cultural, and social) do families mobilise in accessing such support, and how do these strategies shape educational inequality?
- To what extent do these families experience genuine school-family partnerships in terms of communication, trust, and shared decision-making?

To answer these questions, the article applies Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital, offering a relational and structural lens to understand how families navigate neurodivergence and institutional limitations. We focus on capital mobilisation as the mechanism linking perceived institutional gaps to unequal access to private support. The analysis examines how unequal access to resources shapes compensatory strategies and what this reveals about the gap between inclusion as a policy ideal and its enactment in everyday practice.

2. Context: Educational Structures and Institutional Features of Ticino

2.1 Inclusive Education and SLD in Ticino

The Canton of Ticino, located in the Italian-speaking region of Switzerland, offers a comprehensive and equity-oriented public education system. In line with the federal structure of the Swiss Confederation, each of the 26 cantons is responsible for organising compulsory education, resulting in significant regional variation. Until recently, Ticino has been characterised by a delayed form of academic stratification, allowing pupils to follow a common curriculum from ages three to fifteen. Differentiation has traditionally begun only in the final two years of lower secondary education, where students have been placed in mathematics and German into either an extended level, known as track A, or a basic level, known as track B. Although limited to two subjects, these placements have had important consequences, as they have affected eligibility for post-compulsory pathways, including academic upper secondary school, or *liceo*, and subsequent access to university. This model is currently undergoing reform, with the aim of further reducing internal

differentiation and moving towards an even more comprehensive lower secondary school system.

The system is highly standardised and centrally governed. The *Piano di studio della scuola dell'obbligo ticinese* (Dipartimento dell'educazione, della cultura e dello sport, 2022) defines uniform learning objectives and competency-based outcomes for all public schools, leaving little room for curricular variation. This tightly regulated framework is explicitly designed to promote inclusion and equal opportunities for all pupils.

With respect to SEN, Ticino adopts an inclusive policy model that prioritises integration within mainstream classrooms. The cantonal system provides a range of support measures aimed at accommodating pupils with learning difficulties, including those with formal diagnoses such as SLD and ADHD. In primary and lower secondary schools, support is delivered by *docenti di sostegno pedagogico* (pedagogical support teachers), who collaborate with classroom teachers to assist students facing academic or behavioural challenges. For students entitled to a Personalised Education Plan (PEP), support teachers are also involved in planning and monitoring personalised educational goals.

In upper secondary education, including vocational training and the academic track (*liceo*), a specialised role known as the SLD mediator coordinates support and ensures the continuity of pedagogical differentiation (which is the term used for the PEP in this educational stage). These institutional actors reflect a strong policy commitment to inclusive education and are embedded within the broader vision of a "school for all".

Despite this multi-professional support structure and the formal guarantees of inclusion, the interviews in this study suggest that some families of students with SLD and/or ADHD seek private support services to meet their children's needs. One increasingly prominent actor within this educational landscape is the private learning tutor, who operates outside the formal school system yet plays a critical role in supporting students' academic progress (Gaggioli & Sannipoli, 2018). In the Canton of Ticino, the role of the private tutor specialised in SLD was formally introduced in 2012 in response to growing demand from families. This did not make private tutors part of the public school system, nor did it turn tutoring into a publicly funded support measure. Rather, it contributed to the recognition of a specialised professional profile operating outside school provision, usually accessed and paid for directly by families. Tutors may therefore complement school-based support, but their availability and use remain dependent on private initiative and family resources.

The increasing reliance on private tutoring raises questions about how formally inclusive institutional arrangements interact with families' unequal capacities to mobilise resources.

2.2 Teacher–Parent Cooperation in Ticino and Switzerland: Formal Duties and Everyday Practices

A deeper understanding of how families navigate these perceived gaps between policy and practice also requires examining the institutional dynamics of teacher–parent cooperation in Ticino. The School Act of the Canton of Ticino (Repubblica e Cantone Ticino, 1990) mandates that parents of pupils in a class, or groups of classes, be convened at least once a year. These meetings are intended to foster mutual understanding between teachers, specialised staff (such as remedial teachers, special needs educators, and educational psychologists), and parents. Parents are also legally required to collaborate with the school and ensure their child's regular attendance. Additionally, they are entitled to comprehensive information about their child's educational situation and the organisation of the school, and may submit comments or appeals, to which teachers and school authorities are formally obliged to respond. The Special Education Act (Repubblica e Cantone Ticino, 2011) provides for collaboration with the families of pupils with SEN in relation to the assessment of their needs and the decision-making process concerning the allocation of support measures. Parents are also involved in the drafting of the PEP, typically through meetings with the class teacher and the pedagogical support teacher.

However, little is known about how these formal provisions are enacted in everyday practice in Ticino. Existing research, primarily focused on German-speaking Switzerland, suggests that home–school cooperation is often ambivalent: teachers' approaches are shaped more by entrenched beliefs than by policy directives; communication tends to be procedural, limited to scheduled meetings or critical situations; and institutional support for sustained parental involvement remains weak (Egger et al., 2015; Straumann & Egger, 2011). The only study including families from Ticino, a national survey by Pastore et al. (2020), found that approximately 75% of Swiss parents feel they have little or no influence over school decisions. In Ticino specifically, many parents perceive school as a source of stress, citing performance pressures, the volume of homework, and a lack of understanding of family challenges. Dissatisfaction is especially pronounced among parents of students with SEN, who report lower levels of involvement and support, particularly at the lower secondary level.

These dynamics raise critical questions about how families of students with SLD and ADHD engage with schools, and whether formal commitments to inclusion and cooperation are sufficient to prevent the emergence of private strategies that may inadvertently reproduce educational inequalities.

3. Theoretical Framework: Bourdieu, Capital and Educational Inequality

To examine how families respond to perceived or experienced limitations in institutional support for students with SLD and ADHD, this study draws on Bourdieu's theory of capital. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualised social practices as structured by the unequal distribution and mobilisation of different forms of capital, which shape individuals' positions within the social space and their ability to access valued resources. His framework is particularly well suited to exploring how families navigate education systems, especially when formal support structures are insufficient, unevenly implemented, or difficult to access in practice.

Bourdieu identified three principal forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social. Economic capital refers to financial resources and material assets, which are often convertible into other forms of advantage. In the context of SEN, this includes the ability to pay for private assessments, tutoring, or specialist interventions. Cultural capital comprises the dispositions, knowledge, language, and academic qualifications that are transmitted through family and schooling. It enables parents to understand educational expectations, interpret diagnostic and institutional procedures, communicate effectively with school personnel, and advocate for their children's rights. Social capital refers to the resources embedded in networks of relationships, both formal and informal, that provide access to information, influence, and support. These might include connections with other parents, professionals, or individuals who can offer strategic guidance within the education system.

This study also draws on the concept of *concerted cultivation* developed by Lareau (2011), which complements Bourdieu's framework by describing how middle-class parents actively shape their children's educational experiences. Through regular engagement with teachers, strategic use of institutional knowledge, and assertive communication, these parents seek to manage school–family relations and secure favourable outcomes. Although Lareau's work was developed in the context of the United States, the notion of concerted cultivation resonates strongly with the strategies described by parents in this study, particularly in terms of navigating diagnostic processes, requesting accommodations, and organising private support. This perspective aligns with sociological research highlighting how parental involvement and advocacy are shaped by classed resources and uneven capacities to engage with educational institutions (Reay, 1998a, 1998b; Calarco, 2018).

Applying Bourdieu's theory to the case of students with SLD and ADHD allows us to explore how families' ability to mobilise capital influences their educational strategies. In particular, it sheds light on why some families may be better positioned to secure additional support, build constructive partner-

ships with schools, and compensate for perceived institutional shortcomings through private means. Conversely, it highlights how the unequal distribution of capital contributes to the reproduction of educational inequalities, even within systems that formally commit to inclusion.

By combining Bourdieu's structural approach with a focus on the everyday practices of families, this framework supports a nuanced analysis of the relationship between institutional commitments to inclusive education and families' lived experiences of navigating the system. It also provides a lens through which to interpret the increasing reliance on private tutoring as a socially differentiated response to perceived limitations in public provision.

4. Method

4.1. Instrument

To investigate families' recourse to private tutoring for students with SLD and, in some cases, ADHD, we conducted semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen given the limited sociological evidence on how support is negotiated within formally inclusive systems and aligns with the exploratory and interpretive aims of the study. An interview guide ensured comparability across cases while leaving room for participants to foreground issues they considered salient.

The guide covered: (a) reasons for seeking a tutor; (b) forms of family support; (c) alternatives explored and related (dis)satisfaction; (d) relationships with teachers and the PEP/pedagogical differentiation; (e) how tutors were identified and accessed; (f) characteristics of the tutoring service and related (dis)satisfaction; (g) everyday challenges; and (h) concluding reflections. Questions were designed to elicit concrete episodes (e.g., specific interactions with schools, moments of negotiation, and instances of accommodation or refusal), consistent with our analytical focus on capital mobilisation as a mechanism linking perceived institutional limitations to unequal access to private support.

Interviews were conducted in Italian. The excerpts reported in the paper were translated into English by the authors and checked for semantic equivalence and readability, with attention to preserving participants' meanings rather than literal wording.

4.2. Participants

Interviews were conducted with six mothers whose children had recently attended, or were currently attending, lower or upper secondary school, and who had sought the support of a specialised tutor for SLD and/or ADHD. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling. An initial contact known to the researchers provided the names of a few mothers, who subse-

quently referred additional participants. Inclusion criteria were: (a) having a child diagnosed with SLD and/or ADHD; (b) the child being enrolled in lower or upper secondary education; and (c) the family having used private specialised tutoring. Given the study's focus on families' strategies under conditions of perceived institutional insufficiency, the sample is intentionally composed of families who had actively accessed private support; this has implications for the scope of inference, as discussed in the Limitations section.

All interviewees were mothers, rather than fathers, which reflects the gendered division of labour in the domestic management of education. As highlighted in sociological research (Reay, 1998a, 1998b, 2023; Ross, 2019; Vincent, 2017), educational support, particularly when it involves navigating SEN, constitutes a form of invisible labour predominantly undertaken by women. In the context of this study, the mothers' central role in managing their children's SLD and ADHD support pathways exemplifies how gendered responsibilities within families continue to shape the mobilisation of resources aimed at securing educational advantages.

Table 1 presents the codes assigned to each interviewee ("M" for "mother", followed by a number), along with a brief description of each participant.

Table 1. Interviewed mothers and their respective codes.

Code	Description
M1	Mother of two children with SLD and ADHD, one in lower secondary school and one in upper secondary school.
M2	Mother of a child with SLD and ADHD in upper secondary school.
M3	Mother of two children with SLD in upper secondary school.
M4	Mother of a child with SLD and ADHD in lower secondary school.
M5	Mother of two children with SLD (one certified and one borderline for certification) in lower secondary school.
M6	Mother of a child with SLD who had just completed lower secondary school at the time of the interview.

As shown in the table, all mothers had at least one child diagnosed with SLD, and in three out of six cases there was also a diagnosis of ADHD. In half of the cases, the mothers had two children with these conditions, a pattern that may partly reflect the widely documented familial clustering associated with both SLD and ADHD.

While the study did not systematically collect standardised socio-economic indicators such as household income, parental occupation, or educational attainment for all participants, the interviews provide relevant indications of the mothers' social positioning. All participating mothers were able to mobilise the economic, cultural, and social resources needed to iden-

tify, contact, and finance private specialised tutoring, although to varying degrees and sometimes with considerable financial strain. Several mothers also had relatively high levels of cultural capital, including educational backgrounds, professional experience in education, or specific knowledge of SLD and ADHD. These differences across cases are important for interpreting the findings: the study focuses on mothers who were able to mobilise resources in response to perceived gaps in school-based support, while more disadvantaged families, particularly those unable to afford, identify, or secure private tutoring, remain outside the empirical scope of the analysis.

4.3. Procedure and analysis

Five of the six interviews were conducted between February and March 2024. The sixth interview, conducted in June 2023, was drawn from another research project in which the topic of private tutoring for SLD and ADHD had emerged spontaneously and in a manner analytically consistent with the interview guide used in the present study. It was included in the analysis after obtaining informed consent from the mother involved.

The interviews varied in duration: the shortest lasted approximately 40 minutes, while the longest lasted around two hours. All interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analysed using Atlas.ti software. Initial coding was guided by the interview themes, with additional inductive codes added as new patterns and meanings emerged from the data. The material was subsequently analysed and synthesised using a thematic analytical approach, allowing for the identification of recurrent strategies, perceptions, and experiences across cases while remaining attentive to within-case variation.

5. Results

This section presents the main findings of the research. Section 5.1 examines the reasons why mothers chose to seek private tutoring, despite the availability of various forms of support within the school system. Sections 5.2 to 5.4 explore how mothers mobilised different forms of capital—cultural, social, and economic—to support their children's educational journeys. Finally, section 5.5 focuses on the quality of school–family communication and the extent to which parents experienced authentic collaboration with school staff.

5.1 Reasons for Seeking Private Tutoring

All interviewed mothers in this sample opted for private specialised tutoring to support their children with SLD and/or ADHD, mainly during lower secondary school; in one case, however, tutoring had already started during primary school. A central motivation for this decision was dissatisfaction

with the support services provided by public schools. In some instances, the help received, such as that offered by the pedagogical support teacher, was appreciated, but ultimately perceived as insufficient in terms of intensity, continuity, and individualisation:

> *There isn't much time, there isn't a fixed hour each week, it's kind of spread out over time, so they can't really go deep into the subject difficulties. So for me, it wasn't enough, I needed extra help. (M1)*

Other mothers, however, felt that the pedagogical support teacher was not always adequately trained or suited to support their children:

> *I have never been able to benefit from a good relationship with these pedagogical support teachers because, in my opinion, they are not prepared and lack the necessary skills to support these children, both academically and pedagogically. […] In lower secondary school, my daughter's pedagogical support teacher told me she was very sorry, but unfortunately, she didn't know anything about SLD. (M3)*

> *I find that the pedagogical support teachers are definitely trained, but maybe not enough when it comes to SLD. I mean, yes, they explain things to you, but if you're dyscalculic, they can explain it ten different ways—if they don't give you the key, the alternative, or the tool, you'll never get to the solution. So it stays very difficult. […] In the end, the pedagogical support teacher didn't bring any results, unfortunately. (M5)*

Other offerings, such as assisted study sessions[1], were considered inadequate for supporting students with SLD and ADHD, as they are delivered in small groups rather than through individualised instruction:

> *With ADHD, he needs one-on-one follow-up, not in a small group—absolutely not. It would be like not going at all. I mean, something like that is totally useless for a child with ADHD. (M2)*

Furthermore, according to the interviewed mothers, not all teachers are adequately trained in the area of SLD and ADHD, which negatively affects students' academic performance:

> *It's very inconsistent, I mean, in my opinion, it still really depends on the individual teacher. […] I've seen very different situations that had a big impact on academic performance, and it doesn't seem very functional to me. If a student happens to have a teacher who is not only sensitive but also well-informed, then they have a good chance of succeeding. But if the teacher doesn't understand what a specific disorder involves, then it just doesn't work. (M1)*

[1] In many lower and upper secondary schools, there are support services available to students, such as after-school or remedial courses and assisted study sessions. These services are not specifically designed for students with SEN or learning difficulties but are open to all students who wish to make use of them.

> *Not all teachers are equally sensitive, and I find that a bit disappointing because, in my opinion, and this is more in general, [...] there should really be a bit more specialisation in SLD. People are aware of it, yes, but only in a very general way, not enough. (M6)*

This perceived lack of preparation was often compounded by resistance to implementing the measures outlined in the PEP, which some teachers framed as conferring unfair advantages. As a result, mothers frequently felt compelled to intervene directly to ensure that agreed accommodations were respected, a dynamic further explored in Section 5.5.

Overall, the decision to seek private tutoring emerged, from the perspective of the interviewed mothers, not as a supplementary choice, but as a compensatory response to institutional support perceived as fragmented, insufficiently specialised, or unevenly implemented. In doing so, the interviewed mothers were required to mobilise, often continuously, their cultural, social, and economic capital, as illustrated in the following sections.

5.2. Mobilising cultural capital

Two mothers, in particular, work as teachers and therefore already possess strong pedagogical skills to support their children. Both have also undertaken additional training in the field of SLD and ADHD, and dedicate several hours each week to assisting their children on a regular basis:

> *To develop good habits, you need to follow them in all subjects, and that takes several hours a week. [...] To quantify it, it really depends on the workload and the number of tests, but it ranges from 2–3 hours to 5–6 hours a week. (M1)*

> *The main tutor for my son is me, because I'm a teacher [...] I also trained as a tutor, so I have the right background. [...] In lower secondary school, my son had 2, 3, even up to 4 tests every week, so we spent 4 to 6 hours studying together. (M2)*

Another mother, although not a teacher by profession, decided to pursue training in this field and obtained a qualification as a tutor:

> *I am an SLD tutor, so I can help, but it's clear that with your own child it's different, because the relationship is already one of mother and child, not tutor and child. (M6)*

M6 highlighted the challenges of acting as a tutor for her own child, an issue also emphasised by M1 and M2, particularly in relation to authority, motivation, and emotional proximity:

> *If you're the parent, other dynamics come into play [...] you risk that it's never the right time, or the relationship gets in the way, so if they don't feel like doing it now, they know there will be a later, and they tend to*

procrastinate. If there's an external person, the time is set, and that helps create structure. (M1)

He listens to her [the tutor]; if I had said it... now he's 16 and the mother is boring. If she says it, he listens [...] in adolescence, it's necessary, it can't be the parent anymore, you really need an external person. (M2)

Another mother, despite not having specific training or formal qualifications, highlighted the extensive documentation work she undertook from the moment she learned that her daughter had an SLD:

With my daughter, I started right from the first grade; at home, I have a cupboard full of all kinds of books, math exercises, drawings, with calculators, without calculators. I've worked a lot with her, we've worked together, we're a team, we've really worked hard. But unfortunately, there comes a point where it just doesn't go any further. (M5)

I no longer work, I dedicate myself to this. My time goes into it: doing research, getting things ready, helping with homework, and so on. (M5)

Another mother also chose to educate herself in her free time to gain resources to support her daughter. However, she emphasised that she cannot devote herself fully to her daughter due to work and family commitments:

Yes, I might have the resources, but doing only that, in terms of time and energy, takes a heavy toll on the whole family: on her sister, on my job, on my elderly mother who also needs my attention ... really, on everything. (M4)

These practices should not be understood as cultural capital alone. They also involved time availability, emotional labour, and caregiving responsibilities, which intersected with economic resources, work flexibility, and gendered family roles. In this sense, the mobilisation of cultural capital was embedded in broader conditions that made it possible, or more difficult, for mothers to transform knowledge and educational familiarity into sustained support. Taken together, according to participants' accounts, these findings show that five of the six mothers mobilised substantial cultural resources, either pre-existing or newly acquired, to support their children. Yet the translation of these resources into effective support depended on temporal, emotional, and institutional conditions that were not always sustainable within the family. Acting simultaneously as mother and educator often strained family relationships and reduced the effectiveness of educational support. Rather than replacing professional assistance, parental investment frequently revealed its own limits, ultimately reinforcing the perceived need for external tutoring.

One mother chose not to directly mobilise her cultural capital to support her children academically, as she does not feel she has the necessary skills to

do so effectively. Being dyslexic herself, she expressed discomfort with the idea of taking on a pedagogical role. Instead, she preferred to rely on capable professionals. However, she still mobilised her knowledge and experience to critically assess which individuals might be best suited to support her children.

> *Being dyslexic myself, it's not easy for me to support my children, […] I preferred from the beginning to go straight to a capable teacher. Let's say I used my skills only to assess which teachers were suitable or not, they weren't SLD specialists, but they had to be extremely sensitive to the issue. So that was my role: monitoring. (M3)*

This case illustrates that even when parents do not provide direct academic support, cultural capital may still be mobilised in more indirect and strategic ways, such as evaluating professionals and navigating support options. Such forms of reflexive monitoring constitute a key dimension of parental agency and further differentiate families' capacity to secure effective support for their children.

5.3. Social Capital

An aspect that emerged across several interviews is the limited availability of tutors specialising in SLD. These professionals are increasingly in demand, and new families are often placed on waiting lists before they can access support. In this context of scarcity, some mothers mobilised their social capital to secure assistance more quickly. One mother, for instance, relied on a personal acquaintance with a tutor and contacted her directly:

> *I knew her personally […] so at that point, I called her and said, 'If you happen to have a slot and can fit my son in from time to time,' and that's how it went, things moved along quite quickly. (M2)*

Another mother sought support from a local association, which she contacted through her personal connection with its founder. The association, based in Ticino, works to raise awareness about SLD and ADHD, and promotes equal opportunities in both educational and social contexts:

> *I also went through this association, but it's not easy to find availability, as they're very busy and in high demand. (M1)*

Another mother also attempted to obtain support through the same association, but without success. She subsequently contacted a different association based in neighbouring Italy, activating transnational ties that enabled her to bypass local constraints:

> *I tried through the association, but it was impossible, they were full, practically had a waiting list of about four or five months. […] I collaborate with an association in Italy; I have all the tutors I want. […] They really had many tutors. (M3)*

Taken together, these cases show that social capital played a decisive role in mediating access to private tutoring. Personal and associative networks allowed some families to accelerate access to scarce resources or to extend their search beyond the cantonal context. However, the ability to mobilise such networks is unevenly distributed and closely tied to families' prior social positioning. When access to support depends on informal connections rather than institutional guarantees, social capital becomes a mechanism through which educational inequalities are reproduced, particularly in situations where public provision is perceived as insufficient.

5.4. Economic Capital

Relying on a private tutor requires a significant financial investment. Interviewees reported hourly costs ranging from approximately 60–65 Swiss francs to 100 francs, depending on the tutor's qualifications and availability. One mother explained that she was in a financial position that allowed her to afford this expense and therefore chose to engage a qualified professional without hesitation:

> *Thank God, I had the financial means, and rather than wasting time with me and then having to turn to a qualified teacher anyway, I preferred from the beginning to go straight to someone competent. (M3)*

Other mothers emphasised that covering these costs is not without sacrifices, as illustrated by the following accounts:

> *In a month, sometimes 600 francs aren't enough, it happens. […] Sometimes we try to skip a session for my daughter so we can use that money for my son's lessons. Sometimes 600 is enough, sometimes it isn't, if there are big tests to prepare for or if he hasn't understood something and we need more sessions, we do more. Honestly, it would almost be better to send at least one of the two to a private school. […] We're really stretching ourselves to manage these costs, because we're not wealthy. (M5)*

> *Yes, I would have liked them to be followed more. I also found it a great relief, because you know, for me too, coming home from work, having to help them, trying to find the right time and the right energy for both them and me, but when you have more than one child, it really becomes a significant expense. (M1)*

Other mothers also reiterated that the high cost is one of the main drawbacks of this service. Although they were fortunate enough to afford private lessons for their children, they could not help but reflect on the situation of other parents who, unfortunately, are not in a position to do the same:

> *There is a bit of a cost issue, some families simply can't afford such high prices. (M2)*

> *For those who don't have the money, it remains a major problem, even though these children are very intelligent, they often have average or even above-average intelligence, and that's what keeps them afloat. (M6)*

Taken together, these accounts show that economic capital constitutes a necessary condition for sustained access to private tutoring. While some families were able to absorb the costs with relative ease, others faced difficult trade-offs and financial strain. For families without sufficient economic resources, private tutoring remains largely inaccessible, regardless of children's motivation or cognitive potential.

These dynamics highlight how economic capital intersects with cultural and social capital to structure educational opportunities. In a formally inclusive system such as Ticino's, private tutoring operates as a market-based compensatory mechanism, enabling resource-rich families to safeguard their children's educational trajectories while contributing to the reproduction of educational inequalities.

5.5. Dialogues between Families and Schools

In addition to mobilising various forms of capital, a common feature shared by all interviewed mothers was the need to engage directly with their children's teachers. Mothers often felt compelled to explain their children's needs themselves, suggesting that institutional mediation alone was insufficient, as not all teachers appeared adequately prepared to support students with SLD and/or ADHD:

> *I have always found a great willingness to collaborate, absolutely. Even the Italian teacher, now, for this test that was a bit difficult, I wrote her two emails, one of them on a Sunday, and she has always been very kind. […] But I know of people who have to go and say, 'Listen, you haven't understood.' That hasn't happened to me. (M4)*

This mother, although she did not encounter any issues herself, acknowledged that other parents were not as fortunate. Indeed, some mothers recounted having attended numerous meetings in which teachers were not always open to listening or fully aware of the challenges faced by these students:

> *I have held several meetings. I was often told that if he just tried a bit harder, he could manage. When I pointed out some difficulties in the material, like prints that were hard to read, double-sided pages, or too little space to write, they sometimes replied, "Yes, well, but actually it's not that important, he can do it". And there was a lot of focus on his attitude; many behaviours were seen as disinterest or provocation, when in fact they were related to his difficulties. (M1)*

> *There is a certain ignorance, […], but in school, I can't accept that. I can't speak with a physics teacher and hear, "You'll have to excuse me, but I don't know anything about SLD." That just doesn't work for me. (M3)*

In their experience, some teachers refused to implement specific measures outlined in the PEP, either because they considered them unnecessary or viewed them as an unfair advantage:

> *We only had problems with one teacher, the French teacher. I had to step in a couple of times because, for example, he would count spelling mistakes and deduct half a point. And I said, "No, you're not supposed to count that mistake, not even half a point, because the PEP says he has dysorthography, he will never be able to get that right." There was a bit of back and forth, but even in that case, it was resolved and he eventually understood. (M2)*

> *My daughter's math teacher last year, when I told her "She needs a calculator," said, "No, because then she's advantaged. I don't give her those things," and so she kept getting failing grades. […] For example, in the science test, the geography test, where there are tables and you have to look at degrees, she failed there too. And I said they should give her an oral compensation, as stated in the PEP.* (M5)

One mother recounted having encountered difficulties at the upper secondary level, reflecting a belief that, in her experience, continues to circulate that students with SLD and/or attention disorders should not attend this type of school:

> *I have always spoken with all my children's teachers, even in upper secondary school, where they were often unwilling to engage. […] In the first year, the worst comment I received from a teacher was: "I'm sorry, madam, but high school is not a special school". (M3)*

Another mother confirmed that she had to attend several meetings with her children's teachers. Despite her efforts to collaborate and share insights into her daughter's learning needs, the school imposed rigid boundaries on communication, limiting her ability to engage directly with individual teachers. Such constraints risk undermining the development of an authentic partnership and may reinforce a hierarchical dynamic in which parents' experiential knowledge of their own children is undervalued:

> *I held meetings with the class teacher, the support teacher and the principal. I had several meetings to try to explain how my daughter learns, how to help her, and what she needs. […] Moreover, I was forbidden to send emails to the teachers; […] I was reprimanded and told that I must communicate exclusively through the class teacher. (M5)*

This prohibition on contacting teachers reflects institutional gatekeeping and a lack of openness to dialogue. More broadly, the testimonies reveal

that communication was not always actively encouraged or effective. Where teachers' openness to dialogue was limited, mothers were required to intensify their advocacy efforts, although such efforts were not always recognised or supported by schools.

6. Discussion and conclusions

This study explored how six mothers of students with SLD and, in some cases, ADHD navigated educational provision in the Canton of Ticino, focusing on families who had actively accessed private specialised tutoring. The aim was not to estimate prevalence or to generalise to all families of students with SLD/ADHD in Ticino, but to illuminate mechanisms through which support is negotiated and compensated for within a formally inclusive system, as described by participants.

Across interviews, mothers described a gap between inclusive commitments and the support available in everyday practice. In participants' accounts, school-based provision was sometimes valued, yet often seen as insufficiently intensive, continuous, or individualised, and unevenly enacted across teachers and settings. Within this perceived gap, private tutoring functioned as an adaptive response, helping to stabilise learning routines, reduce family tensions, and support the implementation of accommodations. These findings resonate with a growing body of international research highlighting how families in different institutional contexts are increasingly required to compensate for perceived limitations in public provision (e.g. Burke et al., 2022; Nevill et al., 2023). At the same time, the present study extends this literature by showing how such dynamics operate within a formally inclusive and strongly publicly regulated system, thereby contributing to comparative understandings of inclusion and inequality.

The analysis contributes to sociological work on educational inequality by foregrounding SLD/ADHD as an axis through which inequalities may be produced and managed in everyday interactions, and not only through explicit selection rules. It also highlights private tutoring as a potential source of unequal access within inclusive settings when public provision is experienced as fragmented or inconsistently implemented. Importantly, the study does not suggest that inclusive policy frameworks are ineffective per se; rather, it shows how families may experience implementation as variable and how this variability becomes consequential for the strategies they adopt.

By locating these dynamics in Ticino, the study shows that processes often associated with more market-oriented or neoliberal education systems may also emerge in publicly regulated inclusive systems, although through different institutional pathways. This contributes to international research on parental advocacy, responsibilisation, and concerted cultivation by show-

ing how compensatory family strategies may arise not only from overt marketisation, but also from uneven implementation within formally inclusive provision.

Bourdieu's theory of capital provided a useful lens to interpret these strategies as structured and relational practices rather than purely individual "choices." Cultural capital appeared in both pre-existing and newly acquired forms. Some participants reported professional experience in education or training related to SLD/ADHD, while others described extensive self-education, documentation work, and ongoing monitoring of school practices. This mobilisation of cultural resources was oriented toward understanding institutional expectations, negotiating accommodations, and building workable support routines. At the same time, participants' narratives emphasised the limits of cultural capital when mobilised within the family: acting simultaneously as parent, advocate, and tutor was often described as emotionally and temporally demanding and not always sustainable, reinforcing the perceived value of an external professional. In line with research on the gendered organisation of educational labour, the sample itself reflects how this work is frequently carried out by mothers, who reported bearing primary responsibility for coordination, communication, and support management.

Social capital also shaped access under conditions described as constrained. Several mothers reported difficulties finding available specialised tutors and, in some cases, waiting lists. In this context, personal and associative networks functioned as resources to accelerate access, identify trusted professionals, or extend the search beyond the cantonal context. The relevance of social ties in participants' accounts does not mean that networks determine access for all families; however, it illustrates how, when support is scarce, informal connections can become practically significant and may advantage those with better-positioned networks.

Economic capital was a clear enabling condition for sustained access to private tutoring. Participants reported recurring costs that could reach several hundred Swiss francs per month, with experiences ranging from relative affordability to financial strain and trade-offs. While some families described absorbing the costs, others emphasised sacrifices and explicitly noted that such services are out of reach for families with fewer resources. From an inequality perspective, this suggests that private tutoring can operate as a market-based complement to public provision, with the potential to widen differences in the quantity and continuity of support available to students.

Beyond resources, participants' accounts draw attention to the quality and governance of home–school communication. Relationships with teachers ranged from collaborative to conflictual or procedurally constrained. Some mothers reported having to repeatedly explain their child's needs, encountering limited teacher knowledge about SLD/ADHD, or facing resis-

tance to accommodations framed as "unfair advantages." Others described gatekeeping practices that restricted direct contact with teachers. These experiences highlight that inclusion is also enacted through everyday relational work, professional understandings of neurodivergence, and organisational routines that shape whose knowledge is recognised and how decisions are negotiated.

The implications of these findings should be framed cautiously. For the mothers interviewed, limitations in school-based support were addressed through intensified parental labour and recourse to private tutoring. Where the resources needed to pursue such strategies are unequally distributed, access to stabilising support may also become unequal. For policy and practice, this points to the importance of strengthening the consistency and accessibility of school-based support and ensuring that communication and accommodation procedures do not depend primarily on families' capacity to negotiate, monitor, and pay. The findings also indicate the potential value of measures that reduce reliance on private markets, while recognising that the desirability and feasibility of such measures require assessment beyond this study.

These findings should, however, be interpreted in light of several limitations. The sample is small and intentionally focused on mothers who had accessed private tutoring, which narrows the scope of inference. It is also likely to overrepresent more resourceful, proactive, and institutionally engaged families, while underrepresenting those with fewer economic, social, or informational resources. This limits the ability of the study to capture how unmet needs are managed when families cannot rely on private compensatory support.

Snowball sampling and interview narratives may also amplify particular experiences and interpretations. The study is geographically and linguistically bounded, focusing on a specific cantonal context within Switzerland. Future research would benefit from multi-actor designs incorporating students, teachers, and tutors; mixed-method approaches combining interviews with documentary analysis or observation; and deliberate inclusion of families who cannot access private tutoring. Comparative work across cantons or national contexts would further clarify how institutional configurations shape the relationship between inclusion policies, support provision, and families' capital mobilisation.

Overall, the study shows how formal guarantees of inclusion may coexist with unequal access in everyday practice: when the practical realisation of support depends on families' capacity to advocate, organise, and pay, inclusion may be formally ensured while remaining unevenly accessible.

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