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TEACHING ENHANCED LEARNING FOR ENGAGING
AND INCLUSIVE LEARNING

Edited by
Ida Cortoni, Veronica Lo Presti, and Eleonora Sparano



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INDICE

EDITORIAL

Ida Cortoni, Veronica Lo Presti, Eleonora Sparano 11

RUBRICA EDUCATION 19

1. Self-Directed Learning Competences Assessment of Students after Covid-19 Pandemic
Viviana Capozza 21

2. The impact of DaD on the school environment: the role of self-evaluation
Alfonsina Mastrolia 31

3. School in distance teaching. Innovation and equity
Luca Torchia 37

4. A Psychoeducational Program to Prevent Internet abuse in Young people
Antonella Gigantesco, Debora Del Re, Isabella Cascavilla, Daniela Bonaldi, Vindice Deplano 45

RUBRICA EMPOWERMENT 55

1. The Connection between disciplines in the Development of a Training Course
Anna Errico, Fulvio O. Benussi 57

2. Feel Safe as a Means to Improve Minor's Digital Skills and Disaster Resilience <i>Cristina Casareale, Sharon Gilio, Francesco Graziani</i>	67
3. How can a software innovate Latin teaching <i>Luca Cortinovis, Francesco Stabile</i>	75
SAGGI	87
1. The Role of ICT in Learning Processes and University Inclusion <i>Carlotta Antonelli</i>	89
2. The pandemic evolution and its impact on the Italian school <i>Giulia Bianchi Matè, Emanuele Toscano</i>	117
3. Designing Microlearning Programmes for Centennials' Tastes <i>Maria Fabiani, Patrizio Pastore</i>	153
4. Application of Learning Analytics in European General Education Schools: Theoretical Review <i>Aleksandra Batuchina, Julija Melnikova</i>	201
APPROFONDIMENTI	235
1. Le politiche di integrazione socio-sanitaria e il diritto delle Regioni <i>Camilla Buzzacchi</i>	237
RECENSIONI	243
Il Posto Giusto. Risorse umane e politiche del lavoro per l'Italia, R. Benini e F. Dafano, Eurilink University Press, 2020 <i>Sara Martini, Margherita Blasetti</i>	245

3. SCHOOL IN DISTANCE TEACHING. INNOVATION AND EQUITY

by Luca Torchia*

Introduction

Education has historically been an important mean of levelling out social inequalities in student backgrounds (Mann, 1848). Nevertheless, educational choices, performances and outcomes are affected in many aspects by the socio-economic and cultural background.

The innovation linked to the entry of ICTs into the world of education had a problematic impact on the complex relationship between quality and equity of education systems.

This situation has been further complicated by the recent Covid-19 pandemic. The sanitary emergency helped to increase pre-existing social inequalities and the problems related to the entry of new technologies into schools remain open.

1. The problematic balance between innovation and equity

ICTs have become essential tools to enjoy education. The European Parliament places digital competencies (using

* Researcher at La Sapienza University of Rome and collaborator at the DiTES (Digital Technologies, Education and Society) Research Centre of Link Campus University: lucatorchia97@gmail.com.

technologies comfortably and with a critical spirit for personal and leisure purposes and work) among the eight key competencies for lifelong learning (Capogna *et al.*, 2017).

However, they are linked to several problematic nodes; first: the digital divide. This is a complex concept which goes beyond the purely economic sphere. It is assumed that digital technologies-based teaching modes can create more problems, in addition to the simple division between owners and non-holders of digital tools. For example, with distance learning, the boundaries between school and housing environment seem to be increasingly blurred. The two contexts seem to hybridise in an unprecedented way. The school represents a place, even physical, in which social inequalities can be levelled. By going to school you leave the context of daily life to enter a place that is equal for all its visitors. With distance teaching, students are instead ‘re-catapulted’ into their daily context, with all the particularities and inconveniences related to it. Therefore, the starting hypothesis of this study is that the new teaching modes may have created new and unexplored imbalances in the binomial equity-innovation in school. The concept of “equity” consists of two fundamental elements: inclusion and equality of opportunity (Benadusi, Giancola, 2014).

The aim is to address the current contradiction between the undeniable need to use ICTs within the school and the potential equity problems that such use brings. To do that, it has been analysed the impact that new teaching modes based on ICT have had on the school experience of students, especially from the point of view of equity.

It was decided to focus on the perceptions of students attending the fifth grade of secondary school¹.

¹ The sampling technique used is non-probability. The teachers were the key figures who acted as a link between the researcher and the respondents. This

The tool chosen to meet the aims of the study is a standardized questionnaire with 40 questions, released from early summer 2021 until November 2021.

2. Not only economic inequalities

One of the most negative consequences of distance teaching seems to be student's lowering of the motivation to study. It is connected to the inflection of time that they devote to the carrying out of school tasks and, consequently, to the deterioration of their academic performance.

67% of respondents said that the motivation for the study was reduced or very reduced, while only 23% said that it remained unchanged. The perception of peers' and classmates' motivation to study seems even clearer: according to 70% of students, it has been reduced or very reduced, while only 22% have remained unchanged. Similarly, 60% say that learning capacity has been reduced (40%) or very reduced (20%).

At first glance, the thesis according to which lecture in presence has a greater ability to help individuals to the concentration effort than the online one seems to be confirmed (Gui, 2019). Dealing with intellectually expensive tasks together with other physically involved individuals seems to give individuals more strength and motivation. Factors that instead tend to get lost in online lessons, often perceived as 'disembodied', too 'transmissive' and not very interactive. However, the discourse becomes more complex if one looks specifically at the relationship between distance teaching's negative impacts and the theme of equity. Focusing on the question of the change of motivation to

allowed the questionnaire to be administered to a large number of students, both from high schools and from technical or professional institutes.

study, it appears to be linked not so much to the ‘classic’ socio-economic inequalities (family capital indices²) as to the delicate sphere of interpersonal relationships. It is observed that high school students massively affirm the reduction of their motivation to study, while those attending a technician or professional seem to be slightly more divided in opinions. Similarly, respondents with low levels of family capital do not appear to have been heavily affected by distance learning’s negative effects on the motivation. For example, it emerges a particular situation from the intersection of the change in motivation and cultural capital. As cultural capital decreases, the percentages of those who affirm the reduction of their motivation to study gradually become less clear. About 58% of students with a low cultural capital index says that their motivation to study has been reduced or very reduced. On the other hand, if you look at students with a medium-high cultural capital index, the motivation to study seems to have decreased for about 73% of them. It has been observed that the decrease in one’s motivation to study is more linked to a decrease in the relationship with teachers or to a worsening of the family climate as a result of restrictions, that in some cases can create real regimes of forced cohabitation. About 88% of those who see their relationship with teachers reduced also say that their motivation to study has decreased. Similarly, those who perceive a negative change in their family relationships find a lowering of their motivation to study. For example, about 87% of those who perceive a decrease in privacy in their living environment, also say that their motivation is reduced or very reduced. A similar dynamic is found for those who perceive an increase in interferences and reciprocal disturbances,

² For the purposes of the research, it was decided not to build a macro-index representing in general the family capital. Instead, the two additive indices for cultural capital and employment capital were chosen separately. This in order to show the different influence that the two indices can have on the other variables.

an increase in tensions within their own home or a cooling of family relationships. The change in interpersonal relationships seems to be the minimum common denominator that allows us to understand why more high school students (mainly coming from the upper or middle-high social classes) affirm proportionally more the decrease in their motivation to study. Even students with low academic attainment seem to suffer more from a reduction in their motivation to study. Moreover, if you add as a third variable the change in the relationship with teachers, the situation appears more worrying. Almost all students with a school performance ranging from sufficiency down (about 97%) say that both the relationship with teachers and their motivation to study has been reduced or very reduced since the beginning of distance teaching.

3. ICTs between need and problems

From the analysis of the data, the hypothesis from which this research work has taken its cue appears to be repudiated, but only in part. The issue that seems to emerge most forcefully in relation to distance learning is not so much about socio-economic inequalities as about differences in the everyday life contexts of students. However, these are not differences from the ‘physical’ point of view, as shown by the poor association between variables related to the spaces available in their homes or the possession of digital tools. These are differences in the relational sphere of each student. Therefore, the hypothesis that ‘re-catapulting’ students into their daily context could have generated undesirable effects in their school experience has proved valid. Distance teaching, by its very nature, leads to a significant decrease in the relational factor and to the emergence of possible problems related to the increased freedom of self-determination of students, who find themselves

increasingly at the mercy of their motivation. It is clear that a drastic drop in motivation, linked to the decrease in time devoted to study and consequently of school performance, could generate many problems of inclusion, constituent element of the concept of 'equity'. This could open the way for the risk of early school leaving, especially for those who are already less motivated and/or have learning difficulties. For this reason, it seems important to start focusing not only on more technical aspects, such as the possession of digital devices or access to the Internet, however fundamental for participation in distance learning activities. Care must be taken that the personal sphere of the students does not involve their 'loss' behind the darkness of the screens that too often crowd the online lessons. At the same time, it is necessary to pay attention not to fall into the trap of the total "demonization" of distance teaching. ICTs are now essential tools, without which students would have lost fundamental years of education. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that digital tools have great potential for inclusion of the most disadvantaged students, for example students with disabilities or special educational needs.

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