

WELLBEING AND INCLUSION: CLOSENESS IN THE DISTANCE

BENESSERE E INCLUSIONE: PRESENZA NELLA DISTANZA

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Abstract

As a process aimed at structuring dialogical dynamics and participation for all, school inclusion cannot be reduced to compensatory interventions for the learning of students with special educational needs. In this sense, the professionalism of the teachers assumes a central role as a conscious and attentive support to the different dimensions of well-being.

The analysis of a series of interviews with a team of primary school teachers involved in a research-training project highlights the didactic-methodological attitudes and professional awareness that, during the distance learning courses, have allowed teachers to achieve a concrete process of inclusion and an environment of well-being for students and families.

L'inclusione scolastica, quale processo teso a strutturare dinamiche dialogiche e di partecipazione per tutti, non può essere ridotta ai soli interventi compensativi per l'apprendimento degli alunni con bisogni educativi speciali. In tal senso, la professionalità degli insegnanti assume un ruolo centrale quale supporto consapevole e attento alle diverse dimensioni del benessere.

L'analisi di una serie di interviste rivolte ad un team di docenti della scuola primaria coinvolto in un progetto di ricerca-formazione evidenzia le attenzioni didattico-metodologiche e le consapevolezze professionali che, durante i percorsi di DAD, hanno permesso alle insegnanti di realizzare un concreto processo di inclusione e un ambiente di benessere per alunni e famiglie.

Keywords

Remote schooling, Distance, Special Didactics, teachers-parents relationship, teachers research.

DAD, distanza, Didattica Speciale, rapporto insegnanti-genitori, insegnanti e ricerca.

¹ The entire contribution is the result of the shared reflection and joint work of the authors. However, with regard to the writing of the text, Antonello Mura is the author of section 4; Antioco Luigi Zurru is the author of section 1; Ilaria Tatulli is the author of section 3; Daniele Bullegas is the author of section 2.

1. Distance and presence: a scenario of profound uncertainty

In addition to the vehemence with which the spread of Covid-19 has struck the worldwide human community, civil society has repeatedly had to deal with the precariousness of emergency interventions, with the equivocal nature of political and social attitudes towards the various forms of marginality and, more generally, with the constitutive difficulties connected to “doing social work”, which arise with all their contradictory nature in situations of crisis. The school, with the complexities of which it is composed and with the load of social expectations with which it is burdened, can reasonably be considered as an amplified mirror of the complications that the epochal phenomenon of the pandemic has produced (Bocci, Caldin, & d’Alonzo, 2020; d’Alonzo, 2020b). As has now been widely documented (Besio & Bianquin, 2020; Ianes & Bellacicco, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020; Viner et al., 2020; WHO, 2020), distancing practices have led to a variety of problems that have reverberated on the processes of education and training, with particular criticality towards the weakest segments of society.

It is, as a matter of fact, a well-known issue how much the need to protect and preserve public health has led to structure protocols of action and social regulation, often blind to the multiple needs of individuals (d’Alonzo, 2020a). On the other hand, even dispensation provisions towards the weakest have only tangentially intercepted the genuine safeguarding of their interests (Santi, 2020). From a global point of view, moreover, the different attitudes that have been recorded from many sides towards Digital Didactics and Distance Learning denounce the difficulties of a school institution not always fully prepared to deal with the current uncertainties (Besio, 2020; Lucisano, 2020).

In such a context, where time and space have abruptly acquired new meanings, simultaneously pregnant with antinomies and openings, there have been many reflections on the lights and shadows that have characterized the experiences of Digital Didactics. There have also been numerous investigations on the various forms of dispersion and Digital Divide that have emerged alongside possible paths to inclusion (Besio & Bianquin, 2020; Lucisano, 2020). The resulting scenario reveals the contours of a *dialectic of closeness*, which is neither fully realized in presence nor absolutely denied in distance. In the wake of the intense solicitation suggested by the reason for the oppositions, it becomes important, therefore, to understand what are the components of the teachers’ professional action that, even in the distance and beyond the physical presence, allowed for the realization of an attentive closeness, capable of generating unexpected openings and sustaining a real process of inclusion (Zurru, Tatulli, Bullegas, & Mura, 2020).

The question around which this research was articulated is connected to the need to map the type of phenomena that the distance imposed by the *lockdown* has generated in the school. In this regard, while focusing attention only on the reality of the local school fabric, it becomes legitimate to ask how the teaching practices adopted have impacted on educational processes, investigating: 1) the levels of participation and relational dynamics of students with disabilities; 2) the difficulties experienced by families and the support they received; 3) the aspects through which teachers have been able to develop and express a clear professional attitude. These are questions stimulated by the challenge that distance has imposed on everyday school life, framed within a broad research design aimed at defining a systematic set of elements with which to define the structure of the inclusive professional profile of teachers (Mura, 2019; Mura, Zurru, & Tatulli, 2019).

2. Researching with teachers

The issues that guide the plan of the investigation have been developed in a study carried out as part of a fruitful dynamic of collaboration with a team of teachers engaged in carrying out a pedagogical-didactical experimentation. This is a project that starting in the s.y. 2019/20 concerned a class I of the elementary school, at the Istituto Comprensivo Statale “E. d’Arborea” of San Gavino Monreale, a town in the province of South Sardinia (Mura, Zurru, & Tatulli, 2020; Zurru et al., 2020). Therefore, the path outlined is configured as a process of research-training

and *teacher research* aimed at promoting, through reflective practices, transformative processes in teachers (Anderson, 2019; Capobianco & Feldman, 2010; Castro Garces & Martinez Granada, 2016; Clark et al., 1996; Fabbri & Romano, 2017; Feldman, 1999; Gravett, 2004; Klima Ronen, 2020; Reason, 1998; Taylor, 2015; Vannini, 2018).

Although the research project was structured and defined during the central period of the pandemic crisis, the survey did not take place until the end of the 2019/20 school year, giving teachers the opportunity to reconstruct an overarching representation of their experience and reflect on the elements that constitute it, accessing the personal perspectives of meaning that guided their daily actions (Mann, 2016; Mezirow, 2016). The goal of this delay was to provide sufficient time to settle the meaning of the experiences made, distinguishing it from the organizational and professional needs of full involvement at school and the concerns that this evidently entailed. The preferred tool was the interview, so as to probe deeply into teachers' perceptions and access, through their own words, their activities, experiences, interactions, and opinions (Kvale, 2007; Merriam, 1998). The discursive interview space, through the practice of reflective thinking, allowed the interviewees to learn from experience by reconstructing the everyday meaning of teaching action at school.

Keeping in mind the project structure through which the pedagogical-didactical experimentation carried out by the team of teachers is articulated – centered on the macro-category of well-being – the interviews were also declined on three poles oriented to the same thematic horizon:

a) *Pupil well-being*. In an attempt to understand what the levels of participation had been for the students during distance learning, we wanted to investigate: 1) the quality of learning; 2) the relational dynamics among peers; 3) the satisfaction of the educational needs of each student.

b) *Family well-being*. With reference to the difficulties experienced by families, it seemed appropriate to understand: 1) how the relationships of collaboration with families had been redefined; 2) how important the direct participation of families in distance learning had been; 3) the importance of a space dedicated to discussion with parents.

c) *Teacher well-being*. Looking, on the other hand, at aspects of teachers' professional development, it was considered useful to verify: 1) how much the reconfiguration of space and time dedicated to work had affected their professional practice; 2) how the dynamics of collaboration, interaction and confrontation between colleagues in the *teaching team* and the entire school had been redefined; 3) how they had restructured their professionalism.

In the narratives collected, it was possible to highlight and enhance numerous formative and transformative elements for teachers' professionalism (Calderhead, 1989; Mura, 2018). The qualitative analysis and coding of the indicators that emerged made it possible to highlight a coherent "reticular" structure in the declination of the idea of well-being, central to their project. The latter, rather than being disrupted by the phenomenon of distance during the period of distance learning, has continued to represent the load-bearing framework of an authentic path to inclusion. The data collected refer to the investigations carried out in what can be considered as a first *step* of research, to which it is necessary to follow further paths aimed at enhancing the perception of students and families.

3. Pupils, families and teachers in a climate of well-being and inclusion

What emerged from the narratives offers a broad framework of elements through which we can outline the crucial aspects that characterize the climate of well-being and inclusion experienced even during the *lockdown* period. The economy of the contribution does not allow us to retrace in an analytical and widespread manner the thematic nuclei progressively codified in a reticular map (already documented in Zurrú et al., 2020). The schematic representation that follows (Tab. 1) can be considered a summary of the aspects through which the teachers have conceived and realized the climate of well-being and inclusion within the distance learning path.

Pupil's well-being	Families' well-being	Teachers' well-being
Expression of Fears	Acceptance of family fears and critical issues	Recognition and sharing of initial fears
Affective needs	Attitude of care	Responsive attitude
Search for routines	Valuing the parental role	Attitude of care
Learning development	Involvement in educational activities	Reorganization of space and time
Autonomy development	Communication dynamics	Adaptability
Engagement in learning activities	Space for comparison	Creativity and didactic management
Class group cohesion	Recognition of the teaching role	Differentiation
Peer relationship	Dynamics of solidarity between parents	Attitude of openness and listening
		Maturation of skills
		Sharing and collaboration
		Proactive attitude

Tab. 1 The three polarizations of well-being and their thematic cores

Notwithstanding the fact that this was a heterogeneous elementary school class group, not particularly large (19 pupils), characterized also by the presence of two children affected by autism spectrum syndrome and others with learning difficulties that have become progressively more evident, the picture that emerged consists of some clear positive results. Looking at the well-being of the pupils, it is clear how much the children have matured and manifested an effective enthusiasm for the learning experience realized in a cohesive and resilient group and in an environment within which the participation of all in the life of the class and the access to the paths for the development of autonomy has been concretely guaranteed.

Despite the period of particular criticality for many families, both in a health and economic-financial sense, the well-being experienced by the parents of the students is documented by the levels of involvement. Through the narratives of the teachers, we can see a parental group that in active participation has found at the same time the recognition of its educational role and support in the difficulties and moments characterized by many anxieties.

As for the teachers, no less marked by moments of uncertainty and difficulty, the perception of well-being is felt in the overall emergence of a strong sense of belonging. Teachers have experienced and shared with each other a conscious group dynamic within the class team and the entire school, helping to build a professional core capable of ensuring students and parents a connection with reality and a significant alternative to an experience of alienation.

The multiple elements and thematic cores that emerged during the interviews made it possible to highlight how even in a moment of particular criticality, which was configured as a potential “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 2016) – where distance could have limited the actions and experiences of the subjects, by transforming habits and undermining certainties – conditions can arise to mature elements of professional awareness that contribute to the realization of well-being and inclusive processes.

4. Inclusion and characterization of teacher professionalism

The process carried out by the team during the distance learning course has been structured by means of a wide-ranging didactic planning, which has not yielded to the criticalities imposed by the pandemic and has rather been restructured in the daily routine of doing school, enabling

the teachers a substantial reflection on the processes of transformation and professional growth.

The figure of the teachers, even at the most problematic juncture, has been able to become a creative support for the growth of the student and a partner of orientation towards the parental role. Thus, some essential factors of professional action – repeatedly shared and discussed with the teachers themselves – have been outlined, through which to build conditions of well-being and inclusion for all those involved in the educational process.

A first element can be identified in the organizational and institutional fabric of the school in which the teachers have worked. The complex of fears, uncertainties and perplexities that understandably characterized the first reaction of teachers in front of a scenario full of criticality, has found an effective response in the widespread and immediate organization of the Institute. Beyond the indispensable technical and structural solutions that schools can provide, the professional attitude of individual teachers has found a clear reason for orientation in the operational context, built around a consistent expression of collegiality.

Another aspect of considerable importance is the professional approach that teachers have adopted towards the many problems that have emerged. With a conscious attitude of flexibility and responsive adaptability and *coping*, each member of the teaching team has listened to the fears and needs of both students and families, as well as the same colleagues, personally experiencing a continuous expansion and recognition of the role of accompaniment and guidance. To the whirling destructuring of times and spaces, as well as to the decomposition of the didactic dynamics, the teachers have reacted by re-structuring, in turn, times, spaces and tools.

The effective interaction between the roles, overcoming the simplistic distinction between curricular and support teachers, is another important element that has made it possible to achieve inclusion even at a distance. Fully considering the specificity of the educational needs expressed by students with disabilities, the heterogeneity of the class group has led teachers to activate a didactic organization that has allowed a constant process of discussion on strategies and management of the class, as well as an effective sharing of educational tasks to support each student.

Belonging to the team has been experienced by each component as a “condition” and “possibility” of mutual support, allowing to structure and manage a process of authentic inclusion. The collegial work has developed not only as an aspect related to the design and implementation of individual teaching units, but also as a concrete experience of collaborative group, each time called upon to address in a comprehensive manner the different expressions of educational needs of students and support the difficulties expressed by families.

As already mentioned, the path created by the teachers did not end with the occasional and residual response to the emergency, which also characterized the first steps of distance learning. It was not a matter of providing students with some element of instruction so that they would not miss the year, as unfortunately witnessed by the concerns of many schools nationwide. The teachers’ approach has been characterized by a constant constructive will that has gone well beyond the minimal conditions initially required for the activation of digital teaching.

The deontological habitus, as a further characterizing element, has led the teachers to creatively reinvent the didactic opportunities of training to ensure that even the distance imposed by digital technology could accommodate the expression and the most intimate meaning of closeness. The presence thus achieved even through technology has been the testimony of a determined and conscious desire to accompany the growth of students and guide their experience even in the most frightening moments of crisis.

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