

PHYSICALLY DISPERSED BUT VIRTUALLY REUNITED: STORIES OF INCLUSION DURING LOCKDOWN

DISPERDERSI FISICAMENTE MA RITROVARSI VIRTUALMENTE: STORIE DI INCLUSIONE DURANTE IL LOCKDOWN

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Abstract

The article presents a qualitative study to which ten ($N=10$) generalist, subject and learning support teachers working in primary, lower, and higher secondary schools in the Italian regions of Campania ($n=8$) and Lazio ($n=2$) were recruited using convenience sampling. It proposes a narrative of the frontliners' experience during the three months of lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic who, notwithstanding physical and mental barriers, managed to create virtual bridges so as to ensure that no one is left behind. Underpinning the questions set for the interviews was an asset-based approach which oriented the participants' reflection towards the identification of intrinsic and extrinsic strengths that were indispensable to guarantee not only education for all, but also that sense of "being there" and belonging, even if in a virtual learning environment. A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the data collected, whereas the MAXQDA2020 software facilitated the organisation and coding process. Active and collaborative participation, proactive behaviour, and solidarity among teachers, school leaders, parents, and pupils were key. They mobilised their own school community to identify and capitalise individual and collective resources to work in unison towards a common objective and act as change agents. These results, albeit from a small sample, highlight how principles and values of health promotion and inclusive practices have been crucial even in times of crisis.

L'articolo presenta i risultati emersi da dieci ($N=10$) interviste semi-strutturate condotte con docenti curricolari e di sostegno che operano presso scuole primaria, secondaria di primo e di secondo grado del territorio campano ($n=8$) e laziale ($n=2$). Tale lavoro si configura come una narrazione dell'esperienza vissuta dagli attori "in prima linea" durante i tre mesi di *lockdown* dovuto alla pandemia COVID-19, i quali, nonostante le barriere fisiche e mentali, sono riusciti a ritrovarsi virtualmente per non lasciare indietro nessuno. Le domande poste sono state strutturate sulla base di un approccio metodologico *asset-based*, che ha permesso di orientare la riflessione sui punti di forza intrinseci ed estrinseci che hanno garantito non solo un'educazione per tutti, ma anche il senso dell'"esserci" e di appartenenza, pur se in una realtà virtuale. Per l'analisi dei dati è stato utilizzato l'approccio della *Thematic Analysis*; il software MAXQDA2020, inoltre, ne ha facilitato i processi di organizzazione e di codifica. La chiave di successo di tale esperienza è stata la partecipazione attiva, propositiva, collaborativa e solidale, che ha visto il coinvolgimento dei genitori, degli alunni, degli insegnanti e dei dirigenti, attraverso la mobilitazione della propria comunità scolastica per individuare e capitalizzare le risorse individuali e collettive, adoperandosi tutti in vista di un obiettivo comune ed essere agenti del cambiamento. Questi risultati, nonostante l'esiguità del campione, sottolineano come i principi e i valori alla base della promozione della salute e delle pratiche inclusive siano stati cruciali anche in tempi di crisi.

Keywords

Asset-based approach, COVID-19, Remote teaching, Inclusion, Interviews

Approccio *asset-based*, COVID-19, Didattica a distanza, Inclusione, Interviste

Introduction

Two thousand and twenty will be forever remembered as the year in which an enemy invisible to the naked eye brought daily routines to a halt. The public policies aimed at curbing the pandemic forced people from all walks of life to think outside the box for solutions that could guarantee continuity in their everyday endeavours. This was especially the case for educators who strived to ensure that learning progressed as smoothly as possible even if school doors, practically throughout the world, had been abruptly and unexpectedly closed (Russell, M. et al., 2020). Indeed, besides the grappling economic and psychosocial pressures on families, this unprecedented scenario not only brought to the fore all the inequalities advocated against before Covid-19 (World Bank, 2015), but also gave rise to new forms of risk of poverty and marginalisation (UNESCO, UNICEF & the World Bank, 2020).

The situation in Italy was no different. As in other countries, while classrooms were transformed into online virtual environments and in-person communication was replaced by computer-mediated forms, the challenges of disengagement, dropout, and school exclusion heightened. Students with special needs, migrant and displaced students, learners from low-income families and those living in remote areas were at a much greater disadvantage (Censis, 2020). Unfortunately, this came as no surprise, considering publications, even prior to COVID-19, reporting a nation-wide digital divide as well as low levels of teachers and students' digital competencies (European Commission [EC], 2020; Fondazione Ugo Bordoni & ISTAT, 2018; OECD, 2018; Besio, 2020; Censis, 2020). As a response, immediate priority was given to ensuring that all students had internet access and devices, learning management systems that could replace the classroom in the most effective manner were set up, while educators and students were up-skilled with digital know-how (Pace, Sharma & Aiello, 2020; Besio, 2020).

The data presented in this article focusses solely on the Italian context but forms part of a wider international project¹ that has involved 8 countries (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Bangladesh, India, Austria, Spain and Italy) represented in the Consortium of Inclusive Teacher Education and Development (CITED). This group was founded in 2017 with the aim of creating a community of academics, teacher educators, researchers and advocates whose shared interest is quality inclusive education for all learners. In Italy, ten interviews were conducted in June 2020 of which initial results have already been reported elsewhere (Pace, Sharma & Aiello, 2020). The following paper concentrates on the resources and strategies teachers successfully capitalised on to address the challenges brought along with this pedagogical overhaul to inclusive education. An asset-based approach was adopted to engage teachers in a reflective process that concentrated on what worked, what they were able to do and what they will treasure after three months of hard work and dedication.

Research Methodology

The theoretical framework

An innovative aspect in this study is the asset-based approach adopted in identifying the questions set. Inspired by Antonovsky's intuition that "how one poses the question is crucial to the direction one takes in looking for the answer" (1979, p. 12), our attention shifted from identifying the problems and the barriers to inclusive education in this time of crisis to looking for the salient inner strengths and extrinsic resources teachers capitalised on to overcome the challenges.

This is in line with Antonovsky's core concept of sense of coherence that can be defined as:

«A global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living

1 Paola Aiello from the University of Salerno and Umesh Sharma from Monash University, Australia are the scientific coordinators of the study.

are structured, predictable and explicable; (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement» (Antonovsky, 1987, p. 19).

In this period of intensified uncertainty where even the most mundane actions, like going to school, augmented the risk of contagion, the stimuli deriving from the surrounding environment were far from *structured, predictable, and explicable*. The resources available had to be reconsidered and many of them had to be put aside and replaced with innovative solutions *to meet the demands posed by these stimuli*. An example was the shift from in-person teaching in classrooms to virtual online learning environments which demanded a drastic reassessment of the teaching strategies used. What remained indisputable was that the demand of finding feasible solutions to reach out to all students was *worthy of investment and engagement*.

This leads to a second important reflection in relation to Antonovsky's concept of manageability which refers to one's ability to deal with a situation. He posited that not only are individuals required to be able to identify the resources available, but they also need to be competent in using them effectively to manage life stressors (Mittelmark, Bull, Daniel & Urke, 2017; Pace, 2017). It can be argued that this perspective can also be sustained by agentic theories, such as Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory which views knowledge and action as a mediated process and postulates that "efficacy in dealing with one's environment is not a fixed act or simply a matter of knowing what to do" (Bandura, 2001, p. 122). Therefore, our interest in this study was to understand how teachers used these intrinsic and extrinsic resources to cope with the new challenges as a result of the pandemic with the scope of identifying what is already working and strengthen it to actively build capacity and together find solutions that can be sustainable in the long-term (Pace, Sharma & Aiello, 2020).

From a methodological point of view, this approach lends itself extremely well to inclusive research which embraces emancipatory, participatory and action research (Nind, 2014). Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that research participants in qualitative studies are highly engaged. Nevertheless, by concentrating on both the glass half empty and the part half full (McKnight & Russell, C., 2018) through a reflective process on action (Schön, 1984), the participants embark on a journey which orients them to identify the personal resources and contextual opportunities that are at the basis of quality of life, well-being, and new learning (Garista, 2017; Mezirow, 1990). Hence, the interview becomes a cathartic, empowering experience (Saleebey, 2013; Michael, 2006; Ghaye, 2011) and participants feel more at ease because they do not feel judged or assessed (Michael, 2006). Concomitantly, it allows a thorough analysis of the phenomenon.

Procedure and participants

The ten semi-structured interviews were carried out in the first three weeks of June 2020, right after the lockdown measures were lifted in Italy. Convenience sampling was used to recruit the participants. The main criterion was to have generalist, subject and learning support teachers from all levels of schooling. Out of fifteen teachers who were contacted, ten accepted to be interviewed. Based on their preferences, they were contacted via online communication platforms (Zoom®, Google Meet® and Skype®) and the interviews were video recorded. Two of the participants preferred to be reached by phone and so, the interviews were only audio recorded. The duration of the interviews ranged from eleven to thirty minutes.

In line with the objectives outlined earlier, the participants were asked to describe the main challenges they faced, reflect on a specific case involving a vulnerable student and identify which intrinsic and extrinsic strengths they feel emerged despite the difficulties encountered.

Research questions

The research aimed to answer two main questions:

Physical distancing not only separated teachers from students but also from their colleagues and from their classroom - their comfort zone, their stage, their home.

What did teachers do to reunite and find their space, that sense of "being" and belonging in a virtual environment?

Which were the factors that triggered action and those that supported them throughout?

Data analysis

Data was analysed following Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis process. Hence, after transcription of and familiarisation with the data, the initial codes were generated. Themes were successively searched, reviewed, and named. To facilitate the transcription, organisation, and coding process, MAXQDA2020 (Kuckart & Radiker, 2019) was used.

Results and discussion

Although recruitment was based on convenience sampling, the ten teachers who accepted to be interviewed brought different characteristics to the study. Eight teachers were females, while two were males. Four teachers held additional positions within their schools, thus enriching their narratives with a broader perspective of the whole school organisation. Teaching experience also varied from 3 to 37 years. Eight of the teachers worked in the region of Campania (n=8), whereas two worked in Lazio (n=2). However, the type of territories covered spanned from city centres to small towns and rural areas with different socio-economic traits, representative of Southern-Central areas in Italy. In the vast majority of schools (n=9), students were from middle-class families and their abilities varied. These schools were also frequented by foreign students. One of the teachers described her school as a difficult environment where socio-economic disadvantage characterised most families in the area and drop-out rates were very high. The following table provides some further detail on the ten research participants.

Table 1: Summary of research participants

ID Code	Type of School	Gender	Role(s)
LA	Primary	F	Learning Support Teacher; Inclusion coordinator for pre-primary, primary and lower secondary school
VP	Primary	F	Generalist (teaches all main subjects)
NL	Primary	F	Generalist (teaches all main subjects) with previous experience as Learning Support Teacher
PF	Primary	F	Generalist (teaches all main subjects)
LS	Primary	F	Teaches English to 6–10-year-olds
CL	Lower Sec. [LSS]	M	Learning Support Teacher; Assistant Head for pre-primary, primary and lower secondary school
PL	LSS	M	Maths and Science; Digital animator
TM	LSS	F	Italian, History and <i>Approfondimento</i> ; Class coordinator; previous experience as Learning Support teacher
ML	Higher Sec. [HSS]	F	English in an Arts Lyceum; teaches all years (14–18-year-olds)
SG	HSS	F	<i>Lettere</i> in a Professional Institute (14–17-year-olds)

On average, the interviews lasted 19 minutes. Although the key questions were always the same, as expected, the conversations often took different directions. The interviews proceeded smoothly and there were only a few cases where the participants asked for clarification. In the vast majority of the interviews, a friendly atmosphere was immediately created. The two teachers who were a little hesitant at the beginning and preferred to be interviewed by phone, felt much more relaxed right after the first few questions. One of the two even concluded saying that the interview had been useful for her because she managed to bring the experience to a close. She added that reflecting with hindsight helped her to relive her experience taking into account the positive and negative aspects.

A number of themes emerged from the interviews, some of which were already presented elsewhere (Pace, Sharma & Aiello, 2020). The data reported in this article has been extrapolated using an inductive thematic analysis approach and only the most salient excerpts have been included in this article.

A. Reuniting online: Teachers' actions to find their space, that sense of "being" and belonging in a virtual environment

As reported in literature (Censis, 2020; EC, 2020), the first hurdle to overcome was the digital divide. The participants all commented that besides the issue of hardware and connectivity, the main challenge was upskilling the majority of teachers, in most cases this included themselves, the students, and their parents. Nevertheless, this aspect emerged as the trigger that set everything in motion. Rather than a threat, this became a challenge that teachers proactively took on by joining forces, helping each other, creating bridges, becoming agents of change (Aiello & Sibilio, 2018).

«Let's say it wasn't a personal challenge, but of the whole school because [...] the majority of teachers wasn't prepared, in spite of the fact that my school is a teacher training centre for professional development, but it wasn't prepared to a new way of teaching that was solely digital and keep in mind that when we speak about inclusion, the situation becomes more serious.» (LA, Learning Support Teacher, Inclusion coordinator)

This is a common characteristic when people find themselves in a stressful situation (Antonovsky, 1987). Similar studies have also shown how teachers rose to the challenge and did it their way despite finding themselves ill-prepared to strictly resort to remote teaching and learning for long stretches of time (e.g. Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020).

Teacher collaboration, which had been identified in literature well before COVID-19 as an essential strategy for improving schools in challenging circumstances (Ainscow, Muijs, & West, 2006), was reported to have been better than ever, even between mainstream and learning support teachers. This latter aspect needs to be highlighted since many a times such relationships are characterised by conflicting attitudes and delegation of responsibilities regarding students with special needs (Aiello & Sharma, 2018). The working groups created were composed of teachers who had hardly ever had the chance to speak, due to the sheer size of staff members and dislocated school buildings. There was a lot of solidarity with teachers who lacked digital skills. In summary, what was really brought to the fore in all the interviews was that colleagues were there for each other and their students, selflessly, at all hours.

«I became a reference point for some of my colleagues, who, I'll say this plainly, called me at 6.30 in the morning in a state of panic to ask me "how do I do this? How do I do this?» (ML, Teacher of English, HSS)

«[this period] gave rise to a collaboration that maybe wasn't there before; before [the Pandemic], collaboration was limited to signing papers. We would meet, I say this... you say that... sign: Bye, let's go because we're tired.» (TM, Teacher of Italian and History, LSS)

It is hoped that such levels of collaboration will continue to be sustained after the Pandemic, considering that fostering such rapports has been identified as one of the strategies to respond effectively to the disruptions caused by COVID-19 (Campbell, 2020; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020).

B. Other factors that supported teachers' action throughout the months

The sense of "being" and belonging that was taken for granted in traditional school contexts was restored also thanks to a spirit of collaboration and solidarity that also involved students directly. They created WhatsApp® groups to help each other solve technical problems, were more careful to involve their peers with special needs and vulnerable students in groupwork; behaviours that, according to the teachers, had not been witnessed in class.

«it was like a domino effect in the sense that in classes where there was a group of enthusiastic students, very engaged in the activities, these managed to tag along those who were less

wilful and dispersed.» (PL – teacher of maths and science, digital animator, LSS)

Another interesting aspect which cannot be understated is the teachers' observations regarding the parents' presence and participation, who also created their own networks and joined forces whenever possible. Teachers felt the students and parents' presence and considered this solidarity as a lifeline for them.

«It would have been tragic if it hadn't been for the students... to tell you the truth. For me [lesson time] was a very important moment. If we hadn't had this [technological] support, I don't know how we would have managed because being far away, separated from everything... instead we were able to see them, hear them, listen to them.» (SG, teacher of Italian, HSS)

A close-knit network of relationships was created which went beyond certain limits, even unimaginable at times, like disclosing personal mobile and home numbers. In one particular case, this was considered a way to build trust with a special-needs student with oppositional defiant disorder with whom the teacher had lost all contact. One mother sat by her son for whole mornings because the only device available to access online classes was her mobile phone and the teachers did not mind having this constant presence in their "classroom". Teachers felt the parents' appreciation for their work and dedication, helping to strengthen ties which were previously defined as "love-hate relationship" (NL, primary school teacher). Motivation and trust from school leaders were another important factor identified.

«We were all there together with the pupils, all the teachers, even the Head of school, first and foremost, because even she was of great help.» (TM, Teacher of Italian and History, LSS)

Conclusions: Inclusive principles and values at the heart of the solution

Although the testimonies shared illustrate a picture-perfect reality, throughout the interviews, teachers could not help but comment on the downsides of the whole situation. They struggled with keeping students engaged during the lessons, technical problems, lack or low connectivity, disinterested students – especially in higher secondary schools who found all kinds of excuses to miss out, and other issues already copiously reported in literature. Even the teachers who were more enthused about the idea of online learning and hybrid realities were sceptical. In fact, one concluded saying that he now looks at these forms of schooling with "disenchantment" and that he could confirm that school could not hold only on remote teaching. In addition, it is recognised that a qualitative study using convenience sampling drastically limits the generalisation of findings.

Nevertheless, there have been positive results too and the fact that all the ten teachers had success stories to share, it can be said that there are many others out there. By identifying the underpinning factors and sharing them, stakeholders in the field of education may be able to see a silver lining to grasp and see hope for their own school community. Looking at the glass half full by identifying what works and capitalising resources has proved effective in asset-based community interventions worldwide (McKnight & Russell, C., 2018). Moreover, these are in line with the founding principles of inclusive education (Aiello & Pace, 2020) based on a social rights-based model that views the capability approach (Sen, 2003) as the key for holistic well-being.

These stories, as the ones collected in the wider international study, provide further evidence that the values of collaboration, solidarity and equity, underpinning the inclusive paradigm are at the heart of the solution. Naturally, as stated in international policy agendas (UNESCO & MGIEP, 2019), digital literacy is key "to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (World Bank, 2015). This cannot be overstated when considering we are now in the 21st century and a virus, invisible to the naked eye, forced us all to stop, think, and realise that we cannot definitely imagine returning to previous modes of instruction. The future of teaching and learning is in hybrid environments and the inclusive paradigm has not only withstood the winds of change, it stands taller than ever before.

«I want to conclude by saying and I wish it were shared - I have no problem with that - that a positive group has been created throughout and within the whole organisation. We were all pushed, let's say, to turn our school into a digital school in a very short time [...]. It was very positive because for the first time we came together [although physically distant] and above all we had a different spirit. So, with a common goal.» (LA, Learning Support Teacher, Inclusion Coordinator)

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