

## **THE COVID-19 EMERGENCY AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

### **L'EMERGENZA COVID-19 COME OPPORTUNITÀ PER UNA ISTRUZIONE ACCESSIBILE E INCLUSIVA**

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#### **Abstract**

The Covid-19 health emergency has radically changed many aspects of our daily life and has led to epochal changes throughout Europe and in general throughout the world, impacting every sector and aspect of society and affecting every citizen.

It is therefore necessary to identify a new paradigm of reference other than the inclusive processes implemented in the schools. The pandemic has highlighted critical aspects but also opportunities to be seized in order to promote the development of an education system that is resilient and able to adapt to the ongoing transformations, in order to guarantee the educational success of each and everyone.

This contribution intends to report on how it is possible to intervene with educational strategies and methodologies also through the support of information and communication technologies, regarding the difficulties that have emerged especially in relation to people with special educational needs.

L'emergenza sanitaria Covid-19 ha modificato in modo radicale molti aspetti della nostra vita quotidiana e ha condotto a dei cambiamenti epocali in tutta Europa ed in generale in tutto il mondo, investendo ogni settore e aspetto della società ed interessando ogni cittadino.

Si rende necessario, pertanto, individuare un nuovo paradigma di riferimento rispetto ai processi inclusivi attuati nella scuola. La pandemia ha messo in luce aspetti di criticità ma anche delle opportunità da cogliere al fine di promuovere lo sviluppo di un sistema di istruzione che sia resiliente e in grado di adattarsi alle trasformazioni in atto, al fine di garantire il successo formativo di tutti e di ciascuno.

Nel presente contributo si intende riferire su come sia possibile intervenire con strategie e metodologie educative anche attraverso il supporto delle Tecnologie dell'informazione e della comunicazione, riguardo le difficoltà emerse soprattutto in relazione alle persone con bisogni educativi speciali.

#### **Keywords**

Key-words Inclusion, health emergency, information and communication technologies, barriers, disability.

Inclusione, emergenza sanitaria, Tecnologie dell'informazione e della comunicazione, barriere, disabilità.

## Introduction

The Covid-19 health emergency has radically changed many aspects of our daily life and has led to epochal changes throughout Europe and in general throughout the world, impacting every sector and aspect of society and affecting every citizen.

The pandemic has forced the adoption of highly restrictive measures to try to block its expansion by closing all types of activities, including the closure of all educational institutions. UNESCO estimates that schooling has been disrupted for around 70% of students worldwide<sup>1</sup>. How has all this affected our lives but above all those of the most fragile people, with disabilities or with special educational needs<sup>2</sup>, who have long struggled to be part of an open and inclusive society?

Despite important achievements in terms of inclusion, today we find ourselves having to face new difficulties that have emerged in this delicate historical moment that has highlighted latent criticalities in our society. The GEM 2020 Report<sup>3</sup> published by UNESCO on June 23rd 2020 addresses, among other things, that one of the biggest challenges to inclusion lies in the fact that there is no shared definition of inclusive education or policies and programs to support the concept of inclusion. In many cases they do not even exist. In some contexts, there are still forms of prejudice towards individuals or groups that can lead to their exclusion from traditional education paths. An element to keep in mind is that inclusive education is not just about supporting people with disabilities as the barriers they encounter, in most cases, are the same as those facing those who, for example, speak a minority language, or who are part of a religious minority. The term inclusion should therefore be understood as broadly as possible; the Report notes that one third of the countries in the world do not have a definition of inclusion in their education system and of those that have one, only 57% cover more marginalized groups in their definition.

The global health emergency has inevitably affected those fragile sections of the population and people with disabilities, in particular, have seen suddenly reduce what they have struggled with for a long time. Their autonomy, for instance, has been reduced with a consequent increase in degree of dependence and need for personal support. They have also suffered and had to face a sudden decrease in their relationships and their participation in community life.

Educational institutions have tried not to stop; teachers, school managers and different social and educational actors have tried from the beginning to overcome social distancing and to give continuity to education, development and learning activities through new technological and educational methodologies and through distance learning.

Certainly, it cannot be hidden that the school found itself at the forefront of this crisis, which was sometimes unprepared in terms of distance learning, also in consideration of the tight deadlines in which teachers had to rethink their way of teaching.

### 1. A dual vulnerability

In this delicate period, ICT (Information, Communication and Education Technologies), which before the lockdown were considered a simple teaching support tool, have become fundamental for communicating with families and students and have represented the only way to ensure continuity of education. The OECD, in a recent survey, highlighted how in many cases the attempts for teachers to reach students were complicated also in consideration of their housing and economic conditions. Furthermore, from the same research, it emerges that the new systems for distance learning have proved, in many cases, not completely adequate for

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1 UNESCO, *Adverse consequences of school closures*, <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/consequences> 31/08/2020.

2 OECD, *Students with disabilities, learning difficulties and disadvantages: statistics and indicators*, Paris 2005, p.14

3 UNESCO, 2020 GEM Report - Inclusion and education

students with particular needs, who if not constantly followed have found themselves excluded from the possibility of education or simply from the possibility of being able to continue to relate to teachers and classmates, furthermore these difficulties have led to new forms of social exclusion.

Most of them, according to data that emerged from a survey by the National Coordination for Families with Disabilities, once again found themselves faced with many barriers such as the difficulty in accessing different information or being able to receive domestic assistance due to the interruption of essential services<sup>4</sup>. The current situation has revealed perhaps unexpected attitudes towards disability and therefore requires evaluations and reflections on the effective implementation of inclusive processes, at every level of society. In fact, people with disabilities represent one of those most vulnerable categories.

The main barriers that have a greater weight during the Covid 19 epidemic may include:

Environmental barriers: a social environment that is still not very inclusive, which continues to label and exclude and where information is often not developed and shared adequately with people with a certain cognitive or communicative disability.

Institutional barriers: they are often reflected in the lack of adequate protocols to take care of people with disabilities, who despite years of struggles for the affirmation and recognition of fundamental rights that affirm that everyone must be recognized with equal dignity, find themselves still having to overcome forms of cultural exclusivism, architectural barriers, and existential inequalities. During the period of the lockdown, for example, many health centers turned out to be inaccessible to people with physical disabilities and not adequate to people with cognitive and communication disabilities.

Attitudinal type barriers: linked to prejudices, stigmatization and discrimination that still continue to be present towards people with disabilities with the belief that they cannot actively contribute to society by making their own decisions independently.

The pandemic and disability represent a double fragility that requires commitment and adequate resources to be overcome. The health emergency has unfortunately amplified: inequalities; inadequacies of the welfare system; discrimination and social injustices regarding respect for educational rights; the psychological effects of the lockdown with the worsening of the marginalization processes of the socially weaker groups.

The drastic restriction and interruption of habitual activities in previous ways of life, of interpersonal exchanges and more generally of freedom, can lead to feelings of loss, loneliness, anguish and frustration. For many of these students the mere interruption of daily routines or the removal from the places normally frequented, as evidenced by a survey carried out by Telefono Azzurro and Doxa<sup>5</sup>, causes confusion and suffering. Moreover, the risks associated with these new emotional experiences during and after the lockdown period can lead to the development of psychological states of depression and problematic behavioral reactions.

The current emergency context is proving to be unique in some respects, starting with the preventive measures put in place, one of which is quarantine and consequent isolation. Each person can certainly react to all this in his own way, trying to manage the discomfort with the strategies he usually uses, but inevitably the closing news has spread in most cases a sense of helplessness, discomfort and disorientation.

It is therefore important to promptly identify those most at risk of developing significant discomfort due to a lack of adaptation. In this regard, a series of online services and toll-free numbers have been created which can be accessed to seek support and discussion. In addition, it is also essential to provide information about stress and emotion management strategies.

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4 CONFAD - Coordinamento nazionale famiglie con disabilità, *Rilevazione condizioni di vita dei caregiver familiari in fase 1 covid-19*, 2020.

5 Telefono Azzurro e Doxa, *Abitudini e scuola ai tempi del Covid-19*, <https://azzurro.it/press/coronavirus-lindagine-telefono-azzurro-e-doxa/> 31/08/2020.

## 2. Intervention strategies to cope with the emergency

Among the different strategies to be implemented to deal with the changes and new needs related to the pandemic, it can be useful to create a new daily routine based on the new needs. In fact, one of the best ways to facilitate adaptation to the changes imposed by the Covid-19 emergency is to gradually replace the previous routine with a new routine that includes planning activities throughout the day. In addition, it may be necessary to try to regulate one's thoughts and emotions and to stay connected with one's family and friends. All this is not so easy to realize, mainly for those people in need of help.

In this regard, it is necessary to work on three learning and relationship contexts, namely school, classmates, and family.

In the school context, we should highlight the role of the support teacher as mediator, which allowed to maintain the interaction at a distance with the students with disabilities, with classmates and curricular teachers, through targeted didactic strategies also with the simplification of teaching materials, suggestions, feedback, indications on the activities to do at home. Where it is not possible to interact directly with the student with disabilities, the interaction takes place with the family, with whom the methods of distance learning are agreed. The support teacher prepares the material and agrees with the family the methods of use. As for online teaching for students with disabilities, the reference point remains the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), which must be continuously monitored for any updates.

The classmates can also help in learning, but above all they are fundamental because they allow to maintain relationships, they give their presence and closeness. The support teacher together with families can facilitate and encourage the creation and maintenance of this small network of relational contacts.

Families play a crucial role even if they often find themselves having to face the difficulties and changes that emerged in this period in complete solitude, risking being excessively overloaded. Being a parent at the time of Covid-19 is certainly not simple, among the conditions that characterize a functional family, a fundamental element is the ability to guarantee solidity and continuity of interpersonal relationships, effectively coping with changes and crises: in the face of a destabilizing event such as the one linked to the Covid-19 emergency, and the inevitable moment of disorientation that follows, families should be able to react with the search for solutions and then reach a new organizational balance, but to do this it is also necessary to have the right institutional support from the society.

Even in the era of Covid 19 it is therefore necessary to understand the importance of keeping an inclusive cultural paradigm active, at every level of society, which places the need to build positive relationships for everyone, promoting solidarity and cooperation of people, with or without disabilities, through continuous support even in those most difficult moments that require the overcoming of new barriers.

One of the most important objectives of an inclusive educational intervention is to guarantee the personal and social growth of all, even of a more fragile person, through the removal of every possible form of social exclusion, which could prevent its full realization. This goal must continue to be carried on, even now, despite the difficulties and general disorientation.

Young boys, girls, children with already initial difficulties have had to face a sudden relational closure and a detachment from socialization environments that are very important to them. They have also absorbed anxious experiences of fear and anguish and in many cases their difficulties have been accentuated by the increase in feelings of inadequacy, social inequalities and the hardships of the digital divide<sup>6</sup>. Young boys, girls, children with already initial difficulties have had to face a sudden relational closure and a detachment from socialization environments that are very important to them. They have also absorbed anxious experiences of fear and anguish and in many cases their difficulties have been accentuated by the increase in feelings of

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6 P.C. Rivoltella, *Le virtù del digitale. Per un'etica dei media*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2015.

inadequacy, social inequalities and the hardships of the digital divide. The digital divide that we have been trying to tackle for some time is that relating to both infrastructure deficiencies and inadequate user skills. As for the first aspect, in this moment of sudden and forced digitization, it is mainly students, especially the most fragile ones, who have to deal with the weight of the problems inherent to Internet access. Furthermore, according to ISTAT data, in Italy still 25% of households do not have full access to Internet services, with a large gap between Northern and Southern Italy.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, as highlighted by the new Istat Report on school inclusion in reference to the school year 2019/2020, the activation of Distance Learning (DAD), made mandatory starting from 9 April 2020 to deal with the health emergency, represented an obstacle to the continuation of inclusion paths, significantly reducing the participation of students with disabilities. In the school year 2019/2020, students with disabilities who attended Italian schools were almost 300 thousand (equal to 3.5% of enrolled students), over 13 thousand more than the previous year, with a percentage increase, now constant over the years, by 6%. However, with distance learning, the levels of participation decreased significantly: between April and June 2020, over 23% of students with disabilities (about 70 thousand) did not take part in lessons, a share that is growing in the southern regions where it stands at 29%. The reasons that have made it difficult for students with disabilities to participate in distance learning are different; among the most frequent are the severity of the disease (27%), the lack of collaboration of family members (20%) and socio-economic distress (17%). For a less consistent but not negligible share of children, the reason for the exclusion is due to the difficulty in adapting the Educational Plan for Inclusion (EPI) to distance learning (6%), the lack of technological tools (6%) and, for a residual part, the lack of specific teaching aids (3%).<sup>8</sup>

In this context, it appears necessary to continue to guarantee them the opportunity to socialize, experiment and have meaningful experiences in serene environments that know how to welcome their emotions, to be accompanied to find answers to the great questions of existence.

## Conclusions

In the perspective of inclusive education, the school plays a social role, especially where the family and the community context live in a situation of serious social hardship caused by multiple factors. This role of the school implies the development of further skills of educational figures capable of contributing to the construction of a welcoming and inclusive environment.

In order to be inclusive, schools must know how to respond to the right to equality and that of diversity, they must know how to equip themselves to eliminate the barriers to learning connected with the framework of individual diversity through pedagogical and didactic models capable of respecting the styles and conditions of learning that characterize each person. Responding to the right to diversity means conceiving the school as an educational environment at least in part flexible and therefore available to enhance motivations, resources, cultural perspectives connected with the specificities of individuals and different social groups through a didactic approach based on personalization.

Even in this particular historical moment of extreme difficulty, we must always remember the importance of connecting, of mutual help for overcoming every barrier and for bringing out the mutual differences, which must be observed as values and resources that enrich each other.

Today more than ever it is essential to remember the importance of promoting inclusive educational practices to accelerate quality social transformations and the construction of inclusive, equitable and sustainable, democratic societies capable of giving value to a participatory citizenship by all. In this delicate period, what we need most is positive feedback and stimuli to be able, together, to overcome this period of profound malaise and disorientation, preventing risks and establishing new balances and values that bind us all to a common human evolutionary history.

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7 <https://www.istat.it/1/09/2020>

8 L'inclusione scolastica degli alunni con disabilità - a.s. 2019-2020 (istat.it) 10/12/2020.

Another element of reflection concerns the effects of the Covid-19 crisis which are particularly worrying on learning, as highlighted in a recent article in *The Economist*<sup>9</sup>. This is especially true at the primary school level as basic skills form the foundation for a whole school career and are important predictors of opportunities in the life project.

These skills are the easiest to lose when leaving school, as shown by studies on the loss of reading skills during the holidays, and the hardest to catch up once school starts up again.

Several studies show how the impact on the school career of the interruption of the learning process in the classroom can significantly affect the future career of students. The alarm is also emphasized by a survey by the Northwest Evaluation Association, reported by Cnbc, according to which primary school children tend to lose 20% of their reading and writing skills if subjected to months of forced leave.<sup>10</sup>

It is therefore necessary on the part of the school and teachers to prepare remedial activities that can somehow fill the learning gaps that have inevitably formed and prevent them from further aggravating.

Something that could certainly help in recovery activities is short teaching for small groups, which can be easily carried out also in compliance with the spacing requirements foreseen in the pandemic phase.

But the educational systems, even in this situation, have the opportunity to play a crucial role as they can help to connect people, facilitating dialogue and stimulating critical reflection. In this regard, through lines of action in support of students, communities and families, such systems can and must undertake to promote critical education by accompanying learners to understand their surroundings and to overcome any form of difficulty.

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<sup>9</sup> The Economist, *School closures in poor countries could be devastating*. Jul 18th2020 edition.

<sup>10</sup> NEWA, *Projecting the potential impacts of COVID-19 school closures on academic achievement* - Redazione Unesco: *La chiusura delle scuole ha conseguenze sull'educazione di 1.6 miliardi di student*, “Scuola24”, 12/06/2020.

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