

## **THE EDUCATIONAL ALLIANCE BETWEEN SCHOOL AND FAMILIES IN THE DADA MODEL (DIDACTICS FOR LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS): A CASE STUDY**

### **L'ALLEANZA EDUCATIVA TRA SCUOLA E FAMIGLIE NEL MODELLO DADA (DIDATTICHE PER AMBIENTI DI APPRENDIMENTO): UNO STUDIO DI CASO**

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#### **Abstract**

The contribution presents a case study conducted, between 2019 and 2021, in a lower secondary school in Rome that adopted the DADA model (Didactics for Learning Environments) from the 2016-2017 school year and that from the year 2019-2020, saw the adoption of the iPad as an everyday digital learning device. The DADA model is presented as a pedagogical-didactic and organizational innovation: it is structured around the classroom-learning environment, which is assigned to one or two teachers of the same school subject and who thus have the possibility to furnish the environment according to the needs of their subject matter, often in collaboration with students; who move from one classroom to another according to their daily school schedule. The DADA stands out from other pedagogical innovations precisely for its “choral” approach that involves students, teachers, school staff, parents and the local territory. This study analyzes the relationships that the school has established with the family, investigating the point of view of teachers through a focus group and nine individual interviews conducted online with teachers representing the school subjects of the lower secondary school and the point of parental view investigated via a questionnaire administered online. The results show that the trust between the two “educational agencies” is a determining factor in establishing positive relationships for the academic success of students.

Il contributo presenta uno studio di caso condotto, tra il 2019 e il 2021, in una scuola secondaria di primo grado di Roma che ha adottato il modello DADA (Didattiche per Ambienti Di Apprendimento) dall’anno scolastico 2016-2017 e che dall’anno 2019-2020, ha visto l’adozione dell’iPad come dispositivo didattico digitale quotidiano. Il modello DADA si presenta come una innovazione pedagogico-didattica e organizzativa: si struttura intorno all’aula-ambiente di apprendimento, che viene assegnata a uno o due insegnanti della stessa materia scolastica e che hanno così la possibilità di arredare l’ambiente in base alle necessità della loro materia di insegnamento, spesso in collaborazione con gli studenti; i quali si spostano da un’aula all’altra in base al proprio orario scolastico giornaliero. Il DADA si distingue da altre innovazioni pedagogiche proprio per la sua impostazione “corale” che coinvolge studenti, insegnanti, personale scolastico, genitori e territorio locale. Nel presente studio si analizzano le relazioni che la scuola ha instaurato con la famiglia, indagando il punto di vista degli insegnanti tramite un focus group e nove interviste individuali condotte online con i docenti rappresentanti le materie scolastiche della scuola secondaria di primo grado e il punto di vista dei genitori indagato tramite un questionario somministrato online. Dai risultati emerge come la fiducia tra le due “agenzie educative” sia un elemento determinante per instaurare relazioni positive per il successo scolastico degli studenti.

**Keywords:** DADA model, school-families educational alliance, case study, innovative didactics

**Parole chiave:** Modello DADA, alleanza educativa scuola-famiglie, studio di caso, didattica innovativa

## **Introduction**

The paper presents a case study conducted, between 2019 and 2021, in a lower secondary school in Rome and which was chosen as an “emblematic” case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) for having introduced two innovations: the first concerns the adoption of the DADA model (Didactics for Learning Environments) from the 2016-2017 school year and, the second, concerns the implementation of a digital experimentation which, from the 2019-2020 school year, saw the adoption of the iPad as a digital teaching device for all the first classes of the Institute and, from the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, also for the second and third classes (De Santis, Germani & Di Donato, 2021). The context of the case study is marked by the pandemic event that forced about 1.5 billion students of all ages, from every country in the world, to continue “home schooling”, given that the first and long lockdown has led to the closure of schools and universities, as well as many other educational and working contexts (UNICEF, 2020). Several studies (Bond, 2020; Lucisano, 2020; O’Brien et al., 2020; Schleicher, 2020) have investigated the pandemic period from different angles, trying to grasp the changes that have occurred during distance learning, both in terms of didactic approaches, both for what concerned the relational sphere, in particular between students, families and teachers. This research aims to reflect precisely on the relationships between school and families, regarding the sharing of the start of the educational innovations introduced by the school participating in the study.

## **1. The DADA model and the involvement of families**

The DADA model, whose acronym indicates Didactics for Learning Environments (<https://www.scuolodada.it/>) was born in 2014, on the initiative of two school managers: Ottavio Fattorini and Lidia Cangemi; the first, director of the Labriola scientific high school and the second, director of the Kennedy scientific high school, both schools in Rome (Cangemi & Fattorini, 2015). The DADA model presents itself as a radical pedagogical-didactic and organizational innovation: it is structured around the classroom-learning environment, a classroom that is assigned to one or two teachers of the same school subject and thus have the possibility of furnishing the environment according to the needs of their subject, often in collaboration with students; who move from one classroom to another according to their daily school schedule. The movement of students, between classrooms-learning environments, constitutes a novelty for the Italian school system, while in other schools, such as the American or Swedish one, the movement of students is a consolidated practice. The model is designed to favor “learning-teaching” processes (Lucisano, Salerni & Sposetti, 2013, p.20), in which students are placed as active protagonists of the learning processes. “Moving students from one classroom-learning environment to another is functional to reactivate their concentration and cognitive abilities. [...]In addition, movement has been shown to help students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD): physical activity stimulates the brain’s supply of dopamine and norepinephrine, which are effective in managing ADHD, because they affect the attentional system. (Medina et al., 2010). Movement also influences mood, predisposes to a positive attitude with effective implications for learning” (De Santis, 2022, p. 155). In the same year in which the DADA model was launched by the two founding schools, the collaboration with the Department of Psychology of Development and Socialization Processes of the Sapienza University of Rome also began, which takes care of the monitoring study of the schools that have launched the model (Asquini, Benvenuto & Cesareni, 2017, 2019; Bordini, Bortolotti & Cecalupo, 2017) and who, in the perspective of Teachers Professional Development Research approach (*Ricerca-Formazione*;

Asquini, 2018), have tried to share the “sustainability of change” with the University researchers (Asquini & Dodman, 2018) due to the implementation of the DADA. What makes the innovation proposed by the DADA model unique is its “choral” approach (Fattorini, 2022, p.72), i.e., the need to involve the educational community as a whole: students, teachers, managers, school staff, parents and local territory; in that, the DADA is not chosen and implemented by some class, but is implemented in the entire school, as a collective choice. Parents of students of DADA schools share the implementation of the model with the school, taking part in the process of sharing educational responsibility. On the basis of the ecological model proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), the school and the family constitute “microsystems” characterized by a set of relationships, roles and social activities that influence the life of every child; systems that interact with each other (“mesosystem”) creating the context in which the individual actively experiences. Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlights that the stronger the interactions and connections between family and school, the more it is possible to create a social context that favors the child's well-being and consequently his academic success. “Today, there is a crisis in school-family participation not only at the Italian level but also in many other countries of the Western world. Parents seem to be interested and intervene only with regard to the results of the learning process of their children, teachers continue to complain of widespread neglect and failure of families in the educational process of their children or of their presence in school not in a collaborative form but rather pervasive, controversial and inquisitive towards them. The laws and delegated decrees issued from the 1970s to today seem to try to heal this situation” (Guerrini, 2018, p.306). The Italian legislation that followed the delegated decrees, if not accompanied by a conscious willingness to participate in the construction of an educational responsibility shared between schools and families, alone is not enough. It is necessary that the “educational alliance” between families and school is built over time and is based on “quality relationships” (Capperucci, Ciucci & Baroncelli, 2018), recognizing each interlocutor their role and skills, in order to promote student welfare. Several studies (Addi-Racah, Dusi & Seeberger, 2021; Epstein, 2010; Germani & De Santis, 2022) have investigated the multidimensional construct of “parental involvement”, although difficult to delineate in sharing a meaning unique, it lays the groundwork for reflecting on the influence of parents in the participation of their children's school life. The DADA was born as a choral model that also involves families in its implementation. Below we will see how this involvement was carried out in the school chosen as a “case” of the research.

## **2. Methodology**

The research presented emerges from the case study carried out during the author's doctoral course and which, in turn, is part of the monitoring study of the DADA schools, conducted by Sapienza University of Rome (Asquini, G., Benvenuto, G. & Cesareni, 2017, 2019). The monitoring study initiated three studies, resulting in as many doctoral theses, which investigated aspects of the DADA model: a first study investigated the perception of teachers following the introduction of the DADA model (Cecalupo, 2021); a second study analyzed the innovative governance of the DADA model, involving school principals (Fattorini, 2022); finally, the third investigated in depth, through the case study as proposed by Merriam (1988), a school reality that adopted DADA and to which a digital experimentation was added, using the iPad as a didactic tool (De Santis, 2022). In the context of the third study, the relationship between school and families was analyzed, as the peculiarity of DADA is its “choral” aspect. The questions that drive this research aim to understand what kind of relationships have been established with families following the pedagogical-didactic innovations introduced by the school. The research presented has an explorative-descriptive character.

### **2.1 Participants, methods and ethical dimension of the study**

The school chosen for the case study is a lower secondary school, located on the outskirts of Rome which, from 2016-2017, has adopted the DADA model and from 2019-2020 has integrated the DADA

with a digital experimentation, adopting the iPad for the first four classes of the Institute. The iPad was chosen by the school because it guaranteed, in addition to effective performances from an educational point of view, a better management of student privacy. The digital experimentation, launched in September 2019, was configured as a sort of “precursor model” when the pandemic occurred which, from March 2020, forced teachers and students to communicate and continue their didactic-educational relationships exclusively online. The school promptly took action so that each student of the Institute had their own device. Given the pandemic context, the research also took place mainly online and in December 2020 an online focus group was carried out with the five referring teachers of DADA (Physical Education, Literature, Mathematics and Science, Music and Special ed teacher). The purpose of the focus group was to investigate, through the voice of the teachers, the changes that have occurred as a result of the innovations introduced and, then, to identify colleagues from other school subjects taught in the lower secondary school (Art and image, English, Religion and Technology) to participate in individual interviews. The individual interviews, with the nine teachers, were conducted between January and February 2021. The focus group, like the interviews, presented semi-structured tracks (Semeraro, 2011). At the same time, an online questionnaire for parents was proposed, which presented a prevalence of multiple choice questions, built on the model of the parents questionnaire developed by the OECD-PISA international survey (OECD, 2014) to detect school-family relationships, and integrated with specific questions to investigate parents' perception on the use of the digital device (Di Donato, 2020). A questionnaire was also provided for students on the same aspects, but it was not possible to administer it due to the bureaucratic tasks to which the school had to respond in a pandemic context and which therefore could not act as an intermediary between researchers and students. For the parents questionnaire, the data collected from the try-out and which saw the participation of 19 of them are presented, as it was disseminated among families in May 2021 and close to the summer closure of the school it was difficult to reach more participants. These elements also make us reflect on the ethical dimension that inevitably must take shape in the case study and which brings respect for the person as such to the fore. Understanding the totally new difficulties caused by the pandemic, of teachers and head teachers becomes a “posture” for researchers, but not only in relation to the health emergency, but as an “ethical research posture” in general; or in the words of Mortari, Valbusa and Ubbiali (2020), it can be said that researchers must give themselves “directionality”: “have respect for the participants; feel responsible in their actions; offer good experiences; knowing how to embody a self-giving tension, giving and giving oneself time to build positive relationships. These directionalities are actualized when researchers embody precise ways of being sensibly relational in research: being receptive; be responsive; pay attention; be non-intrusive; take care of the emotional climate; cultivate a form of inner stillness, which translates into being calm and relaxed; have confidence” (p.57). The qualitative data that emerged from the focus group and from the interviews conducted with the teachers and which were the result of a verbatim transcription, as audio-recorded with the consent of the participants, are presented below. Each transcript was shared with the interviewee for the member check (Merriam, 1988). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (or IPA) was chosen to conduct the analytical process, as it offers the possibility to thoroughly investigate the interviewees' experience, highlighting elements of convergence and complementarity in the data (Larkin, Eatough & Osborn, 2011). The data that emerged from the parents questionnaire is flanked which, given the number of respondents, are proposed as food for thought.

### **3. Data analysis**

The analysis of the focus group and the interviews led to the identification of emerging themes (the essence of what the interviewee says) and superordinate themes (they collect emerging themes based on the topic). We used the support of the software, for the analysis of qualitative data, MAXQDA (Oliveira et al., 2016). In relation to the research questions expressed above, in MAXQDA, the

superordinate theme School-family relations has been codified. In Figure 1, we read the emerging themes coded and chosen through the software's MAXMaps function.

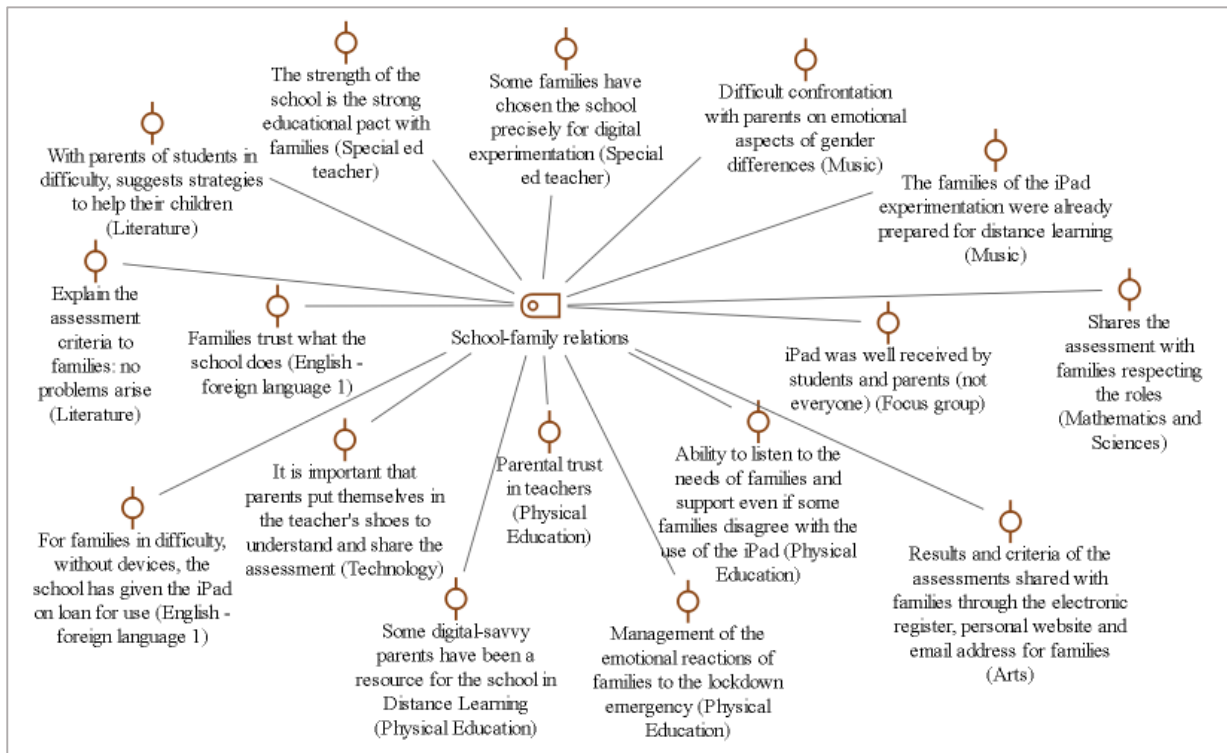


Figure 1 - Emerging themes of the superordinate theme School-family relations.

On the basis of the peculiarities of the IPA methodology, the transcript of the focus group was also codified and inserted among the documents of the interviews, as it was interpreted as a “choral” voice of the referring teachers of the DADA, who expressed a general agreement. As shown in Figure 1, the teachers shared different aspects of the students' school life with their families, from the comparison on the digital device, to the sharing of the students' evaluation criteria, to the understanding of the emotional reactions of families due to the moment of difficulty caused. from the pandemic. Both the English teacher (foreign language 1) and the Physical Education teacher stressed that families have confidence in what the school does and offers; even if some families were not particularly in favor of the introduction of the iPad as a teaching and daily tool, while others chose school for digital experimentation and still others made available their digital skills to make their contribution to experimentation. Given the small number of respondents to the parents questionnaire (19), the frequency of responses given to some items of the questionnaire considered representative for reflection on the issues emerging from the qualitative data set out above is presented below. Of the parents who responded to the questionnaire, 63.2% are of Italian nationality; 89.5% is made up of mothers; 42.1% of respondents have a lower secondary school diploma, 31.6% have a first degree secondary school diploma, 21.1% have a three-year degree and 5.3% have obtained a master's and / or single-cycle degree; 36.8% act as parents' class representative and 5.3% are parents' representatives on the school board. Among the items in the parents questionnaire that investigated school-family relationships, four were chosen as explanatory and one indicative of the parents' point of view regarding the use of the digital device. Table 1 shows the response rate for the items selected and which presented response possibilities on a 4-step Likert scale.



Questions / Answers	Disagree at all	Disagree	Quite agree	Very much agree	% Row total
I trust my child's teachers			31,6%	68,4%	100%
I am satisfied with the communication between the school and the families		5,3%	57,9%	36,8%	100%
I think parental participation in school is important for their children's academic success	5,3%	5,3%	42,1%	47,3%	100%
The school supports parents when they need help for their children			42,1%	57,9%	100%
The use of a digital device in the classroom can help my child to learn better in any school subject		5,3%	36,8%	57,9%	100%

*Table 1 - Items selected from the parents questionnaire on the topic of school-family relationships, frequency of responses as a percentage.*

### Concluding discussions and reflections

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the number of respondents to the questionnaire prepared for parents does not allow for the elaboration of more complex statistical models and this may constitute a limitation of the study, as it is not possible to make statistical generalizations; however, it is possible to reflect on the binding themes that characterize the relationships between school and families in the context of the case study presented. From the analysis of the individual interviews it is clear how the voice of the teachers brings a perception of mutual trust between teachers and parents; the teachers declare that the families have confidence in their work and that, sharing the evaluation criteria with the families, communication and relational problems do not arise. The theme of student evaluation is certainly a central element of sharing and communication between the two “main educational agencies of contemporary society” (Capperucci, 2018, p.251) and the support of teachers for families of students with difficulties is of fundamental importance for sharing improvement strategies that can create positive learning situations for students. For their part, the parents responding to the questionnaire confirm that they trust their children's teachers (table 1) and that they are satisfied with the communication with the school. Parents responding to the questionnaire feel supported by the school when they need help for their children and their participation in school life makes them feel part of the students' academic success. The use of the digital device as a daily teaching tool, which was the didactic innovation introduced to implement the DADA model, has found a strictly favorable reception by families, who have perceived the iPad as a support in learning. of children for each school subject. Therefore, these elements of convergence between the points of view of teachers and

parents make us reflect on the quality of the educational alliance. The mutual trust between the two “educational agencies” is a founding element of the interrelation, in order to create a common ground for sharing strategies and "best practices" that will favor the academic success of the students, who are always the protagonists of learning processes, not only from a didactic point of view, but also from a relational point of view. Future research perspectives look towards the possibility of extending the investigation of the relationship between school and families in a broader context and involving larger samples of teachers and parents; probably, it could be interesting to build two samples of participants: one from the DADA model and the other from schools with purely traditional teaching approaches. Furthermore, it would be desirable to add the students' point of view on the issue of relations between school and families, given that they are the main protagonists.

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