Bogdan Stańkowski
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2803-3085
Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow, Poland
e-mail: bogdan.stankowski@ignatianum.edu.pl

Italian Schools in the Times of COVID-19: Implications for Students at the Personal and Didactic Levels

Abstract

The author takes up the problem of education in Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The objective of this article is to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the progress of school and the lives of children and adolescents. To pursue this cognitive objective, the author conducted an analysis of the relevant literature published between February 2020 and January 2021, mainly in Italian. The author also formulated three research questions to help in the investigation of the above problem. The article was written with the help of the analytical method and takes into consideration the literature on the subject dedicated to children and adolescents. The analysis of the literature allowed the author to formulate final conclusions, which were developed in close correlation with the adopted research questions.

*Keywords***:** Italian school, COVID-19, distance learning, educational poverty, children's and adolescents' psychological health

Introduction

The problem of education during the COVID-19 pandemic is current and little explored; it has been at the center of pedagogical reflection only for a few months. The COVID-19 global emergency has changed the lives of children and young people, not only in Italy. The new reality of education has sensitized teachers and researchers to dedicate more space to dialogue and the exchange of experiences in order to face this crisis together (Scholas, 2020). According to some scientists, children and adolescents will inherit all the consequences of the pandemic and are already forming a generation called in an editorial in *The Lancet* "Generation C," that is, the one that will suffer the effects and deprivations caused by COVID-19 (Editorial, 2020).

The words most heard in this period of crisis are creativity, empathy, hope, collaborative learning, flexibility, responsibility, and solidarity. Health needs have determined the planning of new educational paths in schools and the use of functional environments and common spaces. Schools have been forced to employ a new didactic configuration. The goal is to experiment with new ways of organizing educational activities online, creating listening situations and dialogue with pupils (group and cooperative activities), diversifying work and teaching material, and rethinking spaces and times to collaborate with families.

The online lessons have unmasked the gap in technological tools necessary for both teachers and children in families, and the difficulties regarding weak or non-existent Internet connections. In the first weeks of restrictions in Italy, it was possible to observe a gradual adaptation to new needs and new behaviors by both teachers and, above all, by students in Italian schools. Distance learning has forced teachers to apply different degrees of interconnection between school and family: from assigning tasks via messengers and the electronic register, through asking parents to help their children by explaining the attached lessons, to sending recorded video messages and conducting video lessons interactively.

Although in Italy there are several universities that have prepared data collection measures in the form of online surveys in order to generally

analyze the risks to the psychological well-being of individuals in quarantine (e.g., La Sapienza di Roma, Università Cattolica di Milano, and Sigmund Freud University of Milan) (Burioni, 2020), it must be admitted that so far there has been a niche in the scientific field that could explore the impact of COVID-19 on school practice. Currently, there are still few university-level studies to explore the impact of quarantine on the behavior of children and adolescents (Wang et al., 2020).

Therefore, the objective of this article is to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the progress of school and on the lives of children and adolescents. To pursue this cognitive objective, the author conducted an analysis of the relevant literature published between February 2020 and January 2021, mainly in Italian. The author also formulated three research questions to help investigate this research problem. They are as follows:

To what extent can the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that schools have been closed affect teaching?

To what extent can the fact that schools have been closed affect the educational poverty/early school-leaving of pupils?

What effects caused by COVID-19, and by children and adolescents consequently staying at home, can be seen on their psychological health?

The article is written with the help of the analytical method and takes into consideration the literature on the subject dedicated to children and adolescents.

1. Distance Learning as a Consequence of COVID-19 in School Life

From the analysis of the literature on the subject, we see that the Italian education system previously had little experience with online teaching, especially when compared with Anglo-Saxon countries. However, some authors have noted that starting from the 1990s, and then since 2000, e-learning practices have acquired a greater importance. Currently, it is noted that online teaching still does not appear to be a "normal" practice for several teachers compared to other practices and we can observe

an emerging and continuous learning process characterized by improvisation and formability (Gherardi, 2016, pp. 680–698). It is right to say that based on some available scientific evidence, the total closure of schools does not appear to be an effective measure to slow the contagion of the virus in epidemics. According to Viner et al. (2020, pp. 397–404), closing schools has a minimal effect on a virus with high transmissibility, while it can have profound economic and social consequences.

Now in the first point we will focus more on the consequences of COVID-19 in school education. The COVID-19 crisis and the need to rethink the organization of schools has aroused great concern in teachers; on the other hand, it has also revealed an enormous interest in resorting to teaching methods without any preparation and experimenting with new teaching strategies. Teachers around the world have wondered about the impact of COVID-19 on education (LUMSA Università, 2020).

In Italy, the researchers describe teachers who lack experience in distance teaching, which also refers to the set of activities carried out with the use of technological devices (computers, smartphones, or tablets) and allowing students and teachers to continue their schooling even if they are spatially removed. Having to work from home applies above all to the teachers in the first levels of education, with almost 90% of interviewees teaching kindergarten and slightly fewer of those teaching primary school claiming to do so. For the other grades, about 2/3 of each group are concerned (middle schools, high schools, technical and professional institutes) (Di Nunzio et al., 2020, p. 25).

A few years ago, researchers were wondering and trying to understand whether and how traditional learning can be integrated with digital methodologies (Fiorentino & Bruni, 2013). Now, with the timid appearance of distance learning, it has become an essential tool for maintaining the relationships between children and adolescents and the school and among peers. It is a practice that has necessarily had to rely on families that have become the decisive factor for its realization, but which at the same time have expressed numerous criticisms. Authors therefore encourage a better understanding of the possibilities of distance learning by getting rid of the prejudice that opposes and is critical towards online

lessons by further evaluating the positive experiences and good practices of recent months (Bruschi & Perissinotto, 2020).

There are those who enthusiastically say that with distance learning the remote school has reached a significant number of children and young people characterized by different abilities. Online teaching has therefore trained the children, offering them digital skills and proving to be inclusive towards the most disadvantaged adolescents (Sernagiotto, 2021). However, by analyzing the literature on the subject more carefully, it can be said that the situation regarding distance learning in the world is worrying. According to a new UNICEF report, at least one third of the world's pupils were unable to access distance learning when their schools were closed due to COVID-19 (UNICEF, 2020). However, as regards the commitment of teachers to distance learning in Italy, the situation could be described as satisfactory (OCSE-PISA Programme for International Student Assessment, 2020) despite the important fact that even before the outbreak of the pandemic, from 2018 to 2019, one third of families did not have computers or tablets at home. The situation was even more difficult in the south of Italy (more than 40% of families did not have computers at home and over a quarter of the people were living in overcrowded conditions. The proportion rises to 41.9% among minors) (ISTAT, 2021).

In the last year, numerous surveys were carried out on the subject of distance learning in Italian schools, giving voice to the points of view of teachers, students, and their families. Distance learning in Italian schools for various authors implies the duty to face the new challenge. First of all, this applies to enhancing the training opportunities offered by distance learning, reorganizing time and thinking about schools not only in terms of new technologies, but also of environments that can promote school learning for students (Bruschi & Ricchiardi, 2020, p. 2). Several institutions have reported that children and adolescents in Italy experience difficulties with distance learning (45.4% of students between 6 and 17 years) (ISTAT, 2020). Many authors are warning that technology absolutely must not further amplify digital pathologies, leading to addictive and compulsive behaviors (Capellani, 2018) or, most of all, perpetuate

the existing inequalities in access to and quality of learning (OCSE-PISA Programme for International Student Assessment, 2020).

The analysis of the literature on the subject seems convincing in that the emergency caused by the coronavirus has breathed new life into teaching, helping to give it an impulse capable of "resetting" old teaching methods that had not accounted for the birth of a new digital generation of kids tired of dull and sometimes improvised lessons (Barbuto, 2020). A different school should therefore be created, one capable of empowering individuals who are immersed in the digital reality. This involves rethinking the aims of schools, the structure, the organization, the idea of learning, the paper culture on which it is based, and the equipment (Midoro, 2016). The analysis of the literature revealed that, in the eyes of various authors, distance learning turns into a great opportunity provided that well-standardized content is transmitted to highly motivated subjects and that small groups of children or teens, who favor moments of exchange and interaction online, are created (Giancola & Piromalli, 2020, pp. 1–10).

It is proposed to explore the impact of technologies on Generation Y, or young people who have already grown up in the digital age. In this way, we want to face the challenges of modernity by focusing on the problems of education (educational structures) in the perspective of forming digital natives (Riva, 2019). Teaching in the digital age must surely put the pupil at the center of the learning process; it must train people who would be able to learn critically; and it must create experiential methodologies possible on a large scale and critically use the tools that the network environment offers (Campione, 2015). The contributions of various authors confirm that in today's Italian schools, there is a new generation of children and teachers ready to face a different future (Carlini, 2020). The emergency of COVID-19 has somehow forced the school to rethink teaching, so that traditional teaching is currently seen as an ally to distance learning, as an opportunity to live in harmony, and not in contrast to distance learning (Toselli, 2020). This exceptional situation is also an opportunity for schools to think about providing educational tools to be used in the days immediately following the return to class, to not only

reconstruct the socio-relational issues, but also to reflect on the new experience of life (Capurso & Mazzeschi, 2021).

There are also authors who look with perplexity at the impact that distance learning can have on students considered to be digital natives. It is emphasized that distance learning tends to favor anonymity and marginalization of the most disadvantaged students. Furthermore, in the relationship between teacher and pupil, there is a risk of reducing the spaces needed for discussion. Another particularly delicate issue is the risk of teachers becoming mere computer technicians or computer administrators. Therefore, we also insist on rethinking the preparation of teachers, who will also have to take into account the cultural and mental aspects. (Giovannella et al., 2021, p. 37). In the digital school, with regard to learning, the stress will be shifted from the teacher to the student. This does not mean that the fundamental role of the teacher will disappear, but rather that the teacher will have to perform the tasks of a director of the learning process of each individual pupil. In this case, we are talking about a radical paradigm shift centered not so much on the delivery of education (programs, rigid schedules, standardized evaluation, etc.), but on the demand for it (personalized training itineraries, diversification of the styles and learning rhythms of the students) (Tuttoscuola.com, 2021).

People today, and especially young people, are living in an information society. This society constitutes the stage of a revolution of unprecedented importance, which Luciano Floridi called "the fourth revolution" (Floridi, 2017, p. 3). In this context, the hypothesized role of the future school as an educational agency may oscillate between classroom activities, increasingly remote activities (a flipped classroom), and the environments (laboratories) in which it will be possible to engage in cooperative learning using the different technologies that are often still in their experimental phase.

2. Problem of COVID-19 and Educational Poverty/ Early School-Leaving of Pupils

We must be aware that learning during COVID-19 is not achieved only through a computer, providing new technologies and teaching tools that are often too tied to theory (Ferri & Moriggi, 2018), but through effective social relationships between teachers and students, in addition to between children and parents. Undoubtedly, at this moment of crisis, digital technology can prove very promising in guaranteeing that students can access high-quality learning; however, students staying at home for a prolonged period can also contribute to the increasing implicit school dropout rate (difficulty in reaching the minimum skills in mathematics and Italian) (INVALSIopen, 2020).

In general, the data show us that children and youths make good use of the opportunities offered by the Internet for the purpose of studying (for example, searching the Internet) (Baroni et al., 2019, pp. 229–240). Despite this, several months after the start of COVID-19, there was talk of "lost children" in Italy, in the sense that the school and the teachers themselves lost contact with some children, especially those in kindergarten and in the mandatory school. On the other hand, authors such as Ignazio Drudi and Giorgio Tassinari highlight that the educational poverty resulting from the epidemic should not be underestimated. The term "loss" implies that some families have no Internet connection, no computers, and no smartphones. As of April 2020, around 6.7 million pupils were participating in distance learning, but around 2.4 million of them were still unable to fulfill the distance teaching obligation (Drudi & Tassinari, 2020). Educational poverty is linked to economic poverty, as a consequence of numerous families being in a state of absolute poverty. The increase in social exclusion at home due to the closure of schools and the inability to carry out training and sports activities provokes another new threat, namely, the creation of children of series A and series B (Investing in Children, 2020).

The problem of educational poverty also affects pupils of foreign citizens born in Italy or recent residents of Italy. According to data from the

Ministry of Education, in the 2018–2019 school year students with foreign citizenship enrolled in Italian schools represented 857,729 of the total of 8,579,879 pupils. Ilaria Venturi wrote of a million minors in Italy who live in a state of poverty, thus risking isolation. The author notes that one out of ten minors has not been reached by distance learning, thus remaining without school or sports activities (Venturi, 2020). With this new *modus operandi*, the poorest and most disadvantaged social groups risk induced dispersion. The economic poverty of these children and their families translated into educational poverty is the result not only of the current coronavirus pandemic but, above all, of a policy that is too tied to ideologies and not focused on the emergencies and real needs of foreign children (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, 2020). Not infrequently, immigrant boys and girls have relied on the presence of older brothers or sisters in the family. The help of schools is also important, since for foreign children Italian language mediators or facilitators have been enrolled in individual distance learning (Ardizzoni et al., 2020, pp. 77–78).

There are also authors who do not see a correlation between COVID-19 and early school-leaving. They point out that during the societal emergency, most schools were able to keep students who were already in possession of the technological tools or economic resources that could allow them to keep up with distance learning. In the eyes of these authors, teachers are somehow absolved from the responsibility of preparing lessons that are appropriate to the institutional system (Ardizzoni et al., 2020, pp. 77–78).

3. Consequences of Staying at Home for Children's and Adolescents' Psychological Health

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, schools in Italy have been closed. The impact of this situation can be particularly destabilizing on the mental and psychological well-being of many children and adolescents, especially those who already suffer from certain problems. Regardless of the school context, psychologists speaking of the typically human consequences

connected to COVID-19 emphasize, first of all, a fear of the unknown and a feeling of a lack of control in the face of uncertainty (Scott, 2020).

We can conclude from the research done on the impact of being forced to stay at home on children's psychological status that the answer is positive (Pisano & Cerniglia, 2021). Generally, the research which has been recently done at the international level on the psychological impact of quarantine suggests that from a psychological point of view the influence is broad, substantial, and possibly long-lasting. In recent research published in *The Lancet*, attention was drawn primarily to the increased level of psychological distress and to the onset of feelings of fear, disorientation, anger, emotional emptiness, and resignation. In some cases, the development of real psychopathological patterns can also be seen, mainly characterized by symptoms of anxiety and depression and sleep disorders (Brooks et al., 2020, pp. 912–920).

In general, the authors point out that children and adolescents may express fear and irritability due to the closure of schools and their obligation to participate in distance learning. Due to the prolonged quarantine, spaces to express one's emotions have become restricted and uncertain commitments of the new daily life have arrived. As Orben et al. stated, not only do biological and hormonal changes occur in adolescence, but it is also an especially sensitive period for social development that partly depends on the maturation of areas of the brain involved in social perception and cognition. The authors claim that adolescence is a period of high vulnerability for psychological difficulties. According to the researchers, social deprivation in adolescents can have an impact on brain and behavioral development (Orben et al., 2020, pp. 634–640).

It must be emphasized that in the Italian context, within a few months, several universities and institutes promoted investigations to investigate the psychological impact of the pandemic on children and adolescents. An anonymous survey promoted by the Giannina Gaslini Institute was launched approximately three weeks after the lockdown, through the *Google Form* platform. More than 6,000 people from all over Italy took part in this survey. From the analysis, it emerged that behavioral problems and symptoms of regression arose in almost 70% of children

both younger than and older than 6 years. In children and adolescents, the most frequently seen effects were anxiety disorders, breathlessness, and sleep disturbances. There was also a greater emotional instability with irritability and mood swings. The researchers highlighted how the confinement has led to a remarkably widespread increase in stress levels, with significant repercussions on physical, emotional, and mental health in both the students and parents (Università degli Studi di Genova, 2020). The results of another study conducted by Valentina Tobia et al. on a sample of over 600 adolescents revealed the risk of an increase in anxiety symptoms and difficulties in emotional regulation in adolescents (Tobia, 2020, pp. 39–44). The consequences of the psychological impact of social distancing on children and adolescents were also investigated by Elisa Delvecchio and Claudia Mazzeschi, who reported changes not only in terms of temporary physical disturbances (headaches, stomach aches), nutrition, and concentration, but also changes in mood (reactions of prolonged sadness, nervousness, crying, anger, or agitation) (ModenaToday.it, 2020). Similar results were obtained by the IRCCS Stella Maris Foundation, which carried out a national study on over 700 families in the months before March 2020, with the aim of analyzing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people in terms of psychophysical health. In children and adolescents with neuropsychiatric problems between the ages of 6 and 18, "an increase in obsessive-compulsive symptoms, behaviors related to a post-traumatic stress disorder, and impaired thinking were observed." On the other hand, in children under 6 years of age, an increase in symptoms of anxiety and somatic complaints emerged (headache or stomach ache) (IRCCS Fondazione Stella Maris e Università di Pisa, 2020). Marika Gesué reported that the prolonged stay of children at home led to the risk of a greater possibility of developing various psychopathologies: anxiety disorders, sleep disturbances, depression, psychosis, obsessions, post-traumatic disorders, and even eating disorders (Gesué, 2020).

The contribution of Mara Morelli et al. is also interesting. The researchers investigated the influence of parents' distress on parental self-efficacy due to the COVID-19 lockdown and on children's emotional

well-being (Morelli et al., 2020). According to their research, during quarantine parents were the only point of reference for children between the ages of 6 and 13. The findings also suggest that doctors should remotely provide psychological support to parents during a lockdown, encouraging their personal strengths and working on effective parenting strategies. The research also shows that pediatricians and psychologists have a great responsibility to specifically support families during a quarantine due to a global pandemic, providing advice to parents so that they understand what to do to improve the well-being of their children. Various initiatives that start at schools and that encourage students to share about their moods, reflections, considerations, and fears through blogs are also valued (Scuola Paritaria S. Freud, 2021). It is hoped that these reflections will be able to serve a cathartic function.

Conclusions

Municipalities and regions in Italy, starting from the 2020–2021 school year, have moved in the direction of implementing measures of social distancing and closing schools, which involves the risk of aggravating the inequalities in the learning opportunities of pupils. The considerations cited herein provided clarity on the fact that starting from April 2020, the extension of the quarantine has caused changes in the lives of many children and adolescents due to the individual and collective transformations that followed. Scientists noted that the lack of face-to-face interaction has affected the pupils' adaptation and participation in school activities.

On the basis of these analyses, we can conclude that Italian schools, despite the seriousness of the phenomena linked to COVID-19, seem to manifest a good capacity to thrive in situations of insecurity and to face adverse conditions in order to look for new normalities. The research analyzed in this article shows that adolescents and children generally do participate in classes organized over the Internet. The schools have proved capable of ensuring distance learning by responding positively

to the new circumstances that suddenly appeared in the lives of all pupils. Undoubtedly, it must be recognized that distance learning has made it possible to carry on school activities ensuring, although with a thousand difficulties, the relationship between pupils and teachers. Paradoxically, this crisis situation has brought attention to not only the centrality of the personal relationship between the pupil and the educator, but also to the importance of face-to-face teaching. In light of these analyses, we can also see that the suspension of school activities due to COVID-19 and the subsequent isolation of children and adolescents have led to a significant alteration of their school, social, and personal life, causing an interruption of the didactic process – of acquiring knowledge and skills – while causing psychological problems and early school-leaving. It should be emphasized that this new situation in Italy and the need to adopt the strategies linked to distance learning can be perceived as an opportunity for cultural evolution, for a change in mentality, and – following Pope Francis' reasoning – see and live the problems of our time not as obstacles, but as challenges from which creativity, prudence, new skills, and passion for others are born (Pope Francis, 2020).

The data that emerge from the various studies clearly demonstrate that forced isolation and the lack of social relations can in many cases have a negative impact, generating anxiety, loneliness, sadness, depression, and concern for the future. The physical and mental impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on children and adolescents is a matter of fundamental importance for both governments and families and cannot be overlooked. Scientists are of the opinion that adequate strategies must be developed to support the youth population in coping with the uncertainty stemming from the pandemic and quarantines in order to minimize the psychological impact of school closures and home confinement.

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