

LIBRI IN DISCUSSIONE

**Colombo Maddalena, Romito Marco, Vaira Massimiliano,
Visentin Martina (editors)**

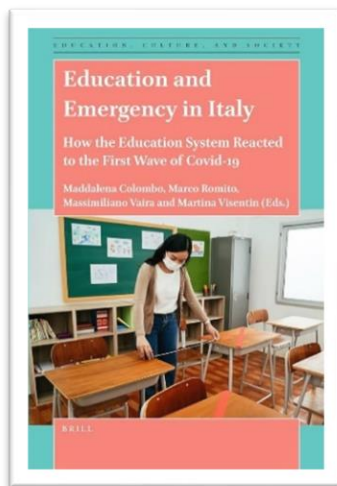
**EDUCATION AND EMERGENCY IN ITALY.
HOW THE EDUCATION SYSTEM REACTED TO THE FIRST
WAVE OF COVID-19**

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di *Marianna Coppola**

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a real “general and deep crisis” that affected every sphere of human and social life, from the health system - the main system put under pressure and exposed to continuous processes of elaboration and reworking of practices - to the economic system, social security, and even the educational and school system.

The latter, in particular, necessarily had to reorganise and redefine working methodologies and practices of delivering knowledge to students who, all over the world and in



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a short time, have been forced to stay at home to prevent disease from spreading to all folds of society.

The word “crisis” refers precisely to the fundamental and peculiar characteristics that shaped the thinking and actions of many social actors during the pandemic period, especially in the early stages and during the first lockdown. The etymology of this term, in fact, comes from the Latin word “crisis”, which recall the Greek word “κρίσις”, choice, decision, decisive phase of a new or exceptional situation.

Italy was one of the few countries - during the first wave and in the first total national confinement of the pandemic, from March to June 2020 - to adopt a system of distance education and training, involving all educational agencies, both formal and non-formal, from pre-school to post-graduate and specialisation courses.

Precisely at that time, given the exceptional nature of the phenomenon and the situation that was being experienced, many scholars from various social disciplines (sociology of education, pedagogy, developmental and cognitive psychology, to name but a few) embarked on research paths and theoretical reflections on two aspects that were considered central: firstly, the ability of the system to maintain its performance and the achievement of its objectives despite the migration of the proposal to the digital level, effectively cancelling out the socio-material incorporation of knowledge envisaged in face-to-face training; secondly, the analysis of the possible social inequalities that distance education could evidently bring to light and how these could influence the formative and educational process of learners, with the aim, where possible, of proposing strategies to resolve social differences and promote egalitarian educational actions that can guarantee access to knowledge for all learners (Lupton, Willis, 2021).

The volume *Education and Emergency in Italy. How the Education System Reacted to the First Wave of Covid-19*, edited by Maddalena Colombo et al., represents a work that summarises the reflections of a number of scholars from the Sociology of Education Section of the Italian Sociology Association who accepted the invitation to present research and reflections focused on how the Italian educational system reacted to the social and cultural changes induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. This in consideration of the fact that this “crisis” has, on the one hand, created the opportunity to reflect on the possibility/need to integrate technology and digitalisation into the educational system in a stable and continuous manner and, on the other hand, has generated adaptations, reconfigurations and, at the same time, resistance in the learning-teaching routine, with a particular focus on the process of meta-analysis carried out by the

various social actors involved in the educational and training process (students, teachers, parents, ATA staff, etc.) in order to learn lessons from the experience of the pandemic emergency.

The work brings together nine essays and research contributions by several scholars working in thirteen academic institutions throughout Italy. The sections of the book deal with different themes involving all the individual units of the educational and training system, school and extra-curricular, that faced the shock of the total closure of schools and universities, living a real “dissociative” experience in which the daily life of the educational process was carried on without passing through the social and relational dynamics typical of in-person training.

The book is organized through a sociological reading key that considers two levels of analysis: a structural one, which considers the governance of the system, the regulatory framework and the relations between the different social systems with reference to emergency and social security; and an organizational one, which considers - at the decentralized level - the daily and organizational life of the “school” system from the organization of online teaching, to the relationships with parents and students, to the role of computerization at the center of the new educational proposals.

In the introduction by the editors, Maddalena Colombo, Marco Romito, Massimiliano Vaira and Martina Visentin, the theoretical and conceptual framework of the work is outlined, which represents the common thread linking - and conceptualising - the various essays selected in the book.

The authors focus on a historical reconstruction of the health emergency from COVID-19, tracing in a clear and careful way the different socio-political stages of the educational and scholastic journey that took place in those dramatic months, of the theoretical and conceptual choices - on the one hand - and practical and factual ones - on the other - that led the Italian school - mostly analog - in a sudden and important digital transition. This rapid and unexpected transition has not been without critical issues and substantial inequalities throughout the country, first and foremost an obvious digital divide present among the different regions of Italy, and between the generational gap between teachers - some of whom are over 60 - and learners, many of whom are digital natives. The editors identify some key words that can help the reader understand and situate the data and reflections in a coherent conceptual interpretive framework: the concept of social risk, for example, returned during the pandemic to transversality, reaffirming the need, in a globalised world, not to think in “sectoral” terms but to emphasise the importance of concepts such as the complexity and interdependence of social and cultural systems (Douglas,

1992); the concepts of cultural trauma and shared suffering that refer to the social and cultural nature of psychological feelings considered in common sense to be the preserve of individualism, and emphasize how reflecting on the social and collectivistic dimensions of feelings and emotions makes possible and clear decisions to be made, future projections and social forecasts especially during emergencies (Eriksen, 2021; Giarelli, 2018). Finally, the editors outline some key aspects on which future research in the sociology of education can focus and understand long-lasting social and cultural transformations: the resilience and consolidation of the digital revolution in education and school systems, which occurred by emergency and not as a gradual process of social and educational transition; secondly, how the de-materialization of knowledge and knowledge transmission can have an important impact-especially for the younger generations-on both learning and teaching and teaching practices and practices.

Students' perspectives, their emotions, difficulties and attitudes (positive or at the same time negative) toward the digitization of knowledge and to a different school daily life experienced during the first wave, the first stringent lockdown in Italy, were the focus of analysis and research questions in the essays by Merico and Scardigno, Di Maggio, and Mesa.

Merico and Scandigno analysed an aspect little dealt with in the literature, and which the health emergency of the pandemic necessarily brought to light, namely the wide range of experiences and educational opportunities that non-formal contexts can offer, returning to the post-pandemic scientific and pedagogical debate the importance of (re)-thinking a policy of integrating formal and informal experiences in the possible learning paths of pupils, diversifying and differentiating learning paths also according to the peculiar characteristics of students (Giovannini, 1997; Alexander et al., 2007; Schneller et al., 2017; Bentsen, 2018; Mygind et al., 2019) . Di Maggio, in his essay, reports reflections and considerations from a mix-methods survey of students enrolled in social science degree programs in a specific territorial and social segment (Sicily). With that, he highlighted how tele-learning is considered by many to be a surrogate a contingent and consequential sublimation to situational needs, and not the first and elective mode of learning, which remains for several reasons the in-person and face-to-face one (such as relationality, the possibility of interaction, and the reduction of distractors and attentional deterrents) (Matthewman, Huppertz, 2020; Hanafi, 2020).

In Mesa's contribution, however, we can appreciate a comparative analysis of the impact on students in five European countries (Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, France and Germany), underling lights and shadows of

the acceleration of the digital revolution in education and schooling generated by the COVID-19 health emergency (Livingstone et al., 2010; Gurcan et al., 2020).

The voices, experiences and psycho-social dynamics of teachers, school leaders and the “training” system, from pre-school to university, are the focus of the discussions and reflections in the contributions by Bertozzi and Sarius, Ramella and Rostan, Bazzoli, Carbone and Dagnas, and Capogna, De Angelis and Musella (Arundel et al., 2007; Dee, Leišyte, 2016).

Early childhood and the experiences of those involved in the educational and school digitization of the pandemic health emergency were the focus of Bertozzi and Sarius’ contribution. The authors focused on distance education relationships with that category of pupils who - due to age and developmental stage - had the most difficulty with distance education and training, namely pre-school pupils. The survey involved several pre-school teachers from the Italian territory with the aim of envying good practices, weaknesses and difficulties that emerged during the most critical phases of the emergency (Sabatinelli, 2016; Mantovani et al., 2020; Santagati, Barabanti, 2020).

The point of view of teachers - from primary to secondary - was the focus of the analysis and reflections of Bazzoli, Carbone, and Dagnes. The researchers focused on the emotions and experiences regarding the transition from offline to online, identifying the functional dynamics - and at the same time the dysfunctional ones - recorded in the early stages of the lockdown and how any difficulties and resistances were faced and overcome, proposing a typification of “teachers in pandemic” (Argentin, 2013, 2018; Kim, Asbury, 2020).

The digital transition of the transmission of knowledge and skills is the focus of Ramella and Rostan’s work, but they focused on the university and academic context, trying to identify the ways in which teaching and research continued during the emergency and how these new experiences contributed to the formation and diversification of teaching strategies. The decisions, emotions, and experiences of school leaders - often at the centre of not easy and important choices - are analysed in the contribution by Capogna, De Angelis and Musella, with the aim of highlighting their strengths and weaknesses in the educational and school system, so as to represent the basis for the construction of educational and training protocols and strategic plans that are not unprepared when faced with other needs and emergencies (Keck, Sakdapolrak, 2013; Avolio et al., 2000).

Santagati and Barabanti's contribution examined family-school interaction by studying and analysing the communicative exchanges - via an instant messaging tool - between students, parents and teachers. The investigation clearly confirmed how synergy and commonality of purpose between the two main socialising agencies are important predictors of students' learning and socio-educational well-being (Di Pietro et al., 2020; Fan, Chen, 2001).

Last but not least, Cappello's contribution offered a careful and clear analysis on the role that the pandemic has played - in a very short time - in accelerating a process of change and digitalisation of education and training by resorting - necessarily - to privatisation dynamics and practices through conventions and memorandums of understanding with leading digital and hi-tech platform companies to make their use possible for all pupils, teachers, administrative and technical staff (O'Neil, 2016; Williamson et al., 2020).

The volume by Colombo et al. has a clear and undeniable strong point, consisting of the richness and completeness of the work carried out from a scientific point of view, with important insights that can be transformed into indications for the identification of good practices: in the nine essays - selected for the composition of the volume - the voice is given to the various protagonists and social actors who have personally experienced the COVID-19 health emergency in the educational and school system: the students, teachers, school managers, parents and technicians who have enabled the digitisation of teaching.

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