

Managing Diversity in Public Administration: The Education System at the Time of COVID-19

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Abstract

The European educational system has been deeply affected by the Covid-19 Pandemic. Specifically, Italian schools of all levels had to resort to alternative and innovative methods of training and learning to ensure the continuity of school activities from home. Distance Learning (DL) has, therefore, allowed students to continue to follow the lessons but, at the same time, has highlighted several difficulties, especially in the management of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). For this reason, through the above-mentioned research work, a survey was conducted at the Italian level, among parents and teachers, to investigate the impact of Distance Learning on the education of students with Special Educational Needs in Italian schools of all levels during the Covid-19 Pandemic, to answer the following Research Question (RQ1): does DL create a learning inequality for students with Special Educational Needs? The main results obtained illustrate a gap between teaching and learning modes between students with SEN and the rest of the class, especially with regard to active participation in lessons, autonomy in completing assignments, motivation and interest, and general academic performance. This study, therefore, aims to provide food for thought and solutions on the importance of managing diversity within the school environment, especially with regard to social inclusion, a fundamental element to improve outcomes for people with disabilities but that unfortunately the COVID-19 crisis and consequently the DL is taking away from them.

Keywords

COVID-19; distance learning; special educational needs; inclusion; diversity management.

Introduction

Since the early 2020s, Europe has been faced with the devastating and completely sudden global Covid-19 outbreak. The pandemic, which erupted as a health crisis, has also had a major impact on education and training systems due to restrictions such as quarantine and school closures. Education at a Glance, the latest OECD (2020) report

released on September 8, 2020, photographs a very complicated phase for global education, due to the pandemic and the cut in funding for schooling and research, highlighting the many inadequacies and inequalities in education systems around the world. Preventing the health crisis from becoming a structural barrier to learning and developmental skills, with serious repercussions on young people's employment prospects and earnings, and ensuring equality and social inclusion, represent, today, the main European challenges for building resilient and forward-looking education systems.

The objective of the following research work is, therefore, to investigate the effects of Distance Learning on the most disadvantaged categories of students to assess the effectiveness of this mode of teaching, to elaborate considerations, and to increase its positive effects. The Research Question (RQ1) to be answered is the following: *Does DL create a learning inequity for students with Special Educational Needs?*

After an initial introduction on the current situation, the second section provides a theoretical framework on the impact of Covid-19 on school education in general, with a focus on the measures taken by the Ministry of Education (MIUR). The third section describes the instrument used (survey) to measure how diversity management has been addressed within schools, with particular reference to the impact of DL in Pandemic time on the education of children with SEN. Discussion and conclusions are devoted to commentary on the survey conducted, the Research Question, and reflections about the future of Distance Learning for students with SEN, respectively.

Background: school education at the time of COVID-19

Education has always represented the backbone of cultural, economic, and civil change in Italy and today, more than ever, an indispensable vector for lifting the country out of the Covid-19 crisis, due to which inequalities and vulnerabilities, but also extraordinary human resources and potential, have emerged even more visibly. This is highlighted by a UNESCO (2020) study on the Future of Education that describes the effort made by children and students to maintain continuity of distance learning during this period by relying on their own resources (UNESCO, 2020).

Specifically, the Italian government closed all schools on February 23, 2020, to prevent the spread of the virus in its territory. This resulted in approximately 8.5 million students in Italy being confined to their homes (MIUR, 2020). At the same time, the Italian Ministry of Education provided with the Decree of June 26, 2020, n. 39 "a framework within which to plan the resumption of school activities in September, with particular reference, for the issue at hand, to the need for schools to equip themselves with a School Plan for Integrated Digital Didactics" (MIUR, 2020). This has allowed teachers to equip themselves with all the necessary tools to plan distance learning and ensure the continuity of classes. The online school has thus preserved the continuity of the school year, even though this solution has created some problems for the well-being of families. In fact, distance learning, not only relies on the availability of technological devices and an internet connection, but requires enormous family support, both for learning and the use of learning devices and platforms (Petretto, &

Masala, & Masala, 2020). Especially, disadvantaged students had more difficulty adapting to this type of learning (UNESCO, 2020).

In the field of education, there are still many challenges that Italian schools of all levels have faced and are still facing, such as, for example, changing teaching methods from "face-to-face" to conducting online lessons and developing valid methods to verify learning, with particular reference to the performance of written tests (Casacchia, Cifone, Giusti, L. et al., 2021). Distance Learning (DAD), that is, the innovative teaching-learning methodology adopted during the closure of school buildings, certainly represents the main challenge faced by our educational system in this period of emergency.

There is no evidence of the effect of Distance Learning on the prevention of virus spread from previous pandemics (Cauchemez et al., 2009), just as there are still few and recently evaluated studies conducted regarding the COVID-19 Pandemic (Viner et al., 2020; Ludvigsson, 2020). Certainly, this sudden reorganization of educational activities has disrupted the way of teaching, so much so that it has been defined by some scholars as "crisis distance education" (Al Lily et al., 2020), completely emergent and at times unprepared to handle this situation.

The effects of Distance Learning have had strong repercussions especially on students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and other known difficulties before the Pandemic. For this reason, within the Guidelines drawn up by MIUR, particular attention is paid to SEN; for these students, it is, in fact, necessary that the teaching team or the class council agree on the daily workload to be assigned and ensure the possibility to record and listen to the lessons, since the difficulties in the management of ordinary teaching materials are well known (MIUR, 2020).

Methodology. Survey to measure Diversity management in schools

Social inclusion is argued to be unclear as a concept, largely due to multiple and conflicting definitions in research and policy (Simplican Leader, Kosciulek, & Leahy, 2015). At the level of the "individual," social inclusion refers to enabling/disabling conditions, such as the level at which a person functions, self-motivation, confidence, and knowledge (Simplican Leader, Kosciulek, & Leahy, 2015). The "interpersonal" element of social inclusion addresses the relationships occurring between the individual, their family, and the professionals with whom they have contact (Beaton, Codina, & Wharton, 2021). Simplican et al. (2015) also point to relationships facilitating both bondings (the building of a common bond or identity which increases trust, reciprocity, and confidence) and/or bridging (the extension of a network). Phillips, Robison, and Kosciulek (2014) argue that this last element is important in improving outcomes for people with disabilities. In fact, the school, by being organized as a "community" stimulates these relationships and improves social inclusion (Beaton, Codina, & Wharton, 2021).

To measure the impact of Distance Learning on pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) during the Pandemic, a cross-sectional and observational study was conducted in Italy. A structured online questionnaire was developed using Google Forms, a free

Google tool that allows the creation of personalized surveys. The survey, conducted in May 2021 was composed of multiple-choice, closed-ended, open-ended, and rating scale questions, aimed to investigate the impact of Distance Learning (DL) on the education of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Italian schools of all levels during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The questionnaire was anonymous and addressed to parents of children with SEN and teachers. Participation was voluntary and free. Data collected were processed in an aggregate manner in compliance with the Privacy Act. The questions were created ad hoc because no validated questionnaires related to the issue of learning of pupils with SEN in relation to school closures during a pandemic emergency have been found in the literature (Scarpellini et al., 2021). The questionnaire was created in Italian and the link was sent via email, WhatsApp, and other social media to relatives of parents with children with SEN and teachers throughout Italy. Data are reported in the text as percentage values.

Table 1. Questionnaire items (author's elaboration, 2021)

Questionnaire items
1-Role (Parent/Teacher)
2-School order
3-Region
4-Teaching tools used to support students with BES (Graph 1)
5-Has a personalized lesson plan been defined for students with BES? (Yes/No)
6-If yes, in what way has it been personalized, and what needs does it aim to meet?
7-Degree of autonomy of the student in carrying out the lesson
8-Learning level of a student with BES compared to classroom peers in DL (Graph 2)
9-Average response during distance education classes of students needing BES (Graph 3)
10- Evaluation of the experience of students with BES in distance education compared to face-to-face education (Graph 4)

Results and discussion

In total, 47 responders completed the online survey. Of these, 80.9% were teachers and 19.1% were parents. Moreover, 72.3% were from the Latium Region. Regarding the school order, the data are distributed as follows: Infancy (2.1%), Primary (36.2%), Secondary I (21.3%), and Secondary II (40.4%). Some of the most significant responses have been collected in this section dedicated to the analysis of the results and their discussion.

The survey shows that lessons in DL for students with SEN were structured, in 70.2% of cases, in such a way that the student was able to carry out the lesson independently, with 57.4% resorting to a personalized lesson plan. Based on the answers given by parents and teachers, this plan aimed to meet needs such as improving levels of attention and learning difficulties through the introduction of compensatory and dispensatory tools to make students autonomous in carrying out activities.

In addition, specific teaching tools were prepared and used to support students with SEN, as can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Teaching tools used to support students with BES
(author's elaboration, 2021)

In particular, the majority of Italian teachers made use of tables, diagrams, graphical settings, concept maps (74.5%), individualized activities (57.4%), and synchronous video lessons or asynchronous recordings made by the teachers themselves (46.8%).

However, despite the measures taken, Figure 2 shows a very fragmented reality regarding the level of learning of a student with BES compared to the rest of the class in Distance Learning.

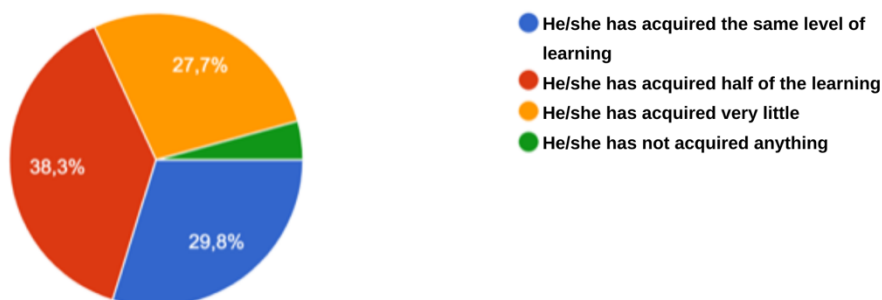


Figure 2. Learning level of a student with BES compared to classroom learners in DL
(author's elaboration, 2021)

In fact, only 29.8% of students acquired the same level of learning, compared with 38.3% who state that they acquired half of the learning and 27.7% who state that they acquired very little.

Another significant finding is represented by Figure 3: the average response during Distance Learning lessons for students with SEN was for the majority of respondents

adequate in all areas (Graph 3) against, however, a large number of responses regarding the value "Insufficient".

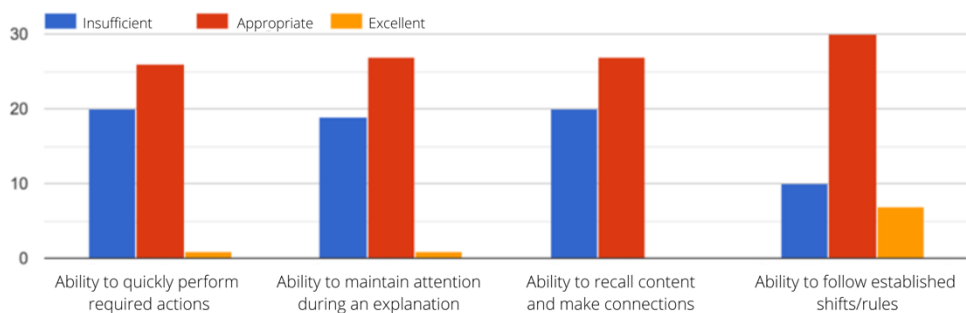


Figure 3. Average response during distance education classes of students needing BES
(author's elaboration, 2021)

Figure 4 probably illustrates the most discouraging but at the same time the most significant data for this study. Concerning face-to-face teaching, the respondents were asked to evaluate the experience of students with SEN in distance learning, regarding active participation in lessons, autonomy in completing assignments, motivation and interest, general academic performance.

All areas except general academic performance (20 "Worse" responses, 21 "No difference" responses) were rated negatively, meaning that this teaching method still presents some gaps and critical issues that need to be addressed so that all students have the opportunity to receive the same levels of education and teaching.

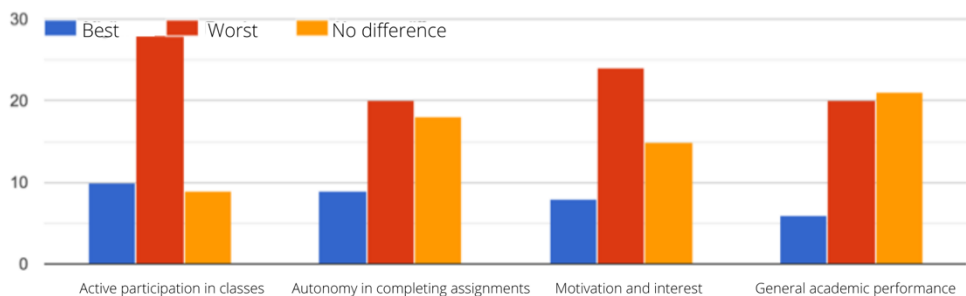


Figure 4. Evaluation of the experience of students with BES in distance education compared to face-to-face education
(author's elaboration, 2021)

Conclusions

The survey shows an Italian school system not yet able to manage diversity within schools at the time of a Pandemic. The short timeframe and the need to readjust the modes of content delivery have led to the adoption, in a completely emergency way, of

Distance Learning which, if on the one hand has allowed most students to continue to learn, on the other hand, has worsened already disadvantaged situations such as, for example, the case of children and young people who need Special Educational Needs and therefore not only greater customization in training, but also a sociality that the COVID-19 crisis and, therefore, the use of Distance Learning, have subtracted from them.

It is therefore evident from this study that DL creates a learning inequality for students with Special Educational Needs (RQ1), as highlighted in the previous paragraph.

To reinforce and strengthen the disciplinary and relational skills of students to recover sociality (MIUR, 2021), the Ministry of Education, for the school year just ended launched the 2021 Summer School Plan. The Plan aims to strengthen the school by making it more open, cohesive, and inclusive; an engine of civic integration, equality, and development. A school that restores spaces and times for relationships, places to meet again, and reconnect all those abruptly interrupted relationships, so important for the emotional, affective, identity, and social development of each student (MIUR, 2021). 57.4% of respondents to the survey stated that their school will adhere to the 2021 Summer School Plan, especially with activities dedicated to the enhancement of learning (65.7%) and recovery of social skills (40%). Despite the activation of this action program, the survey shows that just over 51% of respondents believe that the 2021 Summer School Plan will enable children and young people with SEN to strengthen learning and recover social skills, compared with almost 49% who do not have the same level of confidence in this regard.

In light of what has been said, the survey shows that Distance Learning, if properly structured, can mitigate the learning gap between students with SEN and the rest of the class. For example, by providing spaces and environments for students with SEN in schools. Allowing students to participate in the DAD classroom in small groups would allow them to participate assiduously in lessons and targeted teacher intervention, as well as benefit from socialization. We need socializing activities such as psychomotor workshops, psycho-energy, and everything related to the channeling of emotions, as well as more incisive training for teachers, fewer classes, and more laboratory activities in small groups.

It is, therefore, necessary for the future that the authorities take charge of this situation and that they prepare supplementary measures and support Distance Learning for all those categories of students most affected by the COVID-19 crisis so that, under normal conditions, these children and young people can return to attend classes with their classmates, with the constant support of the support teacher, to facilitate their inclusion and reintegration into the social fabric.

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