

EDITORIAL

Reimagining schools to make a difference, every day

Going back to in-person schooling was a must at the start of this school year. However, despite vaccines for adults, and for younger children from December, classes have experienced new quarantine periods and everyday in-person or distance learning strongly conditioned by the health emergency, and this will presumably continue in the coming months.

It's all Covid's fault!

The pandemic has had a significant impact on school life and the educational experience of pupils and teachers.

Many studies published in 2020 have highlighted the issue, as is clearly demonstrated, for example, by the research promoted by SIRD on the situation in Italy¹, also presented in this magazine², and at international level, by the papers published in special issues of the ISEA journal³.

Surveys at European level⁴ and Italian level carried out in 2021 also provide a worrying picture as regards early school-leaving and the levels of learning acquired. In particular, in addition to previously reported information on geographically related gaps, the INVALSI data⁵ show an increase in the percentages of pupils finishing school with inadequate skills for their future inclusion in social and productive life: this is a phenomenon in which dropping out is implicit.

The comments about INVALSI data in the last few months (as regards the fall in levels of learning, aggravated gaps between geographical areas, the increase in implicit dropouts etc.) have highlighted problems for which a guilty party has been hastily found: Covid.

1. Lucisano, P. (2020). *Fare ricerca con gli insegnanti. I primi risultati dell'indagine nazionale SIRD "Per un confronto sulle modalità di didattica a distanza adottate nelle scuole italiane nel periodo di emergenza COVID-19"*. In: Lifelong Lifewide Learning, Vol. 17, N. 36, pp. 3-25.

The articles referring to national research promoted by SIRD can be found at the institution's website: <https://www.sird.it/ricerca-nazionale-sird-2020/>
2. Lucisano, P., Girelli, C., Bevilacqua, A., Virdia, S., Didattica in emergenza durante la pandemia Covid-19. Uno sguardo all'esperienza locale e nazionale degli insegnanti, *RicercaAzione*, December 2020, Vol. 12, n.2, [pp. 23-46], DOI: [10.32076/RA12208](https://doi.org/10.32076/RA12208).

Batini, F., Barbisoni, G., Pera, E., Toti, G., Sposetti, P., Szpunar, G., Gabrielli, S., Stanzione, I., Dalledonne Vandini, C., Montefusco, C., Santonicola, M., Vegliante, R., Morini, A.L., Scipione, L., Un modello di analisi delle domande aperte nell'indagine nazionale SIRD sulla didattica a distanza durante l'emergenza Covid-19, *RicercaAzione*, December 2020, Vol. 12, n.2 [pp. 47-72], DOI: [10.32076/RA12211](https://doi.org/10.32076/RA12211).

3. The journal ISEA (International Studies in Educational Administration), edited by prof. David Gurr (University of Melbourne) has dedicated four special issues (48/1, 48/2, 48/3 and 49/1) to the subject, thus offering an interesting global panorama of how education systems in different countries have dealt with the situation caused by the pandemic: <https://cceaam.net/publications/isea/>.

EUROSTAT (2021). *Early leavers from education and training*. (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Early_leavers_from_education_and_training)

5. INVALSI (2021). *I risultati delle prove INVALSI 2021*. (https://invalsi-areaprove.cineca.it/index.php?get=static&pag=materiale_approfondimento). In this issue, see the article by R. Ricci, *Gli apprendimenti ai tempi della pandemia*.

Are we really sure that distance learning and school closures without face-to-face lessons are the cause of these problems? And that simply returning to in-presence teaching will solve them?

Alibi or magnifying glass?

The Covid pandemic has certainly aggravated the problems, but it would be too simple and dangerous to use it as an alibi, assigning all the responsibility to the health emergency.

Too easy: because it is undeniable that everyday life has been overturned and that the impact on schools, but also on every aspect of people's lives, has been serious and for many even dramatic.

Too dangerous: because, like a blinding flash, it risks reducing the complexity of the causes for the educational failings revealed purely to the health situation.

However, there is more than this. The distancing practises introduced to safeguard physical health have "justified" an impoverishment in terms of teaching, in many cases limited to purely transmitting content, and led to a weakening of the educational relationship, with physical distance often also becoming personal and emotional distance.

Covid is not the 'guilty party', but has acted as a 'magnifying glass', amplifying the problems experienced by children and young people during their school career and making them even clearer.

Mental health is also at risk

The UNICEF report on '*The State of the World's Children 2021*⁶ underlined how the pandemic has affected opportunities for pupils' learning particularly seriously in disadvantaged socioeconomic situations, also amplifying the difficulties due to the impossibility of exploiting educational technologies or because inadequate use is made of them.

However, the report also highlights another worry with dramatic implications: the mental health of children and young people is at risk. «*The risk is that the aftershocks of this pandemic will chip away at the happiness and well-being of children, adolescents and caregivers for years to come – that they will pose a risk to the foundations of mental health. For if the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that our mental health is profoundly affected by the world around us. Far from being simply a question of what is going on in a person's mind, the state of each child's or adolescent's mental health is profoundly affected by the circumstances of their lives – their experiences with parents and caregivers, the connections they form with friends and their chances to play, learn and grow*» (pp. 2-3).

6. At the end of 2021, UNICEF published the report *The State of the World's Children 2021. ON MY MIND: Promoting, protecting and caring for children's mental health*, the full version of which can be found at the website <http://www.unicef.org>, while an extensive summary in Italian is present at the UNICEF Italia website via the link <https://www.unicef.it/media/salute-mentale-nel-mondo-piu-di-1-adolescente-su-7-disturbi-mentali/>.

As regards the subject of mental health, the pandemic has thus led to the amplification of problems already widely present. For some time local children's psychology and neuropsychiatry services have underlined an increase in the number of situations diagnosed, but those involved in educational contexts have also reported growing unease, which takes different forms and has become an urgent demand for attention that can no longer be ignored. Without mental health it is not possible to think, feel, learn, establish significant relationships, interact constructively with one's environment, and become active and responsible citizens. «*Mental health is not a disorder or even the absence of disorder. It is positive. It is a state of health.... As a positive, mental health has been described as "a dynamic state of internal equilibrium" that involves the capacity to apply essential social, emotional and cognitive skills to navigate effectively through life and the world*» (p.10).

Reimagining schools, starting from education

No new questions have thus emerged from this period of health emergency for schools. They are the same old issues, however 'shouted out' with a gravity and clarity that makes them inescapable. The situation we are experiencing raises questions for schools about the quality of the schooling experience, and education promoting significant learning and mental health-wellbeing for everyone, as two sides of the same coin.

These questions demand more than simplistic responses, they need to remain open, as criteria to be adopted in guiding everyday decisions and actions.

The paper resulting from the important report [*"Reimagining our futures together. A new social contract for education"*](#), recently published by UNESCO's International Commission on the Future of Education⁷ and presented in this issue of the magazine⁸, can be seen as moving in this direction. Imagining a new future for education by 2050, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) raises three essential questions:

What should we continue doing?

What should we abandon?

What needs to be creatively invented afresh?

Starting from the observation that the pandemic underway is demonstrating all our fragility and interconnection, the report indeed highlights the transformative role of high quality, inclusive and lifelong education in encouraging the social changes necessary, recalling the need for a *"new social contract for education"* focusing on human rights, the absence of discrimination,

7. UNESCO, *Reimagining our futures together. A new social contract for education* in https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379707_locale=en. The report was presented on 10 November 2021, in the context of work during the 41st session of UNESCO's General Conference.

Almost thirty years ago, UNESCO presented an important report (Delors, J. (eds.) (1996). *Learning: the treasure within*, Roma: Armando), which summarised the role of schools in the second millennium in promoting learning to know and learning to do among students, given the inadequacy of simply learning content, and the complexity of also supporting them in their personal growth (learning to be) and social growth (learning to live together). This report was followed in 2015 by another interesting UNESCO report with the significant title *Rethinking education: towards a global common good?* which can be consulted at <https://unevoc.unesco.org/e-forum/RethinkingEducation.pdf>

8. The report is presented in the 'Experience and reflections' section in this issue of the magazine.

social justice, human dignity and cultural diversity.

The report is an invitation to reflect and imagine, rather than a project. The questions it raises must be faced and answered at the level of schools and local communities, even before at political and national level, in educational programmes and systems of every kind, all over the world.

The invitation to '*reimagine our future*' must start from promotion of '*a new social contract for education*', beginning with schools. These are called on to rethink their action to promote learning, within an educational context of personal growth for everyone, as part of a shared future.

The emotion of learning

At scientific level, there is by now widespread awareness that learning does not take place as a separate function, but is rather closely linked and interdependent on all dimensions of the individual⁹. It is the person who learns, with all their background, affectivity and relationships.

Mental health, wellbeing and significant learning are thus inseparable and require educational quality only achievable within an educational relationship that is capable of being encouraging¹⁰, ethically directed at taking care of others¹¹ and at building contexts promoting growth for everyone and for each individual¹².

The contributions of neuroscience¹³ and systems neurobiology have provided new evidence of the fact that each act in our psychological life is specific but interdependent, and undoubtedly not isolated. In-depth study of the relationship between emotions and cognition has shown that *«the functions throughout the whole circuit of our brain are activated synchronically and diachronically, thus each cognitive activity corresponds with an emotional trace: while we think, our brain also feels»*¹⁴. The emotions that pupils experience during their time at school are not indifferent, but rather create emotional memories¹⁵ associated with different learning experiences that will facilitate or hamper the approach to new, similar learning processes, on the basis of the positive or negative emotions experienced. To provide just a couple of examples, one need only observe the effects on some pupils of experiencing the joy of solving a problem, or the sense of self-fulfilment obtained when dealing with a new task, to grasp how positive emotions fuel the virtuous circle of educational success, whereas a sense

9. See De Corte, E. (2010) *Historical Developments in the Understanding of Learning* (pp. 35-68) in OECD-CERI ILE project. *The Nature of Learning: Using Research to Inspire Practice*. Paris: OECD. The most recent and significant papers in Italian include: Cornoldi C., Meneghetti C., Moè A., Zamperlin C. (2018), *Processi cognitivi, motivazione e apprendimento*. Bologna: Il Mulino; Moè A. (2019), *Il piacere di imparare e di insegnare*. Milano: Mondadori Università; Lucangeli D., Vicari S. (2019), *Psicologia dello sviluppo*. Milano: Mondadori Università.

10. Franta, H., Colasanti, A. R. (1991). *L'arte dell'incoraggiamento. Insegnamento e personalità degli allievi*. Firenze: La Nuova Italia Scientifica.

11. Mortari, L. (2015). *Filosofia della cura*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina.

12. Sergiovanni, T. J. (2000). *Costruire comunità nelle scuole*. Roma: LAS.

13. Della Sala, S. (2016). *Le neuroscienze a scuola. Il buono, il brutto e il cattivo*. Firenze: Giunti.

14. Lucangeli, D. (2019). *Cinque lezioni leggere sull'emozione di apprendere*. Trento: Erickson, p. 14

15. McGaugh, J. L. (2015). Consolidating memories. In "Annual review of psychology", Vol. 66, pp. 1-24. DOI: [10.1146/annurev-psych-010814-014954](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010814-014954).

of impotence learned, with all the associated negative emotions, generates a vicious circle of failure¹⁶, if the adult does not neutralise these threatening experiences.

The need to construct bridges between school and life

Just as the interdependence of an individual's mental and bodily functions demands a holistic educational programme capable of promoting mental health and learning, so the experience of school must dialogue with life. In this context, educational actions must construct bridges, not walls¹⁷, seeking authentic learning that is not limited to scholastic knowledge, but rather uses this as a starting point to give new meaning and enrich the encounter with reality.

None of this is new, in theory. The indications are already present in the MIUR policy guidelines for the construction of school curricula, in which the key citizenship skills proposed by the EU (2006 and 2018) are proposed as goals to be pursued.

However, in everyday teaching practice it is instead possible to observe all the difficulties of putting into effect a genuine passage from an educational model based on teaching a programme to promoting the learning of skills¹⁸.

Promoting personal and social skills and learning to learn

The in-depth study taking place at European level to better define key skills is certainly also useful in terms of supporting this change in the teaching model. After proposing the digital competence framework (DigComp, 2015¹⁹) and a framework for entrepreneurial competence, creativity and spirit of initiative (EntreComp, 2016²⁰), the framework drawn up to develop «*personal and social competence and the ability to learn how to learn, to improve health-conscious, future-oriented life management*»²¹ (LifeComp, 2020²²) is particularly interesting.

The latter is even more important and useful in this period of upheaval and crisis, also in terms of experiences outside school, because personal, social and learning skills can help people to become more resilient and to manage the complex situations, challenges and changes

16. Girelli, C. (1999). *Costruire il gruppo. La promozione della dimensione socio-affettiva nella scuola*. Brescia: La Scuola, pp. 122-129.

17. See Comoglio, M. (2003), *Insegnare e apprendere con il Portfolio*, Milano: Fabbri, p. 54.

18. Among the various possible references on this issue see: Castoldi, M. (2013), *Curricolo per competenze*, Roma: Carocci; Castoldi, M. (2017), *Costruire unità di apprendimento. Guida alla progettazione a ritroso*, Roma: Carocci.

19. DigComp 2.0: The Digital Competence Framework for Citizens at <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC101254>. A subsequent DigComp 2.1 development in 2017 is available at <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC106281>. The 2.1 version has also been translated into Italian: https://www.agid.gov.it/sites/default/files/repository_files/digcomp2-1_ita.pdf. In 2018 a user guide was also published: DigComp into Action: Get inspired, make it happen. A user guide to the European Digital Competence Framework, at <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC110624>.

20. EntreComp: The Entrepreneurship Competence Framework at <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC101581>. In 2018 a user guide was also published: EntreComp into Action - Get inspired, make it happen: A user guide to the European Entrepreneurship Competence Framework, at <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC109128>.

21. Recommendation of the European Council of 22 May 2018 regarding key skills or lifelong learning (text with EEA relevance) (2018/C 189/01), section 2.2 at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01))

22. LifeComp: The European Framework for Personal, Social and Learning to Learn Key Competence, at <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC120911>. The document is presented in the 'Experience and Reflections' section in this issue of the magazine

continually posed by real life. It is a conceptual rather than regulatory framework that can be used as a basis for the development of curricula and educational/teaching activities that support the processes of personal and social development necessary to promote learning and the “dynamic state of inner balance” with which we identify mental health.

The responsibility to make a difference

The educational problems highlighted by the pandemic and changes made to everyday life in schools as a result of the health emergency are not new, they merely appear more evident today. The experience of schooling has been further impoverished in terms of the quality of teaching and relationships. The risk is that we become accustomed to this, aggravating the educational emergency, which will be translated into an uncertain future for individuals and social contexts.

The UNESCO report invites us to reimagine our future together, starting from a new way of educating within schools, precisely because of the transformative ability it can have on people and society. It is education that can make a difference to people’s lives (personal development, learning, mental health, social inclusion, active citizenship etc.) and to the quality of life of the community, society and nations. In their respective roles, each party is asked to take responsibility for making a difference in their own environment, according to their possibilities. Clearly, for those who have an educational role as parents or teachers, this responsibility is even greater, and cannot be delegated.



In addition to the previously mentioned points for consideration in the “Experiences and Reflections” section, we would also like to note the stimuli offered by the articles in the “Research” section, starting from Roberto Ricci’s article, already mentioned in the editorial. By analysing the results of the 2021 INVALSI tests this highlights the development of several issues in terms of student learning levels. However, the author maintains that it would be a serious mistake to attribute the results observed to the effects of the pandemic: without doubt the complexity and extent of the problems reported suggest that the origins of the difficulties in Italian schools date back some considerable time and the problems have certainly not been produced in the last two years, however difficult these have been for the whole of society.

The article by Andrea Gavosto and Barbara Romano is a summary of the Agnelli Foundation’s report on the state of middle schools, which unfortunately provides a less than comforting picture: learning continues to be unsatisfactory, gaps and inequality continue to grow, and teaching methods have not been modernised, while students appear increasingly dissatisfied with their time at school and teachers struggle to find the best teaching strategies for a difficult

and delicate age. The paper concludes with some proposals for action designed to further recovery and update the mission of middle schools, rethinking this in such a way as to promote higher quality learning than is achieved today, to reduce the gaps that have continued to widen in the last few years, and to provide guidance to young people regarding their future studies, in line with the profile, qualities and expectations of each individual.

The next five contributions are part of a collective project and have been produced in the context of CRESPI (Centro di Ricerca Educativa sulla Professionalità dell'Insegnante), which conceived the 'research-training' programme, characterised by participatory research seeking to offer a route combining research in the field and opportunities for professional growth for the teachers and researchers involved.

In the first paper from this group, Gabriella Agrusti and Martin Dodman examine some methodological issues underlying the development of an operational model to evaluate the impact of a research-training project, to identify contexts and conditions that may facilitate or impede its development and influence its outcome, and to understand the complex relationship between professional learning and promoting change in the learning environments where this takes place.

The second paper, by Maja Antonietti *et al.*, represents an initial attempt to test the impact of two research and training projects carried out in day-care centres and nursery schools by two different research groups, using focus groups. From analysis of the data collected, the most significant aspects emerging as a result of teachers' participation in the research-training projects were in both cases, albeit in different ways, the acquisition of reflective attitudes towards research and the transfer of what has been learned to new circumstances.

In the third paper Davide Capperucci *et al.* document two research and training programmes involving primary school teachers focusing on planning and assessment for skills and outdoor education and teaching. The objective of the study was to evaluate the impact of two three-year projects a year after their conclusion, evaluating the spin-offs in terms of processes, products and professional awareness. The results highlight the willingness of teachers to experiment with innovative practices when these are accompanied by participatory and well-defined research and professional development opportunities, based on the development of effective tools.

The fourth paper, by Ciani *et al.*, presents some exploratory analysis regarding the impact of a three-year research-training programme targeted at promoting change in planning, educational and assessment attitudes, and the use of formative assessment practices by a group of teachers from a specific school section at a middle school. The article does not deal specifically with the repercussions of the teachers' experimental programme on pupils, but rather focuses on research-professional development as a specific way of carrying out research with teachers, to promote spin-offs on their environments, work processes, attitudes and professional skills.

In the fifth and last paper relating to CRESPI, Gabriella Agrusti *et al.* examine some methodological questions at the root of the development of an operational model to assess the im-

pact of a research-training project in high schools, identifying contexts and conditions that can facilitate or impede its development and influence its outcome, and understand the complex relationship between professional learning and promoting change in the learning environments where this takes place.

The “Research” section continues with the article by Massimiliano Badino and Alessia Ruele, which discusses an internship and educational research process taking place within the context of the University of Verona’s Service Learning programme, in order to clarify how this helps pre-service teachers (PSTs) to develop skills for their future career. In particular, the role of educational research in developing indispensable teaching skills is examined in depth, along with the importance of constant reflection and the development of critical thinking as regards one’s own professional activities.

The first part of the paper by Patrizia Cordin *et al.* presents the results of a questionnaire on multilingualism in children from migrant families, distributed in 2017-18 to around 2000 families concerned by the first two years of primary schooling throughout the province of Trento. In the second part, some of the data obtained are related to the results of reading and writing tests (dictation and non-word repetition tests) taken between 2018 and 2019 by these children. In particular, the relationship between the results of reading and writing tests and migratory status (1st or 2nd generation), country of origin, skills in the language of origin, and exposure to Italian in the family are discussed.

In her article, Valentina Biino presents the results of scientific research regarding the benefits of physical activity, highlighting how physical play, complemented by complex coordination tasks, can affect both motor coordination and cognitive development. The scope of her study was to identify determining factors that challenge executive functions and to highlight elements useful for designing cognitively challenging games, to go beyond motor activities based exclusively on the quantity of physical exercise or on pure fun and emphasize the value of play as a form of motor, cognitive and relational enrichment.

The section concludes with Zoran Lapov’s article, in which the author, exploring the educational commitment of R. Tagore, proposes to rediscover the legacy of the past in the light of the emergency raging in education in the present day, marked by alternating face-to-face and distance learning. His analysis is divided into two parts: the first illustrates Tagore’s educational model, which was launched in the early 20th century in the heart of Bengal (India), and which still represents an educational heritage capable of providing both theoretical and practical guidelines; the second part looks more closely at some of the methodological-operational strategies in Tagore’s model, allowing comparison with the anti-Covid measures adopted in Italian schools, in terms of educational relationality in learning processes.

To conclude, we underline the varied and interesting reports present in the “Reviews” section.

Claudio Girelli and Maria Arici