

TEACHERS AND RESEARCHERS COLLABORATION: RE-STRUCTURING DIDACTICS AND PROFESSIONALISMS

COLLABORAZIONE DOCENTI E RICERCATORI: RISTRUTTURAZIONE DIDATTICA E PROFESSIONALITÀ

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Abstract

Almost two years after the first impact with the Covid-19 pandemic, despite difficulties and discrepancies in the national territory, the school is involved in a significant renovation and requalification of educational-didactic processes.

The need for a return to normality is expressed in several ways, from the paths anxiously aimed at recovering time and the opportunities lost during the remote schooling to the reorganization of teaching practices.

Looking at the materials and activities gradually developed and documented by a team of primary school teachers, the article details a collaborative action research and teacher research process that tries to answer to some important questions. Coming back to school learning, in what terms did the teachers value the experience of the remote schooling? Has the renewal of teaching made it possible to respond to the emerging needs that the pandemic has made explicit? Are the necessary adaptation actions able of producing new development horizons also at professional level?

The results show how the concrete process of inclusion and the well-being environment created for pupils and families let arise the didactic-methodological attention and the professional awareness that teachers need to continually foster.

A quasi due anni dal primo impatto con la pandemia di Covid-19, nonostante le difficoltà e le discrepanze sul territorio nazionale, la scuola è impegnata in un significativo rinnovamento e riqualificazione dei processi educativo-didattici.

La necessità di un ritorno alla normalità si esprime in diversi modi, dai percorsi ansiosamente finalizzati al recupero del tempo e delle opportunità perse durante la scuola a distanza alla riorganizzazione delle pratiche didattiche.

Osservando i materiali e le attività gradualmente sviluppate e documentate da un team di insegnanti della scuola primaria, l'articolo descrive in dettaglio un processo di ricerca collaborativa e di ricerca degli insegnanti che cerca di rispondere ad alcune domande importanti. Tornando all'apprendimento in classe, in che termini gli insegnanti hanno valutato l'esperienza della scuola a distanza? Il rinnovamento della didattica ha permesso di rispondere ai bisogni emergenti che la pandemia ha reso espliciti? Le necessarie azioni di adattamento sono in grado di produrre nuovi orizzonti di sviluppo anche a livello professionale?

I risultati mostrano come il concreto processo di inclusione e l'ambiente di benessere creato per gli alunni e le famiglie abbiano fatto nascere l'attenzione didattico-metodologica e la consapevolezza professionale che gli insegnanti devono continuamente promuovere.

Keywords

Special Didactics; research training; teacher-research, transformative processes.

Didattica speciale; formazione alla ricerca; docente-ricerca, processi trasformativi.

1 The entire contribution is the result of the shared reflection and joint work of the authors. However, with regard to the writing of the text, Antioco Luigi Zurru is the author of section 1; Ilaria Tatulli is the author of section 3; Daniele Bullegas is the author of section 2; Antonello Mura is the author of section 4.

Return to normality or evolutionary itineraries of didactic experimentation and research?

Almost two years after the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, despite contrasting attitudes of reaction and feelings of fear, the whole society still appears to be constantly engaged in an important reconstruction process and a return to normality.

Also the school, albeit with significant differences and discrepancies between the multiple realities of the national territory, feels and invokes with passion, and by now unanimously, the need to return to the school dynamics' habits. However, these inclinations are expressed in several ways oscillating between paths anxiously aimed at recovering the time and opportunities lost during the Distance Learning (DL) to practices oriented to rethinking and reorganizing didactics and educational processes. The researchers developed during these two years have contributed to testify how much complexity and the social expectations that characterize the school experience have reasonably amplified the effects of the pandemic phenomenon (Bocci, Caldin, & d'Alonzo, 2020; d'Alonzo, 2020b). Moreover, distancing practices have made more problematic the education and training processes for the weakest (Besio & Bianquin, 2020; Ianes & Bellacicco, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020; Viner et al., 2020; WHO, 2020). Despite the increasing teachers' commitment in the development of didactics IT skills (Fiorucci, 2021), facing Digital Didactics and Distance Learning have been recorded different attitudes which in many occasions highlighted the school institution's difficulties that is not always fully prepared to deal with the current uncertainties (Besio, 2020; Lucisano, 2020).

This scenario has abruptly led time and space to acquire new meanings, orienting teachers towards a practices' ubiquity that has produced a dialectic of proximity, in which presence and distance have been opposed, crossed, and integrated each other continuously. Looking at the didactics practice, it is therefore important to understand what are the components of teachers' professional action that, overcoming sterile rhetorical oppositions, made it possible to accomplish a real inclusion process. Based on the investigations carried out so far (Mura, Zurru, & Tatulli, 2020; Mura, Zurru, Tatulli, & Bullegas, 2020; Zurru, Tatulli, Bullegas, & Mura, 2020, 2021), this research is further oriented to define aspects and processes that, even in the critical situation imposed by the pandemic, they can contribute to the definition of teachers' professional development.

After returning to in presence school, even with the known limitations of social distancing, it is useful to ask oneself in what terms and in what ways teachers worked on the management of the didactic activities, valuing what was accomplished during the previous experience in DL during the lockdown period. Facing with the necessary restructuring of school practice imposed by the new balances, it is also important to understand in what sense the pedagogical care actions and didactics have been configured as an effective response to the pupils' educational needs that the pandemic experience has made increasingly meaningful. Finally, it is significant to reflect on the possible implications and the role that such a rethinking of didactics can play in teachers' professional development.

These are questions stimulated by the multiple challenges that distance has imposed in everyday life school. Nonetheless, however, these are issues that are fully part of a broader national and international survey on teachers' professional role in relation to school inclusion processes (Cottini, 2017b, 2017a; European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE), 2012, 2017; Mura, 2019; Mura, Zurru, & Tatulli, 2019; Sibilio & Aiello, 2018).

Thus, it is interesting to analyze the results that emerged from the study carried out during the school year 2020/2021 as part of a didactic experimentation conducted by a group of primary school teachers (Mura, Zurru, & Tatulli, 2020). The aim is to contribute to the definition of a systematic complex set of elements and skills with which define a possible professional inclusive teachers' profile, and at the same time, to outline the practices through which structure its full maturation and expression (Mura, 2019; Mura et al., 2019).

Teachers Research and transformative processes

During the Covid-19 pandemic and Distance Learning (DL), teachers have had a deeply experience of teaching practices transformation, bringing out new critical issues, especially during the following school year after the first lockdown, and outlining training needs and new ways of "doing school".

New research questions emerge and are aimed to understanding if and in what terms the experiences gained during the Distance Learning have provoked teachers' didactics practices, redefining their educational action and their professional identity.

These issues have been developed in a study carried out as part of a fruitful dynamic of collaboration between a group of researchers and a team of teachers engaged in carrying out a pedagogical-didactical experimentation. This is a project that starting in the A.A 2019/20 concerned a first grade of the primary school – made up of 19 pupils, two of whom with disabilities – at the Istituto Comprensivo Statale “E. d’Arborea” of San Gavino Monreale, a town in the province of South Sardinia (Mura, Zurru, & Tatulli, 2020; Zurru et al., 2020).

An investigation plan is set up based on collaborative action research aimed at promoting, through reflective practices, transformative processes directed to developing professional identity (Anderson, 2019; Capobianco & Feldman, 2010; Castro Garces & Martinez Granada, 2016; Clark et al., 1996; Fabbri & Romano, 2017; Feldman, 1999; Gravett, 2004; Klima Ronen, 2020; Reason, 1998; Taylor, 2015; Vannini, 2018). The aim is to help and support teachers: a) to review meanings perspective with which they explain and understand their experiences; b) to detect the assumptions that guide their didactic and educational action, through the activation of experience-based methodologies (Fabbri, 2017).

Based on these considerations, a path of reflective analysis of past experiences has been proposed through group interviews, documentary analysis and reflective writing practices. The purpose of these activities is to identify critical issues and significant elements to be implemented for further evolution of didactical experimentation.

The data, represented by narrative reports both in written and oral form, were organized through ATLAS.ti software (Version 9.0.7, 2021) to set up and facilitate the analysis and synthesis process. Thematic analysis was used as the main method of qualitative analysis, in order to offer a summarize key features of teachers' narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Qualitative coding and descriptive themes development were carried out inductively, allowing them to emerge directly from the data (Saldana, 2013).

The thematic analysis process has led to define three main themes:

a) *Didactic and educational action*. It describes how teachers' educational and didactic practices have been rethought following the Distance Learning experience.

b) *Professional development*. Outlines how the experiences gained during the pandemic event and the Distance Learning have redefined the ways in which teachers interpret their role and function.

c) *Project evolutions*. The theme delineates the significant elements of didactic experimentation that need to be implemented for further design development.

Qualitative data analysis depicts teachers aware and focused on the transformations that the educational-didactic practices occurred during the Distance Learning and capable to identifying further evolutions of didactic and educational experimentation.

Emerging elements: teaching restructuring and reflective processes

All the team teachers have fully participated and collaborated to the proposed activities, through reflective analysis process. The reflection devices allowed them to stop and rethink the principles and purposes of their actions. Thematic analysis of the texts has brought out various elements that have characterized the renovation of teaching processes, one's professional development and the evolution of the experimental project. For each thematic nucleus, have emerged different codes that allow to describe the develop of professional transformation processes and personal experience.

Didactic and educational action. This theme is closely related to the urgency expressed by several teachers to make each pupil participate and active promoter of his own knowledge process, accompanying him in the maturation of the key competence “Learning to learn”.

This objective has oriented and redefined the project choices and practices towards a more experiential characterization of teaching which has involved pupils in laboratory activities and in the development of discovery learning

practices. Taking into account the needs of two pupils with disabilities, this approach has a close correlation with the promotion of each individual pupil well-being to which particular attention is paid both to promoting inclusion and relationships between peers both in terms of active involvement and in relation to learning processes. From the teachers' narratives emerged choices such as the learning path personalization, the use of cooperative strategies and the learning experience implementation through multimedia. The pandemic experience, indeed, has promoted the use of IT devices to implement knowledge paths also with the contribution of external experts, that have been invited to interact with the students in classroom, with video meetings.

Furthermore, Distance Learning has become part of everyday life to support inclusion processes and allow absent pupils to participate fully in school life.

Professional development. The disorienting event of the pandemic was seen as a restructuring phenomenon that concerns not only the teaching practices redefinition, but to their mastery, which was carried out with in-depth analysis and personal study, but also in sharing the methodological skills acquired with colleagues. This aspect has contributed to the construction of a more collaborative climate among teachers, even with those who work with children for a few hours a week or who have recently started their professional career within the team. In particular, from the reflections matured by the specialized teachers emerges clearly the sense of well-being and self-efficacy promoted by a professional action oriented towards joint ownership, the roles interchange with curricular teachers, that is realized in the belonging to an active "methodological and planning network". Thus, compresence has become a fundamental tool for achieving learning objectives and for promoting the interdisciplinary approach. From the various considerations it is clear that affectivity has been identified as an organizing element and promoter of professional development. Indeed, the lockdown experience and the distancing practices imposed in the return to the activities in the presence has been elements which highlighted the pupils need for support in learning of other affective expression manner. This critical issue encouraged teachers to reflect on their ways of interacting with pupils and also among students, has encouraged the design of additional meeting opportunities for the class with the creation of events organized for the entire school complex, or the participation at projects with after-school activities.

Project evolutions. From the different contributions it emerges how in the return to the activities in presence, the experimental didactics has required further planning measures. Among the various emerging aspects, it is clear that it has been necessary to rethink the setting and overcome the classroom concept. Indeed, thanks to the families' collaboration it has been set up an outdoor space for reading and a classroom for carrying out robotics laboratory activities. Furthermore, the families have been involved in the design and accomplishment of many activities and didactical field trips. A particular exemplification is a virtual journey at the dolphinarium, with the participation of some parents in the role of security controllers and ground and flight hostesses. From the beginning, parental involvement has been a key feature of didactic experimentation success, as it has gradually allowed to build up an educational partnership which, it has been weld during the lockdown period, has expressed its full potential in the school year 2020-21.

Patterns of teachers' professional development

The re-structuration of daily school life accomplished by teachers as they turn back to school from remote learning has become a qualified and clear sustain of the main idea that grounds the didactic experimentation carried out from the s.y. 2019/20. Indeed, the wellbeing is a fundamental objective that has been defined in an even broad way, embracing many dimensions of pupils', families' and teachers' experience (Mura, Zurru, & Tatulli, 2020; Mura, Zurru, Tatulli, et al., 2020).

During the scholastic year examined and notwithstanding the difficulties bound to the distancing, teachers have interpreted their role in terms of creative support for the pupils' growth. As a matter of fact, even with the needed modification for the pupils with disability, teachers have elaborated didactical activities that have stimulated and sustained the entire group class' learning experience. At the same time, the care and favours has been congruously led by teachers to the families and their demand for a clear role of effective support in their children's school life. The dynamics developed during the scholastic year 2020/21 can be placed – as well as the entire pedagogical plan that has characterized the previous period of

lockdown – in the context of a school institution that is distinguished by an organizational structure, which has carefully combined the essential, technical, and online provisions with a collective process of professionalism care of each individual.

The thematic analysis of documentary materials produced and collected during a narration reflective path of experience – developed throughout groups interviews, documentary analysis and reflective writing practices – lets emerge some interesting central elements. Didactics have been characterised as an active field of experimentation that allows teachers to develop creatively their own action. The reframing of classroom dynamics, although imposed by sociality restrictions, has become the opportunity to rethink the essential learning dimensions and, consequently, the teaching strategies. The pupils' needs, including those of them that show some difficulties, have been considered as experiential resource with which convincingly overturn traditional teaching strategies. Likewise, the more critical events marked by distance have served as an effective and convincing proof of the collaborative interaction between colleagues, rather than a mere obstacle to the classroom management. Indeed, the relationship between teachers has grown in a mature experience of co-titularity and interchangeability of roles among specialized and class teachers. Consequently, this interaction has led the didactical planning towards manifold opportunities of sharing experiences for the class and the entire school community. Moreover, the whole didactical experimentation with which teachers started in the first grade – before the pandemic – rather than stopping or continuing as a residual adaptation, it has been oriented towards development and evolution in a solicitous rethinking of practices and environments, constantly aimed at the realization of well-being conditions.

In a context of continuous collaboration between teachers and researchers, the reflective narration path based on revisiting and reworking the experience allowed to highlight the proactive ways in which teachers have restructured their teaching practice. It has been a long and difficult process, in a school year significantly characterized by swirling events. In this situation, the teachers' reflexivity did not emerge as a spontaneous fact, rather as a result of necessary suspension moments that the meeting and interaction with the researchers has represented. What has been reconstructed so far reveals an evident structural need for consultancy, solicitation, and accompaniment of teaching professionalism, so that they can effectively and consciously have an ongoing and regular experience of reflective practice.

In this sense, because the response to critical events that teachers are able to accomplish can become an opportunity for growth and restructuring of their professional identity, it is necessary to work on the development of skills in the didactics' work documentation, through a continuous training action supplemented by guided re-elaboration practices of the experience.

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