
Changing educational roles and competences during the COVID crisis. A case study from Turin, Italy

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1. Introduction

Approximately three fourths of the global student population of all school levels was obliged into online learning during the pandemic. At the same time, formal educational institutions, and relative academic staff, were not prepared for the immediate switch to online education. According to international research in 40 countries, 67% of teachers had never experienced online teaching and were thus lacking essential competences to convey learning content in other formats than previously applied in traditional settings (IN-DIRE, 2020b; OECD, 2020).

Physical school closure during the COVID pandemic and the adoption of distance education had a detrimental effect on students' learning for various reasons: they spent less time in learning; they experienced stressful conditions during their home confinement, which negatively affected their ability to concentrate on schoolwork; they changed the modalities of their interactions and this produced a lack of learning motivation (Di Pietro et al., 2020; Miljković, 2021).

The effects of COVID-19 on students' achievements were not equally distributed but varied according to the student's socio-econom-

ic status. The pandemic exacerbated educational inequality (McCrary, 2014), and it increased an already existing learning gap between native students and migrant students (Dustmann *et al.*, 2012; Armitage and Nellums, 2020). Migrant students from less advantaged backgrounds, in fact, experienced a larger decline in learning compared to their more advantaged counterparts. Many of them did not have access to relevant learning digital resources and did not have a suitable home learning environment. Additionally, many of them did not receive as much support from their parents as their more advantaged counterparts did.

During the emergency period, inequality in socio-emotional skills also increased. Children from lower socio-economic status were exposed to a more stressful home environment than their peers from higher socio-economic status and parents from more advantaged backgrounds were better equipped in terms of socio-emotional skills to handle problems emerging during a long confinement period.

While the majority of research focused on the losses suffered by students, the pandemic had an impact also on the relationships between

teachers and parents, on in-family relations, and on the relationships between educational figures in formal and non-formal settings.

The demarcation of formal and non-formal education increasingly blurred during the COVID crisis, which forced a (re)allocation of roles to all players in the educational field, as previously negotiated responsibilities had been completely shifted. Thus formal 'in-family' instruction outsourced schooling and extra-curricular activities mostly to the home context. Roles of caretakers and task descriptions for professional educators were thus altered in a way that taught us about the fast pace of competences and the true necessity of continuous learning (Moroni *et al.*, 2019).

These changes are therefore very important, because the relationship between teachers and parents as well as intra-family relationships and between teachers and non-formal educators had a combined effect on students' learning outcomes, their well-being and their future possi-

bilities. All the above-mentioned considerations are enough for considering how exceptional has been the pandemic experience across the globe, in Europe and in Italy too, a context on which the paper focuses on.

Indeed, in our research, adopting the point of view of teachers and educators, we explored how educational relationships with immigrant students changed and how these changes have impacted their cognitive and emotional skills in a specific Italian context. We build our arguments on the data collected in micro case studies carried out in spring 2020 in formal and non-formal educational contexts in Northern Italy.

In the first part we introduce our theoretical references, we present our study context and our methodology, then we discuss the evolved relational dynamics in formal and non-formal settings, and we conclude discussing opportunities for future collaborations among the different actors involved in the daily educational scenario.

2. Schools, families and non-formal education for immigrant children

2.1 The complex parents – teachers relationship

Various scholars have focused their research on the links between school-family relationships, migrant children's well being in school settings and their academic success (Carreón *et al.*, 2005; Mapp and Henderson, 2002).

Teachers and immigrant parents have often divergent ideas on educational relationships and this prevents them from active participation and co-education. Parents may have uneasy experiences with their children's teachers; they do not always feel completely free or entitled to express themselves (Adair and Tobin, 2008; Hadley and De Gioia, 2008); they believe that they are called by the teachers only about their

children's behavioural or learning problems, always blamed on faults in the parents. Many parents avoid interfering with school or they choose to stay on the sidelines because they do not have the words to express what they think (Vanderbroeck *et al.*, 2009). Language difficulties and cultural differences sometimes cause trivial misunderstandings; if these misunderstandings are prolonged over time, they produce a parents' detached attitude towards educational institutions and on the other side they confirm teachers' stereotyped image of immigrant parents (Silva, 2004). The teachers, on the other hand, feel frustrated by their relationships with families, they feel vulnerable and they express a sense of helplessness (Saft and Pianta, 2001; Ozmen *et al.*, 2016).

In our study, it emerges that the pandemic has changed these relationships, redefining the role of teachers and of immigrant parents, the modalities of communication and, in some cases, enhanced each other's images. Furthermore, other family members acquired a role in the educational relationship, like older siblings or other cohabiting relatives.

2.2 The formal and non-formal education nexus

The learning outcomes of immigrant students are strictly related to the development of their socio-cultural skills. Validating their competencies and recognising their academic and soft skills within non-formal learning environments ease their integration and participation outside of school hours (Colardyn and Bjornavold, 2004). Various studies have explored measures that encourage young people to participate in the local community and in wider social work and assessed the roles that organisations play in providing non-formal education (Yeasmin *et al.*, 2022). On the other side, non-formal educational organizations could support schools with various activities, fundamental for immigrant students' integration and wellbeing.

Non-formal educational organizations can be an important bridge between immigrant fam-

ilies and the school because it is often easier for immigrant parents to communicate with educators than with teachers. Often, in these organizations, there are people of the same cultural or religious backgrounds, and parents feel free to share their doubts or their concerns about their children's education. Another important aspect that characterizes non-formal educational contexts is the relationship between peers. Non-formal educational contexts favour interaction with other young people: as essential for the development of positive self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of identity. Youngsters can teach each other and make improvements together. The cooperation principle is also central within the classroom, where the high scores of classmates can motivate the student (through competition or social influence) to work harder (Sacerdote, 2011). Furthermore, non-formal educational activities play a central role in helping young people to acquire social skills that they could transfer within the classroom and which have important implications for their future personal and professional growth (Goodman *et al.*, 2015).

Non-formal educational organizations, as it emerges in our study, acquired a renewed relevance during the pandemic because, during school closures, they continued to provide online and offline assistance to immigrant students and to their families.

3. Our study context and the methodology

In our research we selected 3 public institutions, one elementary school and two middle schools, located in the city of Turin, in the Piedmont Region, in Northern Italy. Furthermore we investigated a parish club, as a privileged learning setting that promotes opportunities combining targeted socialization and education (Garelli, 2007). This parish club collaborated in various ways, during the pandemic, with the 3 state schools.

The Turin case is particularly interesting for the study of educational dynamics that concern migrant student population and that have been affected by the pandemic.

Turin is the third city in Italy for the percentage of foreign residents, after Rome and Milan. As of 1 January 2021, there were in Turin 131,256 foreign residents, i.e. 15.15% of the whole resident population. After the peak in

2012 (142.000), in 2013 the number of foreigners decreased and has stagnated since then, as a consequence of the economic crisis which started in 2008 and has particularly hit the Piedmont Region. At the same time, a growing share of the immigrant residents is increasingly integrating in local society, as demonstrated by the data on the school population. In the last two decades, increasing numbers of immigrant youth have brought about profound modifications in the local educational system. In 2020-2021, there were 19,898 foreign students, 19.13% of the total student population in Turin: with 31.3% of them from Romania, 16.5% from Morocco, 7.5% from Peru, 6.50% from China, and 5.5% from Egypt. The growth observed over the past years is mostly explained by the increasing presence of foreign students born in Italy (13% of the total).

Although there is a predominance of foreigners enrolled in primary school level, their presence in the upper secondary school is also relevant, with significant numbers enrolled in high schools with academic generalist orientation, as well as in technical-oriented schools and in vocational training offered by local schools organized at the regional level (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca – Ufficio Scolastico Regionale per il Piemonte, 2021).

All the educational settings we investigated are located in popular neighbourhoods, characterised by a rather significant presence of newly arrived and long-term migrants with a share up to 33% of foreign students (Ricucci, 2021). In these neighbourhoods we observe an urban super diversity, that is a “diversification of diversity” in the everyday social interactions (Creese and Blackledge, 2018). Recent migrations have brought not only more ethnic groups and nationalities but also a multiplication of significant variables, such as gender, age differences, social class differences, legal status. Education systems and especially schools can be considered micro-images of all these diversities and the social effects of the super diversity play a role in both learning and teaching. The super diversity is still regarded in many Italian contexts as exceptional and education systems are still based on the assumption of homogeneity as normal in a (school) popula-

tion. Thus, they make difference look like disadvantage or, in the worst case, they turn difference into disadvantage (Gogolin, 2011).

The elementary school is located in Northern Turin, in one of the most diverse and foreign populated neighbourhoods in the city. It has 70 foreign students (33% of the total), and 45 foreign students born in Italy (21% of the total). The first middle school analyzed is not far from the elementary school, 94 foreign students (25% of the total) and 56 foreign students born in Italy (15% of the total). The parish club is also located Northern Turin. Out of school hours it is attended by around 200 children and adolescents, 30% of which are foreigners.

The second middle school is located in Southern Turin, in a popular neighbourhood with medium immigration, mostly long-term migrants. It has 165 foreign students (20% of the total) and 90 foreign students born in Italy (11% of the total).

Between March and May 2020, we met a total of 12 educators and teachers and we focused the interviews on their changing educational roles and competences during the COVID crisis⁹.

We asked them to present their educational institutions, the specificities of immigrant students and of their families and to discuss three central points: how their relationship with parents has changed during the pandemic; how intra-family relations changed; what pedagogical tools they have adopted and how their students' learning has been influenced by these tools, in a positive or negative sense.

All interviews were conducted in Italian, recorded and transcribed. We are aware to provide a partial view of the educational relationship, because we did not have the opportunity to

⁹ The Italian Ministry of Education has invested a lot of funds to help schools in facing problems generated by the pandemic. Ministerial Decree No. 187 in March 2020 and the following one, No. 155 in November 2020 allocated resources for providing digital platforms and tools, sustaining network connectivity and training school personnel in middle and high schools. In the city of Turin, additional funds were invested in virtual classrooms to allow digital teaching even for primary school students. Electronic devices, books and educational kits were also purchased by teachers and granted on loan to fragile students. All these three schools benefited from these extraordinary measures but the provision of equipment alone did not solve the major problems that emerged during the pandemic.

compare the views of teachers and of educators with those of parents. However, the data collected provide a complex and articulated picture of educators who found themselves at the forefront

of managing educational relationships during the pandemic. In further research we intend to complete the picture, exploring also the point of view of immigrant parents.

4. New forms of communication and new relational dynamics

According to the already available literature on the topic, the interviewed teachers referred to two major categories of immigrant parents that represent a continuum from total delegation to continuous interference. They related thus to parents who never interfered with teachers' educational choices, but who were at the same time absent in problem-solving situations. This scenario has been rather often discussed also by educators of the parish club.

On the other hand, teachers reported on parents who acted rather intrusively and continually interfered in teachers' decisions.

The family composition, the socio-cultural and economic background of each nucleus plays a significant role for the relationship established with educational institutions and thus devolved power by parents for the education of their children.

"Many children we see every day are not culturally emancipated, and this forces them into a path that is not in line with their potentials. (...) So, the objective here is to make up for the shortcomings in their families to act as a crutch ... they are missing pieces, but it is not their responsibility. Our job is to make up for those shortcomings so they can aim for important milestones in their life like everybody else." (PR, educator oratorio).

This educator provided a description of parents not interested at all in the education of their children and pointed out the compensatory

role played by his educational institutions. What the educator defines as a lack of cultural emancipation can rather be traced back to a difficult cultural and linguistic communication between educators and immigrant parents.

Nevertheless, there are parents with a rather stark disinterest about the educational activities of their children and who have only minor concern in discussing their progress or barriers in the daily pre-Covid proceedings – this, in turn, questions the actual role of educators and the actual range of provided educational services.

"We are wondering how we can restore full parenthood to them in order to prevent them from a total delegation to us for the education of the kids. They are their children, they've put them into this world, and they should exercise paternity and motherhood on all levels. Our task should be to act as a support, but not as a substitute." (PR, educator oratorio).

During the lockdown periods and with the introduction of online distance learning "parents were thus actually constrained for the first time to really watch their children" (educator oratorio).

One of the major challenges on educational level was represented by the altered spatial conditions, which implied the change of learning methods, contents and instruments. Accordingly, the school context was brought into the homes and private, sensitive issues entered the formal

education sphere. Thus, parents had the opportunity to be present at all the lessons, which altered the two-way student-teacher relationship to a triangle relation that involved also the caretaker.

“Before it was just us teachers with the students. During the pandemic an exclusive educational space was also invaded by parents. And that’s not good.” (MD, middle school teacher).

Consequently, several teachers reported the gradual development and alteration of expectations and hence even more delegations towards the teaching staff.

“Parents expected us teachers to be able to answer all their fears. They considered school the only safe place in a situation of total uncertainty that they were experiencing everywhere. They feared that their children would have cognitive losses and that, by staying at home, they would waste their time in front of the computer. They asked us: do not abandon our children. They did not realize that we teachers were in a very, very difficult moment, like them.” (MD, middle school teacher).

Due to the rising affective bond between families and the schooling institution, the teacher was thus perceived by several families as a rather close figure and often involved in issues that went beyond the academic level of the students, but also tackled everyday family problems:

“We teachers, through the DAD, entered their houses and they entered our houses. They saw us with different eyes and for this reason a more intimate relationship was created. A Pakistani dad asked me to stay close to his little girl because he was afraid of losing her. Another Moroccan father told me to pray a lot and told me that he was praying for me and for our class.” (SM, primary school teacher).

According to this teacher, during the pandemic the emotional distances between teachers and parents have shortened and this fact improved not only communication between school

and families but also between foreign parents and their children. Foreign parents with low language skills were the most disadvantaged in the online relationships and had the most difficulty supervising their children. In these cases, intermediation by other family members was fundamental. Teachers observed changing relationships among parents constrained to work at home due to lockdowns and thus able to assist their children with school activities.

“There are some students who, during online teaching, even improved because for the first time they had their parents by their side. They gained self-confidence. For example, there is this Romanian girl who had many cognitive problems before the pandemic. Her mother was at home and supervised her very carefully; this mother, whom I had never met at school, talked to me to understand her daughter’s problems.” (ES, primary school teacher).

Other than improving the communications between teachers and parents, changing in-family dynamics also provided for an increased cooperation between siblings as the older ones often became tutors and mentors for younger brothers and sisters:

“Zebida is a fifth-grade Moroccan girl and the oldest of seven siblings. She understood by herself how to do distance learning, and she taught the two younger brothers who are in second and third grade.” (CT, primary school teacher).

The teachers also observed how, in some cases, the parents of different students improved the cooperation between them to cope with the common problems of their children. Immigrant parents, who faced more difficulties in understanding the teachers’ instructions, were helped by Italian parents.

“The parents helped each other a lot. They used whatsapp groups to circulate information and to reach parents who risked being left behind. This is something that we did not expect: the pandemic has strengthened the collaboration

and solidarity between different families.”
(CT, primary school teacher).

Cooperation between schools, non-formal education institutions and families has been fundamental in addressing both technological and learning problems.

In order to encounter apparent economic and socio-cultural lacunas of numerous families in need living in Turin a group of devoted educators put in place initiatives to sustain students with their studies during the second lockdown period at the end of 2020.

“Many of them had technical difficulties with the internet or were missing appropriate devices. Moreover, we noticed their closure, almost a refusal, in the face of every school initiative. Maybe also because sharing a house with several other brothers, perhaps as old as them or older, and thus also forced into distance learning. Sometimes they have houses so small that it is almost impossible to manage several people at the same time there. Or even just the stay-at-home mom who is used to clean and be by herself all day, hence there is the vacuum cleaner and the cooking, regardless if children have to follow lessons or not.” (ML, educator oratorio).

Accordingly, students were provided with technical devices, pedagogic-educational skilled staff and appropriate facilities and grouped with their peers to learning teams. Other than learning benefits and increased motivation to follow their lessons, the educators observed that on the one hand the strong existing socio-emotional needs were further pronounced during the pandemic. However also the competence building of soft skills from the students they had hosted for the distance lessons was apparently stimulated. Accordingly, the involved pupils appreciated the organized, collaborative and co-creative learning context that emphasized respectful, empathic and tolerant relations between the learners.

In this case non-formal educators provided didactic and emotional support, essential to encounter parents' and children's needs. In other cases, non-formal educational organizations coordinated directly with schools to closely monitor pupils most at risk of dropping out throughout the pandemic period. In addition to organizing meetings with students on digital platforms, educators went to visit students at home when allowed, providing material aid and study support, while also maintaining communication with teachers.

5. New pedagogical tools and their impact on the socio-emotional skills and learning outcomes

Online teaching, in the first period of the pandemic, was managed above all through the attempt to reproduce, digitally, the existing educational dynamics. Synchronous lessons were privileged over asynchronous activities and used the approach of frontal lessons above all.

“In the first months of pandemic, our commitment as teachers was not to lose contact with

the students. We did not have time to come up with a new method, we simply moved the classroom online. Our priority was that all students were able to connect, see and hear each other”. (SM, primary school teacher).

Accordingly to teachers of elementary schools in Turin, collaborative learning at distance at the beginning was very complicated,

as they experienced difficulties in alternating speakers, in sustaining verbal exchange between students and in stimulating all students within the class during the online lessons. It's been evidenced by most respondents that the pandemic had a profound psychological impact especially on fragile students and those with complex family backgrounds. Several teachers noted that students were acting online more passively; they had lost the habit of being together and listening to each other:

"When they returned to school in September I had 22 individuals in front of me, not a group. Everyone felt isolated from the others" (CT, primary school teacher).

Didactic contents chosen for the online learning in the first period of the pandemic prioritised conventional and teacher-centric material, such as textbooks, online contents available from textbooks or own digitally produced material ad hoc for the lessons. Only a very low share of material had been produced or co-created by the students themselves.

The resulting evident and immense clash of needs and according competences entailed a re-definition of hard and soft skill sets needed in the newly and ad hoc created global educational space. It rapidly turned out that hard skills were not in tune with needed soft skills to overcome destabilizing socio-emotional circumstances (Giovannella *et al.*, 2020), especially because social and emotional skills of children were the most affected during the lockdown period(s) throughout 2020.

The interviewed teachers highlighted differences related to the age of the students. According to them, during the distance learning secondary school students showed slight improvements on some soft skills, such as collaboration and self-regulation, while, on the other hand, in the younger student groups, distance interaction led to a worsening of soft skills.

On the other hand, the online teaching brought out skill gaps of students who were continuously penalized by traditional and standardized teaching and learning methods. Accordingly, interviewed teachers confirmed that for instance

students with dysgraphia were more comfortable and advantaged in their learning process when using computers or similar technical devices. Students with migratory background who learned or were used to another literary language or had oral communication barriers instead benefitted from online lessons and a technology-mediated relationship.

"I have a Chinese student, he does not speak Italian well and he is very shy. Before the pandemic, when he was in class, he was always in the shade of the others. However, during the pandemic, he communicated quite a lot in the WhatsApp group, he was much more active and involved." (SV, primary school teacher).

The cooperative learning is one of the opportunities provided by the new technologies. Online sharing environments have been used by some teachers as repositories rather than collaboration spaces; and informal platforms (e.g. WhatsApp) fostered one-way communication flows, rather than relationships. Other teachers, otherwise, have made the most of the potential of this method:

"A nice pedagogical novelty was that of exchanging materials through digital platforms such as classrooms. After the first few months I began to make better use of digital tools. For example, I started to share photographs or films that the students could watch after the end of the synchronous lesson. Thanks to the sharing platforms, for the first time, students have begun to do things together, to cooperate, to exchange materials with each other. This was a positive thing but was important to know how to coordinate it." (SM, primary school teacher).

These and other potential opportunities and chances that derived from the concerning situation in the educational sphere during COVID-19 are indeed corroborated by other researches and surveys that investigated teachers' perceptions on the impact of online lessons (INDIRE, 2020a; 2020b).

Accordingly, the experience with distance learning entailed new possibilities to stimulate student motivation and involvement as well as student autonomy in the learning processes through new forms of collaboration and new roles/responsibilities allocated to students' autonomy. In this vein, a rather interesting finding was the different, actually opposed, perception of teachers on how online learning altered the student motivation. In the INDIRE survey, it emerges that, whereas almost one third refer to a positive effect of online distance learning, similar percentages assessed no or negative effects on the student's involvement in the learning context. This implies that different methods as well as class compositions have significantly determined the potential benefits of this starkly changing learning environment.

Indeed, our interviewed teachers referred to new teaching methods and flipped-classroom models to engage with the rapidly changed learning environment and the evolved opportunities for innovative teaching that provided not only for new tools but also reorganized schedules:

"In the classroom students have to sit for a long time, listen in silence. Many students suffer from this frontal teaching. During online learning they were more relaxed, they did not feel the pressure." (MD, middle school teacher).

Accordingly, newly evolving learning and communication processes may therefore be beneficial if their potential is recognized to renew existing schemes and methods in order to favor a rebalancing of skill gaps rather than accentuating them.

"Online learning requires specific techniques that cannot be improvised. For example, you need to create small working groups and know how to associate students in these groups. You must know the weaknesses and potentials of each student: for example, an immigrant student with language problems, but with great graphic skills, can work with an Italian native speaker colleague, less inclined to work with images... Furthermore, distance learning is cyclical; it is not like frontal teaching. You have to return to the topics several times, you have to involve the students and ask them to bring some materials and then start by the material provided by the students" (MD, middle school teacher).

In conclusion, teachers and educators confirmed that online learning has changed not only relations with immigrant students and their parents, but also has an impact on their socio-emotional skills and learning outcomes. Positive results depend, in the first place, on the ability of teachers to adapt their methods to the new educational contexts.

6. Lessons learnt. Building an educational community is still the key

In the research framework of the lack of opportunities for supporting migrant families in crisis situations (Borgna, 2017; Tjaden and Hunkler, 2017) and the heterogeneous effect of the pandemic on families (Raghuram and Sondhi, 2022), our research showed to what extent the pandemic increased educational inequality, showing as pro-

nounced the interrelation between socio-economic capital and educational performance among students with different backgrounds (such as migration status and the socio-economic position of families).

The results of the investigations that we conducted in the educational institutions corrob-

orated the assumption that immediate action was needed to foster and promote the lifelong right of all learners to access high-quality and inclusive training opportunities (European Commission, 2018). This was particularly true when unexpected events occurred, thus requiring institutional settings to cope with the new challenges as they happened in 2020 with the first wave of the pandemic. The Italian educational context, since the very beginning of the enrolment of migrant students at school, introduced – at least in guidelines and government statements – and invited schools to take into account the emerging needs due to the arrival of students with various ethnic backgrounds, and with low or no proficiencies in English and heterogeneous school experiences (Mascheroni et al., 2021). However, this huge reality has been strongly affected by the unexpected shift from on-site to on-line lessons. Schools have had to react and rearrange their way of teaching, in several cases becoming themselves learners on how to use the new online platforms. In doing this, there was a lack of attention to the needs of those immigrant families more in difficulty due to socio-economic vulnerabilities and lack of language for reading the WhatsApp chat written in Italian as well as the emails.

Educators and teachers adopted various solutions, such as the provision of digital devices, new teaching methods, multimedia lessons, flipped-classrooms. These solutions had very different effects, which can be explained by taking into account the age of the students, their socio-economic conditions, and their family background. Our results confirmed that it was not possible to think of the same effective solutions for every child and in every educational setting, but in a context of such superdiversity it has been increasingly necessary to design educational interventions based on individual needs. One of the most relevant aspects is that the pandemic has promoted new forms of collaboration and new roles and responsibilities. These collaborative modalities involved not only students and educators but also parents and other key personnel. Indeed, the learning opportunities improved week-by-week thanks also to the involvement of social workers from NGOs and young volunteers belonging to various ethnic

associations who served as ‘natural cultural mediators’ improving a kind of cultural divide between parents and children within families. Children and parents faced problems in coping with the various challenges that emerged during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Among the various consequences, and close to those specifically linked to learning, the development of both social and emotional skills has been negatively affected in the last two years. Furthermore, the pandemic impacted on family relationships (between parents and children, the parental couple and siblings), cross-cultural relationships with peers in educational contexts (the lack of daily physical interactions at school) and relationships between families and teachers and/or educators, even though these peculiar interactions used to be under observation¹⁰ before the Covid-19 experience.

Covid 19 reminded us that migration processes usually involve challenges in inter-generational relations among families: children can interiorize social and cultural values in contrast to what their parents believed or how they behaved. Among these cultural challenges, language played an important role. Furthermore, the diffused use of ICTs and social media to communicate added a new challenge in the field of interactions, even across generations and across countries. Moving beyond the question of whether or not young individuals were highly skilled in using these technologies, the new technologies have been reshaping emotional ties between parents and children. This is typically occurring transculturally and transnationally in families at this time. The focus on immigrant families provides an opportunity to study how being closer and faster in touch than other migrants can hamper cultural distances and define intercultural misunderstanding, especially as far as emotions, feelings and expressions of intimacy are concerned. The empirical study presented here supports the perspective of the crucial importance of not leaving schools and teachers alone in coping with key educational challenges as those related to migrant children are. Indeed, it supports helping them to

¹⁰ Several studies indeed have pointed out the difficulties in involving migrant parents in school activities (Premazzi and Ricucci, 2013; Gabrielli et al., 2021).

be inserted at school and to successfully pursue the educational path presumed as a close collaboration among all actors involved in the educational scenario, and thus an intertwined dialogue at institutional and individual level (Baloche and Brody, 2017). Accordingly, students and families should be actively involved in the organization and conduction of formal and non-formal educational processes and therefore be in constant dialogue with teachers, educators, stakeholders and policymakers.

Additionally, collaboration and interaction within educational scenarios should also be transversal, and thus occur at the same levels. Hence, policymakers with diverse competence fields, teachers from different disciplines, parents of students with highly diversified backgrounds and students themselves should be patently encouraged to share best practices and to work out strategies to develop existing competences and build new ones in order to optimize the educational experience.

These collaboration and interaction patterns should be structured and benefit from different perspectives that may change during the dialogue. Accordingly, all actors should be enabled in order to be both trainer and trainee, to stimulate the acquisition, cultivation and transmission of competences.

Recalling Sayad (1999), the pandemic has had a 'mirror function': the health crisis is still showing critical issues in managing educational opportunities for all students. The lockdown months and the subsequent experiences of school organization in coping with the challenges of Covid infections among pupils are showing – again – the need to revise educational methods and tools for reducing learning inequalities. It is indeed an old issue, which requires to be addressed with much greater attention and updated methods, as well as the need for improving the nexus between formal and informal educational institutions and thus strengthening soft skills for students, parents and educational staff.

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