

Distance Educational Links: a qualitative study on the perception of kindergarten teachers

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Abstract

The outbreak of novel coronavirus infection that originated in 2020 resulted in the immediate closure of all Italian school services for several months. Children who attend ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) services have particularly suffered from not being able to take advantage of consolidated distance learning models specifically designed for them. The main priority was to re-establish the bond between them and the teachers so that the educational path they embarked on did not disappear from their daily lives. To this end, LEADs (Distance Educational Links) have been established in Italy, a new relational modality involving children, teachers, and families, who could rely exclusively on communication through digital devices. The research presented here explored what happened during the first lockdown phase, corresponding to the start of LEADs, and during the resumption of the school in presence. The study aimed to detect and record reactions, experiences, and changes in children, families, and teachers, with attention to new pedagogical and social practices and a main focus on the unprecedented use of technology as the primary tool to maintain the bond. IT devices revealed new potential as relational and educational resources, making them indispensable during emergencies, not only for basic communication but also for recreating the setting in which bonding occurs and is built. Bonding was possible even at a distance because technology supported it. The unprecedented involvement of families as educational partners, the rethinking of teachers' roles, and close collaboration among colleagues emerged as equally significant results.

KEYWORDS: Educational Links, Teacher Concerns, Qualitative Analysis, Infant School, Covid 19.

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1. Introduction

Since the beginning of March 2020, we have fallen into a condition of extreme uncertainty and we faced unprecedented health, political and social emergencies. At the end of February 2020, in Italy all educational services were abruptly shut down. The World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, has declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic. Since that moment, our lives have been drastically changed in every aspect, and in terms of

rhythm, time, space, relationships, distances (Scarpini, 2020).

Daily life, social relations, and pedagogical-didactic practices undergone transformations that forced educators and teachers to rethink roles, settings, methodologies, and teaching and learning tools. In particular, ECEC professionals had to modify their actions entirely, without being able to rely on tested systems of e-learning and distance learning, since educational links focused on presence are the fulcrum of the educational process in kindergarten. The Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent lockdown drastically changed the world and the experiences of children, who, enclosed in their own homes, were deprived of open spaces, contact with the outside world, nature, educators, and peers. Without any warning, they experienced a detachment from a context of daily habits and practices, that exhibited the symptoms of total eradication. The closure of the services deprived children of the possibility to continue their path of growth and learning. Opportunities for development and experiences generated by playing and exercising

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movement, suddenly vanished (Deluigi, Marino, 2020). Like everyone else, children experienced intense and sudden emotions such as sadness, fear, anger, but in a phase of life during which they are invited to open up to the world and to discover.

The emergency forced teachers to redesign the educational and care approach towards children, to try to respond effectively to the emerging needs. The main priority was to guarantee the right to establish meaningful relationships with peers and adults who are expected to provide protection and safety. Children are also entitled to play, to collect concrete experiences, so bringing the physical dimension back to the center of the learning process was also a major priority. Therefore, it was required to immediately find new ways to perpetuate the missing care relationships and to resume school-family dialogue (Gigli, 2020).

To avoid the risk of prolonged deprivation, education professionals questioned how to reconnect long-distance relationships. For primary and secondary school, an approach defined as Distance Learning (DaD) was used, while for the age group from zero to six years, an untested method was established. Conceived on the lockdown, it was called Distance Educational Links (LEADs). This definition was created because the educational aspect at this age is grafted onto the emotional and motivational bond. It is therefore a primary need to re-establish and maintain a bond between teachers and children, teachers and parents, teachers among themselves, parents among themselves (Commission for Childhood Integrated System Zero-six, 2020). Criticality was immediately found around emotional ties, a central aspect of education in kindergarten. Very young children need solid points of reference, stimuli, reassurance, serenity, protection, and acceptance of their uniqueness, to allow the promotion of their potential (Ceccacci, 2020). Education professionals tried to reinvent, in a few weeks, the educational relationship, to recover the severed emotional, social, and pedagogical bond. Never has an adjustment in educational theory and practice had to be so rapid, sudden, and intense.

In every crisis lies an opportunity: the educational services may explore alternative approaches that bring schools and homes closer together, and governments can pursue quality, equity and well-being starting from the youngest citizens (Gouédard et al. 2020).

The research I present here originated from the need to observe and monitor this epochal change. The study aimed to detect and record reactions, experiences, and changes in children, families, and teachers. We wanted to draw a map of the new pedagogical and social practices, with a particular focus on the tools used to maintain the bond. Since we cannot return to the world as it was before (International Commission on the Futures of Education, UNESCO, 2020), it was imperative to understand what was happening, in order to imagine the school of tomorrow and redesign the

educational future of children, considering limits, positive aspects and possible growth opportunities.

2. Background

2.1 ECEC services in the time of Coronavirus: the birth of LEADs

On May 6, 2020, the Commission for the Integrated System of Education and Instruction from Birth to Six, released the document Pedagogical Guidelines on Distance Education Links. A different schooling model for ECEC, based on the assumption that children's need for relationships has never failed, despite the emergency. This document aimed to stimulate educators to rediscover the value of teamwork, promote good practices for the care and education of children and strengthen the thread of relationships. The final goal pointed to maintain or reconstruct the bond made up of emotions, looks, voices, closeness, sharing, and complicity that constituted daily life before the emergency. (Commission Childhood Integrated System Zero-Six, 2020). LEADs came to life in the absence of the body, movement, embraces, in a virtual environment – an undefined space – in which bewildered teachers acted and looked for new ways of staying in touch with parents and children (*ibidem*) so that they would not feel alone in the absence of ordinary connection. Previously, families used to enter school bringing in their educational models, cultural roots, habits, and values. With LEADs, the school entered families and allowed parents, for the first time, to witness the relationships that teachers create with their children. Schools entered children's homes and homes entered educational services (Chierigato, 2020). LEADs required the mediation of family members, who became the sole point of reference for children, and new educational partners for teachers. A need to construct new meanings, organizational possibilities, and forms of participation emerged (Commission Infancy Integrated System Zero-sei, 2020). LEADs can be defined as a presence at a distance (*ibid.*), a contradiction that is made possible today through technological devices. With the birth of LEADs, projects were immediately activated to monitor this epochal change and the attempts made to maintain the bond through distance.

SIRD (Italian Society for Educational Research), a scientific board that associates university teachers and researchers in the field of educational research, promoted a national survey to initiate a comparison of the distance teaching methods adopted by schools and individual teachers during the lockdown period, between April and June 2020. The collected data show how the emergency required a reshaping of teaching models, involving especially preschool and elementary school professionals, through platforms, interactive

apps, virtual classrooms, and close collaboration with parents. (SIRD, 2020).

The study *Children and Lockdown*, the parents' word (Mantovani et al., 2020), was undertaken by the spin-off *Bambini Bicocca* in collaboration with the Department of Human Sciences for Education "Riccardo Massa" and the Italian Society of Pediatric Primary Care (SICuPP) of Lombardy and took place in July and August 2020. The sample examined nursery and preschool children and SmartWorking parents (Mantovani et al., 2020). The research aimed to collect data to understand the changes that occurred in the daily lives of children, to address actions of assistance, support, and multidisciplinary accompaniment (pediatric, and pedagogical) to families, during the phase of return to post-pandemic social life.

CREIF (Center for Educational Research on Children and Families of the University of Bologna), investigated ways to support families and strategies that schools set in motion to reach and support them (Chierigato, 2020). The field research was carried out in May and June 2020 and analyzed not only critical issues, but also strengths and positive aspects detected during the first phase of the emergency, aiming to trace and, subsequently, spread good educational practices based on the arose problems and needs.

Distance learning and the consequent newly shaped virtual environments pushed teachers and families to test themselves with new methods of teaching, communication, and, especially, relationships. Habits were suddenly overturned, and new priorities appeared, but also did discrepancies connected to our social and cultural system (Ardizzoni, Bolognesi, Salinaro & Scarpini, 2020). Rapidly dismay and disorientation gave way to adaptation, and attention was turned towards potential possibilities, and not only to what seemed to be lost, in a true act of resistance.

2. 2 From the disappearing classroom to the virtual classroom

The contemporary world, characterized by both real and virtual dimensions, witnesses the introduction of technological tools and electronic communication in every aspect of life. Technology has not only an informative or entertainment function, but it's a tool that modifies and shapes reality. The field of education is also pervaded by its influence and there's a rising wave of questions about epistemological approaches and psycho-pedagogical models involving it, investigating how an educational use of technologies and multimedia can contribute to the achieving of a pluralistic and inclusive education (Maragliano, 2019). Recently, research on the role, risks, and potential uses of digital media in early childhood has augmented, aiming to explore how children's environments have become increasingly permeated by digital technology (Knauf, 2016). The focus has been on how relationships

among children, families, and educators, in preschool settings viewed as micro-communities of practice, transform, and evolve with the introduction of technological devices. These studies highlight how the virtual expands the space of the real classroom. It is in the classroom that students meet, talk to each other, accomplish tasks, give presentations, play, read, listen, sing, talk, and eat snacks together. Online tools extend this space into the virtual sphere, but the classroom remains the reference point in the real and in virtual life (ibidem).

The effect of the pandemic was to completely disrupt this perspective, making the classroom a non-existent place for several months, with the virtual space being the only reality left. The classroom, a physical place, setting, and established microcosm, disappeared overnight, and with it an entire emotional, relational world vanished. In experiencing a place, we do not just occupy a physical space, but we attribute meanings to it, often affective and emotional ones. We organize the place and share it with others (Ceppi & Zini, 1998), so what has been lost with the pandemic is an entire universe of meanings. Children's daily lives were disrupted, and a cohabited universe disappeared without warning overnight. They found themselves living in homes with very different spaces, equipped with resources that weren't always entirely adequate. (Deluigi & Marino, 2020). Before the pandemic, research focused on the use of technology to support family engagement, to suggest ways to engage the family more, and then to model learning in the classroom (Zywica, 2016). With the arrival of the pandemic, the use of technologies was rethought in real-time to adapt them to the new emergencies, confirming, albeit, in a critical context, that school is, potentially, the greatest generator of demand for innovation, and therefore for digital evolution (PNSD, 2018).

3. Theoretical Framework

Childcare services for children from zero to six years of age are the first place of encounter with others outside the family. It is in this context that relationships with peers based on shared experiences and dialogue begin to be built and the sense of belonging to a community grows. The relational aspect always plays a crucial role: the center of any educational process is the human relationship between a student and a teacher (International Commission on the Futures of Education. UNESCO 2020). The teacher is at the same time a guide and a facilitator of learning in a continuous spiral process of co-construction of knowledge (Edwards, 2017), in which the teacher stimulates the thinking that comes from doing, supporting the formation of a meta-reflective and critical thinking, and teaching not only to learn but also to understand (Zecca, 2012). The teacher is a mediator on the didactic and affective-relational

level and creates a positive climate, acceptance, and a context in which differences are valued so that everyone can express themselves freely (Nigris et al, 2016), and meaningful learning takes place. An educational event is first of all a relational event that cannot be investigated outside the complexity of the relationship itself. For this reason, social relations are considered a fundamental element that contributes to the creation of cooperative contexts and widespread confrontation (MIUR, 2012). A positively rich relational climate allows the child to develop greater self-confidence and resistance to frustrating and tiring situations, leading him to observe, listen, explore the outside world and, consequently, acquire and construct meanings (Mantovani, 2004).

The educational alliance between school and families, which focuses on trust and exchange and makes it possible to grow together, is at the heart of the pedagogical reflection. A close relationship between the two contexts, focused on the child’s wellbeing, consents to get to know the specificities of each family’s reality. In the educational context, family refers not only to parents but also to grandparents, babysitters, and all the adult figures who support them. Studying the child involves at the same time studying the adult in relation to the child: the relational dimension, therefore, emerges as a central and crucial object of investigation.

With the sudden discontinuation of school attendance, the school-child-family bond has been profoundly transformed and has been relegated entirely to the contribution of technology as a relational tool that is not accessory, but fundamental, generating new study themes to be explored.

4. The research

Once LEADs were established, observing and analyzing how the relationship between educational

services, children and families was being recalibrated become a priority, especially in the light of mandatory use of technologies as the only possible connection.

The research entitled LEADs at pre-school was therefore initiated and carried out in two phases, the first took place from March to May 2020 and the second in January 2021. The survey involved teachers of pre-schools in the Lombardy region of Italy.

The research was a qualitative field study, focusing on changes in the relationship between children, families, and teachers, aiming to understand what had happened to this relationship during the period of closure of the educational services.

At first, the main objective was to understand how the schools had reacted to the unexpected closure. We were interested in how they acted to maintain the educational bond with the children and their parents, reshaping the educational project and introducing the use of technological tools. At the same time, we explore the experiences of those involved, to understand the strategies implemented to reach all the children, especially the most fragile ones, to maintain continuity, frequency, and quality of the relationship.

In a second moment, with the resumption of the activities in presence, we wanted to observe how the relationship had been rethought in the light of this experience. We investigated the reorganization of the services and how the professional role of the teacher had been recalibrated. Critical issues, strengths, and positive aspects were analyzed, as well as possible opportunities for growth. The research was participatory and shared by the teachers, who personally felt the urgency of answering new questions and seeking solutions.

5. Research method and tools

The research methodology adopted was a quality approach. We gathered data through the conduction of

THEMATIC CATEGORIES

Phase 1	Phase 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Strategies activated by teachers at the beginning of the pandemic ○ Critical issues that emerged during lockdown ○ Teachers' emotional experience in the first phase of the lockdown ○ Perception of the emotional experience of parents and children ○ Positive participation of families in the attempt before and during the first weeks of LEADs ○ Collaboration between teachers ○ Children's feedback and documentation ○ Evaluation and self-assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Teachers' emotional experience at the beginning of the pandemic and its evolution during LEADs ○ Teachers' difficulties with new communication modes ○ Evolution of strategies and choices activated during LEADs ○ Criticism of LEADs ○ Teachers' reasons for low family participation in LEADs ○ Positive participation in LEADs ○ Reaction to LEADs by children with BES ○ Collaboration between teachers during the lockdown and at the resumption of in-presence activities ○ Difficulties in teachers' use of technology and preparation of digital materials

Table 1 - Categories emerged from the first phase and used to organise the focus groups during the second phase.

focus groups, an effective method to obtain feedback, to elaborate qualitative results, to give rise to research hypotheses, to transpose complex information regarding the motivations, habits, experiences, knowledge, and expectations of a target, and to probe in-depth specific themes (Stuart & Shamdasani 2014) in numerous fields of social research. The focus group technique provides in-depth information in a relatively short period of time. It represents a useful method to explore in-depth opinions, attitudes, or behaviors of a certain community and to investigate the attitudes underlying human thought and behavior (Trincherò, 2004).

The data collected were analyzed using phenomenological approach, leading to interpretative results.

The focus groups were formed by a group of preschool teachers located in the Lombardy region, who collaborate with the traineeship office of the degree course in Primary Education Sciences at the University of Milan-Bicocca.

Educators with similar experience, position, and background were selected: 18 teachers and two headteachers belonging to 18 schools for the first phase, 11 teachers belonging to the same school complex for the second phase. The socio-cultural and economic situation of the reference area is homogeneous and has a similar demographic distribution of users. All the teachers were selected as privileged witnesses of this research because of their more than ten years of experience, together with their considerable expertise in the field of education for three to six-year-olds.

The research project was designed to explore two distinct moments of the pandemic emergency.

5.1 The first phase of the research

The first phase of the research took place between March and May 2020, the period corresponding to the first Italian lockdown, and involved 18 teachers and two headteachers from 18 schools (state and charters, both municipal and managed by private companies). We held 3 focus groups. In this phase of the research, a monitoring assessment was carried out based on an open narrative of the teacher's experience, focusing on the practices they were implementing. Therefore, a precise outline with structured questions was not defined. These 3 focus groups promoted a reflection on the experience at the heart of the pandemic, i.e., before the Ministry issued the LEAD document on May 6, 2020.

5.2 The second phase of the research

The second phase of the research took place in January 2021, the month corresponding to the resumption of in-presence activities and involved 11 teachers from the

kindergartens of Fino Mornasco (Como), engaged in two focus groups. This second phase was designed to monitor the evolution of topics and issues that emerged during the first survey, in the light of teaching activities resumed and the LEADs document. It was a qualitative study focused on the theme of educational links at a distance, to reveal all its facets in detail.

5.3 Procedure and data collection

All focus groups, in both research phases, took place on the Google Meet platform, according to recent restrictions due to the containment measures of Covid-19 infection. The online meetings were recorded to keep track of the verbal exchanges. They were then fully transcribed following the ethical regulations for social research and analyzed using Atlas.ti software, to carry out a qualitative thematic analysis (Kuckartz, 2014). Data were organized in thematic macro-categories, used to categorize the results at the end of the first phase and also as a targeted outline to sort out the second phase of research.

Tables were then created to collect data, divided into four columns, containing: the name of the teacher, in the transcription of the focus, one the short answers, and, in the last one, the corresponding category.

In the second phase of the project, to deepen optimally the theme of LEADs and to receive complex information about motivations, habits, experiences, knowledge, and expectations of the target, an outline was elaborated in the form of three open questions. It was used during the interviews and re-modulated to adapt the explorations to the discussion in progress, to probe in-depth some specific themes.

Below are the three questions proposed during the focus groups of the second phase of the research:

- Thinking about Distance Educational Links (LEADs) and your professional experience during the lockdown, what are the first words that come to mind? Everyone can write them down and then we will talk about it.
- Considering that the screen puts a distance with our interlocutor, what strategies have you put in place to maintain the bond between teacher and child?
- Were you able to reach all the children? Can we explore this issue further?

6. Results

The crucial goal of LEADs, which was highlighted several times by all the teachers participating in the focus groups and which agrees with conclusions stated in the research *Children and lockdown* (Mantovani et al., 2020), was to recreate the emotional bond with the children and re-establish relationships that had suddenly been broken. The compromised rapport

represented the major criticality, underlined by the need and urgency to reach all the children. Many difficulties, also due to the digital divide and absenteeism due to conditions of socio-economic and cultural disadvantage exacerbated by the emergency, were reported.

In both phases of the research, all the teachers found themselves having to redesign their educational paths promptly, to reach children quickly, trying not to exclude anyone, through digital technologies. In addition to analysing the difficulties experienced by the teachers and the concerns about coming back in presence, the survey examined the quality of the experiences pointing out strengths.

The data collected show that one of the main difficulties was the required use of technology. Even though digital skills are included in the European Parliament's Recommendation 2018, as the key to using technology with familiarity and critical thinking, most teachers in ECEC services have never before received adequate training in digital skills. Teachers reconsidered digital tools as indispensable for the maintenance of the educational relationship. That involved a complete change of perspective. In fact, until then, they considered technology and digital devices as unusable with such young children. The initial disorientation was replaced by an adaptation and educators looked at the potential of this critical opportunity.

The strategies used evolved based on the feedback the teachers were able to capture from parents and through careful observation of the children. All the teachers stated that one of the aspects most affected was the relationship between peers, which was difficult to enjoy through a screen at such young age. The little ones forced in front of screens exhibited the need to restore the dimension of the body and movement through dedicated activities, as well as the necessity to play.

Another aspect raised by this research was the importance of facilitating the inclusion of all children without distinction. In both phases, the development of specific modes of intervention for children with special needs stimulated their participation and contributed to the emergence of skills never observed before. All the teachers stated that they found great co-responsibility on the part of the families, especially in the cases of children with special needs, as similarly stated in the SIRD research (SIRD, 2020).

All the teachers participating in the research wanted to highlight the extraordinary collaboration experienced among themselves. The mutual confrontation and the network created between the different educational realities were crucial not only for the success of the planned activities but, above all, for the encouragement during those challenging times. This is also fully confirmed by the SIRD research, in which an extremely positive relationship between colleagues and management was highlighted.

7. Discussion and conclusions

Tragically, the pandemic has provided an opportunity for researchers, teachers, family members, as well as students at all levels of education, to rediscover a familiar aspect of technology in the light of newly emerging educational needs: its versatility as a relational tool. It could be a bridge to ensure the continuity of ties in the educational context. We witnessed a sudden acceleration that was also a transformation. An unprecedented task emerged within the relational dynamics in the educational field: that of maintaining the relationship, to prevent the bond from evaporating. Before the pandemic,

ECEC teachers perceived technologies as a social and information tool (school blogs, chats) unrelated to teaching, relegating any e-learning use to the school of children aged 6 and over. After the first lockdown, they discovered the educational value of digital tools, perceived as the glue of the relationship during the emergency, considering them indispensable for teaching and learning even for the youngest children. The virtual class becomes the only possible scenario for maintaining the bond with children. Before the pandemic, this was unthinkable, because in ECEC everything was delegated to the in-presence relationship that absorbed all the relational, emotional, and communication needs. For the early childhood services, a horizon of didactic and educational possibilities has opened up that had never been imagined before.

We are aware that this was an emergency teaching method since no technological tool can replace the educational relationship and physical interaction in the presence, especially because of the lack of the bodily dimension, a fundamental vehicle for relationships. (Foti, 2020). Computers or cellular devices cannot constitute a substitute for a professional kindergarten teacher who provides meaningful mediation in the kindergarten, which is mediation for verbal and emotional meaning through movement and guided activity. The virtual space cannot take the place of the kindergarten space, which is tailored to the children's age and enables a tangible and real experience. Nevertheless, we are required to be prepared for extreme situations (Alezra, 2020).

However, teachers have experienced how technologies and computer devices represent additional possibilities and new models of interaction that can be included in the communication with families and used to expand the relationship with children beyond the emergency. The link was possible even at a distance, the technology supported it. This awareness and the potential it represents are one of the most interesting results of this study. In this regard, the need to ensure the inclusion of all children has also shed light on the main limitation of this resource, represented by the unequal accessibility,

highlighting the risk of exclusion caused by the digital divide, which has become dramatically relevant.

As far as younger children are concerned, we have witnessed an unprecedented call to arms: families have become essential partners during the lockdown. They had to take an active role in helping their children. They became indispensable intermediaries in the virtual extension project since children could not be delegated the responsibility of response and participation, as was the case for students in higher orders. Such active participation of the families led to exchanges of information but, above all, to support also on a psychological and emotional level. The family discovered itself to be an important part of the learning setting.

The positive participation especially of pupils with special needs, who have benefited from the situation of reduced social noise finding a space in which they can emerge and make their voices heard, opens up new scenarios to expand the possibilities of ever more careful inclusion, which we hope will be explored.

The dimension of confrontation and collaboration between teachers, which was crucial during the crisis, has imposed itself as a new standard, creating a need to increase dialogue and boost teamwork, which cannot be ignored in the future, and which must become a theme for rethinking the way we experience reciprocity between colleagues.

School is a vibrant center of social development that encourages people to see education as a resource in life. Sharing is the basis of a common path for families, pupils, and teachers. School is the contest where we can find the strength to deal with the problems related to the pandemic, to bring back to the center of attention the importance of relationships (Mazzeo, 2020).

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