Distance learning for headmasters: Designing inclusive school policies for young people

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Abstract

In an increasingly complex reality, in order to respond to the educational needs of the younger generations, it is necessary to promote training opportunities for teachers and managers that can constitute an added value with considerable impact on the life of educational institutions. School leaders are recognised as key figures in structuring inclusive educational contexts that can influence the development of young people. The University of Florence has set up in the academic year 2020/2021 a Master's degree course in *Organisation and Management of Educational Institutions in Multicultural Contexts* with FAMI funds reserved only for school and technical managers operating throughout Italy with distance learning activities. The course has professionally qualified the managers by establishing new models for regulating the relationship between the quality of learning and the development of the quality of teaching, which has enabled the launch of a process of co-responsibility between the school and the territory.

Keyword: headmasters manager, inclusive education contexts, master, distance learning activities, school and territory

1. From criticality as an emergency to educational design

Today, learning at school is just one of the many educational experiences

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that children and adolescents have, and acquiring specific skills often does not require a school setting. Nevertheless, the academic functions are now less well defined than when the state school was founded. So the modern school must define its aims starting from the pupils, taking into account the singularity of their individual path and the possibilities offered by the network of relations that bind them to the family and society.

For this reason, today's school pursues a dual line of education that develops both vertically and horizontally. The vertical axis proposes an education that can continue throughout life, an aptitude for long-life learning; on the other hand, the horizontal axis seeks careful collaboration between the school and extracurricular players (the family first and foremost) to weave an educational network on which the pupil can rely.

Teaching the rules of living and coexistence is a task that is even more inescapable for schools today than it was in the past; the cases in which families encounter great difficulties in carrying out their educational role are more common than ever (MIUR, 2012).

Schools cannot interpret this task as a simple response to an emergency. We can and must not approach the stratification of educational needs as an exceptional event requiring unusual activities to manage it. Responding to the continual demands of the various spheres of society cannot be dealt with utilising individual actions. That would result in a chaotic multiplication of micro-projects affecting the most disparate aspects of students' lives, resulting in fragmenting the educational process into a myriad of different vademecum whose effectiveness is doubtful. By defining a plethora of specific behavioural rules, educators end up turning into the mother of Hans from the Brothers Grimm, who blindly insists on providing indications on what to do in certain situations without trying to develop a critical sense in the child that can guide him in the adventure of life. The aim is not to accompany the student step by step in all his daily experiences but to propose an education that encourages him to make autonomous choices resulting from a continuous comparison of his planning with the values that guide the society he lives.

To this end, it is advisable to propose a constant school-family dialogue that manifests itself at the most critical moments and translates into an educational alliance in which each educational agent recognises its role and supports each other in pursuing common educational goals (Biagioli, 2012; Cambi, 2004). To pursue this goal, the school, using the tools provided by school autonomy, must create a network of connections with families that cannot disregard the territory and the realities of the communities they belong to, both local and national. In addition, school autonomy has made it possible to initiate a process of shared responsibility for teachers and administrators that makes it possible

to establish strong links between the school and the territory in which it is located (Chiappelli e Gentile, 2016; Gestri, 2020).

All this contributes to the emergence of a widespread relational conviviality that, if properly managed, can promote the sharing of those values that make the individual feel not only part of a distant society but also as a member of a real community. In addition to focusing on training that promotes long life learning, schools must also provide training that enhances the uniqueness and singularity of each student's cultural identity, with the aim, therefore, not only to "teach to learn", but also to "teach to be". It has now been ascertained that the presence of children and adolescents with different cultural roots is a structural phenomenon and can no longer be considered episodic and dealt with individually. It is no longer sufficient to recognise and protect pre-existing diversities in their pure and straightforward autonomy. Still, it is necessary to actively support their interaction and integration through the knowledge of our own and other cultures in a confrontation that does not elude topics such as religious beliefs, family roles, gender differences (Cross, 2011).

It occurs to start from the concept that the promotion and development of each person has a mutual influence on the rise and development of others; it is necessary to go beyond the idea of civil coexistence to a path in which individual citizens collaborate to build a society together (Chiappelli e Gentile, 2016).

Until very recently, schools had the task of forming national citizens through a homogeneous culture, but this objective, which, in an international and globalised perspective, is becoming more and more outdated, must be abandoned in favour of education for living together fairly and in solidarity within a larger community. This path does not imply the abandonment of national memory. Still, on the contrary, deep knowledge and transmission of traditions, together with the sharing of historical roots, is a privileged way for a full realisation of the present and adequate planning of the future. The most critical problems that today affect not only our country but also our continent and the whole of humanity cannot be faced and solved within traditional national boundaries, but only through the awareness of being an integral part of a single community of European destiny as well as of a single community of planetary destiny.

2. Methodologies and application strategies: possible paths to follow

To be able to develop strategies to achieve the objectives set in the previous paragraph, it is necessary to identify, as a first step, the tools available to us. It is, therefore, a good idea to investigate what territorial resources we have and

what possibilities they offer. Above all, it is necessary to shed light on the diversity of existing projects, programs, and initiatives. Which potential do they have and on which it is appropriate to focus? Not investigating these aspects would result in finding ourselves fragmented on various fronts, squandering energy and economic resources without an adequate project. It is necessary to think in terms of a curriculum: a project that starts from the context in which it operates and provides a well-defined line on which to connect the various proposals, opportunities and interventions. To carry out a curriculum of this kind, we cannot ignore participatory planning that, through comparison and the network of connections we mentioned earlier, allows us to develop appropriate strategies about the priorities established. Still, it is not enough to propose extemporaneous activities; it is necessary to constantly monitor the school and territorial situation with a view to self-education in cooperative work (Landi, 2004).

An example of this kind of inclusive intervention could be the establishment of special linguistic-cultural training workshops aimed at particularly vulnerable citizens and those at risk and based on the model of teaching classes with differentiated abilities. These should be carried out with non-formal laboratory methods and in close synergy with the network of local services in the area such as schools, libraries, counselling centres and territorial offices of any partner associations involved (Owen, 2011; Ottolini, 2011; Comoglio e Cardoso, 1996).

Another example could be the organisation of specific paths dedicated to the most vulnerable groups with proximity interventions and social mediation, and individual guidance and counselling that pay particular attention to women's and children's empowerment.

A further step could be to promote actions of exchange and strengthening of skills of the actors of the network of local services. For example, through seminars and training sessions, it is possible to exchange best practices and intervention methodologies among teachers of secondary schools of I and II degree, operators, mediators, and volunteers.

These proposals aim to re-evaluate spaces and contexts such as libraries, counselling centres, and other informal places where it is possible to meet with peers while strengthening one's language skills. The use of informal and workshop modalities also makes it possible to develop empowerment, especially in the most vulnerable and at risk of marginalisation, such as women and foreign minors.

Regardless of the type of project you intend to structure, it is always good to offer cultural paths focused on learning and integration and pay attention to the multidimensionality of the training needs of learners, their skills, and

different personal paths of growth and development. (Johnson & al., 1996; Johnson & al., 2015).

By exploiting the vast wealth of skills, resources and synergies that the territorial network of local associations, services, CPIA and library networks have developed over the years, it is possible to ensure an innovative and focused training offer for vulnerable targets.

Furthermore, the actions to be undertaken require an articulation that considers the logic of complementarity to strengthen the system of social, health, educational and cultural services. Thanks to them, it is possible to accompany and support the orientation, integration and inclusion paths of foreign citizens most at risk of marginalisation in the best possible and individualised way.

In conclusion, at the dawn of the third millennium, we can affirm that in an increasingly complex, changing and interconnected reality, attempting to respond to educational needs with schematic and linear programming cannot but prove to be a failure. It is impossible to update those types of programs to the increasingly rapid evolution of events and, consequently, to the increasingly sudden onset of new and complex problems. However, the solution to this problem can be found in a collaboration between educational actors. Those singular actors, strengthened by the skills and sensibilities of the individual, become a group, gaining at the same time a solidity and malleability that allow them to address those modern critical issues that a classical school approach, however granitic in its monolithic setting, would never be able to answer.

3. Distance learning

The choice of reporting the results of a training experience promoted by the Ministry with FAMI funds, which the University of Florence carried out on the national territory, is justified by the innovative nature of that experience compared to the already known in-presence masters. Didactic research is constantly called upon to adopt methods capable of accompanying, supporting and transforming the development trajectories of those in charge of school organisations and the construction of knowledge within the complexity of reality (Fabbri, 2012, p. 104). As a determining characteristic, this model has had that of wanting to safeguard the specificity of a consolidated pedagogical innovation, which considers the function of education as neuralgic, looking at the whole, which tends to value differences, offering opportunities for evolution is achieved through conscious actions.

The empirical and situated study of construction and learning processes has provided detailed knowledge of what happens in real contexts. The idea of

practice as a knowledge-generating field has changed and rewritten the relationships between scientific and professional research (Fabbri, 2012, p. 107). As Tramma (2019) states, the issue concerns education professionals who must educate for citizenship in a cultural context in which such citizenship ceases to be an abstract concept, associated with an equally abstract and universal "common good" condensed into a set of "good practices" to become an exercise in active situational democracy, traceable to intentional experiences and projects, even if only in micro contexts.

Starting from an exploration of the relationships currently acted out between school-students-parents in high school contexts, *distant learning* training for managers has created stimuli to improve the school-student-family relationship to transform a culture of reproduction and domination (Bourdieu, 2005) into one of partnership based on dialogue and cooperation to overcome accusations and forms of mutual ostracism between education and training systems and families and to emphasise, on the other hand, the design of learning and integration pathways attentive to the multidimensionality of students' training needs, their competences and the different personal paths of growth and development. The relations between the school and the families play a central role in accompanying the students in the evolutionary phases and in the growth tasks that characterise their identity development (Boffo, 2011; Dusi and Pati, 2011). To go beyond the mere reception or inclusion of students with non-Italian citizenship and to be able to identify solutions for an adequate adaptation to the needs of an increasingly multicultural and constantly changing society, schools need to be equipped with a didactic and methodological organisation that can effectively implement the principles of inclusive and intercultural education (Stramaglia, Romanazzi and Farina, 2021; Stramaglia 2010).

Through the training carried out during the intense months dedicated to the Master's course, it was possible to contribute to combining in a unified vision the school organisational development of Head Teachers aimed at qualifying secondary school teachers professionally, affirming new models of regulation: of the relationship between the quality of learning and the development of the quality of teaching; The analyses of the project works were carried out in a general scientific perspective of objective examination, of the use of a tool that was the same for all, which highlighted the methodological quality according to clearly explicit criteria so that the intervention hypothesis was validated following verification of the results obtained (Nuzzaci, 2012, p. 395).

4. Young people and schools

One of the paradoxes of contemporary society is that young people are

suspended between imaginary freedom and the reality of the lowering of the horizon of expectations (Lizzola and Caio, 2011, p. 39). They are exposed to the future with an unprecedented force and encounter adult generations in school, as well as parents in the family. In the relationship between generations and families, the school must turn to its territory, to the knowledge that guides and seeks visions, rules, rights and norms, policies that promote new forms of coexistence and social pact. At school, we come from different places, and we start from school: at school, we practice the exercise of continuous confrontation with the plural, in the regulations of different areas of the world, in the application of knowledge, in belonging. The histories of the families with which the school experience comes into contact are articulated and highly differentiated, and the school must design a new horizon within the network of coexistence in which it participates, learning to sustain the high levels of differentiation, aggregation and exchange. In this way, the distance between the contexts of life and institutional functioning is bridged, and the gaps between the formal curriculum and broader forms of knowledge and learning in the social and community environment are filled.

Moreover, these changes can already be observed within school experiences where learning is organised around different themes, problems and projects and where teachers, parents and operators work together. *(*Lizzola, 2012, pp. 22-23*)*. For this reason, the design of action-research paths by managers was aimed at developing projects for student autonomy so that they could become reference figures for teachers and parents through a multilingual and multi-ethnic approach that favoured differentiated skills applied in learning contexts. Another feature of this project was the attention paid to consolidating in students the acquisition of key citizenship skills to "be present to themselves" (Pona and Chiappelli, 2016), playing an active and crucial role in the construction of the relational fabric between schools, families and the territory to promote a synergic action between all the educational components for the development of a culture of legality and democracy, the latter being understood as an expression of knowledge and active measures.

Young people have a strong need for self-realisation, knowledge, relations with other peers, and the other members of the community: it is not enough for the didactic-educational action to deal with a relevant issue. Instead, the addressees must perceive this relevance to participate in it. An educational perspective that wants to deal with the complexity of phenomena related to youth discomfort and that aims to consciously intervene and get in touch with the younger generations cannot but act on the implementation of motivation. Motivational strategies are plural and range from the strengthening of extrinsic motivation, to the choice of personalised teaching strategies, to the intervention

to strengthen the sense of *self-efficacy* (Bandura, 2000)[1] and using peer education. Peer education is an educational method that operates on several levels. It is a training course aimed at acquiring specific skills and producing a wealth of knowledge that is then communicated and shared in the group (Biagioli, Proli and Gestri, 2020). The educational project, in other words, must create the conditions for each subject to express their singularity and autonomy and attribute significance to their learning. Sometimes the project may result from an explicit request from the community; at other times, it is necessary to raise awareness, raise consciousness and bring it into contact with reality. The aim is to ignite questions and reasoning on the reorganisation of knowledge, to offer a culture that is no longer fragmented between the humanistic and the scientific, and that can awaken the ecological intelligence of teaching according to the cultural paradigm that provides for the connection between the effects of human behaviour on the environment and the responsibility to offer educational models in themselves (Calaprice, 2011). Iori affirms that a new society and culture are only achievable through the fundamental objectives of education for the future and the possible: education is based on a project (Iori, 2018, p.13.). Therefore, the planning of the activities by the Headteachers has privileged research and experimentation that would favour the inclusion of innovative elements responding to the educational needs of the students in the educational programming, which has made it possible to stimulate a process of realisation in the students.

5. Social contexts and school communities in education

Social contexts and school communities characterised by the intertwining of different cultural perspectives, and animated by organisational, educational and teaching strategies aimed at welcoming and enhancing a plurality of voices and views, are a focus of interest for pedagogical sciences and national and European social and cultural policies. Scientific research and policies aimed at social inclusion and active citizenship cannot fail to find a source of guidance and a testbed in the practices developed within schools. In this perspective, training opportunities for teachers and managers can constitute an added value of considerable impact on the life of educational institutions called upon to deal with an ever-changing, increasingly complex and plural reality (Biagioli, Proli and Gestri, 2020). An effective school in terms of intercultural integration needs a leadership capable of promoting, within the school, the dimension of

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[1] The notion of *self-efficacy, which is* based on an individual's assessment of his or her ability to succeed at a given task.

openness and mutual recognition and, outside the school, the necessary relationships and understandings with other schools, institutions and resources in the territory in an ecosystemic perspective. In this perspective, headmasters are recognised as key figures for structuring truly inclusive educational contexts that can significantly impact the development of young people.

As underlined by the Ministry of Education, training and continuing education of school managers are a permanent method to ensure the constant adaptation of managerial skills to the development of the cultural, technological and organisational context of reference and to encourage the consolidation of a management culture oriented towards results and innovation (Art. 21/2-4 del *Contratto Collettivo Nazionale di Lavoro relativo al personale dell'area V per il triennio normativo 2002-2005*). Refresher courses and continuous training are a characteristic element of the manager's professional identity, to be consolidated in a perspective that is also open to the European and international dimensions and experiences (*Ibid.*). The *National Digital School Plan* (Law 107/2015) also emphasises the importance of school leadership trained to deal with the renewal process underway in contemporary schools, understood as an open space for learning and not just a physical place, and as a platform that puts students in a position to develop skills for life. In this vision, technologies become a daily operational context at the service of school activity and for overcoming obstacles to all students' inclusion and educational success, including children with a migrant background. These cultural and organisational changes must proactively involve all education professionals, *first and foremost* at the managerial level, to promote the evolution of contents and ways of doing school in a union of intentions that unites school and technical managers with teachers and all the staff who work daily in the living body of the school.

In this perspective, the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund 2014-2020 (FAMI), Specific Objective 2 "Integration and legal migration", has foreseen interventions for the training of managers and teachers of schools with a high incidence of pupils with migrant background that have been implemented at some Italian Universities in the reference period. In particular, the University of Florence has set up a master's degree course in "Organisation and management of school institutions in multicultural contexts"[2] (A.A. 2020-2021) reserved only for school managers and technical managers working throughout Italy, in schools of all levels.

The Master wanted to contribute to enriching the professionalism of managers in relation to multiculturalism, aiming to improve the quality of

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[2] This Master was established at the Department of Education, Languages, Interculture, Literature and Psychology under the direction of Prof. R. Biagioli.

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school integration of all pupils with non-Italian citizenship, introducing dialogical and reflective methodologies into school contexts, useful for understanding and managing the migration phenomenon.

The specific objectives of the implemented training pathway can be traced back to the importance of fostering the continuous training of school and technical managers with respect to the management of multicultural educational contexts, starting from the acquisition of knowledge and the development of pedagogical, sociological, psychological and legal skills related to migration phenomena and the integration of pupils with a migrant background.

The teaching and training activities were delivered entirely at a distance using e-learning, synchronous and asynchronous modes. In addition, 213 managers were trained and enriched their professionalism to design significant actions in an intercultural key in their institutions, both in the school educational field and (for continuity) in the extracurricular area; in particular, through the use and development of analytical tools and appropriate operational and organisational strategies, pedagogical management of the multicultural and multilingual classroom and the use of teaching in an intercultural perspective. This encourages the learning and socialisation processes of young people with adults and peers and the integration paths of pupils and students with non-Italian citizenship in the view of lifelong education and an integrated training system.

6. Headmasters' designing activities during the Master's Course

The identification of significant educational intervention in multicultural contexts (related to the themes of the Master) provided the possibility to use a description form from each and every one, in which it was asked to evaluate the impact and the implementation compared to other previous experiences. This allowed a considerable improvement in the quality and timing of the actions carried out. The design was preceded by a training-mentoring activity, which consisted of listening to the teachers of the educational institutions in order to understand their needs and opinions. Theoretical ideas were used to address the theme of the relationship between micro and macro, to revisit the curriculum in a contextual key. The relationship between the local and global dimensions has always been at the centre of the reflections on the theme of ecology, in its broadest sense, using Kirkpatrick's model (1976), which considers the impact of the educational intervention on the subject-target on the educators who implemented it, on the organisation that promoted it (triangulation of effects) (Lichtner, 2003). Kirkpatrick's model starts from the

assumption that the evaluation must accompany and monitor each phase of the educational intervention (Varisco, 2000). More precisely, it proposes four steps of evaluation, indicating, for each one, purposes and tools that can be used in any training organisation:
- Level 1: Reaction (liking).
- Level 2: Learning.
- Level 3: Transfer of knowledge/skills.
- Level 4: Results for/about the organization.

Using the description form that reported the evaluation of the impact, the implementation of an educational intervention in multicultural contexts highlighted the evaluation of effectiveness (i.e. the relationship between expected objectives and achieved results) and the evaluation of the impact as an evaluation of efficiency: the relationship between typical objectives, achieved results, employed resources, implementation time and the benefits of the evaluation of the effectiveness-efficiency of educational interventions (Capperucci, 2007). In this way, it was possible to promote a conception of education as a transformative and improving intervention oriented to achieving concrete results and increasing the awareness of the target subjects (students and their families) of educational interventions' personal and social value. Furthermore, it was possible to encourage peer learning and discussion among teachers and influence policies, strategic decisions, management, planning of the educational offer and the use of resources of educational institutions. From the learning outcomes, teachers and the organisation receive feedback on the effectiveness and impact of the initiative on the target groups. The learning outcomes provide helpful information on the effectiveness of the organisation of the educational intervention, the training actions proposed, the methodologies used, the use of resources/tools, and the professionalism of the teachers. Evaluating this kind of transfer means recognising what changes in behaviour and learning (individual and group) have resulted from the educational intervention, i.e. detecting the actual use in the school context (in more than one subject, in other projects, in informal experiences promoted by the school), but also in extracurricular contexts (in the family, in play and sports activities), of the knowledge, skills and competences acquired thanks to this intervention.

7. Conclusions

The contexts of training and distance learning have changed based on technological innovations that have marked the transition from using digital

tools for training to designing dedicated digital environments. E-learning platforms are virtual places where training courses are implemented and united by a solid communicative component oriented towards exchanging information, materials and sharing knowledge and personal experiences. Thanks to Web 2.0 digital technologies, which have transformed the web from a container of information into a place for relations, sharing and co-creation, the virtual spaces where communication takes place are mostly general or thematic forums, chats and social networks, with the exchange of experiences, materials and feedback in real-time. This enriches the meaning of e-learning training, overcoming the concept of content delivery in favour of the realisation of cooperative type activities for the shared construction of knowledge (Biagioli, Proli, 2021). In particular, there has been a transition from the second generation of e-learning (web-based learning, online learning), to the third generation of net learning, which is configured as an integrated system of self-training, research and consultancy built by communities of practice that share passions and resources and offer knowledge management services, in which the main objective is to always learn from the continuous exchange with the environment (Proli, 2020).

Learning Communities and Practice Communities are two interesting constructs to define the activities and relationships that bring together e-learning subjects. Online Learning Communities are considered groups of subjects participating in e-learning courses, while Practice Communities are generated from below directly by their members and assume a value for the exchange of expertise and the social cohesion they express (Rivoltella, 2021, p. 49). However, the two constructs can sometimes coincide, i.e. a learning community can become a community of practice by creating a climate of trust and satisfaction with what has been learned that can give rise to new shared projects (Alessandrini, 2014, p. 46).

The 213 headmasters and technical managers who participated in the FAMI Master's course, located in their schools throughout the country, formed an online learning community that was defined through synchronous training meetings on topics of common interest addressed by experts and scholars and through the use of the Moodle online learning environment.

The holding of the course testifies the intensity of the participation and involvement of the managers in training, the activities carried out, and the forums' attendance on the e-learning platform through which a relationship of interaction and exchange was established between the participants and the Master's teachers.

In the planning phase, it was considered essential to consider the Master's course as a training experience-oriented to the deepening of knowledge, the developing of previous skills and, above all, to the circulation and exchange of

practices to facilitate the transformation of the learning community into an online community of practice. As Wenger (2006, ed. or. 1998) argues, the spontaneous structuring of communities of practice facilitates group-based learning through the mediation of knowledge through the subject's personal experience, the negotiation of meanings, and the development of creative solutions to shared problems.

As evidence of the interest shown by the Master's participants in the training group, it is essential to emphasise that they requested to create a space within the platform specifically dedicated to the sharing of practical materials and projects carried out in the school contexts of reference, to reflect on common research themes and solicit possible shared strategies oriented towards problem-solving.

The interactions among the participants in the many dedicated forums included in the various training modules of the Master are still being studied, as well as the reflections expressed by the managers in the final satisfaction questionnaire, although an initial analysis of the open-ended answers contained in the questionnaire shows overall satisfaction with the experience, also thanks to the spirit of belonging to the training group that interested the majority of participants. It also emerges that there is a desire and a need to carry out similar training experiences to deepen topics of common interest and keep alive the relationship with the universities.

At the end of the Master's course, the school leaders and technical managers presented the project work they had developed to meet the needs of the school contexts in which they work or have worked. The importance of the work presented and the enthusiasm of the group of participants in the training inspired the conception of a national conference to share the results of the Master's course, which will be held by the end of 2022 at the University of Florence, Department of Education, Languages, Intercultures, Literatures and Psychology with the participation of scholars from various universities and with the involvement of school and technical managers who will be able to share their project work in parallel thematic sessions.

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