**Distance learning, for a transformative dimension of learning and an inclusive school**

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Universities and schools, due to the COVID19 health emergency, found themselves working differently in this 2020, and will probably have to foresee further changes to their training system, to adapt to changing and sometimes unpredictable needs and circumstances. The scenario of distance learning, and the ways of learning that educational institutions have had to face in these months of pandemic emergency, pose a series of questions on their social responsibilities, but also on the nature of learning in emergency contexts.
The pedagogical reflections today, even more, urgent than before, concern precisely how to mediate and face needs, emergencies with some unavoidable foundations of the educational process. In recent years, formal education, the task of school and university institutions, has always focused on laboratory, active, constructive, authentic, collaborative educational approaches to promote harmonious development, not only cognitive but of values for socialization and for significant learning.
These adjectives, which recall all the characteristics of an active pedagogy, from Dewian activism to Vygotskian-inspired theories of action, seem to be difficult to reach through distance learning. But this apparent contradiction, forced by the emergency, can serve to reflect, even more, today, on the meaning of education and teaching.

**1. The social character of distance learning**

Distance teaching, imposed by the closure of schools and universities, by the home isolation of young people, by the physical separation between students, has brought a strong setback to the potential and richness of collaborative teaching based on educational continuity and socialization in learning. But new forms of encounter have been experimented and the teachers have found themselves managing a transformative request for their teaching, developing "emergency" communication and relational models but at the same time providing opportunities for contact and continuity through digital technologies and online platforms .

Precisely the use of technologies, the use of new means for "spaced" relationships, has revealed the need to create virtual communities that would allow to re-build some form of socialization and recover the social nature of learning. All this, of course, had different repercussions with reference to the different age of the students, the school level and / or education, but also the socio-environmental conditions of the "learners". Socio-economic conditions and the social nature of learning are the theme of this reflection.

We re-read the emphasis on education as a social process, which Vygotskij provided about a century ago, to underline the active and dynamic role of the educational process.

If, conventionally, we mean the social environment as a set of human relationships, then we understand exactly that exceptional plasticity that makes it perhaps the most flexible means of education. The elements of the environment are found not in a fixed and immobile state, but in a variable state, which easily changes shape and configuration. By combining these elements in a certain way, man can always create new forms of social environment every time.

This is why, in the educational process, the teacher also has an active role: he models, resizes, cuts out the elements of the environment and unites them in the most varied ways so that they achieve that goal. The educational process is therefore active in three ways: active the pupil, active the teacher, active the environment in which they act. Therefore, it is not possible to define the educational process as static and constant. On the contrary, its psychological nature reveals the fact that it represents an articulated struggle in which thousands of complex and varied forces are pressing. It constitutes a dynamic, active and dialectical process that does not take place in a slow and evolutionary way, but is discontinuous, revolutionary and full of continuous clashes between man and the world. (Vygotskij, 1926; trad. It. Ed. 2006, p.95).

An educational process of a flexible nature, which must be articulated in a dialectical form and, as in the image offered by the quotation, a sort of struggle, of clash between man and the world. What better picture of this struggle and clash that didactics found itself fighting because of the isolation forced upon us by the COVID-19 pandemic?

The relationship between organism and environment, between individual and society become central to the role of education, and for the very survival of humanity.

How not to return attention to Dewey's relationship between the individual and the environment (1899, 1916, 1938). Human action is significantly linked to the environment, and education has a great mediation function, allowing for mutual changes. The individual and the environment adapt in a sort of relationship, a mutual adaptation. It is with the concept of transaction that Dewey expresses the complex system of relationship between organism-environment: “the organism and its environment form a single whole to such an extent that every human behavior, including his cognitive activity, does not go understood as the work of the subject, but it is a process that belongs to the whole organism-environment system. (Dewey, Bentley, 1949).

Here then we can analyze and discuss the new educational dimensions opened by distance teaching, using some reflections, taking up the historical-cultural approach and some theoretical reflections offered to us by Vygotskij.

The basic axiom is: "The educational process, the activities promoted by teaching are never a static and constant act". Here then, activating students differently, activating teachers differently in an environment that has forced us to change relationships, communications and daily life brings us back to the dialectical and variable dimension of the teaching / learning process. And above all to ask ourselves about the resources and skills necessary to manage the unpredictable situations and dynamics of teaching and learning.

Distance teaching, improvised or planned in recent months, teaching until March 4 in Italy (which we now call with some nostalgia "in the presence"), or a mixed (blended) approach that we may aim for in the near future , coming out of this pandemic period, they are all forms that the educational process can take consequently to organizational or emergency choices. The fact is that all must guarantee those educational characteristics of a responsible, laboratory, authentic, collaborative process that promotes harmonious development, not only cognitive, but of values ​​for socialization and significant learning.

**2. Emergency pedagogy and potential development area**

The emergency pedagogy (emergency in education) lends us some tools for reflection (see Isidori, Vaccarelli, 2013).

Pedagogy, with these characteristics, must reflect on how to re-establish safety conditions, and a renewed balance and encourage educational and development processes in discontinuity.

"Emergency pedagogy can be proposed as a pedagogy: **reflective**, if it goes into greater depth in categories such as risk, uncertainty, a sense of precariousness of existence, trauma, stress, resilience and resistance, etc.; **exploratory**, since it addresses, also through empirical research, the knowledge of the emergency phenomena considered in their impact on individuals, educational institutions and communities; **critical and transformative**, since it works to raise awareness and involve social actors in the management (democratic, participatory, from below) of decision-making processes that concern interests and common goods, in the redesign of territories and in the reconstruction of social and community tissues; **operational and methodological**, since it studies and applies models useful for primary and secondary prevention, it identifies actions and best educational practices to deal with crisis situations; **oriented towards disciplinary openness**, since it establishes interdisciplinary relationships (especially with emergency psychology and social sciences) and intradisciplinary relationships (social pedagogy, intercultural pedagogy, adult education, pedagogy of deviance, teaching, etc.) in order to better define research and intervention concepts, methods and tools "(Vaccarelli, 2017, p.348)

The pedagogy of the emergency is therefore concerned with three aspects: centering on individual well-being, dissemination of active strategies, integration with social and territorial dimensions. The pandemic that has recently upset the planet requires a "reflective" attitude to probe these new categories of risk, uncertainty, the sense of precariousness of existence); and a "critical-transformative" dimension to reorganize educational spaces, methodological choices, activate greater awareness and involvement on a social level, nourished by collaboration, cooperation and a democratic perspective.

Rethinking the space of individual growth and learning in a social dimension such as a "collaborative enterprise", and as it has long been underlined: "for an inclusive school", brings us back to all those theoretical and scientific evidences of a socio-constructivist mold.

It is too easy to recall here the centrality of the theory of the potential area of ​​development (Vygotskij, 1934), to give substance to the pedagogical plan which underlines how learning is not only an individual process, but that takes place with the help of others, that every educational intervention must be aimed at supporting the effort of those involved in the process of psychological and cognitive development, but also, by contrasting the psychometric drifts, that the assessment must take into account the collaborative and potential dimension in the progress of learning. And again, remember the dual function, defined as "scaffolding", of problematization and support of the inter-action and learning processes, well discussed and argued by Bruner (1976). Describing the methods of interaction between a tutor and a child in building a three-dimensional pyramid in wooden blocks highlights how much the help of an expert figure can lead to go beyond the "effective area of ​​development". The skills actually acquired by a subject at a certain moment of cognitive development can grow differently if supported, supported by a tutor (adult, expert, teacher, but also equal). This support, when effective, leads to the redefinition of the role of the teacher, who becomes a mentor, tutor, but also a critical friend in supporting and enhancing development and success, at school and socializing in learning.

The constraints to which the pandemic has exposed us, the need to activate more articulated teaching and substantially that guaranteed social "distance", have put in crisis the entire training system, made of relationships in presence, social interactions and closeness to we were used to and the school organization fed on. But precisely the need to maintain those social relationships, that interaction and relationship between individuals, has forced in these months of isolation and distancing, which Covid-19 has imposed, to enhance the technological and symbolic tools that have arisen over the past decades widespread in our societies and cultures. We are faced with a change in educational and pedagogical steps, forced by the emergency, but which reveals the centrality of learning models in changing cultures and through new symbolic and communication systems.

In many passages and reflections Vygotsky invites us to think how much the activation of "signs" systems, socially and individually used to communicate, becomes "ground" for the development of our cognitive functions. And today digital, distance learning has led us to think, also because forced by the emergency, to a transformation of our teaching strategies. Interaction with others and the crucial role played by linguistic exchanges, between adult and child, between teacher and student, communicative approaches that use different tools and signs lead precisely to the processes of internalization and the development of higher psychic functions. By changing the means, the communication channels, we modify both the signals themselves, and the functions and messages of this communication, to take up a lexicon dear to the communicative functions theorized by Jakobson (1966).

**3. Technologies and digital as tools for socialization and equity**

The digital world, information technologies, and their social consumption in recent years have already changed the way we interact, communicate, think. And the pandemic emergency has only been able to "benefit", if we can say it in a utilitarian sense, the presence and availability, where present, of digital resources.

But the problem that arises, of course, is how much alongside the operational and instrumental use of technologies are associated those educational models and "democratic" contributions that a schooling must pursue. Without neglecting the issue of the emergency in which COVID-19 has thrown us, we must ask ourselves, especially in view of what will be a reopening of schools and universities "in the presence", what we managed to guarantee, before the pandemic, during the emergency, and when we come out of it, those dimensions that Vygotsky's psycho-pedagogical approach has clearly shown in his writing addressed to the "masters", Pedagogical Psychology (1926). Some steps to articulate the speech:

"From a psychological point of view, the teacher is the organizer of the educating social environment, as well as the regulator and controller of his education with the student. And if the teacher is powerless in direct interaction with the pupil, he is instead omnipotent for the direct influence on him through the social environment. The latter is the real lever of the educational process and the whole role of the educator is reduced to the management of this lever " (trad. It. Ed. 2006, p.95)

The task of the teacher, the teacher, the educational operator is to act to "organize" the educational environment to encourage development and learning. His preventive work on contexts is precisely the organization of materials, stimuli, the educational relationship, disciplinary and interdisciplinary openness. In conditions of emergency situations, which are found everywhere where there are social inequalities and inequalities of resources (material and intellectual), it is necessary to support individuals and educational institutions to rebuild social ties, support the territory, guarantee equity and dignity in the defense of rights of the person (to life, to development, to active citizenship).

Distance Teaching (which we have hidden behind the acronym (DaD), which could allude to a familiar, paternal approach is in fact only a term-container that has concealed very different didactic ones. On the one hand the most innovative and transformative ones , typical of that "active" approach and aimed at re-organizing the learning space with laboratory methods and with guarantee of interaction at different communication levels. Other, very traditional, often even more retrospective and authoritarian than some were in presence and that basically have maintained, if not multiplied the distance, through a practice of delivery and assignments of homework.

This was certainly the result of the improvisation that many teachers found themselves managing immediately, when from 4 March 2020 (the last day of school "in attendance" in Italy before the lockdown) it was necessary to "reorganize" the learning space. With the following weeks, the first ministerial indications and the first individual initiatives, then collegial, arrived to renew the school space through the "distance learning" that led up to the end of the school year in June 2020).

What we have to highlight, at least for the Italian situation, is that physical distance has expanded social and cultural distance. The initiatives put in place by the schools to try to face this emergency have been of a very different sign. The emergency caused by the pandemic triggered by Covid-19 has highlighted some deep structural weaknesses in our education system. The pandemic has affected all countries, but has had partially different effects in each of them.

According to available data, for the first time in history more than a billion and a half boys and girls, boys and girls all over the world are experiencing the forced interruption of their school life. In Italy this interruption has affected millions of boys and girls and boys and girls from nursery schools to secondary schools.

But if the pandemic has hit everywhere, it hasn't affected everyone equally. Once again, it was the weaker individuals who suffered the consequences more severely. As before the current emergency situation and even more than before, the differences derive from that set of factors that go under the name of 'educational poverty': from socio-economic conditions to economic and housing contexts; from the diversity of resources and services present at a territorial level to the diversity in the use of extra-curricular cultural and educational opportunities.

To these factors was added the weight of the different possibilities of access to the network and the different availability of digital devices, all the more relevant at a time when the only way to maintain contact with the reality of the school experience was that of the different forms of distance learning. According to Istat[[1]](#footnote-1), thousands of families do not have devices to follow distance learning initiatives. In this context, physical distance has expanded social and cultural distance.

**4. Towards inclusive teaching**

The various theoretical solicitations and reflections presented so far have offered the pedagogical horizon on which to build active teaching, but at the same time that can guarantee equity in education. An equity that means a school for all and for all, therefore respecting and considering individual differences. A difficult task, of course, especially in emergency situations such as recent ones. Task also constitutionally sanctioned, as stated in Article 34 of the Italian Constitution: The school is open to all. Education lower, given for at least eight years, is compulsory and free. The capable and deserving, even if without means, have the right to reach the highest degrees of studies.

Although a law that has been historically and legally sanctioned, and this applies to many societies not only in the West, this right has encountered various difficulties to assert itself and many reforms have historically tried to contain the socio-economic disadvantages and their impact on the continuation of studies. The interventions to be programmed and continued must certainly concern the value and social dimension of education, obviously accompanied by the economic and financial investment dimension, with interventions of education policies and support for families. In any case, the dimension to be defended today in the name of a democratic school is that of inclusiveness. Term to be understood in the broadest sense of school for all and for all (see UNESCO, 2009)

“Inclusive school is a process of strengthening the education system's ability to reach all students. ... An 'included' school system can only be created if ordinary schools become more inclusive. In other words, if they become better in the education of all the children in their community "(UNESCO, 2009, p. 8).

Promoting inclusion means stimulating debate, encouraging positive attitudes and adopting school and social structures that can address the new demands that are now being presented to school structures and to the government. This means improving contributions, processes and environments to grow the student's culture in his environment and, systemically, to support the entire learning experience "(UNESCO, 2009 p. 7-9).

An inclusive school is a school that leaves no one behind. A school that must start again from the problems that emerged and exploded in this emergency period, which enhances teaching and learning outside the classroom, which reflects on how to transform teaching in a flexible way. Above all it is essential that teachers and teachers acquire not only and not so much the knowledge and technological skills necessary for the development of forms of distance learning, but develop critical awareness of the differences that characterize the various forms of teaching in the presence, mixed and at a distance, both from the point of view of the training effectiveness and from the point of view of the affective-motivational aspects that characterize them

To conclude, we take up the points of the Manifesto for an inclusive teaching[[2]](#footnote-2), entitled: "At a distance, but not too much!, widely subscribed at national level and subject to wide public reflection, and which recalls the various Vygotskian and Dewian categories of the active and dialectical school.

1. In the emergency, contact with pupils is saved - Value and continuity of the educational relationship.

[...] faced with the impossibility of students to go to school, the teachers decided to go to the students. [...] In this moment of isolation of children, young people and families, distance learning has proved to be an immediate solution: it has been declined and adapted by the teachers' commitment and needs concern of the educational institution - at its various levels - to ensure adequate technical and organizational solutions. With a lot of effort and also great effort, the teachers have been able to put in place didactic strategies that have proved indispensable to make the children feel the closeness of their teachers. [...]

For this reason, an extraordinary commitment by the state is essential to restart the school in safety as soon as possible, to resume the paths in the presence and recover what has been lost in many months, putting the teaching, its methods and methods at the center, after years of pseudo-reforms learning needs of the new generations through heavy investments in school time, teaching staff and ATA, laboratories, school construction and safety.

2. Pedagogical action as training for critical ability and citizenship.

Complexity of pedagogical action as training for critical ability and citizenship. The educational action of the school is fully carried out through a global approach to the needs of boys and girls, boys and girls, with a "long" look both on learning disciplinary knowledge and on their ethical, social and emotional growth. [...] The experiences that the teachers are painstakingly putting in place have shown that, in addition to the need to keep the class group dimension alive, it is necessary to find forms of individual communication with each student, in order to monitor the state of his well-being, but also to have an accurate feedback on the didactic activities that are taking place.

3. Distance teaching, an emergency tool, cannot replace the educational relationship.

However, it is necessary to be aware of the evident limitations of distance learning compared to face-to-face teaching, both to look for itineraries and organizational models that, even in a possible continuation of the emergency, are more faithful to a more authentic educational relationship, and to prevent this modality the realization of the teaching turns into the umpteenth process of exclusion of the weakest subjects, in a penalization of the students coming from families and contexts deprived from the point of view of the economic, socio-cultural and, therefore, technological resources.

4. Use of technologies and media as tools and not as an end.

We believe that this situation can be an occasion for reflection on the way of teaching and on the relationship with the technological development of each. No technological tool can substitute the educational relationship, interaction in presence, but technological tools represent further possibilities for interaction and one must learn to use them, just as one must learn to use scissors or a pen. In fact, digital technology, the use of platforms, like any other computer equipment, are not, in themselves, neither good nor bad; therefore, without prejudice to the premise that "teaching" is primarily a relationship, their adequate use depends on the degree of awareness and mastery with which you manage them.

5. Dangers to avoid: selectivity and dispersion.

It is clear that the problem of the lack of IT infrastructures, which affects many countries in the country not only at school level, risks increasing inequalities. […] Of course, the territorial, social and economic gaps once again mark the distinction between advanced instruments in use by students and the lack of basic infrastructures. It is perhaps appropriate to ask whether this emergency, rather than opening spaces (including market ones) for distance learning, is not the occasion, through a national and structural plan, to prepare IT and staffing facilities, to be made available to students of all the regions of Italy, also with redistributive and compensatory assignment methods to offer more tools to those who now have less.

6. Collective tools of the educational relationship: school autonomy and collegial bodies.

Collegiality, and not the initiative of individual teachers, continues to be a mandatory function of orientation and planning. [...] The Class Councils plan the training activity according to the needs of each class, choosing and adapting to the context the aims, objectives, methodologies indicated by the Teaching Board: it is not a matter of bureaucratic actions, but of strong pedagogical value, because through the comparison different perspectives are acquired, with the enrichment of models of educational relationships not always superimposed.

7. Summative evaluation and formative evaluation.

The moment of evaluation in the school is aimed at building self-awareness, leading students to understand the potential and limits of their learning path: evaluating means helping children to be able to make informed choices and, at the same time, to offer teachers cognitive elements useful for re-designing teaching (expanding stimuli and research paths) to guarantee everyone their educational success. [...] what helps is not the vote, but the explanation of the error (which, however, alone is not enough because it must be integrated with forms of exercise that promote the learning of methods or alternative responses to the error). [...] We will have time and a way to recover, especially if at this stage we have been able to work on the strengths and limits of the educational relationship between students and teachers.

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1. Istat, 2020, *Spazi in casa e disponibilità di computer per bambini e ragazzi,* <https://www.istat.it/it/files//2020/> 04/ Spazi-casa-disponibilita-computer-ragazzi.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See http://www.flcgil.it/sindacato/documenti/lettere-comunicati-e-documenti/manifesto-per-una-didattica-inclusiva.flc In the parts reported here I have maintained the underlining that the original text indicated with the use of bold type is indicated the interruption of speech with dots in square brackets. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)