# «We teachers really got together».
# The school as an educational community during the Covid-19 pandemic[1]

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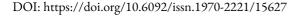
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**Abstract**

The schools' closure and the adoption of distance learning (DL) during the Covid-19 pandemic deeply changed Italian schools' teaching and organizational practices. This article investigates how a micro-universe of four parents, seven teachers, and a school principal experienced and represented the role of the school during the first Covid-19 lockdown (March-June 2020). We analyzed the set of semi-structured interviews through Thematic Analysis (TA). We identified three cross-cutting representations: the school as an "educational community", as a "guide", and as a "place of care". Despite its fading as a physical space, the teachers experienced the school as a place to build meaningful relationships, intensify communication with colleagues, and re-discover the collective dimension of teaching. The school principal's leadership, which was oriented towards the inclusion and valuing of teachers' skills, served as a professional guide and emotional support for the teaching staff.

La chiusura delle scuole e l'adozione della didattica a distanza durante la pandemia hanno modificato profondamente le prassi didattiche e organizzative della scuola italiana. L'articolo analizza le rappresentazioni della scuola durante il primo lockdown (marzo-giugno 2020) in un micro-universo di quattro genitori, sette docenti e una dirigente scolastica. All'interno delle interviste semi-strutturate, analizzate tramite analisi tematica, è stato possibile rintracciare tre rappresentazioni trasversali: la scuola come "comunità educante", come "guida" e come "luogo di cura". Nonostante il dissolversi dei suoi confini fisici, la "scuola della distanza" è stata vissuta dai

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docenti intervistati come luogo in cui costruire relazioni significative, intensificare la comunicazione con i colleghi e riscoprire la dimensione collettiva dell'insegnamento. La leadership della dirigente scolastica, orientata all'inclusione e alla valorizzazione delle diverse competenze, ha svolto un ruolo di guida e di supporto emotivo e professionale per il corpo docente.

**Keywords:** Covid-19; distance learning; lower secondary school; teachers; educational community

**Parole chiave:** Covid-19; didattica a distanza; scuola secondaria di primo grado; insegnanti; comunità educante

## 1. Introduction

During the school years 2019/2020 and 2020/2021, *distance learning* (DL, in Italian *Didattica a Distanza, DaD*, then *Didattica Digitale Integrata, DDI*) was adopted as an emergency measure in Italy to guarantee students the right to education during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2020). As a pervasive measure, DL affected everyday school life on a massive scale and deeply influenced every dimension of the school's functioning, not just at the teaching level but at the communicative and organizational levels (Rompianesi, 2021b). Teachers have been called to a radical and challenging shift in their teaching practice, and schools as institutions had to profoundly modify their internal organization to ensure the full implementation of DL, often facing widespread problems of infrastructural backwardness (Capperucci, 2020).
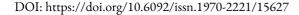
From this point of view, it is difficult – if not impossible – to naively conceive the introduction of DL within the Italian school system and to underestimate its impact on students', parents', and teachers' representations of the school. As the Indire report states, the school as a *physical space* dissolved (Indire, 2022, p.19) during the first wave of the pandemic since teachers and students were attending their everyday school life mostly from home. School, as a *foundational space of educational experience* (Moscato, 2013), has therefore configured itself as a *new space* with new parameters and rules, where teachers had to find new teaching resources and strategies. One of the challenges of current educational research is to analyze the value and role of such a new space and how teachers, families, and school principals have experienced it.

In this article, we qualitatively analyze using thematic analysis (TA) a dataset of interviews with four parents, seven teachers, and a school principal of a lower secondary school (part of a comprehensive school institute[i]) in the Marche region. The research question is: *how have teachers, parents, and school principals experienced the role of the school during the first national lockdown in March-June 2020?*

As we shall show, the informants perceived the school as a place of care, an educational community, and a positive space for significant and resourceful relationships with colleagues. The school principal played a key role in orienting families and teachers during the school's closure when DL was implemented as an emergency measure.

## 2. Covid-19 and DL in the Italian educational research

The Covid-19 pandemic has generated a strong interest in educational research. In the Italian context, many studies have been conducted at the national level since 2020. The Italian governmental agency Indire (National Institute for Documentation, Innovation, and Educational Research) published two preliminary reports on teaching practices during the pandemic (Indire, 2020a, 2020b), followed by an updated edition in December 2021 (Indire, 2021) and a supplementary report in July 2022 (Indire, 2022). At the academic level, the SIRD (Italian Society for Research in Didactics) (Lucisano, 2020) investigated the distance teaching methods adopted by Italian teachers and schools during the Covid-19 lockdown in March-June 2020[ii]. Some of the research focuses on secondary school, as the study by AlmaDiploma and AlmaLaurea[iii] (2020) and the one conducted by the Agnelli Foundation and CRENoS (2021), which deepened the experience of students, teachers, and school principals in upper secondary schools during the school year 2020/2021[iv].

A different research trend investigates the effects of DL on specific categories of subjects. Some studies addressed the families' experiences with DL during the pandemic, such as the study promoted by Unicef (Mascheroni et al., 2021) and the one conducted by the ITD (Institute for Educational Technologies) of the CNR[v] (National Research Council) (Benigno et al., 2020; CNR, 2020). Other research focuses on inclusion, analyzing DL's consequences on students with immigrant backgrounds (Guerrini, 2021; Lapov, 2021) and disabilities (D'Angelo, 2020; Sandri & Ghiddi, 2020).

The general interest of Italian educational research on DL seems to be *understanding* what happened to schools, teachers, students, and families during the Covid-19 pandemic rather than evaluating or assessing schools' actions and performances. Lucisano states that such an approach was an ethical and methodological guideline in SIRD's study (Lucisano, 2020). From that perspective, research on DL during the pandemic can revitalize the relationship between schools and academic research and create new dialogues between the two (Batini et al., 2020). At the same time, such understanding reignites the theme of the *actual contribution* that educational research can provide to school practice (Capperucci, 2020) – and so, Covid-19 research can become an opportunity for educational research *as such*[vi]. In this regard, there seem to be significant attempts to develop research *with* schools and *for* schools, for example, the Conference *Scuole che educano, insegnanti creativi in Emilia Romagna. Una ricerca sul campo*[vii] (Pinelli & Caputo, 2021; Pinelli, 2022). During the conference, secondary and primary school teachers shared their experiences with DL during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic (Rompianesi, 2021a).

To enrich the quantitative analysis with a deeper understanding and encourage dialogue between schools and academic research, education scholars stress the need for more qualitative studies (Lucisano, 2020) and more research at the local level (Girelli, 2020). In this context, it is relevant to investigate the role of the school in the experience of teachers and school principals and to analyze if and how the school during the pandemic can be understood as a space for professional growth and positive sociality (Santagati & Barbanti, 2020).

## 3. Research design

### 3.1 Purpose, data, and informants

This study investigates the experiences of seven teachers, four parents, and one school principal during the first months of the pandemic in Italy (March-June 2020), analyzing how they understood, defined, and represented the role of the school. The study is interview-based and limited to one comprehensive school institute in the Marche region, specifically focusing on the lower secondary school. The data consist of:

- 7 interviews with teachers (T1-T7) between 35 and 65 years old (2 males, 5 females). All the teachers work in the lower secondary school of the comprehensive school institute. 6 out of 7 interviews were recorded and transcribed, and one is a collection of notes. After the interview, one of the informants (T6) sent an additional document with some personal reflections (T6n). The average duration of interviews is 45 minutes.
- 1 interview with the school principal (SP).
- 4 interviews with parents (P1-P4) between 35 and 50 years old (all females). The parents have at least one child enrolled in the lower secondary school of the comprehensive school institute. The informants

come from 4 different family units; 3 of their children attend the 6th grade, and 1 attends the 7th grade. The average duration of an interview is 15 minutes.

| Role | Code | Type of material |
|---|---|---|
| Teacher | *T1n* | Interview (notes written by the interviewer) |
| Teacher | *T2* | Interview (transcription) |
| Teacher | *T3* | Interview (transcription) |
| Teacher | *T4* | Interview (transcription) |
| Teacher | *T5* | Interview (transcription) |
| Teacher | *T6* | Interview (transcription) |
| | *T6n* | Notes (written by the informant) |
| Teacher | *T7* | Interview (transcription) |
| Parent | *P1* | Interview (transcription) |
| Parent | *P2* | Interview (transcription) |
| Parent | *P3* | Interview (transcription) |
| Parent | *P4* | Interview (transcription) |
| School Principal | *SP* | Interview (transcription) |

Table 1: Participants and data overview

The study employed semi-structured interviews. As Corbetta explains, the basic objective of qualitative interview is «that of grasping the subject's perspective: understanding his mental categories, his interpretations, his perceptions and feelings, and the motives underlying his actions» (Corbetta, 2003, p. 264). To allow the informants to narrate their experience from their specific perspective – i.e., as a teacher, parent, or school leader – and at their own pace (Hatch, 2002), the interviews were conducted with a high degree of flexibility and a non-directive attitude. In this regard, the interview questions were intentionally designed to be broad to stimulate the interviewees' narratives and, at the same time, avoid orienting their answers. The use of flexible semi-structured interviews allowed the interviewer to move within the question sets with a reasonable degree of freedom, to follow the informants' lead, and to collect insights on topics that were not necessarily included in the interview protocol (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Three sets of questions[viii] were designed according to the different roles of the interviewees (one question set for the teachers, one for the parents, and one for the school leader). The question set for teachers included topics such as the shifts in their teaching practices connected to DL, the rethinking of their role as teachers, the strategies they adopted to keep contact with the students, and the difficulties they had to face during the school closure. The interviews with parents allowed us to collect insights from the *families'* perspectives and focused on themes such as the parents' perceptions of the school's response during the lockdown, the way their children dealt with DL, and the challenges students and parents had to face. The conversation with the school principal revolved around her personal and professional experience during the lockdown, the organization of the school, the adoption of DL as a teaching tool, and the teachers' and students' responses to the massive introduction of technology in everyday teaching. All the question sets included one question regarding an overall assessment of the lockdown period.

The interviews were collected by Author2, who conducted in her Master's thesis (Cenerelli, 2021) a case study about the informants' experiences on DL, deepening the relationships between interviewees' utterances, internal school guidelines, and national educational policy documents. The fact that different researchers carried out the data collection (Cenerelli) and the analysis (Rompianesi) might have generated different layers of interpretation (at least two). For this reason, it was important to adopt a reflexive methodological approach throughout the different steps of the study, as we shall discuss further.

The interviews were collected during the school year 2020-2021 in an empty room of the school. All interviews were recorded after gaining the informants' explicit consent. In compliance with anti-contagion regulations, the interviewer and interviewees used personal protective equipment (PPE). The informants were identified via purposive sampling, through which «researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgment of their typicality or possession of the particular characteristic(s) being sought» (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 218). Covid-19 was still quite widespread when the fieldwork was conducted, and the school principal had an active role in opening the school's doors to the researcher and identifying the informants. The school principal suggested a pool of potentially interested teachers and parents and, together with the researcher, selected and contacted the informants via phone call to set up the appointments for the interviews. All the available parents (4) were recruited for the study, and the teachers were selected to cover a wide range of teaching subjects. The parents were interviewed one by one on the same afternoon, while the interviews with teachers were distributed throughout the school year, depending on their availability and work plan. Regarding the methodology, it is important to consider that the school principal might have contributed to selecting informants (both teachers and parents) who had a positive attitude towards DL as an educational tool and, more generally, toward the school's role and response to the pandemic. Again, it was important to bear that in mind throughout the whole analysis and – as we shall show in the next paragraph – to adopt a reflexive methodological approach.

### 3.2 Methodology: reflexive & inductive thematic analysis

The study employs Braun and Clarke's model of Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017). TA is a qualitative research method that can be used to detect themes and patterns within a specific dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As Braun and Clarke put it, «thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data» (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). As a research method, TA has already been used in Italian educational research on DL during the pandemic and has shown significant outcomes and further possible developments (Batini et al., 2020). The study has an inductive approach, and no themes or codes were defined in advance. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87) suggest a six-step work procedure when using TA:

1. Familiarizing yourself with your data.
2. Generating initial codes.
3. Searching for themes.
4. Reviewing themes.
5. Defining and naming themes.
6. Producing the report.

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The analysis was carried out by using *Nvivo12*, and Braun & Clarke's six-step work procedure was distributed along three readings of the dataset:

1) We familiarized ourselves with the data during the *first reading*. We also generated the first codes, which were progressively refined and reorganized throughout the analysis.

2) During the *second reading*, we read the interviews in the opposite order. We refined and restructured the codes and started identifying the main themes.

3) The *third reading* allowed us to cluster and refine themes and codes further.

Using TA requires researchers to be explicit about their theoretical and epistemological assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2019; Peel, 2020) before and during the research process. From this point of view, the study employed a reflexive methodological approach (Bryman, 2012). Reflexivity is crucial in any qualitative research (Finlay, 2002; Finlay & Gough, 2003; McLeod, 2001), especially when TA is employed (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In fact, as Braun and Clarke point out, themes and codes never *emerge* from the data but rather are *generated* by the researcher-observer on the basis of their interpretative categories (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Following Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009), being reflective meant for us to pay serious attention «to the way different kinds of linguistic, social, political and theoretical elements are woven together in the process of knowledge development, during which empirical material is constructed, interpreted and written» (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 9). Taking reflexivity seriously implied considering the different interpretative layers involved in the study and their effect on the analysis results since (as previously mentioned) different researchers conducted the data collection and analysis. We also problematized how the empirical material was constructed and the consequences of involving the school principal in the informants' recruitment.

### 3.3 Theoretical framework

In terms of *theoretical assumptions*, this study situates itself within the pedagogical horizon outlined by Maria Teresa Moscato. In this sense, educational research is considered a scientific activity investigating a specific phenomenon – *education*. Education presents itself in various ways across history and cultures, but it is always accompanied by a set of recurring characteristics, or *phenomenological constants*, through which an act can (or cannot) be identified as educational (Moscato, 1994, 2008, 2013). In this scenario, *teaching* is conceived as a human act that intervenes to modify the experience of another human being, either by anticipating or mediating it via different kinds of content (Moscato, 2013).

The educational process always occurs within the sociocultural horizon of a given culture, which is embodied in – and at the same time surrounds – any educational relationship. The school is one of the foundational places of educational experience (Moscato, 2013) and is a key part of the sociocultural horizon. At the same time, the act of "educating" and "teaching" within a school system is a non-neutral activity, but rather is normatively laden and charged with different kinds of value assumptions. In this sense, education and schooling need to be understood and defined in their situated, cultural, and political context (Bruner, 1996). As part of the sociocultural horizon, the school is also a place of political, normative, and sometimes ideological instances (Caputo, 2011). Such complexity emerges at different levels, from textbooks (Rompianesi & Caputo, 2020) to policy documents (Hilt, 2015; Hilt et al., 2019) and within the inner organizational structure of the school itself. The school's educational quality also depends on the harmonious relationship between its internal actors – among

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others, the *school principal* and the *teachers*. A school leader with pedagogical sensitivity and capable of orienting and including the teaching staff plays a crucial role in shaping the school as a place of care (Caputo, 2016). From an *epistemological* point of view, discourse is considered in this study from a socio-constructivist perspective. Discourse takes shape from interaction in a shared social, cultural, and symbolic space (Bruner, 1977). Bruner's narrative principle (Bruner, 1996) seemed particularly relevant for the sake of the analysis. Human discourse and thought can take shape narratively, and narrative thinking is one of the ways we make sense of reality and our own experiences (Bruner, 1991, 2004).

## 4. Data analysis and discussion

Three main themes were generated as a result of the analysis:

1. *School as an educational community*
2. *School as a guide*
3. *School as an educational place of care*

As we will show throughout this section, the themes have a high level of internal complexity. Within the whole dataset, the term 'school' ('*scuol\**') has 115 occurrences and appears at least once in each interview (59 occurrences in the interviews with teachers, 36 in the one with the school principal, 20 in the ones with the parents). In relative terms, the word 'school' ('*scuola*') is the fifth most used (with 107 occurrences and a weighted percentage of 0.53%) in the whole dataset; it is in seventh place in interviews with parents (20 occurrences, 0.61%) and sixth place in interviews with teachers and the school principals (87 occurrences, 0.52%)[ix].

### 4.1 Theme 1 – The school as an educational community

The first theme we identified is a portrait of the school as a place for teachers to discover (and re-discover) significant relationships with colleagues. At the first level of analysis, the informants described an *intensification* of the communication between colleagues during the first lockdown:

> «In order to be able to understand better how we were going to deal with our new type of work [*DL*], we had to get in touch more often with each other than we usually do during traditional teaching. We could meet, socialize, and share more often [...]. We met several times, always through Google Meet, to socialize, to share info» (T4).

> «But undoubtedly, during DL times, we [*teachers*] were in touch more often. Even through WhatsApp, as soon as something was happening, we would tell each other» (T7).

T4 affirmed that the increased communication with colleagues was aimed at «socializing» and «sharing info». Both formal and informal communication channels were used since T4 indicated Google Meet as a means of communication, while T7 mentioned WhatsApp. Somehow counterintuitively, the introduction of DL in the Italian school system on a national scale has increased the frequency and quality of communication for most informants (SP, T2, T3, T4, T6, T7). Nonetheless, T5 offered a different representation of the relationship between colleagues between March and June 2020:

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> «So the relationship [*with colleagues*] was there, but in a different way, of course. I couldn't tell you if it decreased or increased because the hours of videoconferencing were a lot, so we actually met each other, but differently – and certainly, it was not better. It was flat. I can define the relationship with colleagues with one adjective: flat. Because, unfortunately, there was not all that possibility to empathize, let's say, and so maybe, yes, we could see each other behind a video camera, but honestly, it was not such a big deal. It was not uplifting at the human level» (T5).

T5 expressed a significant assessment not on the number of interactions – which cannot be quantified clearly – but on their *quality*. According to T5, the school did not seem to be a space where the relationship between colleagues had improved compared to the pre-pandemic period, and the informant defined such a relationship as characterized by flatness.

T5's experience seems unique in the dataset, and it is not shared by other informants. Generally, the teachers claimed that the quality of their relationships with colleagues improved during the lockdown. In some cases, such improvement took place within a conception of the school as a significant social space. T3 perceived the school during the pandemic as a safe space, a place devoid of judgmental attitudes where teachers could express their professionalism freely and so «get together»:

> «But look at that! [*almost as saying that to herself*] [...] a place [*the school*] where there is a lot of professionalism, but at the same time, there is a great depth, because then what I could see was that we teachers really got together. There was no longer that feeling: 'Oh my God, I will not ask this question because they might think I don't know how to do it'» (T3).

It is interesting to underline the tone of surprise of T3 («But look at that!») when she reflected on her own understanding of the role of the school in her social and professional well-being during the pandemic. The school principal also emphasized the perception of growth of the school «as a group», the overall maturation within the teaching community, and the related feeling of belonging:

> «Despite this, however, in my opinion, what happened here is somewhat similar to what happens when, in marriage difficulties, you either get divorced or strengthen the bond. In my opinion, what happened here is that we strengthened our bond. [...] When I saw them [*the teachers*] come back to school, and we set up the work for this year [*2020/2021*], I really had the feeling that we had grown as a group of this school. So, everyone brings their skills to the table, and everyone helps each other out. We have identified some persons who served as reference points, 'ah yes, we can ask her, she knows how to do this'. So, everyone has shared skills with each other, so here is the positive aspect» (SP).

T4 affirmed that the search for closeness with other teachers stemmed from the «need» to «keep in touch» during the pandemic period when there was a high degree of uncertainty about the future. Indeed, the physical space of the school had dissolved, and with it, all the traditional ways of relating with colleagues:

> «Yes, I felt on a personal level a sort of – I can say – a sort of change the moment the school closed. We were at the end of February; we didn't know yet whether we would go back to school or not, whether the school would

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stay closed for a limited period or not. In my case, I felt right away, I felt right away the need to keep in touch […] with the colleagues I see every day, with whom I have just small talk in the corridors» (T4).

The teaching staff seemed to be relevant for professional and didactic support. That point was stressed by T5, who had previously expressed skepticism about the usefulness and quality of the relationship with colleagues during the pandemic:

> «Then actually, the more you went on a little bit, the more you started to think about strategies, the more you started to dig – let's say –, the more ideas came out. Then, at a certain point, actually, you discover that something positive comes out of the difficulties, out of the crisis. Because you discover – you see things from a different point of view» (T5).

According to T5, the school during the pandemic was a place in which a new kind of professional dialogue took place. The dialogue and exchange of ideas with colleagues allowed T5 to «see things from a different point of view» and find new suitable teaching strategies. In this respect, the teaching staff took the shape of an educational community, where horizontal dialogue was the first on-the-field tool for teaching innovation and training. According to T2, such element characterized school *as such* and has been strengthened during the pandemic, when the level of «synergy» between teachers increased:

> «Here at school, the relationship with colleagues during that time was very important, if I can say that. At school, generally, we were used to working with well-established routines, with afternoon face-to-face meetings – so you can create a synergy between teachers, you can test some things, and have a dialogue with each other when testing them. This happened even more with distance learning» (T2).

Framing school as a place to develop balanced relationships had educational and professional value. In other words, understanding school as an *educational community* – characterized by positive interactions with colleagues, widespread and well-established dialogical routines, and shared solutions to educational problems – served as a resource in times of difficulty and a powerful training device for teachers.

According to T4, the school at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic was based on a feeling of sharing, the perception that «we were all together as a group». Paradoxically, understanding colleagues' needs was more difficult during normal face-to-face school times since the relationships between colleagues were based on «gazes» rather than on a shared sense of unity:

> «In face-to-face school, you [*as a teacher*] can slip away a little bit, also because you know, you get out of a classroom and you have to go fast to the next one. It's not like you can chat so much in the hallways, and that's the only time you actually see each other. [*In face-to-face school*] Relationships are more about the gaze, and you can tell right away if the colleague is doing well or not… but in this situation [*the Covid-19 pandemic*], I saw that there was a total sharing of this… of this need, and we were all together as a group» (T4).

According to T2, the school during the pandemic was a space where the educational community faced a crisis together. The teaching staff was characterized by «running up» to each other, and relationships took the form of «virtual handshakes» based on mutual encouragement and professional and emotional support:

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> «We helped each other a lot, so the collaboration between teachers during that time was not only necessary but also a moment of comfort among us adults, a chance to encourage each other and pass on the secrets we were discovering of technological mechanisms [...] it was, like, a virtual handshake, we were running up to each other because we knew that we were all full of problems and the support of a colleague could be helpful for everyone» (T2).

## 4.2 Theme 2 – The school as a guide

In the interviews, the informants portrayed the school not only as an *educational community* but also as a *key point of reference*. Some parents emphasized the need for a dependable school and the importance of relying on school during a radically uncertain time such as the pandemic. When asked to comment on the school's response to the pandemic, P3 stated that «the school has always been there»:

> «I have to say, I have a positive judgment. Because from the beginning, also through Google Classroom, we went ahead with the school program, and, anyway, there was contact. And then, the thing that was important for me was that the school principal immediately explained what would be done step by step through WhatsApp messages and videos. So we didn't feel abandoned. [...] The school was always there. [...] I liked that the school principal was there and made us feel her presence on several occasions with various messages. Then the class coordinator called us to understand a little bit about the issues, so in the end… We made it» (P3).

P3 and her family felt included in a constructive dialogue with the school, which was perceived as in tune with their concerns. Different school actors played a role in constructing a dialogue between families and school, and alongside the school principal, the class coordinator helped in tightening the bond:

> «From this point of view, I think there was also good cooperation. Every now and then, I remember, the class coordinator would call us parents to find out what things were going wrong and if something could be improved… We were very concerned about the program, I have to say» (P2).

The class coordinator contributed to responding to P2's worries about the school program, and the school principal explained to P3 «what was going to be done step by step». The school played a significant guiding role not just for parents but also for teachers. The school affirmed its guiding role by establishing a solid internal organization, which helped T4 to feel more «peaceful»:

> «In this school, compared to other ones, I was able to work in a more [*quote unquote*] 'peaceful manner' because I was following a defined schedule, and that allowed me to avoid overlapping with other video lessons» (T4).

T6 emphasized not just the guiding role of the school principal but also the resourcefulness of more experienced colleagues:

> «The dialogue with colleagues with more years of experience, let's say, with more experience in educational aspects, was very important. Also, the school principal gives us very clear and motivating suggestions, so I like it. I also feel safer if I rely on people with more experience than me» (T6).

For T6, the school played a key role in orienting her teaching practices and educational approach. The dialogue with more experienced colleagues also contributed to T6's feeling of safety. T3 portrayed an image of the school as a support, a place that does not leave anyone behind and «accompanies» teachers. At the same time, the school's guidance did not compromise the teachers' independence. T3 experienced the school as a space of «freedom» and, therefore, as a space of professional support and human closeness. Such a school could *de facto* become the place of a proper expression of one's professionalism:

> «At school, there was great freedom – with great freedom, we expressed our concerns and reflections, and so – I have to say – at that time [*March-June 2020*], I felt very accompanied both professionally and humanly. I had a place where it was guaranteed that my professionalism could be expressed, even in a different way [*T3 refers here to DL*], because I felt accompanied and supported by the staff, school, and colleagues who were more experienced than me in that respect» (T3).

### 4.3 Theme 3 – The school as an educational place of care

The school was portrayed by some informants also as a welcoming space and place of care. This specific understanding of the school emerged from three interviews with teachers (T2, T3, T4) and the one with the school principal (SP), according to which the «welcoming» and «caring» nature of the school is part of its foundational principles:

> «We here have as our guiding principle the conception of a school that welcomes and takes care, and so we have tried to put welcoming and care into practice even during that time of difficulty [*the Covid-19 pandemic*], as far as possible» (SP).

Such an understanding of school focused on teachers' and staff's well-being. According to T3, the feeling of being kindly guided by the school took the shape of a «hug»:

> «In short, I felt hugged and guided; I felt I could rely on the school both as a professional and as a human being in need. [...] That was something that reaches you anyway, hugs you, accompanies you» (T3).

T3 stressed the importance of a school that cares for teachers' emotional and psychological needs. In this regard, the school could be a place of sharing and personal dialogue also via formal communication channels, such as Google Classroom and Meet:

> «But it was also a place [*the school*] where we could exchange, with this platform [*Google Classroom and Meet*], where we could tell each other about our difficulties both professionally but also, I mean, our life also from the psychological aspect» (T3).

The school principal showed similar sensitivity and a similar conception of school as a place where it is useless to «point the finger». School as a welcoming and caring community needed, on the contrary, «caressing», «understanding», «listening»:

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> «So, I started to make teachers understand that at this stage, we needed caressing, understanding, listening, and not pointing fingers because it wouldn't do any good. Slowly, the concept started to sink in» (SP).

T2 provided a broader understanding of the school as a place of care and depicted it as a safety tool, a «protective structure» responsible for safeguarding students, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. T2 also emphasized the relationship between protection, safety, and well-being:

> «We had messages from students saying, 'hey, they're sick here, my father got infected, now I'm sick too'. Then you find them in front of the screen, and you try to, in some way, make them feel the closeness of their friends, their teachers, and the school structure that must be a protective structure – this is another philosophy of this school: to give the children protection, to make them feel good and to protect them» (T2).

Taking care of students meant for T4 to bridge the gap between school and students caused by the pandemic. Such a rupture led to the lack of something «fundamental» for the students:

> «Because I felt that something got broken, that something fundamental for them [*the students*] had been missing, and so that precisely was my desire, not to lose the thread of the discourse with them» (T4).
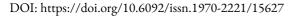
The perception of that rift between the students and the school was also highlighted by T2 and triggered a desire to suture the wound through a process of compensation. T2 displayed a specific focus on his students' real needs and seemed attentive to their fragility *hic et nunc*. T2 then described the school as a key tool for students to perceive that they «have a role in their lives». The school could enable students to perceive themselves as the center of educational activities and thus the «protagonists» – and not mere «actors» – of their lives:

> «Morally, we were trying to compensate – all the teachers, we were trying to compensate for the distance between the school and the students, we were trying to help them regain a little bit of normality because everyone felt lost, the kids. Some faced it in a more or less swaggering way, but all the students felt a little bit disoriented. [...] With distance learning, I was trying to make them feel the school environment as they were used to feel it, to really have a moment of peacefulness, to make them feel that they still had a role in their lives. Because otherwise, they felt a little bit like actors in their own lives and not the main protagonists» (T2).

T2 stressed the importance of a school that takes care of the students and cares about their well-being:

> «Our school's philosophy is to 'feel good at school'. We tried to carry on that philosophy even during that time [*the pandemic*] to make them [*the students*] feel as normal as possible. We knew that if we could make them feel calm and peaceful, like how we used to work face-to-face together, we would help them and their families. We felt that we also had a mission... we had the task to accompany the kids, to help the families a little bit» (T2).

T2 expressed the perception of a «mission» to help not only children but also families, and T4 highlighted the school's social role during the pandemic time as a «reference point» for society that prevented students from getting lost, from «slipping into the unseen»:

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> «Beyond the health care system, the school was giving a point of reference to society. Everyone was slipping a little bit into the unseen, into being out of touch with reality» (T4).

As a result, T2 expressed the perception – both around him and within himself – of a profound reassessment of the role and value of the school for all stakeholders:

> «But there have been many positive outcomes. For example, the value of the school for both teachers and students, but I also guess for families, has grown a lot. When I talk with colleagues, students, and acquaintances, I realize that right now, they think about the school as something very valuable. [...] The value of school has grown so much; this is the most positive and most beautiful part for the kids. It is the most beautiful part because seeing them happy to be here, smiling... and every time there is a little bit of tiredness, you remind them, 'but you remember when we were at home that we were all sad, right? I saw you sad back then', then they smile and say 'yes, we want to be here'» (T2).

## 5. Conclusion

The study sample represents a micro-universe of informants (teachers, parents, the school principal) who experienced the school as a place of care and positive relations during a critical time. The school was described as a space for developing a *teaching community* where teachers became a resource for each other at the educational, professional, and emotional levels. Some connected the school to a feeling of guidance, safety, and freedom, where teachers and students could feel «hugged» (T3) and listened to.

The study provides a complex and stratified portrait of the school's role during the first wave of the pandemic. Nevertheless, such a portrait appears to be *harmonized* in some respects, and the informants' utterances show a low degree of dissonance in assessing the school's first response to the pandemic. The study is exploratory, and the sample cannot be considered *statistically representative* of the general perception of the school by teachers, parents, and school principals during the first lockdown in March-June 2020. The study has some limitations regarding the number of participants involved, their belonging to only one school, and the sampling, which involved the school principal to some extent. To untangle and provide a deeper understanding of the role of the schools during the lockdown, further research could investigate teachers', parents', and school principals' experiences in different areas of the country and assess, from a *qualitative comparative perspective*, differences and similarities at the local level. A richer sample could also include the students' voices to investigate how they experienced the introduction of DL and perceived the role of the school in the early pandemic.

As a concluding remark, it is worth stressing the importance of the positive leadership of the school principal, who seemed to have effectively supported teachers and parents during a critical time. A pedagogically sensitive and inclusive school leadership acted as a real resource during tough times. Interestingly, the school principal seemed to have *consciously* oriented the relationships between colleagues towards a mutual understanding, avoiding judging attitudes and finger-pointing:

> «So, I started to make teachers understand that at this stage, we needed caressing, understanding, listening, and not pointing fingers because it wouldn't do any good. Slowly, the concept started to sink in» (SP).

Such an approach contributed to enhancing teachers' skills and competencies:

> «We have identified some persons who served as reference points, 'ah yes, we can ask her, she knows how to do this'. So, everyone has shared skills with each other, so here is the positive aspect» (SP).

The study shows the high significance of a shared understanding of the school as an *educational community* during the first Covid-19 lockdown in March-June 2020. Conceptualizing the school as a space where professionals can *work together as a teaching community coordinated by a pedagogically sensitive school principal* seems to positively orient teachers' performances and well-being. Such a perspective also emphasizes the need to focus on the *choral nature* of teaching for teachers' education and training.

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[i] In the Italian educational system, a comprehensive school institute (*istituto comprensivo*) can include different levels of education, namely kindergarten (*scuola dell'infanzia*), primary school (*scuola primaria*), and lower secondary school (*scuola secondaria di primo grado*).

[ii] https://www.sird.it/ricerca-nazionale-sird-2020/ (13.09.2022)

[iii] https://www.almalaurea.it/comunicati/2020/indagine-dad (13.09.2022)

[iv] https://www.fondazioneagnelli.it/2021/07/09/la-dad-alle-scuole-superiori-nellanno-scolastico-2020-21-una-fotografia/ (13.09.2022)

[v] https://www.cnr.it/it/news/9890/la-didattica-a-distanza-secondo-le-famiglie-un-quadro-in-chiaroscuro (13.09.2022)

[vi] This theme is particularly significant in the Italian scenario, where pedagogy seems to be perceived as a fragile discipline characterized by «weak bonds» and «a certain degree of potential internal entropy» (Moscato, 2012, p. 31, auth. trans.).

[vii] In English: *Educational Schools and Creative Teachers in Emilia-Romagna. A Field Study.* The Conference took place on 9-10 September 2021 at the "Vladimiro Spallanzani" Comprehensive School Institute in Sassuolo (MO) (https://site.unibo.it/res/en/agenda/educational-schools-and-creative-teachers-in-emilia-romagna-a-field-study, 31.08.2022). The Conference concluded a research project coordinated by Giorgia Pinelli under the supervision of Michele Caputo (University of Bologna). For two years (2018-2020), interviews and observations were carried out within the "Vladimiro Spallanzani" Comprehensive School Institute. The project further expanded in the following year (2021) and involved six schools in Reggio Emilia, Modena, and Bologna provinces. For further information, see Pinelli & Caputo, 2021; Pinelli, 2022; and the website: https://site.unibo.it/res/en/action-research (13.09.2022)

[viii] For an overview of the question sets, see *Appendix 1*.

[ix] The text queries in *Nvivo* were run without considering the text of the interviewer's questions. The entry 'scuol\*' (*school\**) was used in the text search query to also include the plural form. The word frequency queries were carried out by setting to 3 the minimum number of letters and searching for the 100 most frequent words.

## Appendix 1 - *Question sets for the semi-structured interviews*

Question set for the interviews with teachers:
- *Did you need to rethink your job and role as a teacher during the first Covid-19 lockdown? If yes, how?*
- *What consequences did that have on your teaching practices?*
- *What conditions allowed you to re-establish contact with the students?*
- *What kind of difficulties did you face?*
- *What kind of choices did you make regarding the teaching of your subject?*
- *What have been the most significant moments of this experience with distance learning?*
- *What are the positive and negative outcomes?*

Question set for the interviews with parents:
- *How did you deal with the period of lockdown and distance learning?*
- *What kind of problems did you face?*
- *How do you assess the school's response?*
- *How do you assess the response of your son/daughter?*
- *Do you think the school could have done more?*
- *Do you think your son/daughter could have done more?*
- *Do you think you could have done more – or acted differently?*
- *What is your overall assessment of your experience with distance learning during the lockdown?*

Questions for the interview with the school principal:
- *How did you experience the first Covid-19 lockdown?*
- *How did you organize the online school activities?*
- *Why did you choose to communicate with parents and pupils through videos? What was your aim?*
- *To what extent have you perceived the digital divide in the school environment?*
- *What is your overall assessment of the lockdown period?*

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