

# **Distant, but not too far**

School in the time of COVID-19

## **MANIFESTO FOR AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**



**Distance Learning is an emergency tool and  
can't replace educational relationship**

Claiming teaching value. The voice of pedagogists, psychologists, docimologists, philosophers and, above all, teachers, in an extraordinary period for the world of education.

Signed Manifesto will be delivered to Italian Ministry of Education, in hope for a renewed attention to irreplaceable educational relationship made at school.

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## THE CONTEXT

Following epidemiological emergency from COVID-19, Italian Government has launched containment measures for management of country services, with a specific impact on the school sector. The DPCM (Prime Minister Decree) of 4 March 2020 certified an emergency no longer limited, as in the first phase, to some parts of the country. To pursue the primary need to avoid infection spread, lessons were suspended, with a sudden measure that closed all Italian schools.

DPCM advised “possibility of implementing distance learning activities” (art. 1, par. 1, let. d) and such indications - reaffirmed in some successive ministerial notes - started debates and discussions in any schools and among the analysts. Finally, Law Decree of 8 April 2020, n. 22, - in the school section - has further invigorated debate and consequent oppositions.

FLC CGIL, with experts and professional associations, tried to ask questions about methodology and didactic, starting from broader pedagogical concepts: values of democracy and inclusion, as imagined for education system by Republican Constitution.

The seven points of our ***Manifesto for an inclusive teaching are an opportunity for reflection and study about teachers’ professionalism***. We want to share these points with experts and scholars to contribute to a debate more often conditioned by interests and instrumentality. **We think that Education and teaching freedom are an exercise of responsibility and beauty, and they are among key rights included in our Constitutional Charter**. Now they are taken away from teachers, from professors and from all those who, in our education system, accomplish the complex - and often devalued - activity of teaching.

### 1. DURING EMERGENCY, CONTACT WITH PUPILS IS SAVE. VALUE AND CONTINUITY OF EDUCATIONAL RELATIONSHIP.

From beginning of March, when health emergency led to suspension of teaching activities, forcing millions of students at home, Italian teachers made a commitment to get in touch with them. It was a spontaneous reaction to the deprivation of the relationship: **if students will not come to school, teachers decided to go to the students**. Closeness need defeated the distance imposition. The social, pedagogical and relational intensity of this process was much higher than competent use of distance learning, perceived as a useful and available tool in an emergency.

**In this moment of children, young people and families’ isolation, distance teaching has proved to be an immediate solution**: it has been declined and adapted by the teachers’ commitment. Now we need promptness of the educational institution - at its various levels - to

guarantee adequate technical and organizational solutions. With a lot of effort and great determination, teachers have been able to put in place didactic strategies that have proved indispensable to make the children feel the closeness of their teachers.

Today more than ever, we need to **recompose educating community, the training origin for all the citizens**: crucial task of the school is to be a room for life, where knowledge is developed, but mainly a sense of belonging and participation.

For this reason, facing emergency, our schools have continued, by all means, to be a defense of sociality and democracy. And therefore, we need to understand and to value this movement, because it is a sign of social vitality of one of the main public institutions in the country, that has gone beyond the borders of schools and has been able to speak to the society, also in conditions of extreme suffering. Today this sign should be oriented and framed to transform educational actions dictated by the emergency into an opportunity for rethinking and planning for the new school year starting.

**However, a critical aspect remains: everyone - students, families, teachers, managers and school staff - miss real school, the one where we can meet and learn.**

**For this reason, an extraordinary commitment by the State is essential to start again the school in safety as soon as possible, to take up again teaching in presence and get back what has been lost in so many months. Still, after years of pseudo-reforms, we need to focus again on teaching, its methods and the learning needs of the new generations, through weighty investments in school time, teachers and staff recruiting, laboratories, school building and safety.**

## 2. PEDAGOGICAL ACTION AS TRAINING FOR CRITICAL ABILITY AND CITIZENSHIP.

Educational action of the school is fully carried out through a global approach to children, boys and girls' needs, with a 'broad' look, both on **learning disciplinary knowledge** and on their **ethical, social and emotional growth**.

Ordinary school progress, with its rotation of collective and individual moments, creates complementary situations with a well-balanced educational approach. Current emergency breaks this balance and leads us to reflect on the complexity of pedagogical action, both at a socio-relational and cognitive level.

Educational action, when it takes place in presence, is held into a social context, with teacher and a certain number of same age students, and allows and stimulates a face-to-face interaction, which preserves a significant socio-affective effectiveness.

These reflections acquire their meanings only in a **complex design capacity**, integrating frontal teaching and dynamizing lessons. It would therefore also be necessary to think about how distance learning is carried out because there is a strong risk to culminate in a mere vertical transmission of notions.

Furthermore, teachers' laborious experiences have shown that, in addition to keep the class group dimension alive, it is necessary to find procedures for **individual communication with each student**, to monitor his well-being, but also to give an accurate feedback on the results of didactic activities.

### 3. DISTANCE TEACHING, AN EMERGENCY TOOL, CANNOT REPLACE THE EDUCATIONAL RELATIONSHIP.

We need to be **aware of the obvious limitations of distance learning compared to face-to-face teaching**, to look for itineraries and organizational models that, even in a potential emergency perpetuation, are more faithful to an authentic educational relationship. We must avoid that this teaching method turns into the umpteenth process of exclusion for the weakest subjects, or in a penalization of the students coming from deprived families and contexts, both economic and socio-cultural and, therefore, without technological resources.

Not only: inclusive climate - a resource for developing overall social and training skills in the contexts in which pupils with disabilities are inserted - cannot be replaced by digital work, which, although cooperative when used at the best, maintains a strong individual value, because there are no physical references and, therefore, no integrated relationships.

These first weeks highlighted how many students did not have necessary connectivity, nor the technological tools to be able to respond to teachers' requests or simply follow their activities. In addition to the obvious limitations - compared to the usual affective relationship that the school activates with children of kindergarten and primary school - it should be noted, generally speaking, that many children could not count on parents for helping them in activities proposed by remote school.

In other words, **besides compromising the authentic educational relationship, distance education is in danger of being even more discriminatory and selective** than education in presence.

#### 4. TECHNOLOGIES AND MEDIA ARE TOOLS, NOT A SCOPE.

We believe **this situation can be an occasion for reflection on the way of teaching and on the relationship with the technological development.** No technological tool can substitute educational relationship or interaction in presence, but technological tools represent further possibilities for interaction and we need to learn how to use them, as we learnt to use scissors or a pen. Actually, digital technology or platforms, like any other computer equipment, are, on their own, neither good nor bad; **therefore, with the statement that ‘teaching’ is mainly a relationship, their adequate use depends on the awareness and mastery degree you manage them.**

Reasoning about the inconvenience that this unprecedented situation causes for teaching, means coming back to **reflexion on teaching as a whole.** If a crisis can mark a change, **it cannot determine the uncritical assumption of an enhanced centrality of technology. This kind of crisis will help to planning and consciously reorienting an already changed didactic, which - however enriched with new and different tools - remains always set on the centrality of the pedagogical relationship.**

#### 5. AVOIDING DANGERS: SELECTIVITY AND DISPERSION.

Lack of IT infrastructures is a problem and affects many people in the country, not only for what concern schools. This lack is in danger of increasing inequalities (see the alarming [ISTAT report \*Spazi in casa e disponibilità di computer per bambini e ragazzi - Spaces at home and availability of computers for children and teenagers\*](#)).

Certainly, territorial, social and economic gaps once again mark the distinction between advanced instruments in use by students and 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 staff facilities. They can be available to students of all the Country,** also with redistributive and compensatory allocation methods to offer more tools to those who now have less.

For years we have been talking about educational poverty and when we described it we were referring not only to the economic poverty of the family unit, but to a set of factors that, combined with each other, had lead children to live a marginal condition: poor social, economic and housing context, non-accessible spaces, lack of services and educational opportunities, lack of cultural offer for children (books, museums, exhibitions), lack of spaces dedicated to sport, lack of school in good condition and all related services (canteen, full-time, use for external people), lack of accessing to internet and to new means of communication.

## 6. COLLECTIVE TOOLS OF EDUCATIONAL RELATIONSHIP: SCHOOLS' AUTONOMY AND COLLEGIAL BODIES.

Collegiality - and not individual teachers' initiative - continues to be an imperative function of orientation and planning, which must also be exercised in emergencies in compliance with current legislation, with flexible methods and agile and functional organization of all bodies: class, teaching team, departments, etc.

Educational choices are made depending on the contexts and territory characteristics, and thanks to the tools provided by school autonomy, they are able to decline the specific institutional purpose of the school towards its students.

The Class Councils plan the training activity according to each class necessities, choosing and adapting to context aims, objectives and methodologies indicated by the Teaching Board. **It is not a bureaucratic action, but a strong pedagogical value, because through comparison we acquire different perspectives, with educational relationships models enrichment, not always comparable.**

## 7. SUMMATIVE AND FORMATIVE EVALUATION.

**In schools, evaluation** aims to build self-awareness and lead students to understand their learning path potential and limits. **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 their incentives and research paths) to guarantee everyone their educational success.** In this sense, it is essential that teachers and students together perceive clearly that they need to reflect and understand what the appropriate tools to better face the situation are. From this point of view it is useful that, rather than on the specific contents already programmed, we must try to work together with the children about the crisis we are facing (from a scientific, social and historical viewpoint), about communication, about meta-communication and especially about how mass media conveys messages.

Unfortunately, however, **first problem is measuring performance:** grades, report cards, exams, formal aspect. It is an assessment about how student learns in close interaction with proposed teaching as well as the returned feedback.

Still, **what helps is not the grade, but the explanation of mistakes** (and, however, this is not enough and need to be integrated with exercises to improve learning of methods or alternative answers to mistakes). This is the formative evaluation and it is a complex pedagogical operation,

which requires great attention to individual learning mechanisms and a strong teacher/learner relationship.

**Evaluation at the end of the present school year must have a profoundly formative dimension compared to the past, because conditions are extraordinary and we are even less able to help students in difficulty**, with less means, and, above all, we must give them a positive signal, helping them through this hard situation. Hence, starting from the next school year, schools will have to be able to count on the necessary resources to be ready for compensatory interventions, flexibility and extension of school time. Schools need also new organizational models to foster regaining, enhancement, development, essential requirements after a protracted suspension. School owes a lot to the students.

**We will have time and means to recuperate, especially if at this stage we have been able to work on strengths and limits of educational relationship between students and teachers.**

*We therefore ask pedagogists, psychologists, didacticists, philosophers and, above all, teachers [to sign](#) this Manifesto to contribute to the ongoing debate in our country, so that teaching continues to belong to the most important scientific and cultural elaboration, with prestigious roots and ramifications in our Country, and should not be transformed into profitable market operations and in an increasingly inequality.*