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Teachers at Work During the Pandemic. A Qualitative Research about Transformative Experiences and Resilience at School

*Nauczyciele w pracy w czasie pandemii. Jakościowe badanie
dotyczące doświadczeń transformacyjnych i odporności w szkole*

Abstract: The emergency due to the pandemic of COVID-19 has required great adaptability and resilience from teachers and students. This study explores teachers' experiences with distance learning during the first Italian lockdown, investigating their personal and professional responsiveness to unexpected circumstances. A sample of 32 primary and 24 secondary school teachers responded to a narrative survey created *ad hoc* to highlight the differences between the experience factors that characterized the impact and the resilience in the state of emergency. Narratives were explored through T-Lab software, aiming to extract the main themes and their significance. Content analysis of teachers' narratives indicated significant differences between the affective resources invested in primary and secondary teachers. If primary teachers were supported by affective relationships with students in handling their personal and professional resilience, secondary teachers based their management of emergency on the continuity of teaching methods and scholastic tasks.

Keywords: teachers; distance schooling; pandemic; qualitative research; resilience

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Abstrakt: Sytuacja kryzysowa spowodowana pandemią COVID-19 wymagała od nauczycieli i uczniów dużej adaptacyjności i odporności. W tym badaniu zbadano doświadczenia nauczycieli związane z nauką na odległość podczas pierwszego włoskiego *lockdownu*, badając ich osobistą i zawodową reakcję na nieoczekiwane okoliczności. Grupa 32 nauczycieli szkół podstawowych i 24 nauczycieli szkół średnich odpowiedziała na ankietę narracyjną stworzoną *ad hoc* w celu podkreślenia różnic między czynnikami doświadczenia, które charakteryzowały wpływ i odporność w stanie wyjątkowym. Narracje zbadano za pomocą oprogramowania T-Lab, mając na celu wyodrębnienie głównych tematów i ich znaczenia. Analiza treści narracji nauczycieli wykazała istotne różnice między zasobami afektywnymi zainwestowanymi w nauczycieli szkół podstawowych i średnich. Jeśli nauczyciele szkół podstawowych byli wspierani przez relacje afektywne z uczniami w radzeniu sobie z ich osobistą i zawodową odpornością, nauczyciele szkół średnich opierali swoje zarządzanie sytuacją kryzysową na ciągłości metod nauczania i zadań szkolnych.

Słowa kluczowe: nauczyciele; nauczanie na odległość; pandemia; badania jakościowe; odporność

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

The interest and importance of teacher-student relationships have been seen at least since Ancient Greece (Sears-Tam, 2013). In more recent times, during the first years of the twentieth century, important researchers and theorists like Dewey and Vygotsky also looked at the theme and wrote about it (Pianta et al., 2003). Around 1993, in the United Kingdom, a teacher recruitment campaign used the slogan “No one forgets a good teacher” (Banks & Barlex, 2001), of which Pianta (2012) made a synthesis in: “it is [...] true that nearly every student can describe, with enthusiasm and passion, a relationship with a teacher that they felt meaningful and important to them”. We could add that every fortunate student can develop such a relationship.

Research approached the theme from various theoretical visions and used different methods and instruments to measure this type of relationship and the aspects connected to it. A line of research looks at teacher-student relationship (frequently abbreviated in TSR or TCR, for teacher-child relationship), as part of a “connection” to school (also said school connectedness), the sensation of belonging to it, that would work as a protective factor (Areba et al., 2021; Henrich et al., 2005). At times, this vision might become strictly instrumental, looking at a group of strategies to “hook” the student and reduce the risk of risky behavior “such as alcohol and drug use, violence and negative sexual behaviors” (Vidourek et al., 2011).

From an opposite point of view, we can find studies that center on the relational aspect, seeing the qualities of TSR as “key developmental resources for children” (Pianta et al., 2003) and focus research on the affective components (Roorda et al., 2017). Attachment theory and its derivatives (Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Ainsworth, 1973) were used as base for this research line (Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Spilt & Koomen, 2022), to then widen to systemic theories like developmental systems theory (DST) or ecologically-oriented systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Longobardi, 2013; Pianta et al., 2003) or to “social-motivational, socialization, interpersonal theory and social support models” (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Ecologic or systemic conceptions

consider multiple, interconnected relational levels from the macro to the microsystem level. The latter is also called proximal level and is where additional attachments between teacher and student usually take place, together with the ones created with “their parents, extended family [and] peers” (Emslander et al., 2023).

The effects linked to TSR, seen in an important number of studies through time, seem to show – among other things – an improvement of “academic performance, psychosocial functioning, and motivation and engagement in school” (Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Quin, 2017; Thornberg et al., 2022), engagement divided in affective, behavioral and cognitive dimensions (Roorda et al., 2017), but also a reduction of the daytime sleepiness (Longobardi et al., 2022) and seems to have a link with the stress response system, measured through the cortisol levels (Ahnert et al., 2012; Hatfield & Williford, 2017). The relationship with a teacher might act as a corrective experience for the student who grew in problematic relations and with insecure attachments (Spilt & Koomen, 2022) or for boys and girls who show aggressive behavior (Meehan et al., 2003). Teacher’s sensitivity, defined as “ability of the caregiver to perceive and interpret a child’s signals and needs accurately, and to respond appropriately and promptly” (Spilt & Koomen, 2022; Verschueren et al., 2012), emerge as a important component of TSR, accompanied by different outcomes, related with the level of sensitivity accessible in the teacher at the time (Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

Research also takes into consideration the differences between primary and secondary school and TSR, passing from a vision where only the youngest need a close relation with teachers while the oldest are getting gradually to autonomy to a view where adolescents are studied in a deeper manner. Spilt and Koomen (2022) found, as an example, that the secure base function (in which you have a “secure enough” point and relationships to start exploring from them, exploring the surrounds, the environment, to build your identity and to project into the possible futures) seems to have more space while the centrality of the safe haven function (regarding the affective self-regulation) reduces. Roorda and colleagues (2017) concluded that TSR is as important for older students than it is for younger ones, confirming that the previous visions might have been surpassed. The school organization also differs between the school levels, having one or a few teachers and a smaller school at the primary level, while working with many different figures, therefore with a more limited time, and space with each adult, significant or not, and bigger school with larger student numbers at the secondary one (Quin, 2017; Roorda et al., 2017; Spilt & Koomen, 2022).

Through decades, the complexity of the view of teacher-student relationship grew, within the single or grouped theories applied to school and in the integration between different visions and disciplines that probably are aspects of a wider concept of school and relationships moving around it (Pianta et al., 2003; Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Spilt & Koomen, 2022). Attachment theories, as an example, passed from research questions looking at the concordance or continuity between parental and TSR attachment, to an opening to the possibility of domain specific attachments or, in this case, a school

specific version of it (Spilt & Koomen, 2022). Research also widened to new points of view, from the teacher one to the addition of the student and the external observer views, also considering gradually the possible differences between development phases, age and school level, as anticipated before, to cite only a few of the new sub-domains that opened in the field of TSR (Pianta et al., 2003; Spilt & Koomen, 2022).

HOW TEACHERS NAVIGATED THE CHALLENGE

Resilience is a broad concept lacking a universally accepted definition (Aburn et al., 2016). Resilience research has moved away from conceptualising resilience as a trait and towards studying resilience as a process by which resources protect against the negative impact of stressors and unexpected changes to produce positive outcomes and professional improvements. The American Psychological Association [APA] defines psychological resilience as

the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands. A number of factors contribute to how well people adapt to adversities, predominant among them (a) the ways in which individuals view and engage with the world, (b) the availability and quality of social resources, and (c) specific coping strategies. Psychological research demonstrates that the resources and skills associated with more positive adaptation (i.e., greater resilience) can be cultivated and practiced. (APA, 2018)

Researchers explore two core concepts commonly implicated: adversity and positive adaptation (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). What constitutes positive adaptation, depends on the nature of the adversity; which varies from major traumatic events to common everyday stressors. Hardship, stress, adversity and unforeseen events are an inevitable part of the human experience and psychological resilience plays a key role in teachers' well-being and performance. Furthermore, the role of mental processes and behaviour in promoting personal assets and protecting an individual from the potential negative effects of stressors became a relevant factor in the complex educational role of teachers especially during the pandemic period. According to current research, also for teachers the individual differences influence the way one faces and adapts to a stress situation leading to a positive outcome. Both the selection and usefulness of resources and strategies will vary situationally (Fullerton et al., 2021).

The teaching profession is recognized as one of the most demanding professions (Johnson et al., 2005). The necessities due to the COVID-19 pandemic have created new challenges for teachers and students. At an international level, the scientific literature that has dealt with the impact of the pandemic on the teaching profession has generally focused on aspects such as self-efficacy (Andreou et al., 2022; Cataudella

et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2021; Manuti et al., 2022; Pellerone, 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2021; Rabaglietti et al., 2021; Takunyaci, 2021; Tas et al., 2021; Weißenfels et al., 2022) stress, depression and anxiety (Ma et al., 2022; Nang et al., 2022; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021; Rabaglietti et al., 2021), burnout (Pellerone, 2021; Weißenfels et al., 2022; Westphal et al., 2022) coping strategy (Klapproth et al., 2020; Messineo & Tosto, 2023), self-esteem (Cataudella et al., 2021; Pereira et al., 2021). This article aims to contribute to a line of research less investigated by the pre-existing literature, deepening the experience of teachers exploring it from their perspective through the qualitative analysis of their narratives.

Each crisis requires the subject to get involved in the development of a new and different organization of the self (Yerushalmi, 2007). The unexpected is something “un-thought”. The pandemic emergency – surely not expected by the teachers – required them to be flexible and to continuously rethink their teaching activity. The teachers, as well as being like everyone else contending with the strains of the pandemic themselves (Hidalgo-Andrade et al., 2021), from health concerns to changes due to smart-working, also played their professional role with a series of educational responsibilities, in a context where their relationships – and consequently the vital space of every educational and didactic process – had to be completely re-conceived (Ramploud et al., 2022).

During distance schooling, teachers had to develop and implement skills in a more transversal and coping manner such as finding educational intentionality and ways to design one’s educational proposals corresponding to such intentionality, reflecting on their usual pedagogical and didactical premises, beliefs and aims to implement a process of adaptation. Transformability was a critical element of resilience during COVID-19 (Yang et al., 2023). Although most of the teachers did not feel prepared for distance teaching, they re-trained and evaluated distance interaction, taking into account the difficulties of the students (Izzo & Ciurnelli, 2020). The main obstacles faced by teachers for distance learning were technological weaknesses as the lack of adequate digital equipment and poor digital skills, lack of interaction, adverse work conditions, lack of support (from both school administrators and families), precariousness, and a demanding school system (Conte et al., 2024; Doz et al., 2023; Klapproth et al., 2020; Truzoli et al., 2021). The lack of direct interaction with students was the least appreciated element of online teaching (Truzoli et al., 2021). Teachers have equipped themselves using different technological tools, from video conferencing platforms and instant messaging services such as WhatsApp up to doing and receiving calls from personal number, if not possible to do otherwise (Ardizzoni et al., 2020), to reach all the students and maintain the relationship, even if in this technology-mediated mode. The lack of human relationship and emotional and relational involvement have been perceived by teachers as the most critical elements. Izzo and Ciurnelli’s (2020) study have shown that the main motivation guiding the use of distance teaching came from the affective-relational dimension: maintaining a relationship with both the class

group and with each individual student. According to the authors, the promoter of the adaptive spirit demonstrated by teachers during the pandemic has been the passion for their work – therefore, the educational and relational aspects – rather than a redefinition of their skills or previous technological didactic competences. The socialization mediated by school experience is decisive in supporting students to return to ordinary life after the pandemic. Some students felt the school interruption as traumatic while most adolescents and pre-adolescents have tried to replace the face-to-face mode with distance learning, maintaining a certain attention towards learning, even during the quarantine. However, the online mode did not keep its promise: even those who have invested more in digital innovation have encountered many difficulties to return to normality (Pediconi et al., 2023). Teachers' attention to affective and social dimensions of learner engagement and their awareness and action in the affective domain of student engagement is critical during times of trauma (Roman et al., 2022). Parental involvement, peers and teacher support seem to be the essential key for maintaining and improving the students' affective engagement and their academic resilience also in unexpected condition (Yang et al., 2022; Permatasari et al., 2021).

THEMES AND MEANINGS OF EXPERIENCE EXTRACTED FROM THE LIVING PRACTICE OF NARRATIVES

Taking into account that there are different levels of professional knowledge, one being the theoretical level, the best known and studied, and another, more visible through acts, made of experience, of competencies, a more practical level of knowledge, the present study looks at this less explored level for teachers, to help accessing it and, hopefully, to permit their reunion into a wider vision of professional knowledge in general, and specifically of education. As Baldacci (2010, translated by the authors) said: “the theory-praxis relation [...] is to be conceived [...] as a dialectic unity: theory, without praxis, is empty; just like praxis, without theory, is blind”. This unitary vision would give depth and complexity. Both levels, theoretical and practical, could benefit from it. Even if less present in the academic world, various groups have been and are looking at this practical, experience level, using and developing different methods. Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012, 2021, 2023) with the qualitative thematic analysis in its subtypes, like Connelly and Clandinin (1990, 2012) or Stanley (2008, 2010, 2016) and Stanley and Temple (2008) with the narrative inquiry and methodologies, or diverse teams on biographical research (Goodwin, 2012; O'Brien & Schillaci, 2002; Stanley, 2016; Zhao & Poulson, 2006), are a few examples.

From the Italian context, we found and took inspiration from a group of studies of Sisti (2016, 2017a, 2017b), exploring the world of professional educators who work in schools, through the mediation of written narration of their professional experience. This mediation brings closer experience and theoretical knowledge, permitting the

elaboration of their connections. The researcher used a narrative survey to give the possibility to the operators to choose where to start and in which direction to go. A software called T-Lab, developed by Lancia (2004), in its version 9.1.4, has been used for the analysis of the texts. T-Lab allows an automatic or partially automatic text analysis of the significant linguistic elements (Lancia, 2004; Gatti & Graffigna, 2009). Different groups have used this software in various fields of study, from economy and management (Forlani & Pencarelli, 2019; Forlani et al., 2022; Moretti et al., 2016, 2017), to sociology (Boccacin, 2012; Macaluso et al., 2020; Pattaro, 2015, 2016), to education (Di Martino & Zan, 2010; Savarese et al., 2020) and to psychology (Frisaldi, 2009; Lai et al., 2021; Mazzoni et al., 2018), only to cite a few. Sisti used T-Lab to help “retrieve obvious meanings, but also to retrieve implicit elements, often hidden and fragmentary” (Sisti, 2017a, translated by the authors), through thematic clustering. The researcher also planned a restitution phase, to increase the formative content of the participation to the study, from the elaboration of the experience before and through writing and through this final phase (Sisti, 2017a).

School subjects have been highlighted by the emergency (Havik & Ingul, 2022). Analyzing the explicit and “embedded” real practice is only possible through the use of qualitative tools and methodologies. In this regard, the teachers’ stories collected and analyzed in this article bring out the events that took place in the camp during the lockdown period, allowing the emergence of an exemplary knowledge. The narratives describe the specificity of the action – as seen from within – putting experience into words and revealing the practical knowledge acquired by teachers in dealing with the emergency, bringing the reader into the educational context.

METHODOLOGY

The present research, driven by a need for knowledge and answers to specific questions that arose as a result of the pandemic reality, used a qualitative methodology, useful for bringing out the different affective elements of the professional experience of the subjects at the center of the investigation. “Qualitative research has the merit of describing in detail and accurately situations and problems that escape quantitative investigations and would otherwise not be knowable” (Baldacci, 2013, p. 247).

The methodology of the paper is in line with other studies (Forlani et al., 2022; Kozinets, 2015; Rageh et al., 2013) to ensure qualitative research rigor.

1. *Research design.* Qualitative research aims to identify theories of education by bringing out theories extracted from real experience and practices that can be the starting point for building effective methods and tools. The present research questions identify the need to understand the resilience resources of primary and middle school teachers in facing unexpected situations such as the recent pandemic that have an impact on their educational strategies and relationships

with students. The research questions that guided the study design are the following:

- Which factors characterize the experience of the first lockdown and distance teaching of middle and high school teachers?
- Were there significant differences between the experience and resilient resources of teachers in different grades?

The teachers in our sample recounted the “living practice” that populated their work during the emergency; Through the “word” of the narrative they revealed an “underground” knowledge of which perhaps not even they were well aware.

2. *Instruments.* The choice of the research instrument is never neutral, it is an important step for exploring the topic and the research questions of interest (Di Martino & Funghi, 2016). In this study, a narrative survey was used, created *ad hoc* for gathering in-depth affects and resources of teachers’ experience during COVID-19. This method recognizes that narratives provide better access to contextualised knowledge. It is based on respondents sharing experiences and giving meaning to these personal narratives. The method enables researchers to gather and analyse the experiences from teachers, shifting the power of interpretation to the respondent to better understand reality through their eyes (Burns et al., 2021). In particular, through this tool we explored: the impact of the first lockdown on teacher-student relationships and on difficult student cases, what teachers learned from the distance learning, what surprised teachers, and which of teachers’ resources proved useful to face the situation.

3. *Sample and data collection.* The research involved 32 primary school teachers (30 females and 2 males, average age: 42.7) and 24 secondary school teachers (21 females and 3 males, average age: 48.3). The surveys were collected by the authors in September 2021, during an in-person continuing education course. The teachers worked in a public school in central Italy. All 56 teachers who participated were members of the teaching staff of an Italian school institute comprising a primary school (32 teachers) and a secondary school (24 teachers). All teachers gave their consent to participate in this narrative exploration about their experience of teaching in the distance school during the COVID. A total of 56 qualitative surveys were collected, showing how teachers navigated the challenges of school closure and distance learning.

4. *Data analysis.* A qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018) supported by T-Lab 10 software was conducted. Content analysis aims to build a model to describe the phenomenon in a conceptual form (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). T-Lab is a useful software to support researchers in the preparation and analysis of narratives. Specifically, two members of the research team in dynamic psychology used T-Lab to carry out the following operations:

Starting from the complete word list analyzed by the software, only words with a frequency greater than 4 were considered; the too generic or non-sig-

nificant words and verbs were not retained as they were not relevant for the purpose of the work (e.g. “life”, “make”). The list was then reduced by removing “stop words” (e.g. “day”, “I”, “her”, “year”) and lemmatization. A manual regrouping was then done, within the dictionary, to bring together the similar and affectively significant words, to include them in the analysis (e.g. “Affectivity” contains “affection”, “care”, “emotions”, etc.), as well as a regrouping of lemmas with overlapping meanings, to synthesize and make the experience more readable (e.g. “methodology” and “modality” or “colleagues” and “team”). The word frequency was then extracted (occurrences). The result of this process produced a coding spectrum of 76 key words and 1,016 occurrences for the narratives of primary school teachers and a coding spectrum of 84 keywords and 1,430 occurrences for the narratives of secondary school teachers.

The second step was to derive interpretive meanings (King et al., 2018) through linkage analysis between the basic codes. To understand how the most recurrent words were associated with each other to construct complex concepts, a co-word analysis was performed. For the analysis of co-occurrences by word associations, elementary contexts were used and the threshold of frequency co-occurrences greater than or equal to 1 was used. On the other hand, as far as the concept map is concerned, the threshold used has provided for a frequency greater than or equal to 4 co-occurrences. Using T-Lab, the keywords were subjected to hierarchical clustering. To facilitate reading, they were graphically represented by a similarity matrix based on multidimensional scaling (MDS), which depicts the relationships present in the data in a reduced space, similar to a “map”. Sammon’s method maps a multi-dimensional scaling by trying to preserve the structure of inter-point distances in high-dimensional space in the lower-dimension projection. It is particularly suited for use in exploratory data analysis. The results obtained, similarly to those of the correspondence analysis, allow us to interpret both the relationships between the “objects” (proximity/distance) and the dimensions that organize the space in which they are represented. The interpretative categories obtained, extracted from narrative texts, represent nodes of meaning, i.e. subjective cognitive-affective organizers of experience, allowing the teachers’ experience to be told in an intuitive and orderly way. The comparison between the results obtained from the narratives of primary teachers and middle school teachers allows us to specify the different models of resilience adopted.

5. *Research representation.* To ensure the reliability and validity of the interpretive coding, two team members coded the words by associating them with the categories. In the case of disagreement over the association, disambiguation was carried out by comparing the meaning and use of the word within the text. This evaluation was carried out with the support of the “word sequence analysis” tool

of the T-Lab software. Where disagreements remained between the two members that could not be resolved, a third person was introduced into the discussion. This procedure ensured consensus on all codes (100% final agreement).

MAIN RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Teachers' lemmas. The analysis of the dictionary

The words indicate the meanings helpful in shaping the teachers' subjective experience. The dictionary thus becomes a representation of their experience:

- On the one hand, they tell us about their experience of the pandemic emergency.
- On the other, they describe how they responded to the institutional decision they were invested in to give continuity to the school.

In particular, our qualitative analysis focuses on detecting the affective component as it reveals the teachers' involvement in their work and professional mission, showing the links with the other subjects that animate the school experience.

In commenting on the dictionary of headwords, we can note:

- Those that have been used most frequently will be the first in the two lists, as they indicate the primary meanings extracted from the narratives.
- It may also be helpful to note the verbs in order of occurrence, from most used to least used: the verbs indicate how the teachers presented their *modus operandi* in their narratives.
- It may be essential to note which adjectives were used, again in order of appearance, from the most used to the most minor: adjectives make it possible to connote the experience recounted by highlighting the affections they expressed.
- Lastly, it may be essential to note the blunt lemmas with negative meanings that give us a measure of the perception of the difficulties connected with this unexpected experience, despite the explicit request asking them to report what they had learnt from and during the lockdown: the bluntly negative lemmas may suggest the most difficult experiences that complicated their personal and professional lives.

Table 1 shows the dictionary used by primary school teachers in their narratives.

The most frequent headwords. The reference to **students** is the most numerous, with 65 occurrences, followed by **positive outcome** (described through the headwords: pleasure, positive, joy, efficient, effective, gratification, opportunities, occasions, etc.) with 52 occurrences. In third place, we find the **lockdown** with 50 occurrences. The adjective **important** occupies fourth place with 46 occurrences, signalling the relevance of the primary school teachers' experience despite the restrictions due to COVID-19. In fifth place, we find the **family**, mentioned 44 times in the primary narratives, signalling how important the collaboration with the adults who lived at

home with their students was in order to make possible the continuation of the school experience in a way unimaginable until then.

The verbs are in order of appearance. Take on a challenge (21), to learn (21), to help (20), to reflect (16), to understand (13), to see (13), to face (10), to find (9), to teach (9), to look for (8), to use (7), to allow (7), to speak (6), to become (6), to create (6), to handle (5), to discover (5), to receive (5), to work (5), to answer (4), to succeed in (4), to experiment (4), to enter (4), to communicate (4), to ask (4).

These verbs reveal a passionate *modus operandi*: teachers have been protagonists in the transition that the lockdown has initiated in the school. They did not suffer the emergency but rolled up their sleeves to turn a difficulty into a new acquisition.

Adjectives in order of appearance. Important (46), our (27), new (20), different (8), personal (6). The primary school teachers were not only descriptive, noting the conditions of a new, different and essential experience, but they also clearly signaled their affective involvement with which they put themselves at stake in a personal way and with a strong motivation, eager to master the experience so that it became their own (here is the incidence of the adjective “Our”) success (Izzo & Ciurnelli, 2020).

Negative lemmas. Negative outcome (30), difficulty (15), impact (11), pandemic (7), dismay (4), loneliness (4). It may be essential to note the feelings of dismay and loneliness as they signal how profound and potentially traumatic the impact of the lockdown has been (Ma et al., 2022; Nang et al., 2022; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021; Rabaglietti et al., 2021). We can thus appreciate in all its affective significance the work of reclamation and positive transformation that the teachers could bring to their work, forever changing the connotations of the school experience.

Table 1. The 76 lemmas extracted from the narratives of primary school teachers

LEMMA	OCC	LEMMA	OCC	LEMMA	OCC
students	65	lesson	11	demand	6
positive outcome	52	distance schooling	11	sons & daughters	6
lockdown	50	contact	11	to become	6
important	46	to face	10	to create	6
family	44	time	10	to handle	5
technology	42	to find	9	to discover	5
affectivity	31	activity	9	surprise	5
relationship	31	home	9	to receive	5
negative outcome	30	to teach	9	to work	5
our	27	resources	9	professional	4
experience	25	moment	8	to answer	4
take on a challenge	21	to look for	8	to succeed in	4
to learn	21	class	8	to experiment	4
new	20	collaboration	8	dismay	4
to help	20	change	8	loneliness	4
school	18	learning	8	education	4
to reflect	16	continuity	8	to enter	4

LEMMA	OCC	LEMMA	OCC	LEMMA	OCC
teachers	15	sharing	8	content	4
difficulty	15	different	8	need	4
distance	14	proximity	8	homework	4
methodologies	14	video	8	to communicate	4
to understand	13	to use	7	to ask	4
colleagues	13	to allow	7		
to see	13	pandemic	7		
daily life	12	to speak	6		
impact	11	personal	6		
work	11	necessity	6		

Data shown in the table were operated by T-Lab 10 software. OCC = Lemma frequency within narratives.

Source: Author's own study.

Table 2 shows the dictionary extracted from the middle school teachers' narratives.

The most frequent headwords. The middle school teachers spoke a lot about **teaching** (106) and **students** (104), signaling the polarity that animated their work during the lockdown: one eye on the recipients and the other on their educational action. The third and fourth headwords confirm their focus on the novelty of **distance schooling** (89 occurrences) and the challenge of **technology** (83) that has invaded the field of education (Conte et al., 2024; Doz et al., 2023; Klapproth et al., 2020; Truzoli et al., 2021). In fifth place, we find the **positive outcome** (described through the lemmas: positive, enthusiastic, useful, appealing, good, engaging, fun, happy, enriching, etc.) with 54 occurrences.

The middle school teachers felt challenged by the new school conditions, squeezed into a technological revolution that had to be accomplished as quickly as possible (Ramploud et al., 2022).

Verbs in order of appearance. To help (25), to learn (18), to use (15), to participate (14), to take a challenge (12), to continue (11), to create (10), to understand (10), to contact (9), to speak (9), to demand (9), to work (8), to know (8), to look for (8), to ask (8), to find (8), to conduct (8), to see (7), to attend (7), to meet (7), to answer (7), to achieve (7), to face (6), to arrive (6), to listen to (6), to follow (5), to reach (4), to solve (4), to reveal (4), to allow (4), to organize (4), to overcome (4).

Teachers who are protagonists of change are not overwhelmed but industrious and attentive.

Adjectives in order of appearance. Important (21), new (19), "our" (12), simple (5), enjoyable (5). One can see the affections associated with the challenge of a new and decisive condition (important), the drive to master unprecedented conditions ("ours"), and the desire for simple and pleasant success.

Negative lemmas. Difficult cases (42), difficulty (42), negative outcome (36), drop-out rates (19), impact (17), lack (7), unexpected (6), fear (5). Here, too, we can see a polarity: on the one hand, the middle school teachers were concerned about not

losing their students and about keeping the complex cases attached to the school (Izzo & Ciurnelli, 2020); on the other hand, they strongly felt the impact of the unexpected and were afraid of failing. The challenge of restrictions tested the subjective consistency of everyone, including teachers (Cataudella et al., 2021; Klapproth et al., 2020; Messineo & Tosto, 2023; Pereira et al., 2021).

Table 2. The 84 lemmas extracted from the narratives of middle school teachers

LEMMA	OCC	LEMMA	OCC	LEMMA	OCC
teaching	106	methodology	13	lack	7
students	104	to take a challenge	12	to answer	7
distance schooling	89	work	12	to achieve	7
technology	83	our	12	necessity	6
positive outcome	54	presence	11	together	6
affectivity	51	to continue	11	unexpected	6
difficult cases	42	to create	10	to face	6
difficulty	42	focus	10	to arrive	6
teachers	39	sharing	10	to listen to	6
negative outcome	36	engagement	10	real	6
class	34	to understand	10	need	5
evaluations	28	to contact	9	skills	5
family	27	to talk	9	fear	5
to help	25	to demand	9	space	5
school	25	to work	8	to follow	5
achievements	24	to know	8	simple	5
relationships	23	to look for	8	result	5
lockdown	23	to ask	8	enjoyable	5
important	21	colleagues	8	to reach	4
change	20	to find	8	to solve	4
surprise	20	to conduct	8	challenge	4
new	19	explanation	7	to reveal	4
dropout rates	19	to see	7	discovery	4
to learn	18	peers	7	path	4
impact	17	collaboration	7	to allow	4
possibility	16	to attend	7	to organize	4
to use	15	to meet	7	home	4
to participate	14	interest	7	to overcome	4

Data shown in the table were operated by T-lab 10 software. OCC = Lemma frequency within narratives.

Source: Authors' own study.

2. The main themes that emerged in the narratives. Co-occurrence analysis

The co-occurrence analysis allows us to observe how certain aspects of the teaching experience were experienced during the lockdown.

We extracted the following representative themes from the teachers' narratives:

- What the teachers wrote about the **students** allows us to focus on the subjects of the school.
- The references to **technology** allow us to focus on the teachers' challenge to transform the school.
- The descriptions of the **positive outcome** during the lockdown and despite the conditions dictated by the restrictions allow us to focus on the central theme of our research.
- The references to **distance schooling** reveal to us the personal and professional impact that the teachers experienced while running the school at a distance.

In particular, we will observe co-occurrences related to the indicated themes to deepen the comparison between primary and secondary teachers' narratives:

- **students** (the lemma most used by primary teachers; in the middle school teachers' narratives, it is in second place);
- **technology** (ranked sixth in primary teachers' narratives; fourth in secondary teachers' narratives);
- **positive outcome** (ranked second in primary narratives; ranked fifth in middle school narratives);
- **distance schooling** (scores only 11 occurrences in primary narratives, third in middle school narratives).

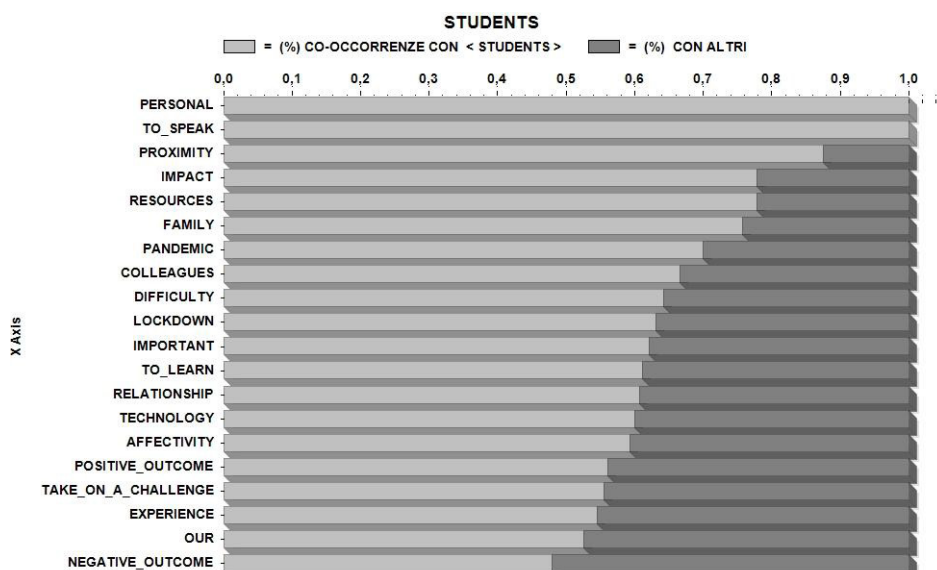


Figure 1. Word associations for the *Students* lemma in primary school teachers' narratives. Co-occurrence threshold ≥ 1

Source: Authors' own study.

The analysis of the co-occurrences related to **students** shows a very different experience between primary and secondary teachers (comparison between Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Teaching children challenged the teachers **personally**: they first had to look for a way to **speak** to them in the new conditions imposed by the pandemic. First, they sought a **proximity** with the students that would elaborate the **impact** and enhance their **resources**. **Families** were crucial in overcoming the difficulties of the **pandemic** (Crescenza et al., 2021; Hodges et al., 2020; Tal et al., 2022), and **colleagues** enabled teachers to cope with **difficulties** caused by the unimaginable **lockdown** (Yang et al., 2023). Although it was **important to learn** a new way of being in a **relationship** mediated by **technology**, it was **affectivity** that transformed even the restrictions into a **positive outcome**, allowing teachers to **take themselves on a challenge** so that **experience** was “ours” but without hiding some elements of a **negative outcome** (Ardizzoni et al., 2020; Izzo & Ciurnelli, 2020).

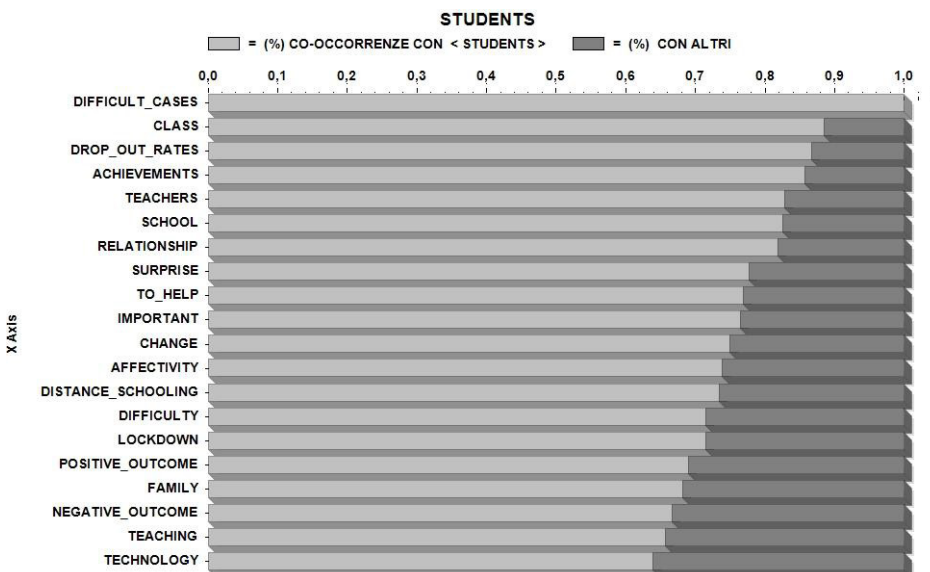


Figure 2. Word associations for the *Students* lemma in middle school teachers’ narratives. Co-occurrence threshold ≥ 1

Source: Authors’ own study.

For the secondary school teachers, students were first and foremost narrated as a source of concern: **difficult cases** and **class** management were in the foreground, but also **dropout rates** and efforts to maintain **achievements**. The unprecedented conditions forced the **teachers** to think of a new way of doing **school** and maintaining **relationships** that could process the enormous **surprise** of the pandemic and ena-

ble them to **help** those in difficulty. An **important change** supported by **affectivity** helped turn the difficulties related to **distance schooling** and the **difficulty** due to the **lockdown** into a **positive outcome** (Roorda et al., 2017; Spilt & Koomen, 2022). The **family** also had to endure the **negative outcome** linked with a **teaching** disrupted by **technology**.

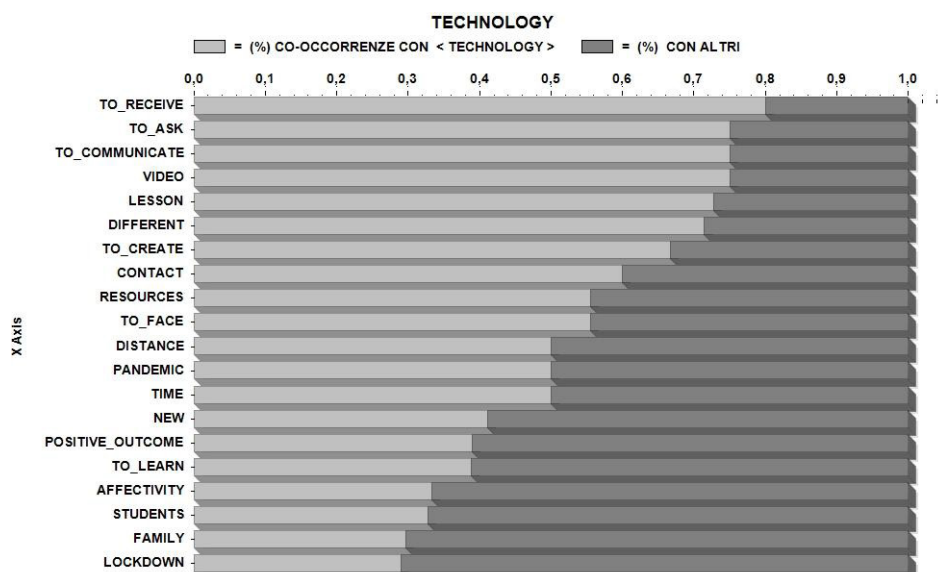


Figure 3. Word associations for the *Technology* lemma in primary school teachers' narratives. Co-occurrence threshold ≥ 1

Source: Authors' own study.

Figure 3 shows that the pandemic forced teachers to transform their profession radically. They had to accept willingly or unwillingly that **technology** became the primary and absolute medium. A technology unknown to many of them until then or at least far from the centrality it claimed during the lockdown. **Receiving, asking, and communicating** emerged as the most critical dispositions for primary school teachers who, for the first time, found themselves using **video** to teach **lessons**: a completely **different** way of **creating contact** with students and **dealing** with the emergency at **distance** by deploying **resources**. The **pandemic** was transformed into a **new time**, a **positive experience** to **learn** from. The **affectivity** supported it, which made it possible to care for the **students** and the **family** despite the **lockdown** (Emslander et al., 2023).

Comparing primary and middle school teachers, we will observe that the latter reveal a strong challenge through words on technology in their narrative.

Figure 4 highlights that middle school teachers were forced to **use peers to take a challenge** for a new **engagement** with students as well as a renewed **methodology** to mitigate school **drop-out rates** (Permatasari et al., 2021). Teachers' attitude **to learn** even from extraordinary circumstances reduced the **impact** in a **school** where a stressful change could determine a **negative outcome**. **Distance schooling** challenged **teaching** because of the growing difficulty to **help the families** and **students** in transforming the unimaginable into a **positive experience** (Roman et al., 2022).

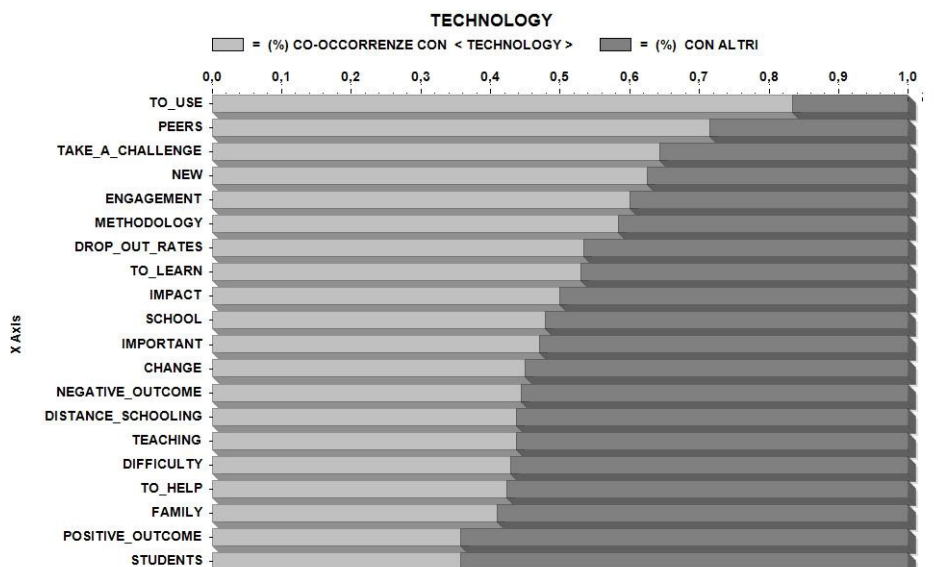


Figure 4. Word associations for the *Technology* lemma in middle school teachers' narratives. Co-occurrence threshold ≥ 1

Source: Authors' own study.

Reading the teachers' narratives and observing what they have based their resilient work on is possible. The theme that we have configured as a **positive experience** brings together all the uplifting elements that they could and knew how to discern in the enormous difficulty associated with the moment of emergency.

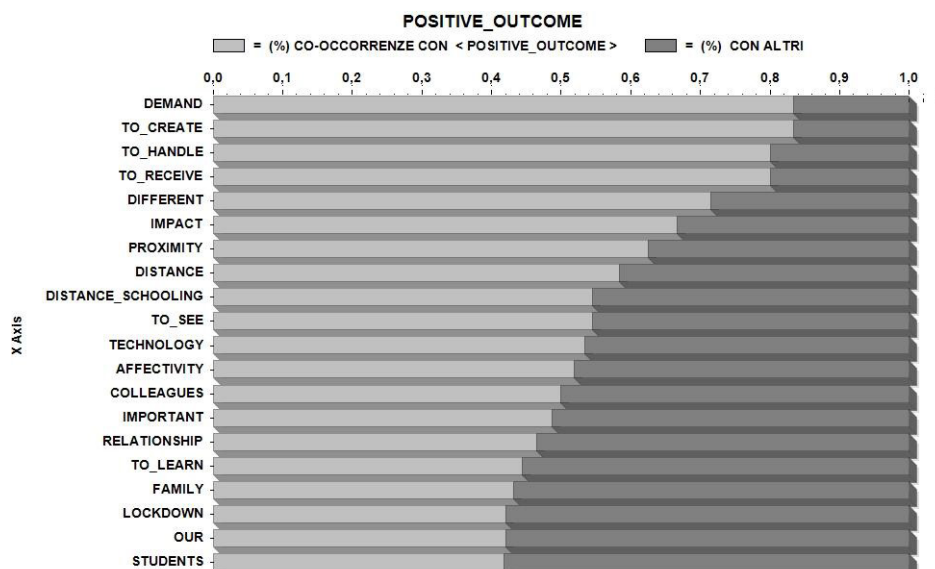


Figure 5. Word associations for the *Positive outcome* lemma in primary school teachers' narratives. Co-occurrence threshold ≥ 1

Source: Authors' own study.

Resilience is configured very differently in primary teachers than in secondary teachers (comparison between Figure 5 and Figure 6).

Figure 5 shows that in primary teachers the increasing **demand** has **created** new tension **to handle** but they were also willing **to receive** something from a moment that was completely **different** from any strong impact they lived until that moment. A sort of **proximity** even at **distance** was possible by means of **distance schooling** that was focused on **seeing** peers and teachers on the screen. The invasion of **technology** was mitigated by **affectivity** while **colleagues** were visibly **important** to maintain an attentive **relationship** with family (Yang et al., 2022). Teachers were able **to learn** from the emergency, so that schooling during the **lockdown** could be perceived as an intimate – “**our**” – moment in common with their **students**.

Middle school teachers describe their positive outcome in very operational terms (Figure 6): it has been **important to use** all means necessary to answer the **surprise** brought by the pandemic emergency. It was their strong desire **to find, to know** and **participate** in the **family** all educational **achievements**. We see these teachers willing **to learn** even during the **lockdown**, a new way of **teaching** so **important** in supporting **students** in **difficulty**. For middle school teachers, **affectivity** mediated the introduction of **technology** into the **class** and permeated the **distance schooling**, so it became a tool **to help** maintain continuity in the school experience.

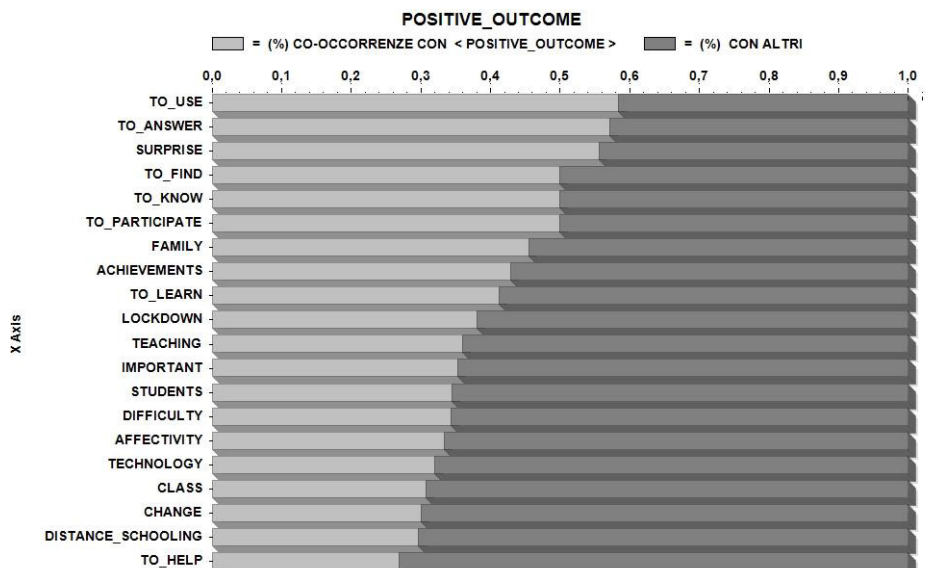


Figure 6. Word associations for the *Positive outcome* lemma in middle school teachers' narratives. Co-occurrence threshold ≥ 1

Source: Authors' own study.

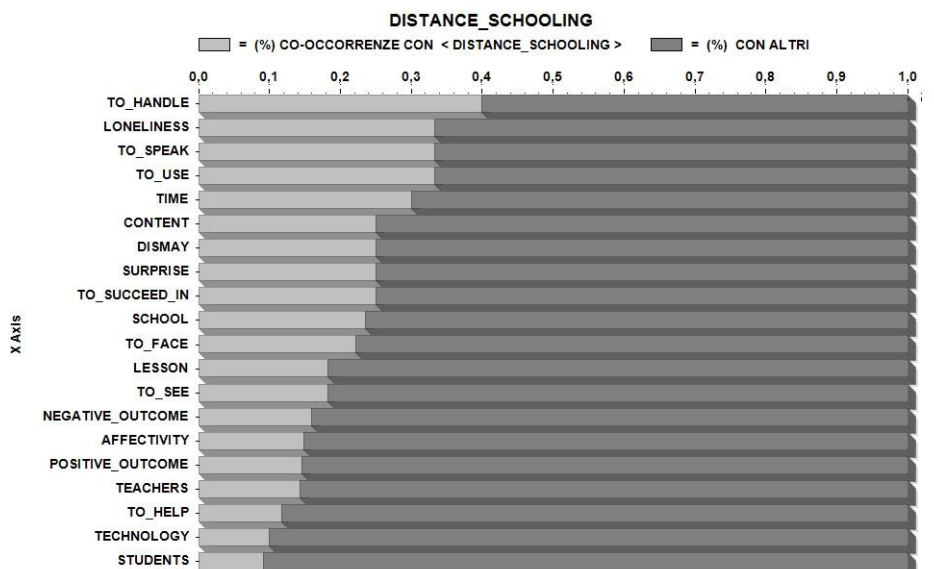


Figure 7. Word associations for the *Distance schooling* lemma in primary school teachers' narratives. Co-occurrence threshold ≥ 1

Source: Authors' own study.

By analyzing the topic of **distance schooling** through its co-occurrences (comparison between Figure 7 and Figure 8), we can assess the perceived impact on primary and secondary teachers with an entirely new way of doing school. With **distance schooling**, teachers were forced to rethink their profession (methods and techniques), the content offered to **students**, and the relationships with other actors in the school (students, families and colleagues).

Primary teachers. Observing the co-occurrences related to the topic of distance learning in Figure 7, teachers found themselves able **to handle** the impact of **loneliness** in facing the transformation of schooling. Understanding how **to speak** and **to use** resources and skills in a **time** of restrictions, revisiting the proposed **contents** allowed the teachers' in facing the **surprise** and mitigate their own and others' **dismay**. They could **succeed** in giving continuity to the **school** during the pandemic. They had to equip themselves **to face** new methods to prepare **lessons** and **see** how to tolerate some elements of **negative outcome**. **Affectivity** was the strength of primary **teachers** who attempted to transform the moments of distance learning into a **positive outcome** through their professional experience, using **technology** to **help** their **students**.

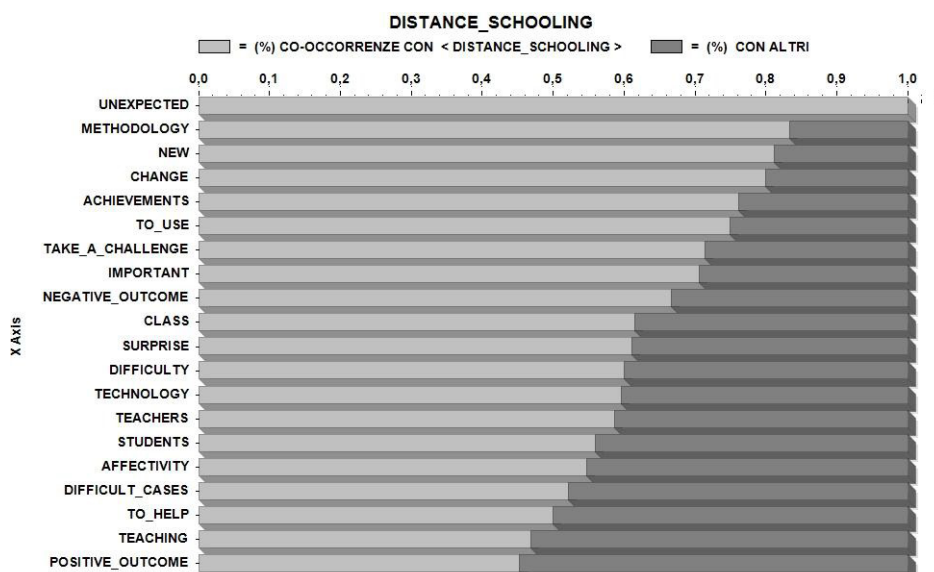


Figure 8. Word associations for the *Distance schooling* lemma in middle school teachers' narratives. Co-occurrence threshold ≥ 1

Source: Authors' own study.

Middle school teachers. The co-occurrences related to the topic of distance schooling in Figure 8 show the experience of the middle school teachers with the online teaching. The tool adopted by schools to withstand the **unexpected** was distance

learning, which required a **methodology** with a **new** setup. The **change** enabled new **achievements**. Using distance learning requires teachers to **take a challenge** to do the **important** work of avoiding the **negative outcome**. The **class**, surprised by the pandemic's impact, presented quite a few **difficulties**. **Technology** allowed the **teachers** to stay in touch with the **students** (Ardizzoni et al., 2020), considering their **affectivity**, especially in **difficult cases**, to **help** them by offering a **teaching** that could foster a **positive outcome** (Roman et al., 2022).

3. The meanings that guided the transformation. The analysis of the organizing nodes

To conduct an overall qualitative analysis of the primary teachers' experience, we will analyze the factorial arrangement of the topics in the map. Recall that the body of the text of the words in each box corresponds to the number of occurrences of each lemma.

In order to read the teachers' experience, we use a summary table that groups the lemmas extracted from the narratives based on the distribution of co-occurrences, configuring some nodes of meaning that we can call factors.

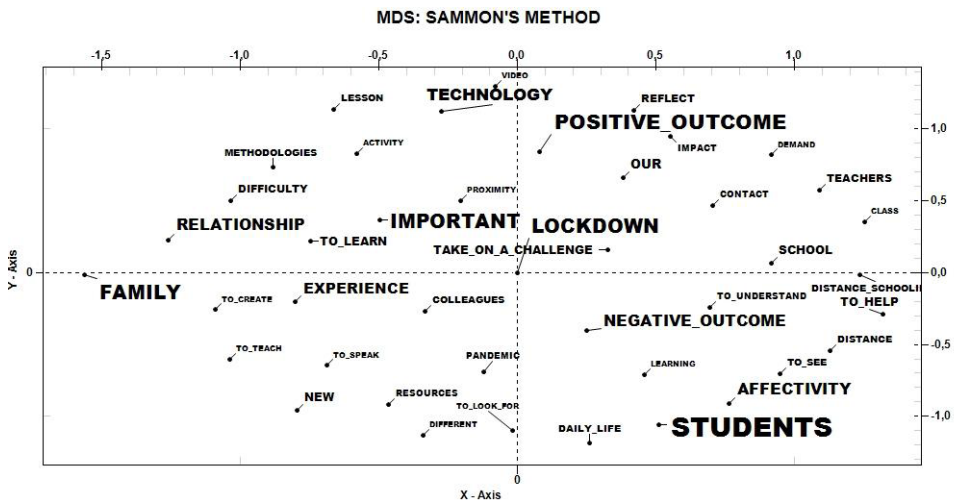


Figure 9. Conceptual map for the *Students* lemma in primary school teachers' narratives. Co-occurrence threshold ≥ 4

Source: Authors' own study.

Figure 9 shows the conceptual map of primary school teachers' narratives. The thickness of the words corresponds to the number of occurrences. The primary teachers' experience presents four meanings nodes that oriented their experience during lockdown:

- the first cognitive-affective node (the top right-hand box) shows what was **important** for the primary teacher during the lockdown. *Technology* and *relationship* was the two columns of their job, supported by the following lemmas: to take on a challenge, to learn, difficulty, methodology, lesson, proximity, activity, video;
- the second cognitive-affective node (the top left-hand box) keep together and **positive outcome** and **lockdown** holding the following further lemmas: “our”, teachers, reflect, school, class, contact, impact, demand;
- the third node (the bottom right-hand box) is related to the **family** that had a strong part in giving continuity to the school during the lockdown. This node holds the following lemmas: experience, new, colleagues, resources, pandemic, different, to create, to tech, to speak, to look for;
- the fourth node (the bottom left-hand box) related to **students** holds the following lemmas: negative outcome, affectivity, to help, distance, to understand, distance schooling, to see, daily life, learning.

The lockdown became a space and a time for experimentation and professional transformation in the digital direction. The primary teachers could also connote the negative experience related to the constraints imposed by the emergency: they felt professionally challenged by the distance schooling. They had to transform their teaching practice profoundly. The resilience of the primary teachers relied on the relationship with students, who remained at the center of the educational action, spurring the teachers to get involved – professional resources and personal flexibility characterized the collaboration with colleagues to the point of transforming the emergency into a positive experience. Resilience, passion, motivation, and transformation characterized the affective experience during the lockdown.

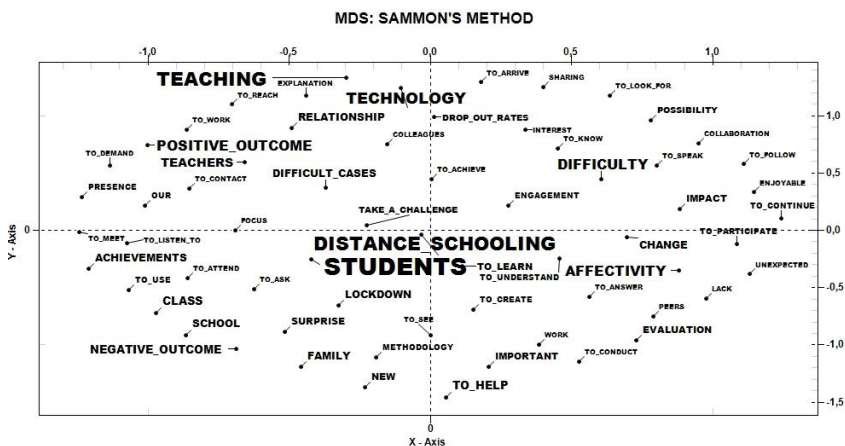


Figure 10. Conceptual map for the *Students* lemma in middle school teachers' narratives. Co-occurrence threshold ≥ 4 .

Source: Authors' own study.

Figure 10 shows the conceptual map of primary school teachers' narratives. The thickness of the words corresponds to the number of occurrences.

The middle school teachers' experience presents four meanings nodes that oriented their experience during lockdown:

- the first cognitive-affective node (the top right-hand box) shows the meaning of **teaching** supported by **technology**, and holding the following lemmas: positive outcome, teachers, difficult cases, relationship, take a challenge, presence, our, to contact, to demand, to work, focus, colleagues, explanation, to reach;
- the second cognitive-affective node (the top left-hand box) is related to the **difficulty** and lead to the following lemmas: impact, dropout rates, possibility, engagement, to continue, to achieve, enjoyable, to follow, collaboration, to know, to speak, interest, to look for, sharing, to arrive;
- the third node (the bottom right-hand box) shows **students** very close to **distance schooling**. This node is supported by the following lemmas: negative outcome, achievements, lockdown, class, school, family, new, surprise, methodology, to use, to see, to ask, to attend, to meet, to listen to, to attend;
- the fourth node (the bottom left-hand box) is related to **affectivity**, it holds the following lemmas: to help, change, important, evaluation, to learn, to participate, to understand, to create, to work, to conduct, to answer, peers, lack, unexpected;

Technology occupied and transformed the teaching of middle school teachers, and relationships with students continued to present deeply problematic aspects (Ramproud et al., 2022). Distance learning and technology-mediated lessons brought difficult cases to the forefront, undermining the professional self-esteem of this school sector (Dursun, 2019). However, the experience of the secondary school teachers supported the transformation to affectivity, which allowed them to remain in the field with full motivation. Personal involvement faced a difficulty: everything was different from before, and the educational profession had to be rethought (Kim & Kim, 2022). Affective involvement was crucial for middle school teachers to develop resilient behaviors, professional solidity and curiosity about new technologies that supported middle school teachers in their daily practice at school (Roman et al., 2022).

For the teachers in our sample, the school continuance during the lockdown was a transformative experience (Yang et al., 2023). A transformation mediated by affective relationships for the primary teachers (Ahnert et al., 2012; Hatfield & Williford, 2017; Sabol & Pianta, 2012), while the secondary teachers held the helm of the teaching activities, putting the learning/teaching process at the center. Results that can be interpreted in the light of the personal and affective moments the students and teachers went through and the various levels of relationships they lived during the period (Pianta et al., 2003; Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Spilt & Koomen, 2022). The primary school children needed family support and sought lines of relational continuity to help maintain a secure support supply despite the emergency (Yang et al., 2022; Permatasari et al., 2021). The middle school children, on the other hand, challenged their teachers on

the terrain of teaching and school subjects (Izzo & Ciurnelli, 2020). In middle school, teachers felt questioned about their professional consistency: when the emergency subverts all the school conditions, is it still possible to configure the elements that make up and construct the school as a primary place for the formation of the person?

CONCLUSIONS

The subjects of the school have been highlighted and activated by the emergency. Writing can have a mediating function when it becomes an instrument of knowledge and a space for comparison with lived experience, significantly improving professional quality. The teachers in our sample recounted the “living practice” that populated their work during the emergency. Through the words of their narrations, they revealed an underlying, underground knowledge of which perhaps they were not even well aware. The results led to the identification of emerging themes extracted from the practice of teachers involved in students’ education at different stages of development. These results can be referred to implement future practices and improve the level of professional self-awareness of educational staff.

Which factors characterize the experience of the first lockdown and distance teaching of middle and high school teachers? The qualitative analysis of the dictionary made possible the identification of the significant constituent elements of teachers’ lockdown experience.

During the lockdown, primary school teachers always kept their students in mind, looking for technology-mediated methodologies and tools that could continue to convey the affectivity and thoughts reserved for their students, to maintain contact with them and achieve positive outcomes despite the difficulties, the impact of the initial dismay and of feelings of loneliness. They signaled their affective involvement, putting themselves at stake in a personal way and with a strong motivation, eager to master the experience so that it could become their own success. They did not suffer the emergency but rolled up their sleeves to turn a difficulty into a learning possibility. The collaboration with the adults who lived with their students emerged as a significant element to make possible the continuation of the school experience during the closure.

The middle school teachers spoke a lot about teaching and students, signalling the polarity that animated their work during the lockdown: one eye on the recipients and the other on their educational action. The middle school teachers felt challenged by the new school conditions, squeezed into a technological revolution that had to be accomplished as quickly as possible. They were concerned about not losing their students and about the handling of the complex cases to avoid school drop-out. In spite of the fact that they strongly felt the impact of the unexpected and were afraid of failing, they focused on mastering the novelty of distance schooling and the challenge of technology, not overwhelmed but industrious and attentive, with the aim of a pleasant success.

Were there significant differences between the experience and resilient resources of teachers in different grades? Observing the occurrences, it is clear that there are differences between primary and secondary teachers' narratives: "Students", "positive outcome", "lockdown", "important", "family", "technology", "affectivity", "relationship" are the first 8 lemmas that appear in the narrative of primary school showing the centrality of affections and relationships with students and the need to collaborate with families to maintain a continuity of the school experience capable of stemming negative outcomes.

On the other hand, "teaching", "students", "distance schooling", "technology", "positive outcome", "affectivity", "difficult cases", are the words most used by middle school teachers that highlight the importance of teaching and technological competence capable of conveying educational content effectively and efficiently to achieve positive outcomes. Affectivity has taken charge of the most difficult cases by engaging professionals in the management of students with greater problematics.

In primary teachers, the increasing demand has created new tension to handle. They found themselves dealing with the impact of the pandemic: talking about what was happening helped them counter feelings of loneliness. Understanding how to use resources and skills in a time like the present, the revisitation of the proposed contents characterized the teachers' efforts to stem their own and others' dismay. Teaching children challenged the teachers personally: they first had to look for a way to speak to them in the new conditions imposed by the pandemic, searching for proximity with students that would reduce the impact and enhance their affective and professional resources with the collaboration of the families. Receiving, asking, and communicating emerged as the most critical dispositions for primary school teachers who found themselves using video to teach lessons for creating contact with students and dealing with the emergency at a distance by deploying resources. Colleagues helped teachers to cope with difficulties caused by the unimaginable lockdown. It was affectivity that transformed even the restrictions into a positive outcome, allowing teachers to take themselves on a challenge.

Middle school teachers focused on methodology, on a new setup. This modification enabled new achievements. The unprecedented conditions forced the teachers to think of a new way of doing school and of helping the students in difficulty. Using distance learning has required teachers to take a challenge to do the important work of avoiding the negative outcome. The class, surprised by the pandemic's impact, presented quite a few difficulties. These students were first and foremost narrated as a source of concern: difficult cases and class management were in the foreground, but also dropout rates and efforts to maintain achievements. They were forced to use peers to take a challenge for a new engagement with students as well as a renewed methodology to mitigate school drop-out rates.

In order to explore the transformative factors of the teachers' experience during the lockdown, we extracted the central nodes of meaning from their narratives. We analysed the networks of lemmas that composed them. The nodes of meaning represent the main

affective and cognitive elements that oriented the teachers' personal and professional experiences in dealing with the pandemic at school. On the one hand, we found that technology has occupied teachers' professional actions by changing how they teach. On the other hand, we find the affective and relational work that supported them in facing the challenge of giving continuity to the school even during the restrictions. Links with students remained in the foreground, especially for primary teachers, while secondary teachers always kept sight of the goal of helping complex cases. Resilience was made possible by the links between the school's stakeholders: teachers, students, and families. Our results show that the human factor remains the first resource facing the unexpected.

Limitations and further research lines. One limit of the present research is that teachers' demographic and professional characteristics are not taken into consideration, as we preferred to focus on the subjectivity of teachers' experience during COVID-19. It could be very important to focus qualitative research on teaching about teachers' affective experience as a subjective support of their professional expertise. Another limit is that the present study analysed the experience of only one side of the situation, the teacher side. It could be helpful to have a more complete panorama to look into the perceptions of students, families in school during COVID. Our study is also limited to a small number of teachers. It has, for this reason, a limited potential for the results generalization to other schools, areas, nations or school levels. The field could benefit from similar studies on different populations and, if possible, on larger numbers of teachers and their narrations.

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