

DIGITAL MEDIA EDUCATION AS A SCHOOL-FAMILY TANDEM. EXAMPLE OF PRACTICES WITH THE EUROPEAN TANDEM PROJECT

EDUCAZIONE AI MEDIA DIGITALE COME UN TANDEM SCUOLA-FAMIGLIA. ESEMPI DI ESPERIENZE DAL PROGETTO EUROPEO TANDEM

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ABSTRACT

Who should educate children in screen use nowadays? Is that the parents' job? Is it the school's job? And why not both, from a co-education point of view? It's what the European TANDEM project aimed by developing through co-design methodology some media literacy pathways to be worked on partly in class (children and teachers) and partly at home (children and parents). Following the explanation of the preferred methodologies, this article provides an initial analysis about the levers and obstacles of school-family collaboration, based in particular on the roles and participation of the various stakeholders: children, teachers and parents within the Belgian and Italian contexts of the project. He then goes on to discuss the issue of recognizing and valuing the role of media educator and the need to facilitate the inclusion of all.

KEYWORDS

Digital Media, co-education, families, schools, collaboration

SOMMARIO

Chi dovrebbe educare i bambini a usare gli schermi al giorno d'oggi? È compito dei genitori? È compito della scuola? E perché non entrambi, con la co-educazione? È quello che il progetto europeo TANDEM ha mirato a sviluppare attraverso la metodologia di co-design con alcuni percorsi di alfabetizzazione ai media e al digitale da utilizzare parzialmente in classe (bambini e insegnanti) e in parte a casa (bambini e genitori). Alla presentazione delle metodologie usate segue un'analisi iniziale sulle leve e sugli ostacoli della collaborazione scuola-famiglia, basata in particolare sui ruoli e sulla partecipazione dei vari stakeholder: bambini, insegnanti e genitori all'interno dei contesti belga e italiano. Approfondisce il ruolo del media educator e la necessità di facilitare l'inclusione di tutti.

PAROLE CHIAVE

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1 Introduction

Who should educate children in screen use nowadays? Is that the parents' job? As those responsible for their children and the agents of their development, it is up to them to establish guidelines for their children's media practices and to support them in their discoveries and use of digital media. Is it the school's job? As the primary place where children experience sociability and a shared and democratic place of learning, the school teachers' role is to promote the development of pupils' basic skills and also cross-cutting skills, including media education. So, whose task is it to educate children in digital media? And why not both, from a co-education point of view? This is what three media education resource centres, in partnership with parents' associations, tried out through the European TANDEM project.¹

It is in fact noticeable that use of media is no longer restricted to the private sphere or the family but is also becoming common at school. The very mobility of the devices (smartphones, tablets, etc.) itself leads to mobile use in different areas: at home, at school, at sports centres, in the street or other public places, and so on (Mediawijs-Mediaraven, 2018). Consequently, it is equally appropriate for teachers as well as parents to support children in their practices. Also, to be noted is the increasingly frequent use of digitized communication between schools and families (digital reports, etc.). These findings raise the obvious issue of an urgent need to develop digital competences (Euromeduc, 2009), both technical, social, critical and also creative, in children of course but also in teachers and parents, so that they can look at their own roles as supervisors supporting children's use of digital media.

This is why the TANDEM project partners aim in particular to promote the development of digital media education within a school-family educational continuum by putting in place educational pathways to support children in their use of digital media, as a back-up to parental and school involvement. Several phases were established in order to achieve that aim.

2 Organisation and methodology

First of all, the partners started by identifying the teachers' and parents' needs and expectations with regard to their roles as digital media educators for their

¹ TANDEM – Tisser des Actions autour du Numérique à travers des Duo d'acteurs en Education aux Médias [Construction of Actions around Digital Technology by Media Education Player Duos], a project co-funded by the European Union as part of the Erasmus+ programme, coordinated by Média-Animation (BE) in partnership with Union Francophone des Associations de Parents de l'Enseignement Catholique [French-speaking Union of Parents' Associations in Catholic Education], (UFAPEC, BE), Zaffiria and the municipalities of Valmarecchia, (IT), Fréquence Ecoles (FR), and Fédération des Conseils de Parents d'Élèves de l'enseignement public du Rhône [Federation of Parents' Committees of Pupils in Public Education in the Rhône Département] (FCPE69, FR), September 2016-August 2019. See: <https://mediatandem.eu> [Access 05.04.2019].

pupils/children (aged 6-12). To that end, as well as a literature review, focus group meetings with parents and teachers were held, between December 2016 and January 2017, at a number of pilot schools in France, Belgium and Italy, bringing together 186 parents and teachers in total. A number of needs and expectations emerged from these discussion sessions such as, among others, having a shared frame of reference between the teachers and the parents (issues, aims and methods), effective methods of communication and cooperation, tackling the management of online sociability, digital identity and controlling personal data or information sorting (Reboul & Bruyas, 2017). Marked contradictions were also expressed during these meetings, such as the ease of use of digital media by children compared with their own lack of skills, for example, or the need to protect children from the risks posed by screens as against the need to develop children's independence (Minotte, 2012).

Next, «duos» (tandem) were formed in the different countries by holding co-design meetings between parents and teachers, firstly to bring them face to face and start the process of mutual acknowledgment of roles and competences, and then to select the issues and topics they saw as being the priorities. This choice of a bottom-up method was essential in order to promote a genuinely inclusive approach. In Italy, the parents and teachers' topics choices were related to emotions with digital and media, to the link between analogue and digital, to creativity with apps while in Belgium, information online searching and online media creating (videos, audiobook, online local newspaper) were the main goals targeted. We could observe therefore a more emotional approach to the media in Italy while a more school approach (skills development, know how, etc.) has oriented the Belgian educational pathways. But in both contexts, the topics of regulation (rules at home, digital practices charter) and the relationship between media and children (risks, opportunities, awareness) were highlighted by schools and families.

Following this co-design work, the resource centres developed educational pathways to meet the needs identified. These pathways proposed practical media education to be worked on partly in class and partly at home. One pathway is about 20 hours long and split into school sessions (about ten sessions lasting 15 hours) and family activities (about five requesting around 5 hours of time). The types of activities were as much as diverse as possible. The need felt was to educate to technology and to media with a plurality of proposals and methodologies: taking photographs and to compare points of views, to identify and decrypt pictograms in the child daily environment, to compare information searching in libraries with information searching online, to draw cartoon character, to understand the difference between fiction and reality while family members are watching movie together, to elaborate a storyboard, to identify advertisements into YouTube platform, to create a video tutorial about a DIY project at school, to build the rules timer, to make big data activity while family members counts how many times they use remote controls and cell phones on a sheet hanging on the fridge, to send a Whatsapp message in which each family member talks about an emotion, etc.

These activities articulated in pathways according the topic selected were then submitted for trying out. In the end, 54 teachers tested a total of 27 educational pathways, in cooperation with the families. The Tandem project partners backed up this experimental phase with regular contacts and assessments, both during the trials and at the end of the experiment.

The main method trialled was a collaborative one, cooperation being the very essence of the project. At local level, cooperation between the teacher and the parent(s) – the duos – was at the heart of the project. The aim of this was to develop digital media education for children in continuity between the school and the family. A special tool was introduced to underpin this school-family cooperation: the correspondence diary² (also called the notebook at nursery or class book at primary school). This travelled with the child between the classroom and the family, carrying messages between the parents and the teacher in either hard copy (in Italy) or digital format (in Belgium). This diary was made up by the sessions and activities sheets for illustrating the work done in the class and passing on instructions for the family activity. Then, in return, the correspondence diary provided a feedback from the family about the activity carried on.

3 Main results

We do not have scope here to develop all of the results of implementation of the educational pathways in the classes and families. Only the most significant results of this school/family relationship in the framework of the Belgian and Italian contexts will be developed here.

First of all, within this initiative in which teachers and parents were encouraged to cooperate from a specific educational viewpoint, the children played a central role. They were in turn the beneficiaries, the players and even the drivers of the pathways and of Tandem co-education. Their interest in the media topics covered greatly influenced their motivation and thus their active participation in these pathways. «The children were very motivated. That echoed a lot in their day-to-day life» (teacher, Schaerbeek, Belgium). They generally expressed great satisfaction with the sessions and activities available: «All the activities always stimulated cooperation, mutual respect and the children's imaginations. The children were always enthusiastic» (teacher, Santarcangelo, Italy). It became clear that the child was not just a motivated pupil but he or she really played a very active role in following the pathway in a school-family co-educational context: «The activity had a snowball effect. There were three children who brought in their records. As they were able to show them to the class, the next day another two or three children also brought in their work. Being allowed to present it increased their status» (teacher,

² Correspondence diary: example (2017, 20 November). Available on <http://www.zaffiria.it/quaderni-schede-attivita-tandem/> [Access 05.04.2019].

Enghien, Belgium). So, the pupils were big driving forces in carrying out the tasks, especially within the class group, where they encouraged one another: «The children's participation level was high, and motivated. The workshop strategies used succeeded in involving all the pupils» (teacher, Verucchio, Italy). The pupil as facilitator of activities in the class also played a special role as a communication «link» for the teacher-parent duo. According to the context, the child played a more or less prominent role as an intermediary, over and above the communication tools provided by the project (correspondence diary).

The technical choice adopted by the Tandem team of directing each pathway towards creating a final media production seems to have been a key educational decision determining the success of the pathways in class: «The pupils are proud to show their videos to the others. When the final video was distributed, they were very proud as well» (teacher, Ans, Belgium); «Thank you. My son was moved when he saw the video. He wasn't expecting it. Thank you» (parent, Penabilli, Italy). In fact, over and above an exercise characterised by success and a usable result, the media production fostered the development of a skills set: «They each had their book page (e-book), there was visual art, there were writing skills and speaking skills» (teacher, Enghien, Belgium).

Since most of the pathway action took place in class, it may be said that within the Tandem relationship, the process was mainly guided by the teacher, but still needed some hard pedalling by the parents. As participation in the process was voluntary, following an invitation to take part, the teachers were therefore all «up for it» and motivated to explore this field. Whereas such motivation is a recruitment bias and therefore a limit to the possible generalisation of our aim, it is itself acknowledged to be a key factor in the successful implementation of the pathways: «We were already more attracted by the media than some other colleagues. I think we get into it more easily and we attach importance to media education. And if we hadn't done that, the year would have gone by without talking about media in our classes» (teacher, Ath, Belgium). Similarly, the Italian trial relied on teachers who were digital technology leaders at the school and highly motivated to explore the possibilities of the Tandem project, but also at ease with the technology. The point is that motivation to integrate digital technology into one's working practices is not all. The personal skills level with regard to mastery of digital technology was frequently mentioned as essential, with some of the teachers admitting to being at a loss: «As regards the audio book activity, I didn't think I would have managed to do it on my own. I wouldn't have been able to cope» (teacher, Enghien, Belgium). Most of the teachers found that the pathways took them out of their comfort zone. The means of overcoming the limits of personal skills that seems to have been most often used was teamwork, with pilot teachers at the same school helping one another.

On the parents' side, their level of satisfaction in terms of the relevance of the activities proposed was high. Among the arguments put forward with respect to the relevance of the activities or the Tandem project more generally, a number of opportunities were pointed out, such as:

- Discovering a medium or media genre that offers various educational possibilities: «Finding out that a video can be for learning, not just for playing» (parent, Forest, Belgium); «What struck me was seeing him using the tablet to play with glue and scissors: he was explaining to his sister how to play with the application, showing in the end that the best way was to create things with their hands, and not to isolate themselves in front of the screen» (parent, Verucchio, Italy).
- Creating new family sharing opportunities: «Times for sharing and thinking about a topic we wouldn't necessarily have talked about» (parent, Enghien, Belgium); «Instead of arguing every night about banning the use of tablets and mobile phones in bed, the project facilitated mediation» (parent, Sant'Agata Feltria, Italy).
- Developing new skills: «Now she knows more about what's to be found on the Internet. She also knows what it was like in the old days» (parent, Forest, Belgium).
- Seeing the school in a new light: «Thanks to the project, we see the school in a different way» (parent, Ath, Belgium); «The child encourages the parents in his or her schooling» (parent, Ans, Belgium).
- Emphasizing the media education dimension: «We've gone beyond the computer course and it's much more practical for children today» (parent, Woluwé, Belgium); «It was a chance to reinforce some rules. When you go to the restaurant for a meal, daddy and mummy don't look at their phones and don't use their phones. You all play on the Xbox together and share some quality family time» (parent, Novafeltria, Italy).

So, what can be said more specifically about the Teacher-Parent cooperation, in other words, this Tandem process? The results for Belgium differ markedly from those for Italy in this respect.

As far as Belgium is concerned, the final assessment of the Tandem cooperation implemented through the pathways in their classes was fairly mixed. Out of 15 Belgian classes in which cooperation was at least initiated and in all cases assessed, only two teachers thought that parent participation in the pathways and parent cooperation in this process was effective and even satisfactory. The low level of parent participation gave rise to a feeling of disappointment in some of the teachers: «There wasn't a great deal of interaction with the parents. No real feedback from the parents on these issues» (teachers, Ans, Belgium). This low level of participation impacted on the teachers' motivation, without all the same preventing the pathway from being implemented in class. The pathways were in fact designed in such a way that not carrying out the activities at home was not a barrier to pupil participation in class, or to the educational continuance of the scenario. This was a methodological precaution that was highlighted as being a strong point of the process: «The activities are definitively inclusive: they keep on going even if the activity is not carried out at home» (teacher, Schaerbeek, Belgium). The teachers accounted for this low level of participation by the fol-

lowing factors: a lack of communication skills in the case of some parents, e.g. lack of fluency in French or poor writing/reading skills on the parents' part; parents' lack of interest or capacity (other primary needs) generally, even in monitoring school work; technical issues in communicating via the correspondence diary; a mismatch between parents' expectations with regard to digital technology and the pathway in itself – a co-design gap; parents not perceiving media education as an academic subject; parents' fear of taking part in school life.

In Italy, parent participation was much higher at all the schools. The opportunity for working together buoyed up the parents' commitment and they felt entrusted with their role as «partner» to the teacher. In most situations, the resulting assessment was very positive: «There's much more cooperation and exchanges of views with the teachers» (parent, Pennabilli, Italy), «Educational workshop projects like Tandem strengthen the desire to play an active part in school life and bring out personality aspects» (parent, Santarcangelo, Italy). The hard copy format correspondence diary played an appreciable part in supporting this high level of participation, due to the close parental involvement with the analogue dimension. Indeed, from the beginning, the importance of a physical support paper support rather than an online platform was highlighted by the parents. Each family then used a «porta-listino» to insert the cards of the notebook: each family was free to propose new activities and add files (but it was mainly the children who proposed it). It's necessary here to highlight the importance of the role of the teacher who was able to motivate families and the pleasantness of the material that made the experience very concrete: there were things to do in the diary, invitations both to reflect and to play together, combining different but fundamental aspects in the adult-child relationship and between the parents themselves.

The Tandem project was therefore more experimented in Italy through a community perspective. The families felt part of an «educating community»: families, all or almost all of them, participated together and reciprocally referred to the activities to be done or confronted on what emerged. While in Belgium, the families were more experimenting the cooperation as a «duo teacher-parent» and not «teachers and all families of the group».

Whatever the success of this cooperative relationship, it is interesting to note that from the parents' point of view, one of the benefits of this project has been the opportunity to take advantage of the support for digital media use, either because they felt that they were being assisted, or because the project created opportunities for working on the scope; or because it changed the parents' perception of the media or developed their personal skills.

4 Conclusions

The main lessons derived from this European experiment concern two major aspects of co-education: the issue of acknowledging and increasing the status of each person's role; and the need to facilitate the inclusion of everyone.

As regards the first aspect, unless there is a complete co-education balance, given that it starts principally from the school (with its rules, codes and contexts), attention should be paid to reinforcing the acknowledgment and increased status of the parents' role. Parents may feel disadvantaged in this duo due, in particular, to fear of being judged by the teacher: parents are likely to feel a loss of prestige in terms of their educational abilities and may not see themselves as on the same level as the teachers, who do it «professionally», in both meanings of the word. Co-education within the Tandem project also led to some self-assessment of their own family practices: parents stressed the educational consistency required by the project; the media practices covered were often the same as the parents' own. It also quickly became evident that the parents were not used to this kind of approach, and soon redirected their support along the lines of monitoring school work in the conventional way. For all that, making it possible for parents to consider these complementary roles at a meeting (one-third of the way through the experiment or at the end) enabled a number of parents to become aware of the advantage of being in complementary – parent and teacher – roles: «Our knowledge is shared; we acknowledge one another's skills. You can ask for help» (parent, Forest); «Education and teaching take place at home as well as at school» (parent, Ath).

The need to facilitate the inclusion of everyone was a second main aspect identified throughout this school-family partnership project. Attention has to be paid to each individual child of course. It is also important to be aware of things that may make it harder for parents to participate: they may be separated, come from different language backgrounds, not have much spare time, not be interested in the subject, they may feel they are not up to the task, and so on. Finding the mechanisms for inclusion that were most relevant and specific to each target group was a difficult undertaking, but one that was essential to the running of this co-education experiment. Lastly, as already described above, the fact that abilities in terms of digital technology skills or available equipment and technology can vary from one teacher to another and from one school to another may affect the teacher's involvement in a media education partnership approach. Ensuring that everyone is included therefore requires a project methodology aimed at securing the active participation of each player (teacher, parent, head teacher) from the outset, by means of co-design activities or needs analysis. On the other hand, the potential for extension is therefore a tricky matter. From the beginning, we have prepared this scaling up potential by developing media education activities for schools and families who might be articulated in different pathways according the goals or issues targeted. The methodology of co-education is also well documented with do's and don'ts available in the online resource centre.³ And finally, these resources, freely available online, are fully documented for supporting argumentation towards educational staff or family communities to involve them in a process of media literacy co-education, as Tandem project has developed.

³ www.mediatandem.eu

Ensuring that the communication is relevant and tailored to the target groups obviously plays a part in the inclusion of everyone in this school-family partnership and, above all, in the success of the cooperative relationship. The project also attempted, with varying degrees of success, to reconcile habits (comfort zone) with innovation with regard to this communication aspect. But ultimately, beyond the technical or even technological viewpoint of the chosen tool, what sort of user-friendly and more inclusive communication could be set up? What strategies and fresh dynamics might fuel different kinds of exchanges? Moving away from the simple viewpoint of monitoring school work and aiming at real co-education of the citizens of tomorrow? The Tandem project attempted an initial exploration of this theme. A number of possible fields still remain.

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