

## Education Professionals and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Turning Crisis into New Opportunities

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic emergency brought human vulnerability to the proscenium revealing the uncertainty associated with existence. It appears as a symptom of a deeper crisis of modern society, whose paradigms need to be questioned. Could this be an opportunity, though? The qualitative study presented here aimed to investigate the emotions experienced and the responses developed by the education professionals during the first lockdown. It explored the areas related to motivation, fears, and the ideas prompted by the change, with a focus on the conditions able to foster “creative solutions”. Teamwork and the presence of training programs appear to be crucial elements.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, crisis, change & opportunities, education, new paradigms.

### Abstract

L'emergenza pandemica da COVID-19 ha disvelato la vulnerabilità e l'incertezza associate alla condizione umana. Ciò, tuttavia, appare come sintomo di una crisi più profonda della moderna società, i cui paradigmi necessitano di essere messi in discussione. La crisi potrebbe forse essere considerata un'opportunità? Lo studio qualitativo presentato indaga le emozioni e le risposte dei professionisti dell'educazione durante la prima fase di emergenza. Oggetto di indagine sono state la motivazione professionale, le paure e le idee suscitate dal cambiamento, con un focus sulle condizioni a favore di “soluzioni creative”. Il lavoro in team e la presenza di piani formativi sembrano essere elementi cruciali.

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**Parole chiave:** pandemia da COVID-19, crisi, cambiamento & opportunità, educazione, nuovi paradigmi.

### 1. *The value of metamorphosis: Moving from a crisis to a change*

The COVID-19 pandemic emergency was a symptom of a deep crisis, exceeding the health one: the crisis of the epistemological and socio-economic paradigms of modern society, which now have to deal with an increasingly uncertain scenario and are subject to a *radical change* (Fabbri, 2019; Morin, 2020). Contini (2021) argues that «it was foreseeable, but we did not foresee it» (p. 9; our translation) because we thought that anything scary we could have foreseen would not have affected us closely anyway: «Drunkness erased the sense of limitation intrinsic to the human condition and took with it the awareness of our finitude, respect for nature, and solidarity and devotion to other humans» (*Ibidem*; our translation).

Those “uncomfortable” themes inherent to human existence (namely its finitude, its being fragile and breakable) suddenly emerged to the surface though and the impossibility of exercising control, whether collective or individual, over all variables interacting in a complex system (Bateson, 1972) was clearly revealed.

However, following Brown’s reflections (2015), the recognition of the vulnerability intrinsic to human experience opens up the possibility of change. Such a possibility can be realised if subjects are also able to accept the fear associated with change, both in the most intimate sphere and in the professional one. If the year 2020 was the year of trauma, the years to follow will be the ones of analysis on the consequences: it is up to us to transform the crisis into a chrysalis, to accomplish the process of metamorphosis for humanity. The crisis is a moment of discontinuity that inevitably forces us to evaluate, choose, and change (Fabbri, 2019). Why not then look at it as an opportunity? What if, at last, what seemed to be indisputable was now necessarily questioned? Could not a paradigm of thought, a model of life, an entire socio-economic system finally be challenged and deconstructed, renewed, and innovated?

This paper deepens the possibility of looking at change as a chance for rebirth. Opposing a “given” destiny and searching for a “creative exit” is a gamble. Certainly, a courageous one, which does not trap subjects to the status of victims, but looks at them as protagonists of new narratives, even within their profession.

Leonard Mlodinow (2018) emphasises the importance of the ability to leave our reassuring certainties behind (which, perhaps, also includes the ability to “unlearn”), to accept contradictions and to exercise “flexible thinking”. Indeed, the importance of accepting and knowing how to experience uncertainty is a key step in the process of change. Uncertainty is valuable, not only because it is ineradicable but also because the chance of controlling all the variables of complexity is not given to humans, even if they have developed intelligence and can interact with machines (Morin, 1990).

In the frame of the *complexity paradigm*, Simon maintains (1947) we have to deal with limited rationality. Based on the available information – which is inevitably fragmented and partial – and being able to consider only some of the possible consequences, human beings try to make satisfactory and sufficiently good choices, without ever being certain of having chosen the best one.

However, it must be said that uncertainty is often linked to fear. In the words of Bauman (2006), “fear” is the term we choose to name our uncertainties. This reminds us that – when facing the need for change – fear is inevitable, but it is also the real driving force behind brave choices. Indeed, courage is not fearlessness tout court, but rather an exposure and risk-taking. Vulnerability and fragility characterise us, they are the «backbones» (Borgna, 2014, *passim*; our translation) of human existence, inextricably linked to the environment in which we are embedded and to our fellow human beings. In Latin, the root of the word *fragile* is the same of the verb *frangere* (to break) and the noun *fragmentum* (fragment). Being aware of human fragility means facing the idea that humans might break and that we are all “pieces” of a more complex and interconnected whole (Malaguti, 2005). Nevertheless, Western cultures are inclined to favour the idea of fragility as a weakness and lack of solidity (Borgna, 2014).

However, the possibility of change lies precisely in the recognition of our ontological fragility and the acceptance of risk-taking. The fear of change, as a matter of fact, can inhibit action, can lead to clinging, to seeking refuge in certainties (for example, in established professional practices that are considered valid “no matter what”). But it can also be experienced as the moment preceding the leap into emptiness, the vertigo before the desirable (or necessary) unpredictable course of action.

We hereby view the crisis as an opportunity for change. Referencing the “crisis-chrysalis” binomial mentioned above, the crisis is a fracture: a breach in the armour of our comfort zone and of our “reassuring cer-

tainties". For the chrysalis, indeed, it is precisely in the fracture of the shell (which protects and reassures) that the signal of the forthcoming metamorphosis (transformation) shows, making it ready to reveal itself and all its potential beauty.

The discourse on crisis and change is of interest to us above all for the contexts of education and its professionals. All areas of education have been forced to cope with the pandemic emergency, and this has necessarily entailed breaking new ground, even reinventing established practices. The call, therefore, for those involved in education, is to be stimulated by a paradigm shift that the pandemic has brought along (Spiteri, 2021; Zhao, 2020).

The COVID-19 emergency posed the problem of how to educate without the school facilities (ECEC services, schools, after-school services, etc.). This is a pedagogical and didactic challenge that has been addressed and has confirmed a key point: the need for (formal) education is superior to any critical aspects that the public and academic debate has always raised about the educational system (Farné, 2020). So why, strengthened by this renewed certainty, can we not assume that the crisis represents an opportunity rather than just a deadlock?

## *2. The study "Education at the time of Coronavirus (and after)"*

The qualitative study "Education at the time of Coronavirus (and after)" was designed starting from this framework. The research aimed at investigating education professionals' perception of their role during the pandemic emergency. The study explored the areas related to the meaning and motivation attributed to their educational activities, the doubts and fears that came to light, the new ideas prompted by the change, and the perceived risks.

### *2.1. Procedures*

Five different online focus groups were carried out in May-June 2020. They were moderated by the same researcher and with the presence of a second researcher as an observer.

The meetings were attended by educators (N=4) and pedagogical coordinators (N=6) of ECEC services and by kindergarten (N=5), primary (N=6) and secondary (N=7) school teachers from 9 different

Municipalities of Emilia Romagna and Marche (N=28; 26 females, 2 males). All participants were recruited according to convenience criteria. Professionals working for the same type of service (ECEC service or kindergarten) or school grade (primary or secondary school) formed each group.

In the days before each meeting, participants anonymously answered an online questionnaire with three open-ended questions on the focus groups' target topics: the answers were the starting point of the meetings. The contents of the meetings were recorded, fully transcribed, coded by both authors and analyzed in order to identify patterns of meaning (Braun, Clarke, 2006).

## 2.2. Results and discussion<sup>4</sup>

The study shed a light on some emotions experienced by professionals during the first lockdown and helped in understanding how these might have influenced their representations of the educational role.

The change and the uncertainty caused by the pandemic emergency destabilised them and generated disorientation, sense of ineffectiveness and loss of meaning.

Not being able to control the events revealed fragility and vulnerability, described by some of the participants with words such as «I hesitated» (G., teacher), «It was all so new. I felt a little on a raft, at the mercy of the events» (M., teacher), «It was a shock at the beginning [...]. It's been a very difficult personal experience» (B., educator). Such emotions, which were experienced on a personal level first, also resonated at the professional one and were translated into feelings of perceived helplessness and frustration. «I felt unable to help», said C.B. (teacher). M.'s (teacher) and G.'s (teacher) words appear emblematic, when describing distance learning activities implemented by schools as «a field hospital [...], an emergency solution», «a patch [...], a palliative».

As we saw previously, the fear generated by an unexpected change might inhibit action, but it can also be experienced as vertigo that anticipates the jump “into the void”. The evidence from the focus group confirms that reactions fluctuated between attempts to remain within

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<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise specified, English translations of the speeches of participants taking part in the study are edited by the Authors, Editor's Note.

the reassuring perimeter of rooted and well-known practices and the desire to explore new paths, inspired by the intention to rethink the educational course.

The desire to linger in (or to re-enter) one's comfort zone is perceivable, for example, in L's (teacher) words, who states «when you find something that overturns the equilibrium, that disrupts it, you [...] you can, however, go back to the already outlined way. This is somehow what we are waiting for, in my opinion».

But change, as highlighted before, can also be experienced from a pro-active perspective. Indeed, the need to question those professional practices is one of the elements grasped during the focus groups.

First of all, change and uncertainty are opportunities to critically revisit the goals that drive educational professionals and their actions. Unprecedented and unknown situations, like the COVID-19 pandemic, actually require new avenues of intervention to be found, especially when the already known solutions or those that seem to be defined a priori prove to be ineffective. To be able to do that, professionals needed to go back to the motivations of their work, not only focusing on how things have always been done, are done or should be done, but above all on why they are done, on what the purposes are. C.F. (teacher) explains:

It was a good opportunity also as a group, to re-examine ourselves, to interpret the things we had done, the motivations behind them, and to put them back on the table. We had to do that, especially because we had to share our decisions with families. Even if it's not been easy, it's been really useful: we studied a lot, re-read the national indications and did an in-depth analysis.

Reflecting on one's role and mission can trigger creative thought processes, which start precisely from questioning what seems to be definitively acquired, certain, almost indisputable. The need to reflect on consolidated paradigms emerges from E.'s (pedagogical coordinator) words:

We now have the great opportunity to work on many aspects of a pedagogical paradigm that perhaps needed to be refreshed [...]; sometimes [...] I notice a sort of paralysis. I don't believe in this way of working, as if it were faith and not a job. Sometimes I hear people saying: «we've always done this way», but maybe you've always been wrong! Not being willing to change often turns out to be kind of cultural protection, while change should be a great chance for ECEC services, educators and the families.

Change can really be an opportunity to unlearn and re-learn in new forms, finding “creative exits”. Which were the factors encouraging such a generative process?

First of all, a constant inter-subjective dialogue with the workgroup, which can be a source of new knowledge and ideas, a place where people feel less alone in the face of their professional challenges and that opens up to curiosity, experimentation, and reflection. When dialogue within a group struggles to occur, responses might be less effective, as F. (teacher) emphasises:

We all thought «Come on, let’s go. What shall we do? Shall we test it? Let’s try this». But it might have been more useful if we all (the entire working group, all the teachers of the school, I mean) had talked about it beforehand and if we acted on a common and shared basis. It is surely true that each section has “its children and its own parents” – so maybe good for my section would not have been good for another one – but...

Indeed, reflecting together, putting fears and constraints on the table, and making one’s idea of education explicit can help in finding collective, organic, and structured answers. We do not want to maintain that being able to react and to respond in a very short time to compelling vital needs is not important when an emergency occurs, but expressing clear intentionality even beyond the short term is equally significant, in order to seize the opportunity of a crisis.

Discussion within the team creates the valuable opportunity to (re)give meaning – on an individual and collective level – to one’s own educational action, to find new motivations. This is what M. (teacher) highlights when she says «it helps the teaching team to be a cohesive body and to reflect together about the meaning we give to the school, to children, what we think about the relationship between teachers and families».

Families also are a precious resource, if their contribution is recognized, valued and made complementary to their professional skills. D. (pedagogical coordinator) recalls:

It was parents who made this request [video-calls between children and teachers, Ed.] and we accepted it, in that thread of alliance [...]. They had seen a need in their children and we listened to them while being aware of and claiming adults’ – and education professionals’ in particular – responsibility for a conscious and attentive use of communication technologies.

Taking the opportunity to be in a relationship of authentic exchange with children's families also helps to experience some of the concepts that sometimes remain abstract statements. Among these, the awareness that effective educational action is conceivable only within a systemic approach and is based on reciprocity: everyone – respecting specific roles and competencies – can make their contribution and bring their added value to the table. This is witnessed by D. and E. (pedagogical coordinators), who respectively say: «we are taking home the message that parents know how to be parents» and «the pedagogical colonialism that some educators sometimes have – as they might think they can teach the world how to bring up children – has decreased».

Possible new creative solutions are therefore the result of a process that is not undertaken alone, but with a community, where others are a source of enrichment. Certainly, new courses of action are not without real or perceived risks. Taking up the challenge of change and uncertainty implies risk-taking and accepting oneself as fallible. M. (teacher) says:

We tried, and we did things. That was the only thing we could do, what else could we have done? What were the risks and what were the possibilities? [...] If we had been sitting on our hands, we could not have done anything. [...] Let's try, [...]: let's insert a variable, let's look at the boys and girls, let's try to find ways, opportunities and paths to respond to their needs.

Given the impossibility to control all interacting variables, new initiatives sometimes are fully successful, and sometimes not. There are two important aspects to be highlighted though. First, when education is involved, “trial and error” approaches are not conceivable: an ethically guided intentionality is the baseline of every educational action and this means that the respect and well-being of the subjects can never be questioned or at stake. As already mentioned, one cannot be sure that the choices made are the best ones, but they must certainly be the best possible at a given time, in a given context, based on the information available.

Second, recognising oneself as imperfect, not omniscient and not (self)-sufficient may sometimes be perceived as a disavowal of one's professional value, particularly when this is linked to a feeling of “superiority” in asymmetrical relationships based on the education professionals' presumed “higher level of knowledge”.

A latent “principle of authority” (or a “desire for authority”) is indeed still detectable among professionals. For example, in the words they use to describe a good relationship with the families: «every time parents



accepted our requests willingly, we had good results» (L., teacher). «It is important that parents are engaged, but discreet, too» (M., teacher). «It is positive when parents come with ‘the hat in their hand’, meaning the parents are there to hear what you say, to ask for your advice. Unfortunately, not all of them are like that» (G., teacher). «Students improve when parents echo what I say at school» (D., teacher).

When one’s professional role is interpreted in this manner, anything that questions the “teacher’s authority” and that contradicts the system of thought and action that is commonly considered logical, coherent and validated is “rejected” (Morin, 1990). This limits the willingness to openly and continuously rethink one’s profession, to share thoughts and ideas and to cooperate to identify new possible solutions.

Going beyond this attitude means being aware that we are “pieces of a greater whole”, and that we are partial, and limited in vision and possibilities. This awareness makes us complementary to others, allowing us to find motivations, conceive ideas and reach goals greater than the ones we could achieve on our own. This is a further element that allows us to unveil the *positive* and *generative* potential of a crisis.

### *Conclusions*

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a “test” of the actual quality of our educational system, putting its implicit and/or explicit logic – as well as its socio-cultural and pedagogical value – under the magnifying glass.

As the professionals stated, «during the lockdown [...] everything got bigger, so the good things became beautiful, the bad things terrible» M. (teacher). The exceptionality of the situation shed a light and brought on the proscenium already known (but probably temporarily set aside as “secondary”) issues.

The words of the professionals we met are significant proof that the themes related to the crisis can become an opportunity for growth if the individuals directly affected experience the situation as protagonists, with responsibility, creativity and flexibility. At the same time, they open a reflection on which structural conditions can foster this type of attitude and response, highlighting two crucial elements that can help to “take care of the crisis”.

On one hand, the importance of valuing teamwork and the presence of professionals who facilitate reflective processes. On the other hand,

the centrality of the support and continuous training processes, aimed at enhancing metacognitive and emotional skills. Key factors for the care of the educational professions, especially, but not only, in times of crisis.

The post-pandemic ECEC services and schools should not return to the previous status quo. There should be the opportunity to take advantage of the lessons learned and take a step forward toward a truly democratic and emancipatory education.

After this experience, [...] there could be the circumstances for a political and cultural battle [...] to reaffirm the value of school as a community. A democratic community that is based on the active participation and cooperation of its members, on the civic passion for teaching and the desire to learn, and in which everyone finds the opportunity for intellectual and ethical-social growth (Baldacci, 2020, p. 157; our translation).

This unexpected and paradoxical opportunity could foster a collective awareness of the meaning of educational (and care) work. It is therefore not a question of «not worrying, not asking so many questions and seeing how it goes», as was suggested to F., one of the teachers we met, but perhaps, on the contrary, of not stopping reflection. Indeed, in the midst of the emergency, the places of education never stopped being lived.

This brought to light what, perhaps for too long, had been taken for granted: from nursery schools to universities, the world of education has continued to grow and build – even if sometimes it has also collected roadblocks and failures (the perpetuation of inequalities first and foremost). The essential dimensions of education, which have never really been forgotten, have emerged: relationships, the community, the value of knowledge as a tool for collective and individual growth.

But it is not only in the contexts of formal education that we can reap the benefits of the opportunity “offered” by the pandemic: indeed, pedagogical reflection can make its way and become an opportunity in the most varied areas of life. As Cambi remarks, we are called to question all the “big” pedagogical issues

from lifestyle to a rethinking of guiding values, from a renewal of politics to a revival of the role of culture (also and precisely of the highest and noblest culture), from the cultivation of the self (of that inner hole of the ego that the pandemic with its isolation has put back at the center [...]), looking also at a redefinition of our idea of civilization as a whole (2020, p. 56; our translation).

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