

Inclusive Technology-mediated School-family Communication in Contexts of Social Violence: A Proposal for Guidelines for Schools and Families in Gaza

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Abstract

I-CAN: Independence, Capability, Autonomy, iNclusion was an international cooperation project run in 2018-2021, which involved 15 selected Gaza Strip's schools, whose objective was to promote the full inclusion of people with disabilities. The project was articulated in two main actions: the first was the establishment of an "Holistic and Innovative Centre", created to support educators and families in the promotion of initiatives directed at building inclusive communities; the second was a qualitative research, which explored the implications that the lockdown and the forced transition towards technology-mediated communication had on school-family relationship.

Keywords: school-family communication, technology, inclusion, disability, guidelines.

Abstract

I-CAN: Independence, Capability, Autonomy, iNclusion è un progetto di cooperazione internazionale condotto negli anni 2018-2021 che ha coinvolto 15 scuole selezionate della Striscia di Gaza, con l'obiettivo di promuovere la piena inclusione delle persone con disabilità. Il progetto si è articolato in due azioni principali: la prima è rappresentata dall'istituzione di un "Centro Olistico e Innovativo", creato per supportare gli educatori e le famiglie nella promozione di iniziative volte a costruire comunità inclusive; la seconda si è concretizzata in una ricerca qualitativa che ha esplorato le implicazioni che l'isolamento e la transizione forzata verso la comunicazione mediata dalla tecnologia hanno avuto sul rapporto tra scuola e famiglie.

Parole chiave: comunicazione scuola-famiglia, tecnologie, inclusione, disabilità, linee guida.

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1. *The Gaza Strip*⁴

Living in the Gaza Strip, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, means living in a land full of barriers and obstacles even for activities that we normally give for granted: this land has been shaped by decades of occupation, blockade and war. In 1967, it was invaded and occupied by Israel. Since 2007, after Hamas won the elections, Gaza is isolated from the West Bank and the rest of the world and is suffering a land, air and sea blockade (Barakat, Milton, Elkahlout, 2018). In the last 15 years (2008-2022) Gaza was subjected to four wars, with civilian infrastructures targeted in the agricultural, energy and water fields, and this situation is impacting everyday life: 85% of Gazans depend on food aid, the population is living a humanitarian crisis and the blockade is restricting the possibility to rebuild what conflict is destroying (Weinthal, Sowers, 2019).

In this context of “de-development” (Roy, 1987) where it seems impossible to see human potential and any change, mental and physical wellbeing of Palestinians is aggravating (UN, 2017): restrictions on mobility, unemployment, poverty, crisis in education, health, safety, made Gaza become an “unliveable place” (UNCTAD, 2015; UNRWA⁵, 2012).

After the 2008-2009 war (also known as “Operation Cast Lead”), a research in the field of education found significant psychosocial problems (anxiety, fear, distress, lack of hope) affecting students’ learning and the increase of drug abuse (Kostelny, Wessells, 2010). Due to this prolonged conflict, long-term impacts on child development cause learning difficulties, making it more difficult to complete studies and achieve higher education.

These difficulties are more evident in fragile groups: people with disabilities (whose acronym is PwD) represent one of the most vulnerable groups within the Gaza Strip. Being the 2,6% of population (PCBS, 2017), they are forced to face extreme difficulties in daily life, excluded from the enjoyment of their rights and subject to discrimination. This

⁴ This contribution was written before the tragic events that started on the 7th of October 2023. Today the situation in the Gaza Strip is very serious and still very uncertain. The conflict that has been raging in these days will give rise to long-range consequences that are hard to imagine. Only one thing is certain: future generations of young Israelis and young Palestinians will grow with this war, this trauma, in their minds. We can only hope that they can find a way to make possible what past generation failed: building a future of peace.

⁵ Acronym for United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

situation is even more serious for women with disabilities, who suffer double discrimination: being female and being disabled. In Gaza, it emerges that the main obstacles to the recognition of the rights of PwD and their full social inclusion are linked to three interconnected factors: non-autonomy; non-access to socio-economic empowerment opportunities; stigma of the community.

Non-autonomy is due to the poor accessibility of places and the lack of appropriate aids. Lack of empowerment is linked to difficulties in accessing education and lack of job opportunities. Finally, social stigma affects both the self-esteem of PwD and their individual and social empowerment process. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education in Palestine (MoEHE) has developed policies addressed to the development of educational and social practices based on inclusion and implemented in the national school system (MoEHE, 2015, 2017).

According to UNICEF (2016), 23,1% of PwD in Palestine have serious difficulties accessing education due to social discrimination, and about 43% of children with disabilities aged 6-17 years are not enrolled in education in the Gaza Strip (PCBS, 2019). Here around 45,2% (27,7%, in West Bank) of children with disabilities aged 6-9 years are out of school compared to 0,9% of their peers without disabilities. Gender inequalities are significant and show that 36,6% of 10-15 years old girls with disabilities are out of school, compared to 26,3% of boys with disabilities in the same age-group (UNICEF, 2018).

2. *The I-CAN project*

It is in this context of deprivation and immobility that the *I-CAN: Independence, Capability, Autonomy, iNclusion* project was born in, with the primary purpose of contrasting this sense of de-development, separation, and closure, responding with inclusive education strategies.

The three years *I-CAN* project⁶ (2018-2021) was founded by AICS (the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation) and coordinated by the Italian NGO “EducAid”: its main objective was to promote the full inclusion of people with disabilities, in particular women, and the families of students attending 15 selected schools within the Gaza territory.

⁶ For more information, see <https://www.educaid.it/en/portfolio/i-can-independence-capability-autonomy-inclusion-center-for-independent-living-for-pwds-in-gaza-strip-2018/> (last access: 24.10.23).

The project consisted of these following two main actions:

- establishing a “Holistic and Innovative Centre” to support teachers, educators, youth workers, and families in the promotion of initiatives directed at building inclusive community educational contexts;
- promoting research and experimentation in the schools involved.

More in detail, the project launched an exploratory survey aimed to detect the schools’ level of inclusion, followed by experimentation of the Index for Inclusion and Empowerment (IIE) (Pacetti, Soriani, Castellani, 2020a). This tool has been co-constructed, formalized, and tested starting from the original Index for Inclusion by Booth and Ainscow (2011) in the framework of a previous project carried out in West Bank’s Palestinian schools (Pacetti, Soriani, Castellani, 2020b).

The approach was centred on bottom-up strategies in the construction of the tool and in the actions implemented, with a cooperative and constructivist methodology necessary to develop a community of teachers able to collaborate, reflect and plan together also after the project itself. The IIE is functional to the design and self-evaluation of the quality of inclusion processes in communities and schools; and it integrates the perspective of inclusion and empowerment as emancipatory process, in both an individual and social dimension.

Within the *I-CAN* project, experimentation required training for teachers about the use of the IIE for planning inclusive school policies and identifying educational priorities not only in schools but also in the community.

The role of the University of Bologna – Department of Education Studies, was to coordinate the training actions targeted to the Holistic Centre’s staff, and to consult in the research and monitoring actions regarding the use of the IIE in schools and communities. As the pandemic situation started in early 2020, during the second half of the research, the situation in schools was more complex: teachers had to manage remote teaching and being able to communicate effectively with families and parents had to fully support their children in home teaching and maintain open communication with teachers and other parents.

For this reason, the project addressed these new challenges:

- a qualitative inquiry on the impact of lockdown and the forced use of technology in communication between teachers and families;
- the proposal of guidelines for technology-mediated school-family communication.

2.1 Research's goal

The research aimed to investigate the school-family communication practices mediated by technology during Covid-19's lockdown in the Gaza stripe's schools.

The need for investigating this dynamic came from the local Ministry of Education and the I-Can project's leader: the Italian NGO "Edu-cAid". During the pandemic, all the schools of the Palestinian territories and Gaza's Stripe found themselves in a very complicated situation: not only the problem of their students' scolarisation needed to be addressed but also the problem of keeping an open dialogue and contact with their students' families.

2.2 Methodology

The exploratory-qualitative-based research described in this contribution saw the involvement of 15 middle schools (first to sixth grade) located in Gaza's Stripe: eight UNRWA schools and seven public schools run by the MoEHE.

Three focus groups have been conducted: one with six teachers from first to fourth grade, one with five teachers from fifth and sixth grade, and one with ten parents having children attending different schools.

The focus group were conducted online, with people selected voluntarily, in Arabic and lasted 60 minutes. To facilitate the process of data analysis and to support the interviewer, the researchers structured the focus group's scripts in a list of questions that served as guidance for conducting the discussion (Ochieng *et al.*, 2018).

Questions for teachers' focus group were articulated in the following six sections:

Instructional design	During the pandemic, have you managed to keep organising a regular meeting with the rest of your colleagues?
Distance learning	During the pandemic, have you changed and adapted your way of running and managing your lessons? How? Which major challenges have you faced? Which aspects of your past practices have you maintained because successful?

Distance evaluation	During the pandemic, have you changed and adapted your way of evaluating your students? How? Which major challenges have you faced?
Digital competences	Were your digital skills sufficient to manage the emergency and distance learning moment?
School-family communication	During the pandemic, which communication channels have you used to communicate with parents? Which major challenges Have you faced? Which aspects, if present, have you appreciated the most?
Communication with colleagues	During the pandemic, which communication channels have you used to communicate with your colleagues? Which major challenges Have you faced? Which aspects, if present, have you appreciated the most?

The questions for parents' focus group were articulated in the following four sections:

Distance learning	Which kind of challenges and struggles are generated by the management of your children's digital-school-lives? Especially when one has more than one son/daughter Concerning digital distance learning during the pandemic: does the management of your home spaces generates struggles or difficulties? Were the technological devices at your family's disposal enough to guarantee everybody's participation in school's distance activities?
Digital technologies	Were your digital skills sufficient to manage the emergency and your sons'/daughters' distance learning? Which were the most challenging aspects for you?
School-family communication	Do you feel the need to communicate more with your children's teachers? Do you manage to communicate effectively with the school (Teachers, Principals...) using ICTs? Which major challenges have you faced? Which aspects, if present, have you appreciated the most? Did teachers and school principals stay available during pandemics? through which tools?

Parents-parents communication	Do you feel the need to communicate more with other parents of your children's classmates? Do you manage to communicate effectively with the other parents using ICTs? Which major challenges have you faced? Which aspects, if present, have you appreciated the most?
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Due to space reasons, the present paper mainly presents the results more closely connected to the communication dynamics occurring between all stakeholders of school.

3. What emerged from teachers

Especially during the pandemic, teachers found it difficult to maintain regular meetings with their colleagues due to the following aspects:

- *teachers' lack of digital competence* put some of the teachers in the condition of not being able to communicate properly, in a short time with the others;
- *teachers' lack of adequate digital tools* caused lots of technical problems. Teachers reported not only issues in terms of possessing/not possessing adequate digital tools, but also a proper internet connection.
- *lack of official digital communication platforms*: both teachers from first to fourth grade and from fifth to sixth grade used non-official platforms to communicate with their colleagues: WhatsApp and Facebook have been largely used for maintaining an exchange with the other teachers and to reach some families;
- *difficulties in the communication dynamics mediated by technology*: maintaining a relationship was harder because the teachers were used to meeting and interacting without the mediation of a digital tool.
- *psychological stress*: many teachers stated that, during the pandemic, they were suffering from their working conditions. More hours spent sitting in front of a screen, less free time because of the need to adapt their educational strategies to the online interaction, and the absence of breaks between one lesson and the other are among the most relevant motivations, which teachers brought.
- *workload increase*: another critical aspect raised by the teachers during the focus group was the increase in their workload; man-

aging the transition between a school anchored to the present towards a digital-mediated one, meant a lot of work in preparing all the lessons, revising all the activities, in managing the technical issues and rethinking the evaluation strategies.

Regarding school-family communication dynamics, teachers made an important remark: none of their schools settled an official tool for school-family communication. This forced them to communicate with their students' families through non-official digital tools, such as *Zoom*, *Facebook*, *Messenger*, *WhatsApp*, or *IMs*.

Among the most relevant difficulties faced during the pandemic concerning the school-family communication dynamics, teachers reported the following.

- *technical issues*: internet cuts or electricity blackouts represented a big obstacle in interacting with the families. this, in gaza strip territories, was not only a huge problem during the pandemic but also in every day's life of the people who are forced to live in a constant reclusion-like situation;
- *lack of adequate digital devices* from teachers, families, and students. the economic conditions of many families living in the gaza strip do not allow the possession of a proper device for all the members of the family and this may cause the malfunction of some of the devices used by the students or by the parents;
- *parents' lack of support in terms of school-family alliance*: the families in difficult conditions (economical, with a history of disability, social-contextual) were the hardest ones to reach and collaborate with during lockdown. this did emphasise the distance between these families and the school even more;
- *parents' low levels of digital competence*: teachers reported that parents do not have enough confidence in using a digital device and this hindered their contact with them during the pandemic.
- *privacy issues*: many parents have been contacting privately teachers on their mobile phones during inappropriate times.

4. *What emerged from parents*

Parents reported that the main difficulties related to this aspect are the following:

- *lack of devices*: parents stated that many Palestinians cannot afford to have a device for every member of the family. This affects negatively on the possibility of getting connected and properly following the school's online activities. It also affects the relationship dynamics within the members of the family by opening ground for potential conflicts. Another problem raised is related to the space available on the devices, especially if multiple people share these devices. This means less space to store apps, videos, photos and learning materials.
- *technical problems*: according to the parents that participate in the focus groups, Gaza Strip's territory is plagued by a very low-quality of internet connection along with frequent electricity cuts. This caused (and will in the future) many problems in granting proper participation in online schools' activities.
- *lack of an official school-family communication platform*: another concern expressed by parents is the fact that the schools do not provide an official space to communicate with teachers. Some teachers used to send the homework via email, some via *WhatsApp*, and some other with other social media, and this created a lot of confusion forcing the parents to monitor multiple platforms.
- *psychological stress*: parents denounced a state of the psychological pressure of being home and following school tasks and home/family management. For instance, when working on producing videos with their children, many parents reported that the noise in the house was a problem, another problem raised is about finding the proper spaces: many parents reported the lack of privacy for the child and, contextually, issues in managing the rest of the children.
- *lack of digital competence*: parents reported that at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic their digital skills were far from being sufficient to face the situation. From the focus group emerged that thanks to the help of some teachers and their continuous efforts in providing support, many mothers could develop new competencies in managing digital tools.

Regarding the communication dynamics between families and other families, a large part of the parents reported that they felt the need for a more open and continuous communication with their peers.

The motivations brought were mainly the following:

1. parents feel uncomfortable explaining to their children the materials that teachers send, and therefore they looked for support from other parents;
2. having the support of other parents' point of view on how they were dealing with all difficulties helped them a lot.

About the communication dynamics between families and teachers, parents reported that not all the teachers were available and easy to reach, but that, in general, they could communicate with them sufficiently. Some parents complained about the fact that teachers could not always reply on time to their request for help: in this regard, 1st to 4th grades' teachers were much more available and reachable compared to 5th to 6th grades ones.

5. *The guidelines*

Thanks to the focus group, the researchers, working together with the Gaza's team of "EducAid", teachers and parents involved in the research, produced guidelines for an inclusive school-family communication and for facing distance learning in emergencies. These guidelines are divided into two sections: one dedicated to teachers and the other to parents.

The teachers' section of the guidelines is structured into five different areas of interest:

- *instructional design*: this area offers insights for improving the collaboration among colleagues to better organise the way teachers plan their educational interventions.
- *distance learning*: this area contains advice to improve the management of distance learning situations.
- *distance evaluation*: this area's aims is to provide teachers more tools to improve the way they evaluate their students.
- *school-family communication*: this area focuses on the possible strategies that teachers may use to communicate inclusively and effectively with their students' families.
- *communication with other teachers*: this area's main focus is providing teachers with strategies and tools that they can use to communicate inclusively and effectively with their colleagues.

The section dedicated to the parents is articulated into four areas of interest:

- *supporting distance learning*: this area's aim is to provide parents guidance in how they can support their children in participating to online distance school's initiatives.
- *digital technologies*: this area focuses on the management of the digital tools within the family, providing hints on how to find a balance in the economy of the timings and the spaces to use those devices.
- *school-family communication*: this area provides insights and support to parents in how they communicate more effectively with their children's teachers.
- *communication between parents*: this area contains guidelines and suggestions dedicated to parents about how to communicate more efficiently and inclusively with other parents.

Conclusions

The guidelines produced during the project, although developed in the emergency context of the pandemic, highlighted new ways in which schools can communicate with families more inclusively and effectively. Beyond the lockdown imposed by the covid, in fact, the guidelines proved to be a fundamental tool for reflecting on communication dynamics between school and family and for proposing new ways of connecting and shape relationships. The Palestinian context, particularly in Gaza Strip, which is always at risk of closures and suspensions of educational services due to the conflict, needs to question what the inclusive strategies are to keep communication and collaboration between school and family active and to guarantee the right to education.

In this sense, the guidelines offered a space to reflect on teachers' working conditions and on families' situations, raising few key elements that should be addressed to create a more inclusive school-family communication:

- the importance of maintaining a contact and to make sure that no one is excluded;
- the relevance of activating innovative learning strategies (also mediated by technology) that are student-centered and that promote equal participation of the learners;
- the value of managing school-family communication's time more effectively and in a way that it is more respectful to the privacy of the actors involved;

- the importance of creating meaningful school-family alliances, which go beyond acknowledging the importance of parents' involvement in the educational processes.

In particular, the issue of school-family alliances represented an important topic in the Gazan and pandemic context. Teachers realized how this alliance is a dynamic process that must be continuously built and rebuilt, requiring continuous adjustments and redefinitions over time: it is more difficult than a simple interaction as it involves the understanding and acceptance of points of view sometimes opposites (Contini, 2012). In a context where schools are subjected to closures because of conflicts (and not only due to Covid-19), it is necessary to develop mutual interdependence, to work together to achieve common educational goals. Teachers and families should share a common vision of the school: the school should inform on values, didactic objectives, evaluation methods, tools and support families in defining their active role and tasks in the educational process, while families should motivate and mediate supporting those parents more in need.

Communication between school and family is “a nerve center to the achievement of educational success and to the full enhancement of educational interventions: from this derives the possibility of thinking of the family not only as a source of help and support to the school, but also as an actor who can contribute to qualify the school enterprise, sharing one's wealth of experiences, and reflections” (Fabbri, 2008, p. 126)⁷.

Only when this communication is clear and bidirectional, when it involves all actors, it is possible to develop a sense of belonging to a community, to avoid clashes between teachers and families, therefore seeing others as a *resource*, not as an *obstacle*.

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