Smart welfare: The work of the educator at the time of Covid-19

Smart welfare: Il lavoro degli educatori al tempo del Covid-19

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ABSTRACT The field of socio-educational services is focused on the value of relationships, proximity, support and intervention on site, at home or in users' facilities, and all those elements are difficult to convert digitally. Nevertheless, during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, smart working also became part of the everyday life of social educators. This study discusses the role of technology in the work of the educator during the pandemic period and possible future developments. The study offers an insight into the influence of Covid-19 on socio-educational services, focusing on the function of technology both in maintaining contact with the users where the service was suspended and in reshaping the assistance that continued to be provided. The research study highlights that, despite the challenges and the initial disorientation faced by educators, digital technologies can constitute important working tools to assure the continuity of the pedagogical relationship also in the socio-educational and care contexts.

KEYWORDS Professional Educator; Covid-19; Smart Welfare; Educational Technologies; Educational Work.

SOMMARIO Il settore dei servizi socio-educativi è per sua natura incentrato sul valore della relazione, sulla vicinanza, sul sostegno e sull'intervento a domicilio o presso strutture, tutti elementi difficili da convertire telematicamente. Nonostante ciò, durante il periodo della pandemia da Covid-19, lo smart working si è imposto anche nella quotidianità degli educatori professionali. Il presente studio si interroga sul ruolo che la tecnologia ha avuto nel lavoro dell'educatore nel periodo pandemico e sugli eventuali sviluppi futuri. Lo studio qui presentato offre dunque uno spaccato sull'impatto del Covid-19 sui servizi socio-educativi, focalizzandosi sulla funzione delle tecnologie sia nel mantenimento del contatto con gli utenti laddove il servizio è stato sospeso, sia nella rimodulazione dei servizi che hanno continuato ad essere erogati. La ricerca mette in luce come, nonostante le sfide e l'iniziale disorientamento, le tecnologie possano costituire, anche nei contesti socio-educativi ed assistenziali, un importante strumento di lavoro per garantire la continuità della relazione educativa.

PAROLE CHIAVE Educatore Professionale; Covid-19; Smart Welfare; Tecnologie Educative; Lavoro Educativo.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent scientific literature has generated a great amount of data on the pandemic's impact on schools (Ranieri, 2020; Carretero Gomez et. al, 2020; CENSIS, 2020; CIDI-TORINO, 2020; INDIRE, 2020; SIRD, 2020) and on the world of work (Angelici & Profeta, 2020; Decastri, Gagliarducci, Previtali, & Scarozza, 2020; Mascagna, Izzo, Cozzoli, & La Torre, 2019), but few data have been reported on socio-educational services. In recent years, the Italian law no. 205/2017 has given an important acknowledgment to the figure of the professional educator, by significantly marking the transition from a purely welfare role to a promoter of collective well-being (Oggionni, 2014).

Educators, generators of experiences (Bertolini & Caronia, 2015), often have to deal with a dynamic and never definitive way of understanding and carrying out this profession, not only adapting their educational intervention to the different contexts or different age groups, but also to the rapid change of socio-economic and political conditions of the contexts in which they work (Striano, 2010). On one hand, educators are used to operating in socio-educational, cultural, judicial, environmental, and sports contexts of integration and international cooperation (Iori, 2018). On the other hand, every day, they face a structural uncertainty capable both of destabilising (Perla & Riva, 2016) and of stimulating healthy and uninterrupted research on the meaning, purposes and methods of education (Tramma, 2018).

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted all these problems even more. The social and educational services sector is in fact focused on the value of the relationship, proximity, support and intervention often at home or at facilities, all of which are difficult to re-propose in the online setting. Despite this, smart working has been imposed in the everyday life of social workers and the difficulties resulting from their lack of contact with the people in their care have been consistent and linked not only to technological difficulties, but also to the specific characteristics of their work. In the case of socio-educational services, we talk about smart welfare (Petrella, 2020). Smart welfare means social work addressed to citizens and carried out through telematic methods. This type of work usually consists of interviews, interventions and home visits, accompanying paths, activation of support and is carried out by individual (individual professionals, volunteers) and collective (public institutions, associations, cooperatives) actors. All these aspects concern both the individual dimension of educational work linked to reflexive practices (Cambi, 2014) and authentic educational care (Mortari, 2015), and the dimension of planning that enables the educator to govern the educational processes intentionally and explicitly (Palmieri, 2011) within a context expressing needs and awaiting answers (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2016). This requires a theoretical-practical commitment that links social needs with the educational emergencies related to them (Striano, 2010).

Therefore, this study aims at investigating the role of technology for social educators' work in the pandemic period, underlining how educational work has changed in order to give continuity to projects, interventions and activities.

2. EDUCATIONAL WORK AT THE TIME OF COVID-19

2.1. *The impact of Covid-19 on socio-educational services*

On August 16, 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) recorded 21.294.845 cases of Coronavirus around the world in Africa, the Americas, the Eastern Mediterranean, Europe, South-East Asia and the Western Pacific. Thus, the pandemic has resulted in the adaptation of restrictive measures in the majority of these countries. In America (Crawford, 2021), as in Europe (Martínez-López et al., 2021), social workers have played a significant role in public health during the world pandemic crisis in health care and social

fields, through disseminating reliable information about safety, resources and opportunities to assist people with special needs. On one hand, this situation has placed educators under much stress with a high risk of burnout (Martínez-López et al., 2021). On the other hand, it has helped to emphasise the importance of technology and training in education (Trust et al., 2020).

In Italy it is possible to identify two phases of the pandemic period where educational work needed to be rethought, leading education professionals to build new paths, never experienced before. The first phase began with the DPCM (Italian Prime Minister's Decree) of 4 March 2020 which decreed the closure of educational services for children and schools, cultural and sporting events and every initiative at all levels and disciplines, with the subsequent suspension of in-presence activities of schools and universities. In this first phase, the social and educational actors in the communities tried to give continuity to educational interventions, also through the use of technology, trying to fill the gap created by the closures (Dellavalle & Cellini, 2020). In particular, the measures adopted to stop the expansion of the pandemic had a strong impact on a large part of population, increasing economic and educational poverty exponentially.

The second phase (Legislative Decree no. 34, 19 May 2020) introduced the possibility of intervening again on site and led to the adaptation of the services provided to comply with safety standards, leading to a re-definition of the timing and modalities of educational interventions. At local level during the pandemic, the administrations providing these services also gave guidance for their management. Some of these indications were more general, while for other specific services the indications were aimed at ensuring minimum levels in compliance with social distancing, where possible, and promoting remote contact through telephone and video calls (Dellavalle & Cellini, 2020). For territorial services, it was indicated to give priority to telephone contact and access by appointment for programmable activities. For territorial education for minors and people with disabilities, the suspension or the maintenance of contacts with the persons followed, with the adoption of precautionary measures, was ordered. Finally, day-care-centre use by subjects with particular difficulties was established but, in different realities, the problem of controlling the distance, also due to the characteristics of the types of cognitive and behavioural disabilities, resulted in a general closure, to the surprise of the sector associations (Garavaglia & Lotti, 2020). Save the Children's report (2020) on educational poverty highlighted the gap generated by the limited ability to fully understand the immediate effects of the health crisis on children and their families, given the lack of up-to-date data from statistical offices and the urgent need to implement targeted responses in a short time. In fact, in addition to material deprivation, there was also educational and cultural deprivation, due not only to the prolonged closure of schools, but also of educational spaces, with possible long-term implications in terms of school learning and dispersion, especially in the case of children from disadvantaged families. All this impacted on educational work both at home and in residential facilities.

From March to May 2020, the number of people assisted by Caritas rose to 450.000, of which about 129.434 people in their first experience of discomfort and deprivation (CARITAS, 2020). In addition, existing situations such as domestic violence against children and the risk that fragile people might become victims of sexual extortion or cyberbullying facilitated by a more massive and uncontrolled use of technology persisted and worsened in most cases (Rutai, 2020). Several studies (SIDiN, 2020) also reported that prolonged isolation is a risk factor for functional decline and for the development of both physical and mental illnesses and disorders, with a strong impact on people with intellectual disabilities and autism. In fact, even when it does not cause serious health problems, isolation still tends to foster negative feelings, such as sadness, impatience, irritability and anger.

The pandemic has also put a strain on residential reception institutes, both those for children and adolescents and those dedicated to immigrants, affecting both the young people who live there, as well as educators and auxiliary staff. In the first type of institution, the mental well-being of two out of five residents

(39.5%) worsened during the crisis (Jenkel, Güneş, & Schmid, 2020). A similar situation was highlighted within the structures for immigrants, which after the implementation of the Security Decree 2018 saw an increase of the concentration of reception in large structures at the expense of widespread reception, for educators and people. This was a great challenge in a period of pandemic, due to a greater health risk for users and operators who had to make considerable efforts for the reorganisation of environments, in particular reducing and, in some cases, also eliminating common spaces and reorganising laboratory and training activities (Sanfelici, Gui, L., & Mordeglia, 2020).

2.2. *Technology and educational work during the pandemic*

This scenario stimulated in the educators the feeling of bewilderment and scepticism cited by Tramma (2015): bewilderment at the number of variables that make it increasingly difficult to hypothesise a pedagogical-educational planning and scepticism about the limited possibilities granted to pedagogy and education to be able to make a real contribution to the improvement of reality. Educational action, which until then had played a marginal role in relation to school, was called on to broaden its horizons not only searching for new tools, but also in the creation of new spaces able to open up to the territory to welcome and involve entire communities (Boffo, 2020). Work in the educational field is mainly made up of relationships (Rossi, 2020), so much so that when it comes to the skills of the educator, the reference goes above all to internal dimensions of the person such as sensitivity and the ability to act in situations (Costa, 2001). This has opened up a completely new scenario for the use of technology in the world of education. Therefore, if, until now, technology has been considered an ancillary element, during the lockdown, it has proved to be the main tool for the provision of remote educational interventions. The unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic have heavily impacted on the methodological aspects of educational work, leading to a redefinition of the educational project.

On one hand, it was certainly necessary to better define the objectives. Autonomy is one of the necessary destinations for those who are at a disadvantage because it is essential to manage their self-organisation and identity (Sannipoli, 2015). Social educational work is thus carried out with a scaffolding and fading approach, so much so that it can only be regarded as concluded when the scaffolding is not needed any more. The educator deliberately chooses not to occupy all the living spaces of people, skilfully subtracting himself in some moments to offer the opportunity to take one's own steps (Iori, 2018). This gradual path towards self-determination (Wehmeyer, Abery, Mithaug, & Stancliffe, 2003), which requires the ability to act autonomously in different situations, looks appropriate for the dignity of people and gestures in tune with their condition (Bruzzone, 2016), represents a fundamental aspect of the educational project, which cannot be quantified in terms of time. The advent of the health emergency and the consequent closure or remodulation of educational services in many cases threw users into a condition that required their immediate achievement.

On the other hand, smart welfare has led educators to re-think their relationship with technology, the frequency and intensity of use of which has increased. The significant increase in the adoption of digital media within a household has resulted in their incorporation into several daily practices (Cino, 2020) with all the risks and consequences that this can entail at the educational level. Research (Carenzio, Rondonotti, & Rivoltella, 2020) conducted with over 1,000 pastoral workers as well as in an extracurricular context, such as that of the parish, showed that there is an increased interest in the representation of technology, the frequency of use and the purposes with which technology is used in pastoral care (information, collaboration, participation). The use of technology in the field of social work (Pasta & Rondonotti, 2020) and prevention can become an opportunity for the building of bonds, the (re)construction of the community, the liberation of the resources and energies of a territory (Rivoltella, 2017).

Today, the world of education is more concrete than ever in a socio-technological approach that characterises the interactions between social and organisational structures as well as between people and tools (Rivoltella & Rossi, 2019). In the formal, non-formal and informal areas in which the socio-pedagogical educator operates, there are many technologies that offer the possibility of mediating and supporting the work of care and empowerment of which educators are protagonists (Ranieri, Gaggioli, & Borges, 2020). In particular, technologies can intervene with different functions depending on context or age: at school and/or with people with disabilities they can facilitate participation in learning; on the street and with at-risk teenagers they can offer opportunities for self-expression and networking; in prison they can support professional updating and cultural growth; adults can use them for lifelong learning activities, while for the elderly they can become useful tools to train cognitive faculties and assist the person in carrying out material activities. This variety of uses is accompanied by a variety of approaches that educators adopt towards technological devices (Aviram & Talmi, 2006): from purely administrative and organisational visions to curricular and didactic conceptions up to systemic and cultural approaches. However, the particular conditions of the health emergency have highlighted the great potential of technology in the field of work in social services (Dellavalle & Cellini, 2020). Therefore, trying to grasp the possibilities offered by technology (Calvani, 2004) and considering that the main tool of the educator is the "*educational relationship*" (Garavaglia & Lotti, 2020), it almost seems that the use of technology has managed to compensate for those forms of interaction and interactivity typical of direct communication through communication mediated by media (Bonaiuti, Calvani, Menichetti, & Vivanet, 2017). In general, the aspects that most influenced the use of technology in order to rethink the physical presence in services, reduced to essential activities, can be traced back to the needs of information and communication. During the lockdown period, the experience of webinars (Sanfelici et al., 2020) allowed comparison and solidarity within the professional and scientific community of the Italian social service. This datum confirms itself as the way to give priority both to the consolidation of training and to stimulate dialogue between professionals (Ranieri, 2020). These comparison processes can in fact give rise to both public narrative opportunities on pandemic emergency management and on support, comparison and support between colleagues, typical of communities of practice.

3. METHOD

3.1. *Research aims*

The study presented aims to question the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on social educational services and educators in Italy, to understand if and how social educational work was reorganised, with particular reference to the remodelling of educational projects, and to investigate what uses have been made of digital technology and with what benefits or criticalities.

The study starts from the following research questions on the role that technology has played in the work of the educator in the pandemic period:

- RQ1. How did the organisational and technical management of educational work change during the Covid-19 emergency period?
- RQ2. How did digital tools influence the possible reshaping of the educational project and activities carried out online during this period?

3.2. *Instrument, data collection procedure and data analysis*

To answer the research questions, an ad hoc instrument was constructed. It was first drafted by one researcher and then validated through discussion and analysis with two other researchers. It is a question-

naire with open- and closed-ended questions. More specifically, in addition to a section reserved for users socio-demographic data, the questionnaire contains 50 questions related to the status of the educational service during the first lockdown (Section 1 - 1 item) - which distinguishes between suspension, i.e. formal absence of service (Subsection 1A - 17 items), or delivery, either in remote or on-site mode (Subsection 1B - 26 items), - and to the evaluation of the experience (Section 2 - 6 items). Sections 1 and 2 were submitted to all participants, but the two conditions of suspension (1A) or delivery (1B) of the service were administered alternatively.

The questionnaire was administered online between June and July 2020 via G-Suite's Google Forms service. Data analysis was carried out with the support of the statistical software SPSS Statistics v.27. Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted for the closed-ended questions, while comments were analysed and included to contextualise and clarify the answers to the closed-ended questions.

In order to assess the status of the service during the health emergency (i.e. from March to June 2020), whether the socio-educational activity continued, albeit with the variations imposed by the health crisis, or was interrupted - a specific question was asked which conditions the continuation of the questionnaire in the relative subsection. In this study we illustrate the results of Section 1 of the questionnaire concerning the provision of services active during the lockdown, comparing the two subsections, excluding from subsection 1B the participants who continued with on-site educational services only.

3.3. *Participants*

The instrument was administered to a convenient sample reached through the snowballing technique, which is neither probabilistic nor representative of the reference population of Italian educators. The students of the first and second edition of the professional socio-pedagogical educator course at the University of Florence, a course reserved for educators already in service, were invited to participate in the research. It was further disseminated through Facebook to reach an adequate number of participants, since the researchers had many contacts among educators due to previous work and research experiences and by specifying in the questionnaire's landing page that it was to be filled in only by those professionals.

244 educators (M=65, F=179) working in the social educational field participated in the research, with an average age of 40.8 (SD=8.3; range 22-60) years. Concerning the level of education, more than 40% had an upper-secondary-school diploma, 25% had a three-year degree and 24% a master's degree, finally, a small minority (6%) had completed a postgraduate programme. Most of the participants had between 10 and 20 years of professional experience in education and social work (55%) and 30% worked in the sector for between 3 and 10 years, finally, 10% had more than 20 years of experience and only 5% of the sample had worked for less than 3 years.

The organisations for which the educators work are distributed among social cooperatives (76%), associations (11%), public organisations (5%) and other residual types, such as private companies and foundations. Although the scope of professional intervention is variously distributed across many sectors, work in schools makes up 29% of the sample and 25% in support of disability. In addition, the socio-assistance sector (10%), disadvantaged youth (10%) and parenting and family (7%) are also present to a lesser extent.

4. FINDINGS

Concerning the sample examined (N=244), half of the educators worked for services that were suspended (49%) due to the health emergency and the lockdown condition, while the other half continued to work, albeit in remote mode (21%), on-site (21%) or blended remote/on-site (9%). We examine, therefore, in order to answer the research questions, the two subsections with respectively 120 respondents for the lockdown

service and 73 for the service provided in blended or remote mode, excluding the 51 educators who continued to carry out their work exclusively on-site.

4.1. *How did the organisational and technical management of the educational work change during the Covid-19 emergency period? (RQ1)*
Service suspended

The educators who experienced the interruption of the service (N=120) also underwent a relevant change in working conditions. Indeed, for the vast majority (73%) payroll subsidies were activated, while 18% had a suspension of the current contract and 15% other different alternatives, including a reduction of working hours (3%) or the contract's conclusion (3%).

Despite the suspension of the service and the consequent changes in educators' employment conditions, communication with the users does not seem to have ceased for the majority of the educators. To the question "*Did you contact the users?*" 53.3% did so on their own initiative and 38.3% because they received external instructions, while only 10 (8.3%) answered No. In contrast, workers were contacted directly by their users in 80% of cases. The first contact was an educator's initiative in 79% of the cases and the majority of the communicative exchanges (63%) were planned and agreed upon by appointment. In 9 (8%) out of 120 cases in which the educators declared not having had any contact with the users and, during the phase of data cleaning, for two participants the answers that were not coherent with this declaration were eliminated. The video call (49%) was the most used tool to keep in touch with the users, followed by online messaging systems (21%) and phone calls (18%). SMS (3%) and email (3%) were used sporadically to communicate with users of the suspended service. In any case, the frequency of contact with beneficiaries was fairly high: half of the contacts (53%) were weekly, 17% daily and 10% monthly or fortnightly. In 3% of the cases, contacts took place more than once a day. Concerning the criticalities that emerged, the main difficulty encountered by beneficiaries in managing contacts was the ability to use the tool (27%), in addition to the availability of an internet connection by 13% and the availability of tools by 19%. Moreover, the unavailability of the family or the structure (12%), also due to problems related to work-life balance, had a non-negligible relevance.

Communication did not stop even from an organisational perspective. The majority of educators (57%) made contact with local organisations so that educational activities could be resumed, even remotely. This happened both internally, within their organisation with structure coordinators and managers, and externally, towards schools, healthcare and social services, through non-formal or institutional contacts, for example in "*working groups between different professionals*" (municipal and provincial). Teamwork and collaboration among colleagues are noted in some comments, underlining, in particular, the project dimension, declaring having been "*engaged in multiple proposals both during the closure, but also for the subsequent reopening*". Furthermore, cooperation with other professional figures continued: indeed, the vast majority (88.3%) declared having been in contact with the other professionals with whom they usually interface. The educators waiting for the service to be reactivated tried to maintain contact (73%), in addition to this, they thought of valid alternatives (28%) and actively contacted those in charge (27%). These actions, in addition to waiting for and seeking information to a lesser extent, may have been carried out simultaneously during the reporting period.

4.1.1. *Service provided in blended or remote mode*

In this segment of the sample (N=73), the educators mostly (88%) received from the organisation they worked for, public or private, indications to guarantee the remote assistance and only 12% of the workers did not receive information on how to proceed. However, regarding the technological equipment, it is noted

that only in half of the cases (51%) were the tools also provided by the organisation to make contact with users, while in the remaining half (49%) the tools used were owned by the workers themselves.

The main tool used to keep in touch with users was video calling (75%), followed by telephone calls (12%) and online messaging systems (11%). Only in one case were text messages used, while there was no use of email to deliver the service. In 45% of the cases, it was necessary to activate another service to provide the beneficiaries with the tools to connect, in particular the school (30%) and the support of informal networks (11%). For 44%, the tools were provided by the user or the structure. The equipment, however, is not the only component necessary for the providing of the service, which encountered some criticalities in its implementation. The main difficulties encountered by the users were technical, such as the ability to use the tools (38%), followed by the availability of the internet connection (22%) and the availability of the tools (8%), however, some criticalities of a socio-relational nature were also observed. Only 14% of the educators noted a lack of willingness on the part of the users to maintain contact and in 7% of the cases, the problem was the unavailability of the family or the host structure. There was a high frequency of contact with the beneficiaries of the services provided: half (49%) of the contacts were daily, 45% weekly and 6% more than once a day. In no cases were they contacted monthly or fortnightly. In 28 situations (38%), the user was unable to connect independently to use the service and the main support was given by the family (68%) or by the facility operators (13%).

The reorganisation of the service in online mode also influenced the working practices of the educators and their skills. Concerning time management and work commitment in smart working, it can be observed that 70% state that they spent more time on activities/services mediated by technology compared to on-site working, while 18% state that they spent less time on them. For the remainder, smart-working conditions did not produce any changes in the time dedicated to professional activities (12%). The majority of social educators felt very prepared (23%) or prepared (59%) to manage digital tools for working remotely. From the comments it emerges that someone already knew how to use similar digital devices and adapted immediately to the knowledge of new tools, while for others "*the acquisition of knowledge about the platforms was not easy*" and "*it took time to understand how they work*".

The participative dimension of teamwork was preserved through the use of digital tools for intra-organisational communication. In many cases (44%), the frequency of interactions with colleagues was weekly or daily (28%), sporadically it was even higher involving more than one contact per day (12%). In the comments, educators reported that "*there has been great collaboration with some colleagues who, like me, never stopped working, trying to reinvent their work despite the difficulties, others have disappeared, underestimating and rejecting this new teaching method*". In addition to the weekly planning meetings, there was a lot of contact with colleagues, not only by phone (calls and messages) but also through video calls using the Zoom, Meet and Skype platforms.

4.2. *How have digital tools influenced the remodelling of the educational project and the activities carried out online during this period? (RQ2) Service suspended*

Concerning the contacts with beneficiaries despite the interruption of the service, the educators noted above all requests to listen (54%), to carry out alternative educational activities to the suspended services (49%) and to obtain information of an educational nature (43%).

What was the request you received most from your user(s)? (up to 3 possible answers)	Frequency (N=120)	Percentage
Listening	65	54%
Implementation of alternative educational activities	59	49%
Educational information	51	43%
Support in carrying out certain tasks	33	28%
Request for help	18	15%
Administrative information	11	9%
Health information	5	4%
Other	10	8%

Table 1. Users' needs expressed during the suspension of the service.

In the participants' comments, those who mainly received requests to listen said that they mainly gave "*reassurance during the suspension period*" and encouraged activities to "*express the Covid emergency through drawings and stories*". Those who observed the need to implement alternative educational activities, proposed specific actions for people with disabilities ("*working with autistic children who attend nursery school, the requests from the family were mainly games-activities that stimulate the child like when they are at school*") and interventions carried out through exchanges of audio-visual material ("*based on activities seen in a video that I sent to the users, the users showed me how they had carried out that activity*"). The requests for educational information took the form of both questions on "*how to deal with this moment from an emotional and relational point of view*" and requests for "*discussion about the domestic management of the children's days*". Further necessities configured in a need for educational support "*in carrying out homework and using digital tools, to follow up on the DAD[1]*" and explanations about the emergency situation underway and the possible reactivation of services.

4.2.2. *Service delivered in blended or remote mode*
About three quarters (74%) of the 73 educators who provided online or mixed mode services answered that they modified the educational project and the majority (66%) shared the reasons for these changes with the beneficiaries, while others (15%) did so only partially. It emerges from the comments that the remodelling of the educational project took place mainly in terms of objectives and modes of intervention. In many cases, the educational intervention was "*configured more as a service to the family*"; in these cases, "*the projects have become monitoring of the educational situation of the families*" or "*intermediation of the parents on objectives, autonomy and learning areas*". As far as the new modes of intervention are concerned, the reference is mainly to video call tools and the creation of educational videos. If some of them continued to guarantee only instructive support, many declared having given more space to the relationship with the subjects involved in the intervention and having provided support to the families. Educators who worked intending to guarantee a didactic continuity tell above all of having "*realised playful didactic videos for children who next year will attend the first year of primary school*" or of having worked "*on didactic support*" for subjects with disabilities, always "*through the use of technological tools*". The interventions described (e.g., readings, games, didactic cards and manual activities) concern both group and individual activities. Instead, those who declared that they "*concentrated more on the aspect linked to the feelings experienced during the quarantine*", proposed above all "*activities of reflection on the situation experienced*"

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[1] In Italian, "DAD" is the acronym for distance learning at school during the pandemic period.

through interviews and informative moments provided through the video call tool.

A specific question was asked to investigate the possible influence of the mediation of technological tools on the educational relationship with the beneficiaries of the service: evaluated both as positive (52%) and to a lesser extent as negative (23%), absent (7%) or "*Don't know*" (18%) in the remaining cases. The provision of the service in the blended and remote mode seems, in the majority of situations, to have facilitated the relationship between educator and student, even though there are some critical points and also a fair margin of indecision on the implications of technological tools for the educational relationship. If some technology seemed "*to have had no impact*", there were some cases in which the negative impact was mainly linked to technical problems "*the poor connection often led to the interruption of the video lesson, affecting the quality of the service*". Another aspect that was negatively perceived was the lack of "*physical proximity*" as "*technology complements but does not replace the value and transformative energy of the relationship*". Instead, the aspect that seems to have had the most positive impact on the intervention was "*greater collaboration with families*" and that there was a "*progressive adaptation*" that led users to "*get used to it*". Another of the most relevant positive aspects is that "*some beneficiaries increased their digital skills*", in one case for example. it is reported that "*the user learned to use the tools provided with a fair degree of autonomy*" and anyway the tendency was that "*they participated showing empathy and a good degree of involvement*" in the majority of cases.

5. DISCUSSION

The restrictions due to the Covid-19 emergency entailed significant changes in the management of educational work, regarding both the organisational dimension and the type of technological equipment used for educational services. At an organisational level, two main situations emerged: on one hand, formally the services were completely interrupted, on the other hand they were reshaped to provide assistance from a distance. In particular, the results of current research show that only half of the educators involved in the research remained active during the lockdown period, with a relevant number of beneficiaries who did not receive any assistance. In this regard, it can be noted that data from our study are consistent with the figures reported in the Save the Children study on educational poverty (Save the Children, 2020), pointing out the low level of attention received by the sector of socio-educational services in terms of policies outlined to face the emergency. However, despite the formal interruption of services, it is interesting to note how the communication between the educators and beneficiaries did not stop. Of course, the continuity in communication is less than a true, fully-delivered educational offer. Nevertheless, a kind of non-formal organisation supporting beneficiaries was built routing on the same identity of the professional figure of educators, which is centred on the educational relationship (Bertolini & Caronia, 2015; Boffo, 2020; Rossi, 2020; Striano, 2010; Tramma, 2018). We can perceive this non-formal organisation as a relational canvas, able to resist the emergency, giving evidence of its strength, wealth and its capacity of taking care. And yet, it is clear that without proper measures of support, the "educational damage" generated by the interruption of formal services will remain a loss, and the wealth of non-formal human relationships will give way to the material poverty of an under evaluated and impoverished working context.

Where the socio-educational and assistive services were not interrupted, they were redefined and adapted, even with the support of digital technology, which allowed educators to maintain and cultivate the educational relationship with their beneficiaries, mitigating the sense of abandonment and social isolation.

New positive forms of communication were established with the territory and families by the mediation of digital technologies, which became the bridge between the inside and the outside, between the educator's home and the homes of beneficiaries, between the seat of the services and the main offices. With this regard,

Rivoltella (2017) talks about technologies of communities, that are as bridges enabling connections and social synthesis, tools for building common spaces to meet other people and share resources and stories: a sort of socio-technical infrastructure for "onlife social work" (Pasta & Rondonotti, 2020).

Looking at the world of socio-educational services from this point of view, we may affirm that technologies played the role of linking rather than dividing and contained rather than increased the social marginalisation of users. In the debate on schools and digital technologies, during the lockdown, the image of a dehumanised technology, penalising the educational relationship, prevailed. Despite the importance of direct relationships, we need to recognise that without technologies it would not have been possible to maintain any contact and the absence of contacts in difficult situations can generate even more dramatic effects than a decrease in scholastic achievements. If, in general, the delivery of the service in a different modality raised disorientation, its continuation generated relief for many beneficiaries. The relief seems to be accompanied by the image of a safe anchor so as not to fall into invisibility. In the context of a strong discomfort, the technologies of communities can become tools of being, from a beneficiary's perspective, or tools of caring, from the perspective of educators. In some cases, digital technologies were essential devices for integration. However, in other cases the compensatory and integrative function of technologies did not work. Therefore, it should be further explored whether the partial or complete failure is due to the technologies themselves or to other factors, from the lack of infrastructure to digital unpreparedness, from the absence of practical and methodological knowledge to the distance of socio-educational services from the digital culture. The best practices of management of the educational relationship through technologies can become methodologies to establish a lasting smart welfare perspective (Petrella, 2020). According to international data, (Crawford, 2021) social workers have played an important role, also in Italy, by making healthcare accessible for all who need it, while continuing to fight for social justice in all realms of public safety. It is imperative to take into account the increased levels of anxiety and stress among educators, working in such conditions (Martínez-López, Lázaro-Pérez, & Gómez-Galán, 2021). Furthermore, it is of the utmost importance to take into consideration the personal needs expressed directly by the educators themselves (Carpenter, Krutka, & Kimmons, 2020). Emotional exhaustion can lead social workers to borderline situations that can cause work-related psycho-social illnesses.

These observations lead to the introduction of a further element of reflection on the educator's competences. As noted, either in case of interruption or in case of reshaped services through a blended or remote mode, communication with users never stopped for the majority of educators. In both cases, the most used tool for smart working was the video call, with the phone in many cases. This datum appears particularly significant because it highlights two aspects. Firstly, the poor availability of technological devices for educational work and, likely, the low level of digital competence among educators, where this competence is meant as something more than a basic technical skill. A more complex understanding of the notion of digital competence is included in the Digital Competence Framework for Educators (Redecker, 2017). And yet, this framework outlines a series of competences that are related to the school context and the teacher's needs, while only partially does it intercept the needs of social educators, who work between formal and non-formal contexts.

Secondly, there emerges the importance of avoiding the interruption of aid relationships and therefore ensuring continuity, even remotely, according to appropriate professional forms. This leads to a reflection on the relevance of digital competence in the educational professions, despite the educator's work usually being associated with direct relationships as the opposite of "cold" technologies. From this point of view, more work should be done to define specific educational frameworks of digital competence for social work, even to improve the way in which this profession is framed. As observed in other studies (Ranieri, 2020), looking at the new challenges of the digital world, the educational professions need to be rethought in the

light of benefits for users and professionals, otherwise there will be the risk of relegating this profession to the margins of the world of work. This does not imply that we can delegate care to the machine: "*Digitally rethinking the profession does not lead to a loss of responsibility: decisions and actions still remain the main prerogative of educators. But we need to take into consideration the current changes looking at both risks and opportunities, and adopt the new tools for designing, managing and evaluating socio-educational interventions*" (Ranieri, 2020, p. 8).

6. CONCLUSIONS

The measures adopted during the Covid-19 emergency have impacted on our societies with effects that are still difficult to estimate, since they involve different contexts and actors, at different levels. Nevertheless, studies have soon started to explore the phenomenon in its different facets. In the educational field, the school has been the most investigated subject, followed by higher education, while there is a lack of research on socio-educational services. This study provides a snapshot on the Covid-19 influence on socio-educational services, particularly focusing on the changes related to the management of the educational work and on the impact of digital tools on the redesign of the educational projects and implemented activities.

Despite the challenges and the initial disorientation, when the socio-educational services were not interrupted, several benefits were generated for the users, indicating how technologies can be an important tool of integration for the continuity of educational relations, even in socio-educational and assistive contexts. Educators were generally favourable towards new emerging scenarios. However, a better appreciation of this professional figure appears to be necessary, even in terms of investments in training - particularly referring to the theme of digital competence - and infrastructures, as a measure to face the long-term effects of the emergency.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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