



# PEDAGOGIA PIÙ DIDATTICA

## Teorie e pratiche educative

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## Contesti sociali dell'educazione

# Il ruolo delle TIC nella comunicazione scuola-famiglia e il coinvolgimento genitoriale nella scolarizzazione dei figli: i dati di una ricerca

*Alessandra Gigli*

Ricercatrice in Pedagogia Generale e Sociale

*Autore per la corrispondenza*

Alessandra Gigli

Università di Bologna, Via Filippo Re 6, 40126, Bologna

[a.gigli@unibo.it](mailto:a.gigli@unibo.it)

### Riassunto

Il lavoro presenta una ricerca finalizzata a conoscere il punto di vista dei genitori italiani sul potenziale ruolo delle TIC nella comunicazione scuola-famiglia. In particolare, ai 302 genitori (campione su scala nazionale) che hanno risposto al questionario, sono state poste domande sugli strumenti di comunicazione telematica predisposti dalle scuole, sulla percezione della disponibilità degli insegnanti a comunicare con le famiglie, sui bisogni dei genitori per migliorare la loro relazione con gli insegnanti. I risultati mostrano che la maggior parte dei genitori ritiene gli insegnanti molto disponibili. Si ha la conferma che la relazione scuola-famiglia possa essere sostenuta da una comunicazione efficace che, però, deve essere prevalentemente «faccia a faccia». Le TIC sono ritenute utili soprattutto per ottenere informazioni, ma non possono sostituire la relazione di persona.

### Parole chiave:

Tecnologie dell'informazione e della comunicazione, Comunicazione scuola-famiglia, Alleanza educativa genitori-insegnanti.

## Introduction

The theme of the educational alliance between schools and families has long been at the centre of attention in the pedagogical field. In previous works (Gigli, 2007; 2012; 2017) the focus was on defining the theoretical and methodological coordinates of this complex, and in some ways controversial, relationship, in other ways defined as collaboration/cooperation school-family or co-education. Deepening the knowledge of this very important part of the educational work concerning the relationship with parents, which involves both teachers in schools and the educational staff of the pre-school services, in recent years a new variable has emerged with force to be considered: the new communication technologies (ICT) and their impact in the dynamics of exchange and information between teachers and parents.

In our country, as we will also see in the literature review, the phenomenon takes on peculiar characteristics, compared to other contexts, and research in pedagogy has not yet produced many studies or collected significant data.

The present work stems from the need to better understand the impact of ICT on the school-family relationship and is part of a wider research called *Parents and ICT: how new communication technologies influence parenting styles and the educational alliance*,<sup>[1]</sup> which is the result of teamwork within the Centre for Educational Studies on Children and Families of the Department of Education Sciences of the University of Bologna.<sup>[2]</sup> The subject of this work, therefore, is the



ABBONATI ALLA RIVISTA

CODICE ETICO

LA RIVISTA È SOGGETTA A UNA PROCEDURA DI REFERAGGIO IN DOPPIO CIECO COORDINATA DA BERTA MARTINI ED È INDICIZZATA NEL DATABASE GENAMICS JOURNAL SEEK. RISULTA INOLTRE TRA GLI ELENCHI AGGIORNATI DELLE RIVISTE DI CLASSE A, SECONDO LA CLASSIFICAZIONE ANVUR

segment aimed both at knowing the tools of telematic communication provided by schools to communicate with families, and the opinions of parents on certain areas such as:

- the willingness of educational staff and teachers to communicate with families both through face-to-face and ICT;
- the importance given to the willingness of school staff to communicate with the various possibilities (sms, chat, blog, forum, email);
- the communicative behaviour of parents, and the possible use of ICT, in complex situations.

## Literature review

### *International*

At the international level, the use of ICT in school/family communications has developed considerably in recent decades, as evidenced by the number of studies and researches dedicated to them.

The basic, universally shared belief is that cooperation with parents can develop mainly through good communication; consequently, in the age of telematic communication, many argue that ICT can facilitate school/family communication.

The effects of parental involvement in children's school or pre-school careers, in terms of benefits on performance, behaviour and socialisation, are well known (Cary, 2006; Chen, Yu e Chang, 2007; McKay, Atkins, Hawkins, Brown e Lynn, 2003; Epstein, 1991).

But parental involvement is not always easy to attain and school staff often find themselves in difficulty (Epstein e Sanders, 2006; Howland, Anderson, Smiley e Abbott, 2006).

Frequent communication with parents helps to strengthen students' learning at home, fosters greater parental interest and involvement in school activities, promote more positive attitudes of students towards school and learning and raises parents' expectations and educational aspirations for their children (Joshi, Eberly e Konzal, 2005). Open, clear, welcoming and effective communication can serve as a relational glue that helps to bring together parents, teachers, headmasters and support staff in the pursuit of shared goals, promotes high expectations for the development of all children or helps both sides to address any concerns, disagreements or conflicts in a productive and beneficial way (Joshi, Eberly e Konzal, 2005; Thompson e Raikes, 2007).

Providing parents with access to their children's grades, information on homework or personalized suggestions from teachers on how to facilitate learning has proven to be an effective way to improve the involvement of minorities or socially disadvantaged people as well (Bergman, 2014).

There is no shortage of specific studies and reflections on the criticality of the use of ICT in communication at school. As already mentioned, one of the main drawbacks is that the accessibility of technologies by all families is not guaranteed, nor taken for granted. Moreover, the digital divide is still relevant even in Western contexts; linguistic minorities in high immigration contexts can be penalized: it must be admitted that the socio-demographic differences of parents affect their possibility of involvement in communication initiatives mediated by technologies (Shin e Seger, 2016) and this aspect can disadvantage pupils coming from families or from complex social contexts.

In light of these critical issues, some projects have been implemented to facilitate access to and use of technologies by parents: in some contexts with high migratory densities, for example, some schools have been equipped to send messages in three different languages (Heath, Maghrabi e Carr, 2015). In order for the use of ICT to be truly inclusive and effective for parental involvement, therefore, investments of energy and funds are needed to implement practices adapted to the needs of local communities (Shaw e Shaw, 1998; Clark, 2005; Lee e Bowen, 2006; Sanders, 2003; Servon e Nelson, 2001).

In general, however, the interest of researchers was mainly focused on: investigating the quality of communication between teachers and parents through ICT; measuring the effectiveness of some practices; defining the communication preferences of parents and the skills needed by teachers for the new communication scenario.

To better understand how communication exchanges take place, for example, Thompson and Mazer (2012) have developed a model for measuring the frequency of parent-teacher communication (PASS). According to this model, this can be divided into five main thematic areas: school performance, classroom behaviour, preparation, hostile peer interactions and pupil health. In particular, for each thematic area there would be more effective ways and channels of communication than others: by asking parents to indicate which communication tools they prefer, for example, in some research results, email is considered useful and convenient by the majority of parents (Thompson, Mazer e Flood Grady, 2015) because they are forms of asynchronous communication that can therefore be managed more comfortably. These analyses also show that parents feel they are more likely to receive a timely response by email than by synchronous means (FTF and telephone), which are more difficult to organise as both partner must be present simultaneously.

On the other hand, other research that has defined effective communication as clear, empathetic, cohesive and with active listening (Sharma e Sharma, 2014), indicates that forms of informal communication, such as those typical of instant messaging, can be more effective in developing a relationship of trust between teachers and parents.

An interesting picture emerges from a survey carried out in the United States by Christmas and Lubniewsky (2018). The research surveyed a group of 24 families (not very large in fact) asking them about preferences and communication habits

between parents and teachers and revealing that for the majority of parents surveyed the most frequent topics are related to the situation in the classroom (34%) and the educational performance of children (24%). The survey also shows that the communication tools preferred by parents are emails (76%) while only 8% prefer phone calls, text messages, or other. In addition, the family perception of teachers' accessibility through technology has shown that 72% of the families who participated in this study think that the teacher is accessible through technology. Many, however, express a desire to have face-to-face communications with teachers, also because technology mediated communications can be a source of misunderstandings, as well as requiring time and immediacy of responses that are often difficult to find.

#### *In Italy*

The already analysed diffusion of electronic communication tools in the daily life of Italian families and the habit of communicating in real time in many areas of existence, including the workplace, is not confirmed, in our country, as regards to the relationship between teachers and parents.

It is important to underline that in the Italian school and pre-school sector, the majority of public educational institutions have not set up operational tools or adoption plans for this type of communication.

The reasons for this attitude can be attributed to many factors that can be linked to two macro-categories: the first concerns the pedagogical/educational dimension; the second concerns the organisational and management aspects and directly affects the specific functions of teachers.

The most widespread theoretical approach, and supported by a large part of the pedagogical panorama, is that the aim of implementing an optimal communication with families does not go beyond a small part (the one related to the exchange of information) through the use of technologies, but can be achieved above all through direct and personal exchange (face-to-face communication).

From this point of view, teacher's communication skills should be supported and strengthened in order to foster effective communication, which could become more empathic and able to encourage relationships based on mutual trust and shared educational objectives.

The use of technology by teachers for voice or written communication (sms, chat, video calls) with families is not encouraged at all (in some cases the school management has even prohibited this type of exchange), except for the use of email and the electronic register.

In the absence of significant data or studies to monitor this phenomenon, the recent news gives us a scenario in which, for example, chat between parents and teachers for three kindergartens have been expressly prohibited by the municipal authorities. This decision also concerns the vast majority of pre-school educational services and schools of all levels and places throughout the country. In general, it is not considered convenient or profitable, either from a relational or an organisational point of view, for teachers to provide personal numbers or to communicate through social applications with parents. Moreover, in Italy, the teaching staff has not been provided with any tool, practical or theoretical, to deal with this new task in a prepared, recognized and professional way.

There is a difference in the subject concerning the use of the electronic register: Decree-Law no. 95/2012[3] introduced its use since 2012, but the legislation does not provide for mandatory use. This decree declared the intention to dematerialize administrative procedures in the field of education, university and research and relations with the communities of teachers, staff, students and families; however, in the past six years, this plan has not yet been implemented. Currently, in the absence of specific equipment and training, schools decide to adopt the electronic register on a «local basis», or rather by decision of the teaching staff. According to the law, no teacher can be obliged to use their own tools for the compilation of school documents.

Legal problems have also arisen with regard to both compliance with the privacy rules and the problem of real-time compilation, since the law provides that, since the compilation of the register is a public act, those who compile the register at different times risk being convicted of material forgery or ideological forgery.

On the ICT adoption front in the school/family communication, the Italian scenario therefore appears rather complex.

Much clearer and more consolidated among teachers and managers is the conviction that the synergy of intentions and practices between school and family (Contini, 2012) can facilitate, amplify and support the growth path of children. Evidence of the dissemination of the objective of school/family cooperation can be found in almost all educational projects or in the training plans of schools of all levels.

This theme has been analysed by numerous studies and research carried out in the pedagogical field dedicated to monitoring the state of the art of this complex relationship (teachers/parents), to detect the critical issues and prefigure scenarios of resolution from both a theoretical and methodological point of view (Gigli, 2007; 2012; 2017; Contini, 2012; Daffi, 2006; La Marca, 2005; Bartolomeo, 2004; Levorato e Levorato, 2001). For about a decade in some Italian universities, although not in an organic way, the university training of educational staff has included these aspects and much has been invested locally in the training of staff in service.

Even in the absence of systemic surveys, we can say that almost everywhere in Italy, spaces are sought for dialogue and opportunities to meet with parents, projects are activated to improve communication school-family, there are counseling

desks and guarantors of the rights of children and their families, the staff is prepared to accommodate the requests of parents.

Not infrequently, however, there are problematic phenomena (such as conflicts between teachers and parents, misunderstandings, etc.). The pedagogical orientations in this sense insist on defining the relationship between teachers and parents as something more than an information flow: passing through a good communication, the educational alliance is configured as a sharing of intentions and actions to arrive together at a common goal, namely the welfare and educational progress of children/pupils.

Configuring itself as a cooperative relationship, it requires a precise awareness of the roles and their boundaries, mutual trust in the capacity of the other to perform his specific functions, a robustness of principles and tolerance for diversity.

Sometimes the conditions necessary for the alliance are lacking for various reasons due to deficiencies in the system (organizational or relational), lack of skills, wrong expectations, ignorance, defensive/aggressive attitude on the part of one or both of the partner subjects (Contini, 2012).

Despite some signs of «dis-alliance», many parents turn to teachers for solutions to problems or suggestions and advice: they seek dialogue, contact, support even for extracurricular issues (Gigli, 2017). It seems that parents and teachers have an ambivalent relationship, oscillating between two extreme poles of mistrust/reliance.

The pedagogical environment questions the potential facilitating role of ICT in improving school/family communication, but there is a need to research and collect data while preserving the complexity of this issue.

## Research

### *Survey tool and methodology*

The online survey was carried out between April 2017 and October 2017 using a questionnaire on Google Drive. The part of the questionnaire used in this report (excluding the personal data part)[4] is made up of 8 questions, 5 of which are closed-ended and 3 open-ended, divided into the following items:

- communication tools developed by the school;
- perception of the willingness of teachers to communicate with the families and through which modalities;
- parents' points of view on the use of ICT in communication with teachers;
- what parents would need to improve in their relationship with teachers;
- which communicative tools parents prefer in complex situations such as some form of child distress due to school life, difficulty in understanding homework delivery, or the suspicion that a teacher does not behave as he should with children, or the fear that he is not sufficiently attentive and effective at the educational level.

Quantitative data were analysed with SPSS. For all the statistical tests (correlation, regression and Chi-frame), a standard (alpha level) significance level of ,05 was set, operating a binary logistic regression to identify possible predictors of PWG among the socio-demographic variables: gender of the parent, age, family structure, education, work status, characteristics of the children (number, age, and school level).

For the only open-ended question, which wanted to enrich the qualitative data with suggestions, instead, we opted for a categorization based on the content of short texts (maximum 5 lines) given by the parents.

### *The sample*

We used a convenience sample (achieved through WhatsApp chat groups, Facebook groups, and word of mouth) consisting of 302 questionnaires used for statistical and qualitative processing.

The sample is mostly made up of mothers (85%), and is mainly made up of people living in pairs (86%), workers (89%) with a high level of education (70% have a degree; 27,5% have a high school diploma). Few cases of parents under 30: the majority (48%) of respondents are between 41 and 50 years old, 38,7% are between 30 and 40 years old, 12,3% are between 51 and 60 years old. The answers came mainly from Northern Italy (67,6%), 23% from the Centre and only 8,7% from the South.

The average number of children per family is 2 and, for the purposes of the research, it was decided to consider only the age of the first child, in relation to his attendance at school:

32% of the first children are over 13 years old; 20,5% are 4-6 years old; 18,2% are 7-9 years old; 15,6% are 0-3 years old; 13,6% are 10-12 years old.

The majority of the first children attend primary school (30,5%), 19,2% secondary school (second level), 17,2% are in kindergarten, 14,9% in secondary school (first level), 10,3% in crèche, 4,6% are at university or have finished their schooling, 3,3% have not yet begun the process at the time of compilation (Demozzi, Gigli e Cino, 2019).

**Data from the survey**

Let's proceed with the presentation of the survey data question by question.

Question: *Which telematic communication tools has your school set up?*

In the list of possible answers to the question on telematic communication tools, the most selected was the electronic register, but not to the extent that could be assumed because it does not exceed the answers of a third of respondents. In particular, it is absent from nursery and kindergarten but chosen by 34% of parents of secondary school children (first level), by 31% of secondary school (second level), by 32% of primary school.

Question: *How willing are your eldest child's teachers to communicate with families in the following ways?*

According to 94,7% of the sample's parents, the teachers are quite/very willing to communicate in person interviews, without particular variations by geographical area and municipality of residence.

The willingness to communicate with technological means of communication, on the other hand, is diametrically opposed:

- willingness to communicate by phone (personal number): the average number of answers «available» is 70%; at intersections by school grade the most available are those of primary school 38%, followed by those of kindergarten 37,3% and those of secondary school 24%;
- willingness to communicate by text message to the personal number: the general average indicates that 74,5% of the teachers are «barely available» (the most available are those of primary school 35,9%);
- willingness to communicate by email: the response «just/nil» available totals 66,9%, only in primary school the figure of «availability quite a lot» reaches 44,6% (doubling the other grades);
- willingness to communicate in teacher-managed chats: 90,4% are «not available» to communicate and manage chats with parents;
- willingness to communicate in chat rooms run by parents: 90,4% is «not available» but among the available 16% is located in Southern Italy (double the figure for central and Northern Italy), 13,3% in secondary school, 12% in kindergartens, only 5,4% in primary school;
- willingness to communicate in Facebook groups: according to the parents of the sample, 95,7 of the teachers are «not available»; the few available are located in the South (12%) and mainly in the crèche or kindergarten (6%).

Question: *What importance do you attach to the willingness of teachers to communicate in chat with parents?*

The most frequent agreed responses are at secondary school level. In particular, in the 0-3 age group, 19,9% believe that it is quite/very important; in the 3-6 age group, 22,3% believe that it is important; in the primary school group, 25,3% believe that it is important; in the secondary school group, 26,2% believe that it is important. In general, the majority of these responses are located in the South twice as much as in the Centre or North (e.g. at secondary school: South 45,5%, Centre 26,9%; North 23%).

Question: *I don't think it's right for teachers to give their parents their personal phone number.*

75% are very much in agreement (South 66,7%; Centre 80%; North 75%).

Question: *Would you like more meetings in person with teachers?*

80% express this willingness by being quite/very much in agreement.

Question: *What other opinions, if any, do you have regarding school/family communication?*

This question provided for open and facultative answers. Only 39 parents expressed their views and their responses were grouped through a conceptual analysis into 4 different categories: critical positions; satisfaction; comparison of face-to-face communication and ICT.

– Critical positions with current school/family communication patterns: 11 responses (almost one third of the total) express criticality, for example:

The school doesn't want dialogue, just exchange of information.

Communication does not exist except in performance talks and there is no willingness to talk about anything other than the program. All aspects of relationships within the classroom are not considered or managed until you get to ask for the intervention of a psychologist. We need less formal, more personal growth-focused relationships.

Some answers complain of a progressive lack of communication going up in the school grades: from a maximum of competent and daily communication of the early education school (also favoured by the daily contact) to a minimum and

formal communication of the secondary school. Here's an example:

Up to kindergarten I perceived my daughters in a group and I clearly felt that the teachers were those who gave me back the image of my daughters within the community, while respecting their individuality. It was not uncommon to find a real support to parenting, especially in the years of the crèche. I feel that this educational closeness is loosening as my daughters progress along their path.

– Responses that express satisfaction with the good functioning of the communication: 7 out of 39 responses. We confirm our satisfaction with the availability and openness of the communication, especially with regard to the possibility of meeting face-to-face both in individual interviews and in brief daily exchanges. Some examples of these answers:

See you every day. If I have something to ask, I say it out loud. If I put it in writing, it's for serious misconduct.

The ways I experiment with my children's teachers seem to me to be very good, since they are based on a great willingness to talk in person, which I prefer, and not at all through telematic ways.

– Answers comparing communication with technological means and meetings in person: 17 out of 39 (43,5%) answers express the conviction that more communication is needed in person because it cannot be replaced by ICT (in line with what has already been expressed by the vast majority of the sample). Here are some examples of answers:

IT tools can be a communication channel, but not the only one, and above all not the priority one.

Other means are only more comfortable for the parents but completely distort the function of the interview. In an interview there are gestures, tones of voice and body postures that can't be in a message or an email.

*Question: If your child is experiencing some form of discomfort due to school life, but you cannot understand what it is about, what is the first action you take after perhaps having discussed it with him/her?*

Of a total respondents, 41% chose to search for a personal interview with teachers, 32% decided to write an email to the teacher, only 9% asked for advice from other parents. The other options («I ask for an interview with the listening desk at school»; «I talk about it with trusted friends»; «I look for a direct comparison with other parents»; «I telephone the teacher»; «I ask my expert»; «I ask the group/chat of class parents»; «I talk about it with some family members») have been chosen with percentages from 0 to 5%.

If we analyse the answers with the variable of the children's school grade, we observe that the direct comparison with the teacher is sought more when the children attend kindergarten (93%) and the crèche (69%). The exchange of information between parents, on the other hand, is more frequent at the secondary level (19%) and at the primary level (17%). Finally, writing to the teacher is a more common practice from primary (50%) to secondary level (56%).

*Question (Primary and secondary only): If you suspect that a teacher is not behaving as he/she should with the children, or you fear that he is not careful enough, or you think he/she is not very effective at a didactic level, what is the first action you take?*

The 113 answers are distributed as follows: 32% write to the teacher for a direct interview; 29% ask other parents for information by phone or message; 27% try to talk in person with the teacher directly at school; 12% ask the group/chat of class parents if any other parent shares my concerns.

## Conclusions

Considering the particularity of the Italian situation, the answers given by the parents of the sample confirm that the relationship with teachers can be supported by an effective communication that, however, passes and must continue to pass mainly through interactive face-to-face exchanges.

ICT are considered useful above all for obtaining information, but they cannot replace the personal relationship. Parents' perception is that teachers are very willing to meet them and that the email tool is sufficiently effective for all information exchanges with teachers. There is no desire on the part of mothers and fathers to use other forms of simultaneous communication, nor is it believed that teachers would be available.

The electronic register tool is less widely used than expected, accounting for just over a third of the responses of parents with school-age children.

The answers to the open questions also show the habit of Italian families to use in-person communication to manage complex situations (difficulties, doubts, misunderstandings, etc.). Again, there is a need for more opportunities to meet with teachers.

Moreover, Italian parents are already quite connected and engaged in communication activities ties (Gigli, Demozzi e Pina-Castillo, 2019; Demozzi, Gigli e Cino, 2019) via ICT (chat, parental groups, social groups, etc.) for the management of school and extracurricular activities of children. It can be assumed that relations with the school and its representatives want to be kept out of this excess of daily connection.

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[1] Participants in the research: A. Gigli and S. Demozzi (conception, administration, coordination, analysis of results, reports), D. Cino (statistical processing, analysis of results, reports), M. Scarpini (consultancy and conception), R. D'Ugo (consultancy for drafting questionnaire).

[2] For more information <https://centri.unibo.it/> (consultato il 9 ottobre 2019).

[3] D.L. 95/2012 related to: Agenda Digitale, DPR n.122/2009; D.Lgs.n.62/2017.

[4] The research was carried out ensuring anonymity, no sensitive data were requested, and was built ensuring privacy and ethical standards according to the guidelines of the Italian Data Protection Regulation GDPR 2016/679.

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