

STUDENTS WITH NO SCHOOL: AN INTERVIEW WITH A GROUP OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

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SUMMARY

The sudden and prolonged closure of schools due to the outbreak of the pandemic last spring has created, especially in adolescents, disorientation and discomfort, more than they themselves would have imagined. This article presents reflections and testimonies about that first dramatic phase.

Key words: school - students - lockdown - Bergamo

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Starting from Wednesday 26th February 2020, due to the rapid spread of the Coronavirus, all levels of schools in Lombardy were closed. This closure would have been irreversible: that is, no pupil could return to school until the following September, from the smallest to the oldest. Only the students of the secondary fifth grade would have returned to their Institute before the summer break: on the day of the oral exam of the State Exam (moreover, this was the only test, as established by the Minister of Education, given the exceptional nature of the situation).

For all the others, the return to school took place on September 14, 2020, with masks and social distancing, but the 2020-2021 school year proved to be anything but quiet.

A few months at school alternated with prolonged periods of lockdown, characterized by remote lessons for all school orders, but for secondary schools the daily attendance of students at lessons no longer occurred, instead there was curfew, interruption of sports activities, and closure of gyms, cinemas, clubs and every place of healthy leisure.

During autumn 2020, I wanted to interview the two representatives of the Provincial Student Council (institutional body representing secondary school students) of Bergamo town. This town had been the most tragically affected by the pandemic – attending the fourth class of the Human Sciences High School "Paolina Secco Suardo", in order to be able to gather their testimonies linked to such a dramatic period, but also to understand concretely the difficulties of everyone.

It is not difficult to imagine how the fact that has united everyone, beyond the single pain for the loss of loved ones, has been the lack of social contacts, but above all of the school.

The school, which has always been an ambivalent object of love/hate for students of all times, had unexpectedly become what filled life, that gave meaning to one's days, something whose absence now provided a deep emptiness.

- Why did the lack of face-to-face school cause so much disorientation in students? (Student's answers in Italics)

Because it made aware what school is: a place not only dedicated to the transmission of knowledge, but a place to cultivate relationships and develop one's own personality. D.A.D. (distance learning) had caused the students to feel the most human part of the school. And this is a component that is often forgotten.

During the quarantine period we had to get used to a new way of doing school, through online platforms. It was very tiring to get used to, first of all because of the difficulty of use and the problems of connection, and then because of the absence of true relationships and comparison with our peers. We also had a hard time staying focused and attentive, understanding explanations, being interested and motivated. Without the "physical" school, we could not learn well. The real school is relationship, dialogue, comparison, interest, concentration. We were constantly distracted by the surrounding home environment and could not support each other.

- What discomfort did you feel most strongly during the first wave of the epidemic?

The first lockdown brought with it a "great void". The cancellation of social relationships, except for those filtered by screens, was truly surreal and alienating. This "great void" also resulted from the suspension of sports activities, which in the lives of many adolescents occupy a very important role. The lack of these two components gave rise to empty afternoons, characterized by boredom.

Due to the Covid-19 epidemic, we were forced to spend several months in prison at home, away from the people we were most attached to. In order not to go crazy, we also dedicated ourselves to manual activities and we engaged in housework. It was psychologically very tiring never to be able to go out to let off steam, walk or play sports; even losing or seeing loved ones we were fond of suffering was very difficult. It was very sad not

to be able to see our grandparents for so many months, and also difficult to stay 24 hours a day in the same home with family members. Unfortunately, quarrels have increased, even for trivial reasons, due to forced cohabitation. That period has left an indelible mark on us.

- How has everyday life changed during the first wave of the pandemic?

Especially the school experience was completely unexpected and difficult to assimilate. It was all new and stressful: entering codes, connecting, not having direct relationships but divided by a screen. It was not easy to coexist the high emotional stress with the attention to the lessons. Weak connections, sad thoughts, worse and worse news from the media, low mood on the ground, not being able to leave the houses, the sound of ambulances rumbling in the ears: this mix of elements and emotions created discouragement and turmoil. The days were monotonous, nothing ever changed and there was no way for improvement. But despite all the difficulties, DAD kept the students busy; hearing the encouragement of professors and classmates made one breathe a sigh of relief. Friendship, mutual help, altruism and union have given us the strength to avoid situations of total discouragement and provided hope.

It was necessary to find new ways to meet friends and relatives that we could not see in person. We used video calls to be in company, have a snack together and give ourselves strength to face that difficult period. Unfortunately we had to forget about Saturday night outings, entertainment and laughter.

- Have you got to know guys who have had depressive experience and/or anxious symptoms during that time?

The stories of some students were characterized by mourning, others by feeling alone and "suffocated". In addition, the common denominators of many responses have been boredom and distrust about the future and the institution closest to us, the school, which in fact is recording a significant drop-out rate.

During the lockdown many teenagers didn't feel the need to maintain friendships and relationships, even at a distance. They were fine alone, at home. When it was possible to go out again, they were not happy and didn't want to hang out with anyone. They have suffered a lot and would no longer be able to withstand further lockdowns.

- Have you heard of peers who, because of the difficulties experienced, have adopted risky behaviors?

Situations of inner discomfort, which can already be faced with difficulty before the quarantine, were managed with great difficulty during the lockdown, all under the inevitable gaze of the continuous forced coexistence with their family members, which deprived teenagers of the intimate sphere and condemned them to repress their malaise. For this reason, often the discomfort has been experienced in a "clandestine" way, causing additional stress that in some cases has translated into self-harm.

To be equally worrying are the long-term effects: in the delicate path of growth, any event has a lasting effect over time and everyone will carry with them the weight of this experience.

In November 2020, during the period of the closure of secondary schools in Italy, eight specialists (pedagogists, psychologists and university teachers) wrote a document entitled "School is health", in which they underline the essential role of the school as a learning community, a place of meeting and growth for children and young people, reiterating the need to keep schools open. "School is a physical presence: bodies are an irreplaceable vehicle for learning, communication and exchange. School is an encounter: the relationship for young people is the only antidote to existential alienation." In addition, according to the signatories, "the experience of the months in lockdown has clearly shown that distance learning is not a real school: it is a seriously reductive surrogate for face-to-face teaching". Again: "isolation and distance learning are a dangerous condition for the mental health of students who are in a serious risk of depressive and social withdrawal". "School is indispensable. Let's keep schools open!" (Novara et al. 2020).

In May 2021 I prepared, together with a small number of students of "Paolina Secco Suardo" High School in Bergamo, a questionnaire to be submitted to all the students of Bergamo's secondary schools, in order to touch the emotional situation of adolescents following the long and repeated periods of closure. Overall, 2,254 students (21% of first class, 26% of second class, 19% of third, 19% of fourth and 14% of fifth) (Figure 1), of which mostly girls (73%) responded (Figure 2).

Students were asked 29 questions through a questionnaire on Forms Office, which investigated the changes in everyday life, social life and family climate as a result of the pandemic, regarding the impact of distance learning, the concerns of contracting Sars-Cov2 disease and the anxiety and psychic discomforts generated by it.

Daily life has changed little or nothing only in 37% of cases (Figure 3), just as for only 19% of students there were no increases in tensions in the family during the periods of emergency (Figure 4). Technology in schools

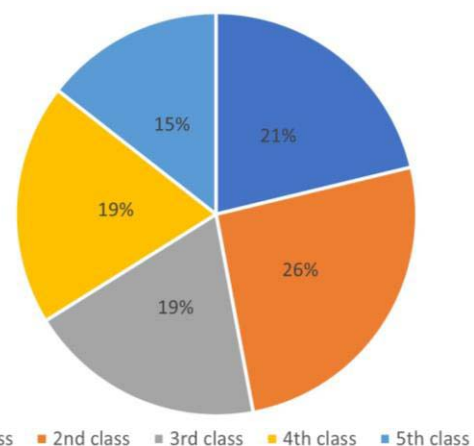


Figure 1. What class do you frequent?

is considered a great resource (57%) (Figure 5), however distance lessons negatively affected attention, concentration and participation for the vast majority (94%) of students (Figure 6).

17% say they are not at all worried about contracting Covid-19 and 43% are not worried (Figure 7), but in any case the pandemic situation has created a high level of stress in 74% of cases (Figure 8) and also

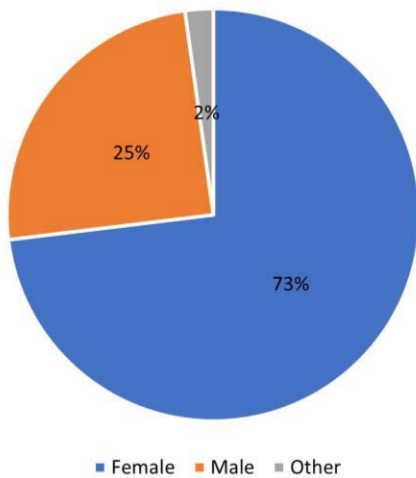


Figure 2. Gender

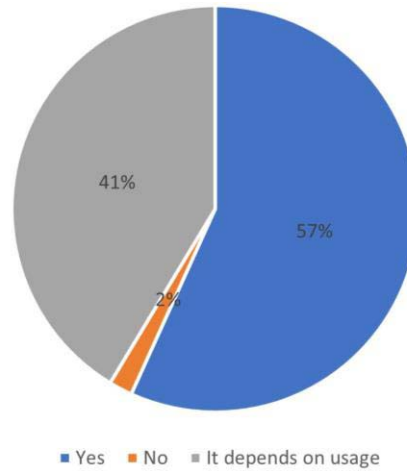


Figure 5. Do you think that technology in schools is a resource?

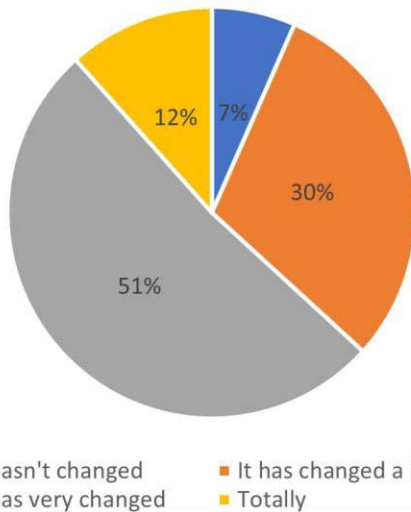


Figure 3. How much has the management of everyday life changed in this period?

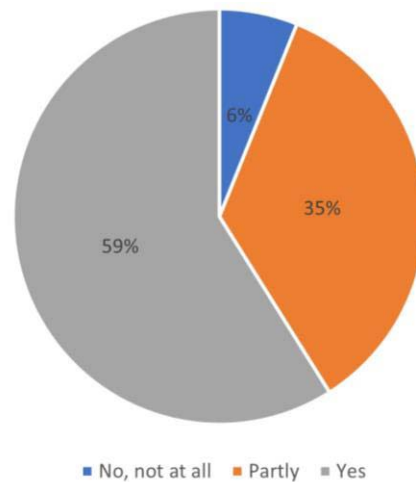


Figure 6. Do you think DAD has affected your attention and participation in the lessons?

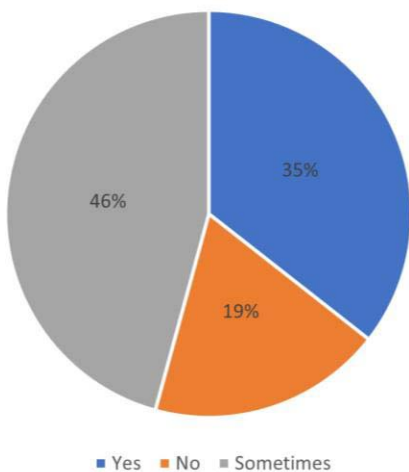


Figure 4. Have there been any increases in tensions in the family during this emergency period?

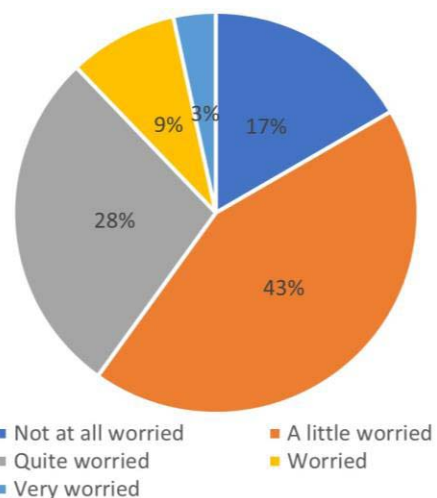


Figure 7. How worried are you about contracting Covid-19?

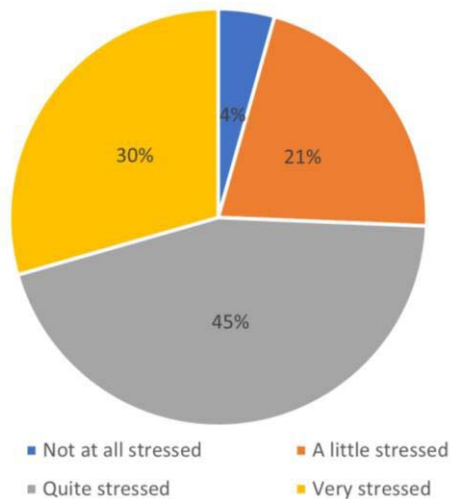


Figure 8. How stressed do you feel about this situation?

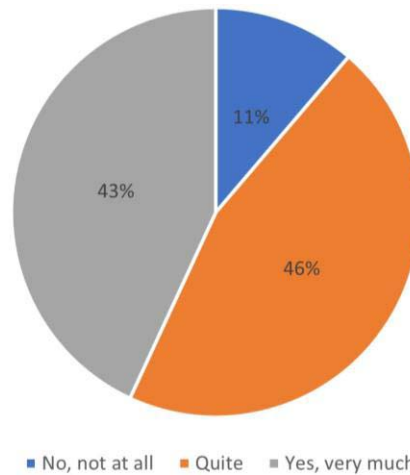


Figure 10. Do you believe that this situation has affected your social life?

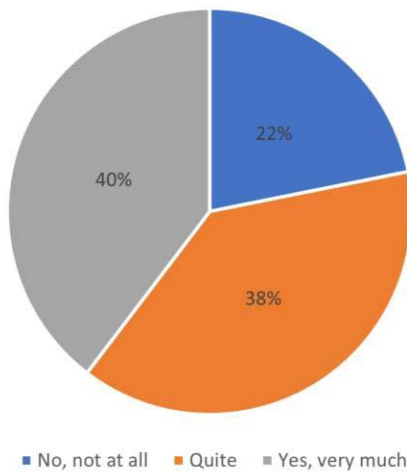


Figure 9. Do you believe that this situation has increased your level of anxiety?

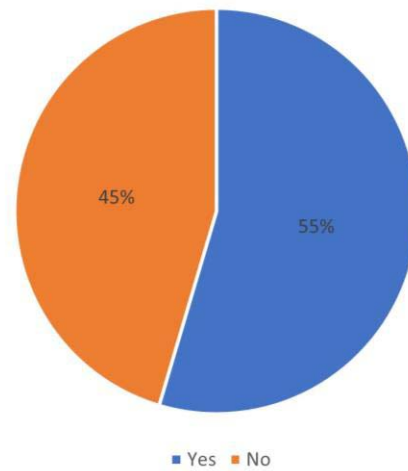


Figure 11. Have you ever thought about resorting to the support of a psychologist?

anxiety (79%) (Figure 9). Just as 89% of adolescents show the negative impact on their social life (Figure 10) and for 55% there is the desire to want to resort to psychological support (Figure 11).

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