ORIGINAL ARTICLE

"School Never Stops": Measures and Experience in Italian Schools during the COVID-19 Lockdown

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Abstract. *With the COVID-19 outbreak and the resulting lockdown, Italian schools have continued to provide education using distance learning systems. In this emergency, the primary aim of the Ministry of Education was to guarantee each student's right to education. The expression "School Never Stops" ("La Scuola non si ferma") is a clear response to the country's isolation and a demonstration of the school staff's commitment. This paper describes Italy's educational response during the lockdown by illustrating the measures undertaken by the Ministry of Education and the initiatives by private and public organizations. The challenges of distance education during the pandemic emergency and future directions for the reopening of schools in September are also examined and discussed.*

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THE end of January, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the COVID-19 outbreak constituted a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, reporting 7,818 confirmed cases worldwide with the highest number of cases in China (WHO, 2020a). Given the wide and rapid spread of the virus and its severity, in March the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic. As we know, Italy was one of the first countries after China where the number of cases increased rapidly from February. The Italian government took immediate measures to halt the spread of the virus, starting from the most affected regions. On February 23, some municipalities in Lombardy and Veneto have declared 'red zones and were subjected to quarantine to reduce the spread of the virus outside these regions. After the initial measures that related only to specific areas in the country, the Ministerial Decree (DPCM) of March 4 established measures at the national level that involved the suspension of public events, the closure of schools and universities, and the recommendation to implement smart working where possible. Measures to isolate affected areas and limit the movement of people were no longer effective in a country where the number of cases and deaths had risen exponentially within a few weeks. Furthermore, the percentage of patients in intensive care reported daily in early March rose consistently, and by March 11, Italy had announced 12,462 cases and 827 deaths (Remuzzi & Remuzzi, 2020).

In this scenario, the Ministry of Education coined the expression "School Never Stops" ("La Scuola non si ferma") in response to the entire country's isolation and the measures taken to continually providing students with online instruction. As rapidly as possible, school principals and teachers implemented distance learning using different systems to deal with the emergency and the suspension of face-to-face instruction. Restructuring lessons, creating virtual classes, and managing synchronous and asynchronous communication systems was challenging for teachers and students. In April, further measures by the Ministry of Education together with the support of several educational and technological organizations helped improve and systematize online teaching and learning.

This paper aims to describe Italy's educational response during the early months of the outbreak and to discuss issues concerning distance learning during this period of emergency. Future guidelines for the reopening of schools in September – recently published by the Ministry – are also examined and discussed.

Measures and Initiatives of the Ministry of Education

The protection of citizens' health is recognized by the Italian Constitution as a fundamental right since health represents the premise for the exercise of all the other rights that contribute to the full development of the human person (Art. 32 of the Italian Constitution). The early measures of the Ministry of Education at the beginning of February concerned the diffusion of the circulars prepared by the Ministry of Health through the Regional School Offices (USR). They contained the "Indications for the management of students and teachers returning or leaving to affected areas of China" (Circular of the Ministry of Health n. 113/2020). To limit the spread of the outbreak, the Decree-Law of February 23 suspended school trips in Italy and abroad and, later, the DPCM of March

4 declared the closure of schools and authorized distance teaching activities in schools and universities.

At the same time, a task force was set up at the Ministry of Education to manage the pandemic emergency; the group was composed by delegates of the Civil Protection, pediatricians, local delegates of Ministry of Education, representatives of parents and students associations as well as public and private organizations.

As regards the management of the epidemiological situation, it was recommended referring only to information confirmed by official sources and information published by the Ministry of Education. A *website page* was opened by the Ministry of Education in which useful information was constantly updated for schools, universities, and institutions of advanced artistic, musical, and choreatic education. This webpage – still active – is divided into four sections: (i) distance learning in which indications and resources to support schools are published; (ii) FAQ in which the answers to the most frequently asked questions are available; (iii) measures and rules in which the measures and decrees adopted are available; (iv) links to other useful websites.

Distance Education in Italian Schools

In the last twenty years the measures adopted by Ministry of Education regarding ICT have been of different types and have involved different sectors: (i) technological equipment for schools; (ii) staff training in ICT; (iii) support of students at risk of drop out, (Ministerial Decree n. 55/2002; Ministerial Decree n. 851/2015). Especially two school experiences in place in Italy were important to base distance learning during the lockdown. The School in Hospital that guarantees education to hospitalized pupils and youths through a variety of systems including distance learning, and the Rural School project, that involves about 200 schools located in the Italian islands or mountain municipalities. In these isolated contexts, technology has always been central to maintain relationships between teachers and students and to provide education through distance learning at home.

Despite these actions and experiences, the Italian school was not prepared for such a radical change requested by the COVID-19 that 'has thrown' schools into the dimension of online education systems, with their teachers and families.

In the early weeks of the lockdown, teachers undertook a variety of initiatives, such as the transmission of materials by e-mail or class electronic register, the record of video lessons, and the use of distance education platforms activated by their schools, the contact with students via mobile phone. This operation involved over 8 million students, thus their families, and one million workers including school principals, class teachers, support teachers, and educational assistants. The tests for this emergency teaching had never been planned or hypothesized; while teachers and students know the escape routes in case of fire in the school and know where to take shelter in the event of an earthquake, nobody was prepared to teach and learn during a pandemic crisis or had previous experience to base teaching activities. Suggestions to deal with distance learning and a wide range of online training courses for teachers were promptly made available by the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, the Italian government developed

measures to allow parents to take time off from work during school closure and, at the same time, provided funding to purchase devices for the Internet connection, tablets, and laptops (DPCM of March 11).

The Note of the Ministry of Education of March 17 provided schools with concrete suggestions to teach using online educational platforms. Conscious that nothing could fully replace face-to-face education, the aim was to design a learning environment to be lived by students and teachers and to be reshaped if needed. The document also suggested privileging as far as a possible virtual classroom to conduct and attend online classes. A specific section of the document covered activities for children with disabilities, linguistic and/or socio-economic difficulties, at the hospital or in prison schooling.

A mini-guide was provided to teachers on April 6 as methodological and practical support to help students to face the emergency. One of the main objectives was to give pupils a sense of security – without sweetening the reality – providing them with simple and clear information to protect their rights – recognized by the UN Convention of 1989 – and to stimulate their ability to give original and innovative answers to situations of crisis. The guide developed by the Ministry of Education contains suggestions of activities to do with students concerning the principles of equality, solidarity, well-being, information, listening, and personality development. The followings are relevant statements from the guide: (i) reassuring children and youths without an Internet connection or digital devices that State is started to provide them; (ii) teachers should contact by phone students who cannot follow distance education and invite classmates to share their notes with them; (ii) engaging everyone in educational activities that act as a stimulus and encouragement; (iii) video calling children and youths with disabilities involving the whole class or part of it and the whole teaching team in order to give encouraging messages and make families and children feel part of the school; (iv) starting educational activities from telling a story, listening to music, or creating small artifacts; (v) reflecting with children and youths on the new educational experience according to their age and their level of awareness; (vi) proposing to write letters and postcards to grandparents, elderly and lonely people, children in group homes; (vii) proposing the hour of listening, that is one hour of connection per week to listening to the doubts and fears of children and youths; (viii) promoting physical education, through video tutorials, following the motto of 'Relaxing everyone, nobody excluded'; (ix) proposing musical pieces to listen, sing, play and then, make a narration about students' emotions.

Since COVID-19 does not only concern health but is a social, economic, and cultural crisis, the document made clear the need to guarantee students the right to play, to devote themselves to creative, supportive, awareness-raising, and mutual aid activities.

Distance Education for Inclusion

As known by the scientific community, Italy is one of the first countries that adopted the model of full inclusion abolishing special classes and schools in 1977. During the COVID-19 lockdown, particular attention was paid to students with special educational needs and their inclusion in online distance learning. As indicated in the Note of the

Ministry of March 17 "the suspension of teaching should not interrupt as far as possible the inclusion process". The Ministry of Education suggested supporting teachers to maintain interactions with the pupils with disabilities and between to promote the relationship between the pupil and the other class teachers. Furthermore, the document suggested being in contact with the family and to prepare personalized materials for the student and to periodically evaluate the implementation of the Individualized Education Plan.

For students with other special needs, such as pupils with linguistic and/or socio-economic difficulties, principals had to assign them – on loan for free use – any devices of school property or request them to the Ministry of Education. The right of education had also to be guaranteed to hospitalized pupils and youths (School in Hospital).

The main objective of the web inclusion of all children was to mitigate the potential social isolation connected to the lockdown. For this purpose, the website of the Ministry of Education had been expanded with a section called 'inclusion via the web' (https://www.istruzione.it/coronavirus/didattica-a-distanza_inclusione-via-web.html). It is designed to support the work of principals, teachers, and school staff in providing distance education opportunities to students with special needs. In this section of the website Ministry measures, educational experiences, and webinars in collaboration with the Institute for Educational Technologies of National Research Council (ITD-CNR) were published. Furthermore, online platforms for distance education were made available free of charge and thanks to the contributions of private organizations that responded to the call launched by the Ministry of Education.

Resources for Distance Learning

In the implementation of the so-called 'Cura Italia' (Care Italy) Decree-Law (Decree-Law n. 18/2020), the economic resources were allocated and distributed very quickly among schools to enhance distance education. Of the total amount of 85 million euros, 10 million were allocated to the use of e-learning platforms and to immediately increase or equip schools with digital tools; 70 million were used to purchase digital devices to be assigned on loan for free use to the students with low socioeconomic status; the remaining 5 million were invested in school staff's training. The assignment of digital devices (for 70% of the amount) was based on the Pisa Index of Economic, Social and Cultural Status (ESCS-OECD) that allowed to identify areas of disadvantaged families and in which digital devices are less widespread. Furthermore, the Ministerial Decree n. 187 of March 26 established the procedures to assign to schools the 1,000 computer technicians, who are giving support to teachers in distance learning.

An additional amount of 80 million euros were then provided to primary and middle schools through the PON (Programma Operativo Nazionale) call – funds from the European Structural Funds – for the purchase of computers, tablets, and devices for the Internet connection. The aim was to guarantee everyone access to distance education. Funds were also provided to the Provincial Centers for Adult Education (CPIA), prison schooling, and schools in hospitals.

To support schools and families the Ministry of Digital Technology and Digitization, with the technical support of the Agency for Digital Italy promoted the 'Digital Solidarity' project. It is solidarity collaboration between the public and private sectors to facilitate smart working, education, well-being, and, therefore, distance communication. Companies, associations, and other organizations have provided free digital services to limit economic damage to families, citizens, and businesses. The goal was also to improve the lives of citizens forced to stay at home and reduce social contacts and travel as much as possible, even within cities, to protect themselves and others from contagion. Many private and public organizations showed great solidarity towards schools and families supporting the growth of a school community.

Additional Initiatives to Implement Distance Education

The COVID-19 emergency forced millions of teachers and students to adopt distance learning using digital technologies. However, they were aware that these technologies would not reach the entire school population. Not only has the digital divide concerning those who do not have the devices in Italy, but even more those who are unable to use them. To deal with these issues the Ministry of Education promoted collaborations with radio and State television as well as publishing houses and training agencies to offer additional training and educational opportunities besides online distance education.

Learning Through Radio and Television

The health emergency and the requests for interpersonal distancing had given value to the role of the Italian State Television (Rai) for many reasons: ease of use; a powerful way to overcome the digital divide; the accessibility throughout the country without the need of broadband Wi-Fi internet connection; and the cultural, historical, and artistic richness of the Rai archives. In Italy over 97% of family units have the television and watching television may reinforce family relationships (CENSIS, 2018).

According to the agreement between the Ministry of Education and the Rai a wide range of television channels and programs were dedicated to education. In contrast with distance education, which is mainly developed online, Rai has made available to the schools, families, and students of all ages educational contents and lessons usable with every device.

A vast repository of products and educational programs was offered on Rai Cultura (which includes Rai Scuola, Rai Storia, Rai3), Rai Ragazzi, and RaiPlay. Among the various initiatives promoted, 'La Scuola in Tv' provided students with lessons on many subjects (e.g., English, mathematics, history, literature, art, Greek, Latin) taught by expert teachers identified by the Ministry of Education. This service also includes programs dedicated to adult education (e.g. adults participating in prison schooling) as well as programs channels to support students in preparing the secondary school State Exam. Even the radio – Maturadio – offered over 250 educational podcasts to students who are going to take the State Exam.

Unexpected Professional Development

Principals, teachers, and administrative offices had no breaks in delivering educational services and in being committed to improving their professional skills especially related to technology. In response to the need to be up to the new task, free training offers were rapidly promoted by institutions, private companies, and publishing houses.

The National Institute for Documentation, Innovation, and Educational Research (INDIRE) has provided hundreds of free webinars on good practices to support innovation processes as well as video tutorials for the use of distance education platforms differentiated by the level of skills in collaboration with 'eTwinning' – a community for schools in Europe. Many other organizations (e.g., USRs, publishing houses, ITD-CNR, scientific and educational societies) had made available training materials and training opportunities for teachers.

The offer of training courses was based on the specific need of the schools; when schools were well technology equipped the training offer was directed to contents and educational methods; when schools had teachers with a low level of digital skills the training offer was focused on the technical aspects of the use of the distance learning platforms. The COVID-19 emergency also required significant sensitive and relational resources; therefore webinars on the management of anxiety were widely attended by teachers.

The most used e-learning platforms were the ones created specifically for schools and listed by the Ministry of Education as compliant with the regulations (EU Regulation 2016/679): G-Suite for education (Google), Office 365 Education A1 (Microsoft), WeSchool (Telecom Italia Mobile). To use them, many teachers were engaged in many hours of detailed study with the support of the school digital animator. This professional and moral commitment is demonstrated by over 35 thousand accesses to the website the Ministry of Education on the first day of distance education.

As a result of both the COVID-19 pandemic and everyone's commitment to the digital skills of citizens – in particular of teachers – have been improved and strengthened.

Distance Education: Challenges during the COVID-19 Lockdown

Since the closure of schools and universities on March 5, the effort of principals and teachers was to provide instruction with online systems, as required by the DPCM of March 4. In the space of a few days, teachers, students, and their families were 'thrown' into a new reality and an approach to schooling characterized by virtual relationships instead of face-to-face ones. As a consequence of the emergency, a huge social change put into question the traditional teaching and learning process and demanded that teachers and parents design and manage online education at home. Since the COVID-19 crisis, online learning is considered "a critical lifeline for education" (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2020a, p. 1).

This rapid change was carried out within a few weeks, not without difficulties and issues mainly related to school organization, social inequalities, and the teachers' knowledge and skills in using online platforms. The challenges faced by Italy were similar to those all over the world (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2020b).

Organizing Online Teaching and Learning

One of the first challenges was to completely change the organizational rules and models for providing education. During the initial weeks, assignments, and homework via email or WhatsApp were the most common ways of connecting with students. This was done to maintain an active relationship between teachers and students; in other words, a way to show that schools were not stopping. Some schools started directly with online lessons through platforms already familiar to principals and teachers, such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and G Suite. In the beginning, each school used whatever they already knew how to use. As a consequence, the methods for continuing school activities varied considerably between schools. As quickly as possible, the Ministry of Education identified platforms to choose from and provided guidelines for online education – as explained in the previous paragraph.

Another organizational challenge emerged especially with students in primary schools, due to their low level of autonomy and self-control. The role of parents during the lockdown has been extremely important especially in primary schools; due to the lack of teacher guidance in the school context, many parents supported their children in studying and supervised them during the synchronous lessons. Many people worked from home during the lockdown, meaning that parents often had to work from home using their personal computers and at the same time take care of their children and support them studying.

On the one hand, this situation fostered a closer relationship between teachers and parents and a further integration between school education and family education, as happened also in China (Zhou & Li, 2020). On the other hand, supporting children in school activities demanded that parents manage the time devoted to work and their children and, for many families, access to the one device in their house. Furthermore, with the transition to phase two that happened a few days ago, other issues emerged since many people went back to work. As mentioned by Locatelli and Mincu (2020) phase two "may create even greater difficulties for families where parents need to go back to work and cannot afford to pay someone to take care of their children, who must stay at home because of the school closures".

Social Inequality and the Digital Divide

These organizational issues are linked to another wider issue, namely social inequality throughout the country. The crisis generated by the COVID-19 outbreak had a significant impact during these months on disadvantaged families and intensified existing inequalities (Locatelli & Mincu, 2020). Knowing the parents' prominent role in providing

support in education during this period of lockdown, children living in families with a high level of education had better opportunities to cope with online learning compared to vulnerable and poor families. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2016) found that in Italy, 27.7% of adults are at or below level 1 in literacy and 31.7% in numeracy. As a consequence, many parents might not have sufficient skills to give their children the necessary educational support.

A recent report by Save the Children on poverty in Italy showed a huge increase in the level of poverty of children (aged 0-17) from 2008 to 2018 (Caderna, 2019). In 2008, 3.7% of children were in poverty, while in 2018 the percentage more than tripled (12.5%), with a clear disparity between the North and South of Italy – 45% of the children in poverty in 2018 lived in the South. Furthermore, the index of cultural deprivation of children ages 6-17 – calculated considering the access to cultural activities, such as theater, cinema, museum, and concerts – showed that 7 children out of 10 are considered 'deprived'. The ISTAT data (2020) suggests that these children might be the ones who suffered the most during the lockdown and that inequalities may grow due to the COVID-19 crisis.

Inequality was inevitably intensified during the lockdown due to the introduction of distance learning systems to provide students with lessons at home. The ISTAT data (2020) showed that in 2019, 33.8% of Italian families had no computer or tablet. The percentage dropped to 14.3% when only families with at least one child were considered. 22.2% of families in Italy have a computer or a tablet for each family member. Students aged 6-17 often have low digital skills; only 30.2% of children have high digital skills, resulting in a low level of autonomy to study using a computer. Furthermore, 23.9% of Italian families do not have access to the Internet at home and 41.9% of children live in overcrowded housing, two problems that together reduce the children's possibility of studying in a quiet place using online systems.

It is estimated that 6.7 million students were reached by distance learning during the lockdown, while 1.6 million students were excluded (Cittadinanza Attiva, 2020). To limit the rise of inequalities between advantaged and disadvantaged people and to make distance learning possible throughout Italy, at the end of March the Ministry of Education allocated funds to purchase digital devices in order "not to leave anyone behind", quoting Lucia Azzolina, Minister of Education.

The effects of this situation were particularly damaging for the most vulnerable students, including students with disabilities. Many teachers and principals believe that the greatest difficulty has been developing a system capable of giving the necessary attention to pupils with disabilities, to adapt and personalize contents and educational strategies through distance learning (Fundaro, 2020). Despite the inevitable difficulties in providing students with personalized instruction through online systems, many initiatives were promoted by the Ministry of Education, private associations, and publishers to support teachers and families during the lockdown – as described in the previous paragraph.

Teachers' Knowledge and Skills in Distance Learning

One of the first issues raised by the COVID-19 crisis was the capability of teachers to provide distance learning. According to the TALIS 2018 report (OECD, 2020c), Italy is below the OECD average for the level of ICT usage during class lessons – 47% of teachers answered that they allow students to frequently use ICT during lessons. Regarding teacher professional development, 52% of teachers reported that they have attended some kind of training on ICT, 36% felt sufficiently skilled to use ICT in teaching after completing their training. Furthermore, the PISA 2018 data (OECD, 2020a) showed that 50% of the principals believed that teachers in their school have the necessary technical and pedagogical skills to integrate digital devices in their teaching. Further data published by the European Commission in 2019 and WeSchool showed a worse scenario regarding professional development on ICT; only 20% of teachers have attended digital literacy training courses, 20% can teach remotely, 40% would like to learn to do it, and the remaining 40% are against it (Pasta, 2020).

These data revealed that Italian schools and teachers were not fully prepared for the shift from face-to-face instruction to distance learning that occurred due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Nevertheless, a huge change was achieved in the first months of the lockdown thanks to the commitment of principals and teachers and free professional development initiatives. Teachers' efforts were recognized by public authorities, families, and more in general by society as a whole, and their efforts, like those of healthcare personnel, are uncontested throughout the country.

As regards teacher professional development, in the first weeks of the school closures the need to know and use the various online systems was particularly highlighted. Later on, more attention was given to creating digital content and adapting face-to-face instruction to the online way of delivering education (Caponata et al., 2020). As mentioned in the previous paragraph, a prominent role was played by the INDIRE, which provided teachers with first-hand support on online learning systems, and later webinars on topics related to teaching and learning strategies, evaluation, and more in general to distance learning. These initiatives were essential in addressing the emergency, however further "suitable measures will have to be adopted [at the Ministry level] to provide all teachers with the necessary skills to deal with the digital transformation which has been accelerated by this emergency" (Locatelli & Mincu, 2020).

Plan for the Reopening of Schools

As we approach the end of the school year in mid-June, the major concern for people involved in schools – the Ministry, principals and teachers, parents and students, experts, and researchers – regards the conditions under which schools will start in September. Although the decision partially depends on how the outbreak develops during summer, the Ministry of Education is working to provide guidelines for the new school year. The question from many experts and teachers is: on what basis will the Ministry of Education make decisions on how to reopen schools?

To answer this question, it would be important to know what worked and what did not, based on the data that the Ministry should have been collected during these months. A rigorous evolution would have not been feasible in a period of emergency,

during which the aim was to provide education and to continue the relationship between teachers and students. However, data on the opinions of teachers, students, and parents on distance education would have helped to effectively design the reopening of schools in September.

In Italy, few data were collected during this first attempt at distance learning and no investigations regarding the implementation of distance learning were launched at the central level of the Ministry of Education. Data were collected by the USR of each Region, but only some of them published the results on their websites. An investigation 'Youth and Quarantine' promoted by the Di.Te. National Association (Technology addictions, Gap, Cyberbullying) and Skuola.net collected data on the opinions of students, parents, and teachers on distance learning through a survey. Although the initiative is certainly valuable, it did not provide a picture of the entire country. Participation was voluntary, with 1,245 responses, which represent a few data considering that there are about 8 million students in Italy. As a consequence of the lack of a centrally promoted investigation, we do not have a clear and exhaustive picture of what worked and what should be improved in reopening schools.

A positive initiative by the Ministry of Education to restart schools in September was to collect best practices in a dedicated section of its website and its social network pages. Experiences, stories, and examples of distance learning in Italian schools were collected and shared as a way to animate the narrative of best practices, to bring together educational institutions, and to show that the school wanted to move forward, even in such a difficult and unpredictable time.

A few days ago, on May 28, the Ministry of Education published the guidelines for school reopening in September which take into account the recommendations of the WHO (2020b). With this document, the Ministry proposed to start the new school year mainly using face-to-face education. According to the guidelines, it will be necessary to observe interpersonal distancing and hygiene requirements by wearing a mask, differentiating the times of entry and exit of students, and reorganizing the classroom space, such as the arrangement of the desks and furniture. Interpersonal distancing is more difficult to observe in preschool and kindergarten. For this reason, organizational and personnel precautions will be required, e.g. disinfecting regularly the surfaces, washing hands, and reducing the number of pupils present in each class at the same time.

Each school may decide to alternate face-to-face education and distance learning based on the spaces available and the age of the students. Primary schools should privilege face-to-face lessons, while middle and secondary schools may propose the use of distance learning systems for part of the educational time to reduce the number of pupils in the school environment. The recommendation is to use school outdoor facilities for physical activities, breaks, and lessons when possible (Council of Ministers and Technical Scientific Committee of May 28).

Conclusions

During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers, principals and families showed a great commitment to continuing to provide students with the education, thus responding to the 'Schools Never Stops' principle put forward by the Ministry of Education. In some cases, despite a few digital resources and skills, they tried to guarantee each student's right to education, also through the use of additional resources (e.g., television channels).

In a few months, the Ministry of Education, with the support of other organizations, provided professional development to teachers and technological devices to students, accelerating the integration of technology in the teaching and learning process. However – as discussed in the article – there is an urgent need to overcome the difficulties and challenges faced during these past months in time for the reopening of schools. Among the most critical issues discussed in this paper, it is worth mentioning social inequalities exacerbated by the lockdown and the preparedness of school staff in the redesign of educational strategies and contents for distance learning. This new way of teaching introduced during the lockdown has increased the difference in students' opportunity to learn in Italy worldwide. Students with disabilities, with a low socioeconomic status as well as students with no technological equipment or an Internet connection, were the ones who suffered the most during this period for the low access and participation in distance learning. This issue should be taken into account in effectively designing the reopening of schools in September; these students need the adequate support they did not receive during more than three months of lockdown by their teachers or parents. Italy may look at the initiatives for school reopening announced by other countries that are facing the COVID-19 crisis, such as the Netherlands and the UK that have planned to provide the most needier students with tutoring by an adult (Slavin, 2020a; 2020b). Tutoring – recognized by many international reviews of research as the most effective practice with struggling students (Inns et al., 2020; Pellegrini et al., 2020) – could accelerate the learning of students who did not participate in online learning or did not improve their learning during the lockdown due to different reasons.

Furthermore, there is the need to invest in teacher professional development to improve their competencies in using online educational tools, and more in general technology to make sure to provide students with adequate resources, contents, and strategies in online, face-to-face, or blended learning in September.

For the reopening of schools in September, the Ministry of Education has established a Committee of Experts to support the Ministry in making decisions and to provide advice about innovations to be implemented in schools. According to the Ministry's course of action for school reopening (latest plan dated May 28), face-to-face education will be privileged since the school is, as recognized by the document, the context in which each child has the opportunity to properly grow and develop. The Ministry guidelines of May 28 are not final and will be updated in the following weeks to provide a clear guideline for school reopening in September.

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