# The Cohesion of Schools as Communities in the Management of COVID-19 Pandemic: Reflections, Narratives, Fears and Hopes from the Voices of Children in England and Italy

Federico Farini, Claudio Baraldi & Angela Scollan[1]

**Abstract:** The classroom can be a community of dialogic practices where personal and cultural identities are constructed and negotiated and a key context for integration of children with migrant background. However, for the first time in many decades, children across Europe, and globally, have been removed from their primary contexts of socialisation in the public health scramble to contain the pandemic, primarily through extended lockdowns. The consequences of the management of the COVID-19 pandemic on the cohesion of schools as intercultural communities of learning impacted on teachers, children and families. Public health measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic affect the quality of children's learning experience and deny access to the classroom as a space of socialisation and intercultural dialogue. Developing from the analysis of 50

[1] Federico Farini is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Northampton. From 2015 and 2017 he worked as Senior Lecturer in Sociology of Early Childhood at the University of Suffolk leading the equality and inclusion strategy of the institution. Previously in his career, Federico was a founding member of the Centre for Educational Research and Scholarship (2014) at Middlesex University. Federico received a Ph.D in Sociology of Intercultural Relations from the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, where he worked as a researcher in Sociology between 2008 and 2013. Federico has published books, chapters, articles and edited books in Italian, English, and Slovenian language. His research activity includes EU-funded research projects concerning inclusive education, intercultural communication, renovation of urban spaces. Federico's current interests mainly revolve around issues of inequality in access to education and social services, as well as around participatory research methods and public sociology.

Claudio Baraldi is a professor of Sociology of cultural and communicative processes at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Department of Studies on language and culture. His research concerns communication systems and forms of communication. In particular his research focuses on forms of intercultural and interlinguistic communication, and adult-children interactions in educational contexts. His most important interest is in the analysis of methods and techniques for dialogic facilitation of participation and language and cultural mediation. Claudio Baraldi has directed or co-ordinated more than 70 empirical research programmes, and he has extensively published in national and international journals. At present, he is principal investigator of a consortium of 10 partners in a Horizon 2020 research program on migrant children's integration in schools (Children Hybrid Integration: Learning Dialogue as a way of Upgrading Policies of Participation). He is also coordinating a national research programme (PRIN) in Italy, researching education and health of migrant-background children.

focus groups with children in Italian and English primary and secondary schools, this contribution discusses the perspective of children on how the management of the pandemic: 1) impacted on the learning experience, in particular the progression of children with limited access to suitable spaces and resources for home learning; 2) affected the networks of social relationships and intercultural dialogue that have the classroom as their substratum.

**Keywords:** School closures, Interpersonal relationships, Online schooling, Children's agency, Families, Italy, England

## Introduction

This contribution engages with the voices of children in two major European countries, Italy and the United Kingdom as they were facing a dilemma whether to keep schools open to secure minimal conditions of socialisation for children or closing schools to prioritise the containment of the pandemic. This contribution gives voice to the perspective of teachers and children in super-diverse (Vertovec 2007) educational contexts, focusing on how the management of the pandemic: 1) impacted on children's learning experience, in particular the progression of children with limited access to suitable spaces and resources for home learning; 2) affected those networks of social relationships and intercultural dialogue that have the classroom as their substratum. The analysis of 50 focus groups with children (Italian and English primary schools and Italian secondary schools) supports a discussion and the comparison of children and teachers' representations of the challenges that the management of the pandemic is posing to the classroom as a dialogical community and a context of integration, hybridisation and dialogic construction of the meaning of cultural differences.

The data are drawn from CHILD-UP (Children Hybrid Integration: Learning Dialogue as a way of Upgrading Policies of Participation), a Horizon 2020 project

Angela Scollan is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies and Education Studies at Middlesex University. Previously, she has worked as Foundation Degree Coordinator in a Further Education College and as an Ofsted Inspector. Since the early 1990s, Angela has worked directly with and for children positioning her practice within a transdisciplinary approach and as a rights-based advocate. Her teaching philosophy, research and writing focus on the child first. Whilst touching on an array of themes relevant to education and care: adults-children interactions; rights-based pedagogies, leadership and management, curriculum studies for Early Years Education, critical education studies, social work with young children, services-families' partnership. As an activist against educational disadvantage, Angela has worked with many local authorities in projects to support inclusion and equality in education across England towards enhanced social mobility. Angela is currently undertaking research within an EU-funded project analysing how facilitative education can promote dialogue and children's agency in intercultural educational settings.

(Grant Agreement No 822400) which started in January 2019. CHILD-UP aims to research and promote dialogic practice of educational inclusion of children with migrant background in seven European countries (Belgium, Germany Finland, Italy, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom). The data discussed in this contribution concerns Italy and the United Kingdom, the two national contexts were the collection of data had been completed where this contribution was written. Education in Italy and the United Kingdom was particularly disrupted during the Covid-19 pandemic; however, the response to the public health emergency in schools has been rather different between the two countries, for instance the policies on the compulsory use of face covering and social distancing, much stricter and prolonged in Italian schools. Such differences allow a comparative outlook on the effects of public health ensure to contain the pandemic on schooling, in particular regarding the possibility of entertaining interpersonal interactions.

## Theoretical background

In this contribution, coherently with the ethical and methodological foundations of CHILD UP, children are considered as social agents, and their agency is considered as primarily important for policies and educational interventions. The analysis of the enhancement of children's agency is a frequent topic of Childhood Studies (e.g., Baraldi 2014a; Bjerke 2011; James 2009; James & James 2008; Leonard 2016; Oswell 2013). Agency may be seen as the ability to participate in changing their social and cultural conditions. An important theoretical presupposition of this contribution is that education can improve the potential of children's agency in order to change the social conditions of their lives. The benefits of children's agency may be considered as both individual, in terms of children's empowerment, access to information and new skills, and social, in terms of improved democracy (Baraldi & Cockburn 2018; Cockburn 2013). The recognition of children as agents entails the recognition of their ability to gauge, manage and transform the contexts of their social experiences. Interventions in education may take a dialogic form, which "implies that each party makes a step in the direction of the other" (Wierbicka 2006: 692). The dialogic form is based on the positive value of active and fair participation, perspective taking, and empowerment of expressions (Baraldi 2012 2014a). It enables the equal treatment of different perspectives, opening the floor to all kinds of diversity expressed in personal trajectories.

Dialogic processes in school classrooms include interpersonal interactions, based on "mutual interdependence, recognition and respect for children and their views and experiences" (Fitzgerald et al. 2010: 300). The analysis of dialogic practices highlights the importance of interpersonal interactions that enhance children's agency. They show that "both children and adults are co-constructors of knowledge and

expertise" (Hill et al. 2004: 84), i.e., that children's agency in schools means children's authority in accessing and producing knowledge (Baraldi 2015b). Dialogic practices include interactions based on adults' empowerment of children's personal expressions and decision-making (e.g., Baraldi 2012 2014b; Baraldi & Iervese 2014; Hendry 2009; Shier 2001 2010), including empowerment of interpersonal dialogic interactions among children that include children's personal expressions. Thus, the classroom can be a community of dialogic practices where personal identities are constructed, negotiated and reflected on (Baraldi et al. 2021).

This may also happen in conditions of superdiversity (Vertovec 2007). The concepts of agency and personal expression work in conjunction with theories of culture conceiving cultural identity as a contingent product of social negotiation in interaction (Holliday 2011; Piller 2011). This view stresses the importance of negotiation of identity in communication (Baraldi 2015a) and warns against insisting on pre-defined cultural identities which are based on cultural belonging (Byrd Clark & Dervin 2014). Identity is seen as fluid, malleable, and contingently constructed in communication (Dervin & Liddicoat 2013; Piller 2011; Tupas 2014). Since identity is always negotiated in communication processes through the manifestation of personal cultural trajectories (Holliday & Amadasi 2020), cultural identity is constructed as hybrid identity (Jackson 2014; Kramsch & Uryu 2012). Thus, the classroom can be recognised as a crucial context for the construction of hybrid identities of children based on their exercise of agency.

## The CHILD-UP research in the COVID-19 pandemic

Research in CHILD-UP aims to compare different sociocultural settings, in seven countries (Belgium, Finland, Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden and United Kingdom), in specific local areas in these countries. The target group includes children belonging from 5 to 16 years old. The research plan has been divided into two parts. Part 1 was concluded before the pandemic, consisting of (1) background research on migrant children's condition of integration in Europe and in the seven countries involved in the fieldwork, and (2) a survey regarding the local schools, protection services, educational and mediation agencies and families.

Part 2 was planned in the months in which the pandemic afflicted the European countries, causing the lockdown of schools. It included (1) interviews and focus groups with professionals (teachers, social workers and mediators) and children, and (2) research on dialogic practices in schools, based on the use of videorecording, audio-recording, questionnaires and focus groups. This second part of research were extended to the following school year (2020/21). However, the pandemic continued to affect the schools and the involvement of children in activities and research. The

impact of the pandemic was high in all participating countries, including long periods of schools' closure, challenges in involving children, and difficulties in admitting external educators and researchers in schools. However, most focus groups and interviews with children could be done when schools reopened (in Italy also remotely) including new questions about children's life during the times of the pandemic.

During the pandemic, an important issue has been protecting children's right to education, stressing the importance of children's need of professionals' guidance and that the pandemic is disruptive for children's learning. However, the management of the COVID-19 pandemic also impacted on the cohesion of schools as communities of dialogue. Public health measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic denied access to the classroom as a space of socialisation and dialogue. For the first time in many decades, children across Europe, and globally, have been removed from their primary contexts of socialisation in a public health scramble to contain the pandemic, primarily through extended lockdowns.

The attempt to re-establish education through distance teaching has disembodied children, dramatically disrupting their interpersonal relations, that is, a primary context of their agency. It may be noted that s the voices and expressions of children were excluded from both public debate and strategy building. This shows the weakness of the political and educational agenda of children's agency. In recent years, education has progressively included methods to support children's agency (e.g., Baraldi 2012a 2014a 2014b; Hendry 2009). However, during the pandemic, the consideration of children as agents has been weakened by the widespread worry for the breakdown of school organisation and teaching. The disappearance of interest in children's agency and classroom socialisation can generate distrust in education since children may interpret their agency only when it is not institutionalised. If children do not have some opportunity of exercising agency and involving in interpersonal interactions at school, their distrust in education is likely to increase (Farini 2019). For this reason, the present contribution focuses on the voices of children, to include them in the developing reflection on the implications of the management of the pandemic for children's learning and lives.

The research activities of CHILD-UP allowed collections of children's views and experiences of the pandemic and its effects on the classroom as a space for dialogue and personal expression. In particular, the analysis that we propose in this contribution is based on 50 focus groups with children in Italian and English primary schools and in Italian secondary schools. It is important to highlight that whilst the Italian settings of the research include some secondary schools, the English settings consisted only of primary schools. In the discussion, specific comments will invite attention to the possible effects of participants' age on the data presented.

Within CHILD-UP activities, focus groups became an important opportunity to enhance children's agency as production of knowledge and personal expression during the pandemic. Focus groups could provide children with a chance to become active again in the production of personal points of view concerning their social life during the pandemic. Focus groups afforded opportunities for children to (i) share their views on the current situation with the researcher and their classmates (ii) hear how their peers felt and had reacted to a shared experience. Children were able to gain insight into the experiences of peers and the impact that COVID-19, and its management, driven by public health considerations, had on them, gauging commonalities and differences.

When asked about the consequences of the pandemic, children talked about two different aspects of the pandemic impact on their experience of schooling and personal trajectories. The first was the experience of online learning (when schools had been closed) and the second (albeit exclusively in Italy) was the experience of attending school during the pandemic. The following sections of the article will be dedicated to discuss children's perspectives regarding: online learning as a challenge for children's agency expressed in interpersonal relationships and dialogic communication; children's efforts to preserve interpersonal relationships; the implication of online learning and social distancing for family relationships; learning to cope with online schooling and the experience of attending schools during a pandemic, with a focus on the impact of public health measures. The conclusion of the article will point to possible implication of the results for policymakers and education professionals.

## Online learning and the challenge for children's agency as interpersonal relationships

According to the contributions of the children to the focus groups, the most negative aspect of online learning both in Italy and England is the absence of social and emotional relationships during the lockdown periods, for instance the impossibility of getting out, meeting friends, or working together. The expression of regret for the loss of interpersonal relations shows that school is an important socialisation context for children's agency to be expressed as personal expression. Children described how they missed their classmates throughout all focus groups and across countries, as shown in the excerpts below:

> It was bad because I didn't talk to anyone, that is, only with my family, but it's bad to be separated from your friends.

> (IT_F25_CH_B)

It was bad to be away from your classmates because at home you don't do anything but at school you have fun with your classmates.

(IT_F25_CH_B).

M(ale)1: Honestly, me, I don't really like online meeting. Because like, I felt like I was stuck in a  prison. I have my brother, but like, he's small and he doesn't even understand me. Like I try to play with him, he doesn't understand, he goes and plays with himself and watches tv. I personally don't really like playing by myself, I really like playing with my friends at school, and I feel like I was just prisoned in my own room.

Researcher: Sure. Did you miss your friends?

M1: Yes, I did.

(UK_F5_SF4)

F(emale)1: Since we've been back at school, we get to meet our friends, because when we were at home,  we didn't get to meet our friends.

Researcher: Did you miss your friends?

F1: Yeah.

Researcher: What did you miss about them?

F1: They like entertain me and have fun with me.

(UK_F7_SF1)

Researcher:  So, what do you all think of Covid? What's your response to Covid? Yeah, what do you  think of Covid?

 M1: I think, I don't like how, during lockdown, like, we got separately. got so used to being with my friends, having fun, and then Covid comes along…

Researcher: And stops it. And were you worried about it?

M1: Yeah. I was missing my friends because they have always been here for me.

Researcher:  Yeah, you would miss them. And how did you feel about it? Yeah…

M1: Two thumbs down.

Researcher: Oh. Why?

M1: Because like [name removed] said, it makes me separated from my best friends.

(UK_F5_LS1)

Secondary-school children in Italy and children attending primary schools in England emphasised that engaging with friends remotely felt very different from face-to-face interactions. If they were able to meet in person, the encounters were made challenging by public health restrictions, causing negative feelings as expressed in the excerpts below:

F1: since Covid has begun, it's been really bad.

Researcher: but do you keep in touch with your friends remotely?

F1: but it's not the same thing.

F2: I do genuinely, both remotely and at home, I struggle a bit more though.

(IT_F2_CH_G)

 F1: It's just so weird not being able to socialise with people. Like since they said you  can't be with  your family, it was very weird going to like, let's say, Brent Cross, and seeing people like social distancing everywhere. It was really weird to see.

Researcher: It's strange isn't it, not to hug people...

M1: Wearing masks...

Researcher: Yeah, and you can't see the expressions and stuff.

F2: Yeah, that's hard, because when you've got masks on and people are talking, you don't know if they are looking or listening to you, you can't tell what you would normally tell.

M1: Yep.

(UK_F17_FM4)

M1: I found it hard since Coronavirus came because there's never been something like this since we've been alive, so since we've never had anything like this, it's hard for us because we don't know what's going on and what's gonna happen.

Researcher: Sure, yeah. No, there's a lot to deal with, isn't there? A lot to deal with. I think we might have come to the end now. Yeah, what were you going to say?

F1: I think, there might be some children I love talking to. But then Coronavirus ruined everything. It's like, I don't get to get a get fresh air, even if I play with one of my favourite games, it doesn't even cheer me up. Even though my parents brought me a new game in the Easter holidays, I started playing on the PS3, but I still upset, I still have the image of before Coronavirus happened.

Researcher: What image? What do you mean?

F1: Like an image of playing with my friends, an image like that. And sometimes I just go away and stay in my dreams for five minutes, and then I just close my game and throw the controller. And my parents…

Researcher: It makes you feel a bit angry?

F1: It makes me feel a bit angry.

(UK_F10_BR1)

Most children described online learning as *very boring* because it offered very limited opportunities for interpersonal interaction. As exemplified by the excerpt below, data from focus groups in both countries suggest that the limitations of online learning are connected by children to the impossibility of the personal expressions that are only allowed by interpersonal, in-person, interactions:

I liked my school because you could see your friends and teachers there every day and you didn't have to wait long to see them.

(IT_F30_CH_G)

Researcher: were you taking classes from home?

M1: eh unfortunately.

Researcher: why do you say unfortunately?

M1: it bored me.

(IT_F25_CH_M).

 It's boring to stay home.

(IT_F19_CH_B).

I like the other school because that way we can talk to each other easily, like every time C and I want to talk but every time we struggle to connect.

(IT_F28_CH_G)

Researcher: What was it about online learning that you didn't like?

F1: putting everything you did, your homework on classroom [the software], and because I missed  the physical contact.

(IT_F19_CH_G).

I like the other school because when we do an online lesson, when the teacher shares the screen, she sometimes doesn't see us when we want to speak.

(IT_F28_CH_G)

For me the other school was better because here you have to charge your mobile phone and after a while it switches, and you have to wait an hour and then when you turn it back on the lesson has ended.

(IT_F28_CH_B).

You struggle a bit more in these classes because sometimes you don't hear, with the connection, you struggle a little more.

(IT_F19_CH_G)

M1: It's like weird when you get up every day knowing you don't have to get ready for school, you just have to go on your computer. Doing online school was really boring because you couldn't see your friends. You had social distance. You had to wear a mask.

F1: I got really distracted at home. At school, you can't really get distracted.

Researcher: What distracted you, then?

F1: Mostly my family and, like, they are just sitting in the background. My family is at school, basically.

Researcher: Yeah, that's a good way to say it, they are at school with you. Is it making you feel like you don't have any space from your family?

F1: Kind of, yeah.

(UK_F4_SF3)

F1: When I did online school, it's like, everyone was talking to me. It's like watching paint dry was more interesting than online school. Online school was so boring.

F2: I do prefer school, 100%, because like, there aren't any friends around to like joke and stuff. It was really boring.

F3: I have two older brothers but they are old so I have literally no-one to talk to.

Researcher: Oh right. So, yeah, it's tricky.

M1: I was having an online meeting, and I was unmuting asking Mr [teacher] a question, and my brother said 'you're not on a meeting, I'm telling Mum'.

Researcher: So you had to deal with all of that while you were trying to learn at the same time?

M1: I would get distracted...

Researcher: And then you'd forget about it? Getting distracted is hard.

F2: The thing is, I'm the youngest child and I have a room with my sister and it's very annoying. It's so annoying because my sister, she would always distract me from what I'm doing, she's like 'come and do this' or 'do that'

(UK_F22_BR5)

## Working to maintain interpersonal relationships

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned disruptions to socialisation and experience of agency as personal expression, data suggest that children maintained connections during the periods of online schooling, both in breaks within lessons and outside, using video calls (sometimes hours long) or texts:

> In my opinion it was great on the one hand, and awful on the other because, I mean, on the one hand it was great because once with the T1 teacher we were there in the online lesson and we talked during the breaktime, we talked, we played we did a lot of things.
>
> (IT_F17_CH_G).
>
> Researcher: It's nice to have friends, yeah, when you're feeling a bit. Did you stay in contact with each other? During Covid?
>
> M1: I've got their phone numbers.
>
> Researcher: Oh so you could ring each other up and things?
>
> M2: During Covid, my friend [name removed], he used to do video calls all through home schooling.
>
> Researcher: Ah, so you were calling each other through home schooling stuff?
>
> M2: Ah my friend [name removed] who is in reception always made friends with [name removed].
>
> Researcher: So you've got all connections and links?
>
> F1: Yeah. And we've arranged one playdate so far, and we've been calling each other, he's been calling me on the iPad on my laptop and on my Mum's phone, and sometimes we arrange for a playdate, but we can't. I miss being home a little bit, because I like to be home a little bit as I got to have a little rest.
>
> (UK_F2_SF2)
>
> Researcher: Covid is tricky. Did it impact on you when you were at home, when you didn't come to school? How did you feel about that?

F1: Nothing really changed, except for the fact that we had online school, because every time I go back from school, I will always like video chat my friends and stuff anyway, so...

(UK_F12_FM2)

Although the first lockdowns came as a shock, during the focus group some children mentioned that the aftermath of the lockdown left them with stronger relationships with their friends:

After quarantine we had a closer bond because [...] I could finally see my friends again.

(IT_F10_CH_B)

I didn't like this Covid situation at all, for example when we were taught online, but I think that thanks to the online learning we had much more desire to see each other, and when we returned to school, we were closer.

(IT_F19_CH_G)

Some children (but exclusively in Italian schools) also referred to strengthened relationships and connections as a positive aspect of schooling in the pandemic. ISCED3 children often mentioned that disruptions helped them to discover which relationships were genuine and which relationships were more superficial:

F1: even with false friendships, I mean, in a moment of need, even during this pandemic, I happened to test positive for Covid in November, and as a result I really found out who was there for me, I often received messages like "how are you feeling?", "how do you feel?" "when are you taking the second swab?", there were people who were worried, and others who didn't care at all.

F2: that's right, I had Covid in November, and as a result I understood many people, I understood the people I had by my side, and I also understood the people I didn't consider to be close friends, but now I consider them to be close because they were there for me at a time that was very difficult for me.

(IT_F2_CH_G)

Researcher: what would have been different if there had been no Covid?

F1: the relationships between people, so even friends etc. would have been different, then in the first quarantine (lockdown, translator's note) I came to understand many things about my friendships, I mean, I found out what the real friendships were, the people who were there and the people who didn't care.

(IT_F1_CH_G)

## Online learning and social distancing for family relationships

For the first time in most of the children's lives, spaces shared with other members of the family and inter-generationally became the context of schooling. Online learning brought changes in family relationships, as suggested by data from the focus groups.

Online learning was negatively evaluated by younger children who felt they were losing their autonomy as they often needed their parents to assist them in the use of the computer. Losing autonomy was coupled with the difficulty in using the computer without help when parents were not in the house due to working commitments.

Participants across the two national settings converged in describing the family and the unusual sharedness of spaces during online learning as both the source of necessary support, albeit often not available and an obstacle to learning:

The fact that some children are not able to access a computer and need the help of a parent is a mess.

(IT_F2_CH_G)

I didn't like doing the lessons online either because I was annoyed when my parents weren't home and the connection was down and I didn't know what to do, and because it was a bit harder and there are older kids who are there [online] for longer.

(IT_F19_CH_G)

At first, at the first lockdown, everything was online, we didn't have online meetings like Google Meetings. So we did everything by ourselves. Even my parents didn't have time to help me, so I did everything by myself. And then, as like, sometimes I wouldn't even know what to do, so because I didn't know what to do, my parents would just tell me to teach my brothers.

(UK_24_BR5)

Researcher: And what was it, was it easier to learn at home or was it harder?

M1: It was hard.

Researcher: Why?

M1: Because it was, like, usually we have a plan at the school, like a timetable. But at home, we don't know which one and because it's a lot more harder.

F1: I think it was hard to study because I had to do it all on my own, because I have a little sibling and my parents are helping him more because he's only in reception.

Researcher: So you had to do a lot more stuff on your own? And what was hard about that? What didn't you like?

M2: Well, like [M1] said, I didn't have a timetable or a structure to follow.

Researcher: I see. And was there lots going on at home? Was it noisy and busy and stuff?

M2: yes but we didn't have much family time either.

Researcher: Oh ok. How come?

M1: Because we had to work to end, we, there was lots and lots and lots of homework and things…

(UK_F12_FM2)

 Researcher: Is this when you were online?

F1: Yeah. And then I didn't get that much help. I have a little brother in year 1. Like, he's fine, it's just that he needs my mum to help him most of the time, and my dad, he can't help me either. Most of the time he's in a different country in the Netherlands, or he might be working from home being too busy.

Researcher: Oh wow. And I guess that's hard when people are in different countries.

F1: Yeah. And I have to work all by myself, and my mum can only help me a little bit. And then, during English, they make it ten times harder than at school and I have to manage to do it all on my own.

(UK_F6_SF6)

Besides the intersection between family relationships and online learning, several primary school children emphasised a need to spend time with relatives they could not see during lockdowns. Virtual meetings with relatives, particularly with grandparents were considered enough by children who live far away from them; on the contrary, separation was a source of anxiety for children who were used to meeting relatives more frequently:

M1: Coronavirus isn't only separating us from our friends but from our family. I have a cousin and they have loads of cousins and the last time I have seen any of them has been around two years now.

M2: I had cousins sometimes a few times a year, like one or three times a year they would come, like, because we have a celebration called Eid, it's the 31st day of Ramadan, that means for how long we've been fasting, fasting means we have to eat breakfast at 4o'clock at dawn and then we can't eat or drink all day until 9 o'clock. And my cousins were supposed to come but only like a few came.

Researcher: Is that because of Covid?

M2: Yeah because they have cousins that come all the way up for it, and I have a few cousins who live a few doors down, and they came, and the year before Covid ruined everything for me, because the day before the 30th day of Ramadan, you can choose presents, and then you're meant to wrap it up and yeah, your parents wrap it up for you after you go to the toy shop and choose what you want to buy, and then it's Eid, and it's similar to like Christmas, instead your cousins buy things for you and you have no idea what it is. Two years ago, we got a fun game where there's this fishing game called 'gone fishing'. And then it ruined everything…

M3: Like [M2] pointed out, Eid last year was very disappointing last year because I didn't get to see my cousins. I was supposed to see my cousins last year too, but I have a feeling this year, Eid will be even better because we get to go to the toy shops and to get to go to the part. Eid this year is actually tomorrow.

(UK_F1_SF1)

I kept in touch with my grandparents the same amount, it has not changed much because, even now, they live very far away so I speak to them only on the phone and in the summer, I was able to go and see them for three months. So the quarantine was not that hard for me, but doing online learning was difficult.

(IT_F25_CH_B)

For me Covid did not change that much on the one hand, but on the other hand it did because with Covid when I was in quarantine last year, I always saw my paternal grandmother because she looked after me at home as my parents were not able to be at home when I was doing online learning. Instead, the other side, my maternal grandparents, and also the other part of the family, I could not see them because they were older, and therefore there was more danger that they would catch Covid and die.

(IT_F25_CH_B)

## Learning to cope with online schooling

However, older children, probably less troubled by the management of technologies, on the contrary referred to positive aspects of independent, online learning as far as concerns their exercise of agency. For instance, participants to a focus group in a secondary school in Italy highlighted that online learning offered scope for greater autonomy and sense of responsibility, as in the excerpt below:

M1: in my opinion the biggest difference between digital school and face-to-face school is that the digital school, in my opinion, makes you grow, for example it makes you mature in certain areas, for example in certain lessons that are done in class, the teachers can see if you are concentrating, but at home you can switch off in different ways and relax, or you can become more mature and recognise when you should do something or not.

Researcher: so you're saying you're more empowered because it's up to you to decide if you're paying attention or not?

M1: yes.

Researcher: you can get out of control somehow so if you're paying attention, it's because you know it's important to pay attention.

M1: understand when you have to pay attention and when maybe you can relax a little bit [...]

Researcher: so in your opinion even regular school should give you that option?

M1: yes, I'd say so, allowing you to be more free

(IT_F29_CH_B)

Some children also mentioned they adopted creative strategies for instance to buy for more time for themselves outside of learning activities:

I also wanted to tell you that during online learning, you might as well wake up twenty minutes later and say that the computer was (logged in) but that you couldn't get in.

(IT_F11_CH_B)

Finally, older secondary-school children, exclusively from the Italian settings, shared the experience of online learning helping them to manage levels of stress more effect-ively.

Online learning helped me to manage my stress, I was no longer anxious, which was incredible, but otherwise I was a bit sad, but I was much more relaxed during online learning.

(IT_F10_CH_G)

F1: Concerning online learning, when there were questions, I had less anxi-ety because I was at home and not at school.

Researcher: Listen, but when you got back to school, did the anxiety come back or had you learned to manage it at that point?

F1: No I had learned to manage it

(IT_F10_CH_G)

In Italy, particularly in secondary schools, several children not only expressed the negative impact of online schooling on friendship, they also mentioned a positive aspect of online schooling: being at home and thus being more comfortable (getting up later, having breakfast slowly and wearing whatever they wanted).

During online learning I didn't like it much, but I also liked it a bit. I didn't like it a bit because I only saw my friends virtually, yet I liked it because I was in my own home.

(IT_F17_CH_B).

In my opinion online learning was both a positive and a negative thing. Positive because I was able to wake up much later, and negative because I couldn't see what was really going on in reality, and I wanted to be with my friends, chatting during the breaktime and playing outside without this online learning.

(IT_F26_CH_B).

However, this was not the case for any of the English participants. In the English focus groups, the positive aspects of online schooling in terms of personal comfort were not mentioned. This can be related to some age difference: the English participants were all primary school children, and the benefit of a more relaxed ante-meridian routine might not have been very important to them.

Nevertheless, children in both national settings of the research settings acknowledged that new learning activities were organised by teachers specifically to support learning and interpersonal relations during the first lockdown and online schooling. Across the two national settings, children expressed appreciation for such activities that were both unexpected and positive:

> For example, from five to six in the afternoon we do a workshop with a teacher that involves all the third-year students, but unfortunately only a few of them participate, and we read the newspapers about this period and how children of our age or a little older are experiencing life during this difficult time. Because, you know, to distance yourself a bit from your friends at this age and at this time is quite difficult, I mean you need the moral support of your friends because being with them makes you a little bit stronger in your yourself.

(IT_F22_CH_B)

Researcher: And how did you all cope with online lessons? How did that work?

M1: Honestly, when the first wave struck, I was like 'hmmm yay, I get to do a bit of relaxing.' But then online work hit me like a truck. Because I was just thinking, I'm gonna be honest, I wasn't expecting it, I was just like 'I'm gonna sit around, maybe look at some stuff once in a while, do some work, do some spelling, keep myself educated.' But they'd already planned it.

Researcher: Oh wow. And was it planned well?

Many children: Yeah.

Researcher: And what sort of stuff did you do?

F1: Our teacher Mr [name removed], what he used to do was, he would record his lessons, he worked extra hard, he told us all about it, how he had to work after school to record the lessons and during his lunch break, he had to record the lesson for the afternoon.

Researcher: Oh wow. A lot of preparation.

(UK_F20_SF8)

M1: We were very thankful because all of our home learning books were filled with work and it was so fun. We got to draw. We got to, when we did Maths, personally I loved Maths and English because, on the documents, we could do English and then submit it onto something called Google Classroom, and if we wanted to, we could post it on the stream, and people could read it if they want.

Researcher: Oh so you could read each other's work? That's really clever.

M1:.And if, during school, if we needed help, Mr [name removed] would always help, we just would send a message and Mr [name removed] checks the stream and answers questions.

(UK_F13_FM3)

## Going to school during the pandemic

Based on their contributions during the focus groups, the management of the pandemic largely affected, and still affects in most cases, the learning experience in schools. The experience of face-to-face schooling is probably the dimension where differences linked to the national contexts emerge more clearly.

The conditions of attending schools are rather different in England and Italy and this may explain the more negative outlook on schooling expressed in the Italian focus groups, where most children said that the pandemic had a negative impact on the learning experience in schools on return to face-to-face teaching. The most important difference was the policy on the compulsory use of face covering. Whilst face coverings for children were not compulsory for English primary school children, they were for their Italian counterparts. In addition to a more comprehensive face-covering policy, social distancing measures were much stricter in Italian schools.

Such differences can justify the discrepancy between data from Italy, where references to the negative effects on schooling of public health measures intended to contain the pandemic were very common, and data from England, where the emphasis was mostly on the negative experience of online schooling. Once back at school, English primary-school children, that is, the whole cohort of participants, experienced an environment that was less dramatically different from the ordinary.

Italian children generally described the school experience under strict public health restrictions as somehow sadder than before the pandemic. This is clearly related by the participants to limitations on the possibility of entertaining interpersonal interactions.

> So, the school as I see it, with Covid, really is much sadder, there is a lack of contact with people, I mean, you are always spaced out and closed in your desk, and I can't think of many positive aspects [...] it's a bit sad and that's it.
>
> (IT_F10_CH_G)
>
> It wasn't nice because you couldn't get close to anyone, for example, we can go to the blackboard to write down a calculation only if we have our own chalk, we have to sanitise ourselves, well it's not nice to be at a distance.
>
> (IT_F32_CH_G)
>
> When there was no Coronavirus, I was always much happier, but now I'm always at home and I'm bored.
>
> (IT_F13_CH_G)

Also, in primary schools, many children in the Italian contexts of the research openly claimed to prefer online learning to being at school under a regime of strict social distancing. The most important reason was the physical separation from peers, a personal distance reflected in the spatial organisation of the classroom. A few secondary-school children expressed troubles in adapting to this new situation, such as wearing masks and maintaining physical distance from one another. Children referred to their struggles to maintain some degree of genuine interpersonal interaction in situations where desks are (still at the time of the focus groups) widely separated from each other, breaks are taken separately by each class and any physical contact is strictly prohibited, even during play. This is illustrated by the excerpts below:

> I don't like it [...] previously you had a desk mate, you copied in the tests [...] we exchanged snacks this was an important part of things.

(IT_F11_CH_G)

Having the desks spaced out gives me more anxiety [...] because during the lesson you can't talk as much with your classmates and maybe you have less fun too.

(IT_F19_CH_G)

In the meantime, the desks are spaced a metre apart, my God!

(IT_F19_CH_G)

We have desks spaced apart and I used to like being close to others.

(IT_F19_CH_B)

A school where you can have breaktime all together [...] T1: since we are in a Covid period they can't even meet the kids from the other classes.

(IT_F8_CH_B)

Researcher: Does the fact that you can't touch people bother you?

M1: yes, it bothers me.

(IT_F19_CH_B)

 I also miss physical contact a bit.

(IT_F19_CH_G)

If we want to see each other we're still not allowed to hug.

(IT_F19_CH_G)

F1: Covid bothers me because we can't be close to each other, and we can't hold hands and we can't even hug

Researcher: so you miss the physical contact a bit

F1: yes, and because we can't get close to each other to talk.

(IT_F19_CH_G)

During a focus group with younger primary-school children in Italy, participants mentioned how the pandemic meant they were not able invite their friends home like they used to. Such piece of data can be combined with the reference to the inability to play with friends or to see young relatives, which was particularly emphasised by primary-school children in the English settings.

> I don't like being away from my friends because they can't come to my place, because they usually come to my place.
>
> (IT_F15_CH_G)

Another negative aspect for interpersonal interactions, highlighted by children in Italian schools, particularly primary-school children, was the use of masks as an impediment to seeing their classmates' faces.

> Covid bothers me a lot because you have to wear a mask and it bothers me a lot.
>
> (IT_F19_CH_B)

> M1: The thing that bothers me the most is the mask, I can never keep it on [...].
>
> Researcher: but is it the mask that bothers you or is it because you can't see your companions' faces anymore?
>
> M1: both.
>
> (IT_F19_CH_B)

> M1:. you have to wear a mask or you could get sick.
>
> M2: when there was no [coronavirus], we didn't wear a mask [...].
>
> F1: I don't like masks
>
> (IT_F16_CH_GB)

## Discussion of the main themes emerging from children's voices

Regarding online learning and the preservation of affective interpersonal relationships, participants both in Italian and English schools, point to the absence of social and emotional relationships during the lockdown periods as the most disturbing

experience. Much more emphasis is placed on disruptions to interpersonal relation-ships than in disruptions to learning, in line with sociological research emphasising the role of school as a primary context for children's socialisation (Baraldi and Iervese 2014). Online platform allowed preservation of interactions with other, but in a largely unsatisfactory manner, evidencing the importance of face-to-face interac-tions for children's socialisation. Whilst the implications of online schooling have been discussed regarding children's learning (Bubb and Jones 2020), the finding presented here invite attention on the implications of online schooling has for chil-dren's socialisation and the possibility of building affective relationship with peers based on personal expression (Baraldi 2012).

Nevertheless, children's networks of interpersonal relationships display resilience. Children's narratives indicate a continuing work to maintain relationships over the periods of forced separation. It is true that participants in both national contexts converge in describing the first lockdown as a shock. It is also true that they agree in emphasising the negative consequences of distance learning for their networks of relationships. However, participants highlight that a long, unexpected period of physical separation strengthened relationships and connections. A recurrent theme from children's narratives reminds of the result of recent research from Kluck and colleagues: a situation of crisis reinforces strong social ties, which survived the test of lockdowns, whilst crowding out weaker social ties (Kluck et al. 2021).

If compared to affectivity among peers, affectivity within families appears to have suffered the effects of public health measures. In both national contexts, online chats were considered enough to keep satisfying relationships with relatives by most chil-dren. However, a prolonged physical separation from relatives generated some anxi-ety in children who were used to see them very often, aligning with (LIT). Based on their narratives, children who are used to distance relationships with relatives, for instance in the case of children with migrant background, were better equipped children to cope with the disruptions to social relationships related to lockdowns.

Children in both contexts of the research cope with online learning, displaying agency in their adaptation to changing conditions (Bjerke 2011). Data suggest that the major disruption experienced by children was not related to learning but to peer-relationships, as the limitation to the possibility of cultivating affective relationships. This is suggested also by several narratives that indicate a high grade or adaptation to online schooling regarding learning activities. Children in Italian schools, who were on average slightly older than children in English schools were also able to identify some positive aspects of online schooling for their well-being, which was not the case for children in English schools. The most evident difference between the two contexts is related to children's experiences on return to face-to-face teaching. Italian

children express a more negative outlook, related the stricter face covering policy and social distancing measures. On the contrary, children in English schools did not experience a great deal of change on return to school; rather, they were are vocal in their negative assessment of online schooling.

The voices of children in English and Italian schools become one in suggesting that the experience of online learning and the experience of re-establishing classroom interactions under public health measures impacted, and largely still impacts, on their opportunities of excising agency in interpersonal interactions. The nature and importance of structures of expectations become relevant when they are disappointed (Luhmann, 1995). Children's disappointment for the social limitations imposed by lockdowns and children's disappointment for the conditions of classroom interactions in times of social distancing indicate that for children, interpersonal interactions are a primary source of dialogic communication and personal expression in schools (Baraldi, Farini and Joslyn 2021). This should not suggest that for children learning is a marginal aspect of schooling: both in Italy and in England children have shared mature preoccupations for the impact of online schooling on their learning. However, learning without socialisation, where dialogic interpersonal interactions in the classroom are a core aspect of such socialisation (Baraldi 2014a), simply does not work for children.

## Conclusion, and implications for school leaders and policymakers

An important implication of this result of our research for policymakers and education professionals should be the need for reflecting on the variegated aims of schooling as face-to-face teaching resumes. Our results suggest that it would be mistaken to focus exclusively on filling possible deficits of learning and performances. '*Catching up*' is important but the voices of the participants to the focus groups invite to give due importance to the dialogic foundation of children's motivation to participate in teaching and learning (Baraldi 2014b).

The importance of enhancing and supporting dialogic interpersonal interactions in the classroom suggested by previous research (Hendry 2009; Fitzgerald et al. 2010; Baraldi 2012; 2015b; Baraldi and Cockburn 2018; Farini 2019) was confirmed by some activities facilitated by teachers and educators, promoted by the CHILD-UP project in Italian as well as in English schools on return to face-to-face teaching. In both contexts, children expressed great appreciation of the opportunity provided to re-establish interpersonal dialogue in school contexts where otherwise there was an insisting focus on 'catching up'.

It is important to highlight that participating schools' leaders have displayed a positive assessment of activities to facilitate dialogic exchanges in the classrooms. This demonstrated that teachers and school heads can be receptive towards the promotion of dialogue as part of the learning experience and supportive of educational activities that facilitate it. Further publications will aim to discuss the activities to facilitate dialogue promoted by CHILD-UP, as well as children, and teachers', evaluation of them.

As a conclusive observation, which invite further research in the future, it is important to mention that differences connected to cultural background did not emerge in the focus groups, neither in Italy nor in England, notwithstanding the conditions of *superdiversity* (Vertovec 2007) connoting schools participating in the research. The difficulties of interpersonal interactions, and the strategies to preserve them, were similar for all children, across cultural backgrounds and national contexts. When differences emerged, they were rather connected to participants' age or the effect of diverging public health measures.

Such results invite confirm the importance of hybrid identity-formation in classrooms (Baraldi 2015a; Holliday 2011; Holliday and Amadasi 2020), which leads to shared experiences between children and shared expectations across cultural backgrounds (Wierbicka 2006). The intercultural dimension of dialogue appears to be inextricably intertwined with interpersonal communication that fosters personal expressions.

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