



**Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference
of the Journal Scuola Democratica
REINVENTING EDUCATION**

VOLUME II

**Learning with New Technologies,
Equality and Inclusion**

ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"

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ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"
Via Francesco Satolli, 30 – 00165 - Rome, Italy

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***Title* Proceedings of the Second International Conference of the Journal “Scuola Democratica” – Reinventing Education VOLUME II Learning with New Technologies, Equality and Inclusion**

This volume contains papers presented in the First International Conference of the Journal “Scuola Democratica” which took place at the University of Cagliari on 5-8 June 2019. The aim of the Conference was to bring together researchers, decision makers and educators from all around the world to investigate the concepts of “education” in a “post-democracy” era, the latter being a set of conditions under which scholars are called to face and counteract new forms of authoritarian democracy.

Populisms, racisms, discriminations and nationalisms have burst and spread on the international scene, translated and mobilized by sovereigntist political movements. Nourished by neo-liberalism and inflated by technocratic systems of governance these regressive forms of post-democracy are shaping historical challenges to the realms of education and culture: it is on this ground, and not only on the political and economic spheres, that decisive issues are at stake. These challenges are both tangible and intangible, and call into question the modern ideas of justice, equality and democracy, throughout four key dimensions of the educational function, all of which intersected by antinomies and uncertainties: ethical-political socialization, differences, inclusion, innovation.

The Conference has been an opportunity to present and discuss empirical and theoretical works from a variety of disciplines and fields covering education and thus promoting a trans- and inter-disciplinary discussion on urgent topics; to foster debates among experts and professionals; to diffuse research findings all over international scientific networks and practitioners’ mainstreams; to launch further strategies and networking alliances on local, national and international scale; to provide a new space for debate and evidences to educational policies. In this framework, more than 600 participants, including academics, educators, university students, had the opportunity to engage in a productive and fruitful dialogue based on researches, analyses and critics, most of which have been published in this volume in their full version.

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**Researching the Relationship
between Gender and Education:
Innovative Methodologies
and Open Questions
in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

From Face-to-Face to Online Interviews: An Experience Description on University Male and Female Students

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ABSTRACT: *This paper describes an experience linked to a gender-sensitive university orientation project for young men and women. In particular, the contribution intends to offer some meta-reflections following the reformulation of the project itself during the COVID-19 pandemic. The contribution is developed starting from the project «Piano Lauree Scientifiche» (PLS – Plan for Scientific Degrees) in collaboration with ABCD Interdepartmental Center for Gender Studies of the University of Milan-Bicocca. The project initially envisaged the involvement of some high school students in a preliminary focus group phase to collect suggestions and points of view about their future projects. The pandemic completely reversed plans in several moments: it was no longer possible to meet students in schools. Therefore, the study was based on focus groups aimed at university students who should have followed double interviews to be carried out in person. The worsening of the pandemic situation led then to online interviews rather than face to face interviews. This article aims to highlight this experience to inform future research and encourage flexibility and reflexivity in research. It is hoped that this article can be helpful to develop cross-cultural qualitative methodology and expand upon the emerging field of literature surrounding video conferencing qualitative research, first of all those regarding the link between gender and university orientation.*

KEYWORDS: *Gender differences, University Orientation, Online Interviews, Face to Face Interviews, COVID-19*

Introduction

The COVID-19 global pandemic had a significant impact on research as the normal and expected research difficulties were exacerbated by the drastic change of everyone's way of life. This article is a reflective narrative of the authors experience of the transition from face-to-face to online interviews, within a project dedicated to the definition of a gender-sensitive university orientation intervention, due to the pandemic social distancing and contact restrictions. Through a descriptive analysis, this

article details the numerous ethical, logistical, practical and cultural issues that the authors confronted in preparing qualitative online interviews through personal reflections, current events and existing literature.

The contribution is developed starting from the project «Piano Lauree Scientifiche» (PLS – Plan for Scientific Degrees)¹ in collaboration with ABCD Interdepartmental Center for Gender Studies of the University of Milan-Bicocca². The project's aim was the declination of a short orientation path to choose university studies dedicated to third or fourth-year students of upper secondary school. Path finds its characterisation in putting gender dimension at the centre and investigating the influence that this *informally* acts on the choices of young people around their future (Biemmi, 2019; Biemmi, Leonelli, 2016; Ulivieri, 2007).

The project initially envisaged the involvement of some high school students in a preliminary focus group phase to collect suggestions and points of view of the young people about their future projects (including desires, fears, doubts about the choice of the university), which it would be followed by workshops where a theme of the gender-orientation relationship would be proposed that could hopefully support the paths of university choice by deconstructing some gender stereotypes that risk binding or precluding some possible choices or experiences from the beginning (Padoan, 2020; Brambilla, 2016).

The pandemic completely reversed plans in several moments: it was no longer possible to meet students in schools. Therefore, the intervention research project focused on focus groups aimed at university students who should have followed double interviews to be carried out in person. The worsening of the pandemic situation led to online interviews rather than face to face interviews.

The aim of this article is to highlight our personal experience to inform future research, encouraging flexibility and reflexivity in research, and implementing the university's focus on the connection between gender and orientation.

In accordance with the original project and with the subsequent changes made to the project following the COVID-19 emergency, we asked ourselves a series of initial questions to reflect. The main research question should be summarised in: «*How COVID-19 influenced the Gender Orientation Project for University Choice?*». Due to the pandemic, as said, we afforded the interruption and reformulation of the original proposal, and this contribution is a starting point for reflection.

We assumed that the COVID-19 emergency had implications and repercussions regarding various aspects of the project and in particular:

- on the design of interventions;
- on the methodologies and tools used;

¹ Piano Lauree Scientifiche: <https://www.pianolaureescientifiche.it/>.

² The Interdepartmental Center for Gender Studies – ABCD <https://abcd.unimib.it/english-description/>.

- on exacerbation of gender inequalities.

With regard to the intervention plan, as mentioned, the pandemic forced to reduce the scope of some initiatives in terms of time and number, and to modify the original project where the impossibility of being in attendance represented the main difficulty. This necessarily led to reflecting on the implementation of remote detection methods. As highlighted in numerous contributions, the idea of reformulating the original project in order to adapt it to new conditions is a frequently opted issue (De Barros et al., 2020; Nind et al., 2021).

About methodologies and tools, the impossibility of acting in person required a reformulation of the project procedures. Starting from the limits imposed by the pandemic, we tried to adapt our objectives according with the new technological tools made available by the University itself. In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic altered the landscape of higher education, forcing institutes across the globe to lockdown campuses and shift instructional methods (Kara, Khoo, 2020a; 2020b).

Finally, we reflected on how much the pandemic situation exacerbated gender inequalities and how much this may have an impact on the present and future orientation projects as well, especially those that are characterised by a gender-sensitive approach (Collins et al., 2020; Riva, 2020).

In particular, we have long wondered about the specific relapses concerning the aspects mentioned above in the arrival of the pandemic, specifically:

- On the topic in question (orientation / gender);
- On the redesign of the intervention;
- On logistical and practical issues;
- On ethical and cultural issues.

In this contribution, we present the aims and the features of our original intervention research project who is part of the Scientific Degree Plan Project (paragraph 1). In paragraph 2, we describe the changes of the original project resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic emergency. Following this, in paragraph 3, we examine our experience and offer some reflections on the expected and least expected aspects that emerged during the reorganisation and relative implementation of the project in the light of the changes made. Finally, in the concluding paragraph we share some reflections about future perspectives on the different methodological, ethical and orientation plans.

1. The original project

Our intervention research project is part of the National Plan for Scientific Degrees (PLS). PLS was implemented on the initiative of the Ministry of

Education, University and Research in 2005³, consolidating the experience of the Scientific Degrees Project for the disciplines of Mathematics, Chemistry, Physics and Materials Science to strengthen the linking actions between school and university and between university and the world of work and to spread interest in scientific subjects by students of secondary schools.

Since 2016, the National Scientific Degree Plan has also been active for Biology and Biotechnology, Geology and Statistics. From 2018 the project also involves the study courses of Computer Science and Environmental Sciences, with national coordination for each discipline. The project support the orientation of students in scientific areas and the training of secondary school teachers according to the guidelines of Ministerial Decree 976/2014.

The Scientific Degree Plan (PLS) at the University of Milan-Bicocca⁴ have implemented the activity started in the past years to direct students to a more reasoned and conscious choice of the Course of Studies. Both the interdisciplinary initiatives and the activities organised by the PLS specific to the various disciplines are currently fixed points of the University training offer. Among the specific initiatives of the broader Scientific Degree Plan (PLS) project, there are those of the three-year degree courses in Statistics linked to student orientation. More specifically, The Scientific Degree Plan Project (PLS) group in collaboration with ABCD (Interdepartmental Center for Gender Studies of the University of Milan-Bicocca), commissioned a project on gender and orientation⁵.

The original project provided an occasion for practice, intervention and initiative in supporting an orientation considering the influences of gender dimensions in the choice of higher studies.. The project aimed at providing information and training opportunities on the influence that stereotypes and traditional representations of professional profiles exert on university choice, limiting the margins of awareness, reflexivity, freedom and self-determination (Felini, Di Bari, 2019; Gamberi et al., 2010).

The main target was made up of third or 4th year students attending upper secondary schools, both in the scientific and humanistic areas. The activity was aimed to be an opportunity for critical reflection on the relationship between gender and orientation, with particular concerning the choice of university courses and the related educational, existential and professional implications.

³ <http://www.progettolaureescientifiche.eu/il-progetto-lauree-scientifiche-la-storia-2005-2009/>

⁴ PLS at the University of Milan-Bicocca: <https://www.scienze.unimib.it/it/orientamento/piano-lauree-scientifiche-bicocca>.

⁵ ABCD works with PLS: <https://abcd.unimib.it/attivita-di-ricerca/seminari-di-ricerca-abcd/>.

The initiative was originally divided into a series of phases managed by an interdisciplinary research group composed by the authors (two pedagogists, one sociologist and one psychologist) with the scientific supervision of a statistician expert in social demography⁶:

1.1 Phase 1

The intervention started with the implementation of 4 Focus Groups (FG) with male and female students of 4 different university courses (humanities and hard sciences). More specifically, these appointments were dedicated to the exploration of:

- a. the university choice (motivations, desires, paths, supports/obstacles);
- b. the university experience lived as boys and girls;
- c. imaginary around the university experience of those who live it from within a gender minority;
- d. expectations, wishes and fears for one's future;
- e. advice for secondary school students and their university choice.

1.2 Phase 2

This phase aimed to realise face-to-face double interviews with male and female university students who participated in the focus groups to create a video to be submitted to high school students. The use of the collected material should have formed the basis for phase 3 and, more specifically, face-to-face guidance interventions in high schools (Denicolai, Farinacci, 2020).

1.3 Phase 3

The specific objective was the collection of some suggestions and points of view of the young people on their future projects including desires and fears (Savickas, 2015) about the choice of university. This phase included the scheduling of meetings dedicated to high school students to talk about the university choice from a gender perspective.

The first phase was carried out according to the times and methods envisaged in the original project. On 19th and 20th of February 2021, 4 focus groups were held with the participation of students from the University of Milan-Bicocca from the courses of Education, Primary Education, Social Service, Materials Science, Computer Science. On the 24th the first COVID-19 regional lockdown was declared. In the meantime, in the months preceding the first COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, the working group contacted the schools in which Phase 3 should have been implemented. One scientific high school and one Human Science High school of Milan and the city hinterland confirmed their interest in implementing the project, confirming that there had never been a gender-sensitive orientation within their institution and, at the same time, recognising its need. Both schools identified the contact person who

⁶ Prof. Laura Terzera.

would manage the relations between school and university. As the pandemic progressed, contact with schools was not followed up. As we will see, Phase 2 has been reformulated, and phase 3, the one involving school, currently is suspended.

2. The project during the COVID-19

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the project team group have afforded the new social condition rethinking in particular the Phase 2 methods and exploring the potentiality of online platforms to support and continue their qualitative endeavour (Dodds, Hess, 2020)

Considering the constraints and the contents emerged from the focus groups, it was decided to reformulate the Phase 2 by replacing the previously hypothesised in-depth interviews with online double interviews to students with «eccentric» careers (women in STEM and men in the social and educational professions) to be used within the activity teaching, that can be enjoyed in person or remotely (Janghorban et al., 2014). The new objective of the project's activity become producing a material completely accessible online, that could be used in presence or remotely as didactic material in an orientation intervention for high school students.

The face-to-face interviews were due to take place on March 23, 2020. The reorganisation of face to face to online interviews took the interviews to be done on December 14, 2020. The technical support Multimedia Services Sector of University of Milan-Bicocca helped the double interviews realisation.

3. What about our experience?

As said, the COVID-19 pandemic experience took the project group to interrogate itself deeply among different dimensions such as the impact on the topic question, on the redesign of the intervention and the methodological issue related to the redesign and on the ethical and cultural issue linked to the reorganisation of the project and the new social configuration of the interviewers and interviewed.

3.1 On the topic question

The main objective of the project was exploring and supporting the university orientation considering the choice of higher studies with a gender approach.

During the focus groups and in particular, during the online interviews, we noticed that some students seemed to have reflected on the gender topic by themselves or during some attended university courses and were sensitive to it. Conversely, other students seemed to focus on the gender topic for the first time and were not able to relate it to themselves

and their biography. In both cases, in the narratives collected we observed some risks.

Risks identified, first of all, concerning an «ease» of overcoming constraints and limits related to stereotypes and gender order (e.g., I have chosen in absolute freedom / advice to choose according to your wishes). In this sense, the choice of their future does not seem to reflect anything other than their own decision, their own desire, their own commitment. A certainly positive look at one's own possibilities, that which however ignores the weight and educational consequences of gender constraints and other dimensions intertwined with them (like class, ability, culture, ethnicity etc.) (Casalini, 2018).

Moreover, this element becomes significant if we considered that, some students pointed out the role of middle school in orienting their trajectories in higher education. According to the literature, we consider that students are more or less oriented towards specific trajectories by teachers and other professionals in the school they have attended (Formenti et al., 2015; Olivier et al., 2018; van Zanten, Maxwell, 2015). The lack of systematic attention to the gender dimension at all school grades (from primary school to university) prevents many teachers and students not only from designing a gender orientation but from noticing what is already informally and problematically present.

The collected focus groups and the overall project invite to reflect on another risk: gender issues often were seemed to be exclusively traced back to the numerical disparity of presences (male or female) in the study courses, which it is believed can therefore be overcome by achieving an equal presence of men and women (Biemmi and Leonelli 2016). Where present, this simplification makes problematic the meaning that students could give to some tools, such as quotas and incentives for an equal presence of genders in university courses. Tools that are strategic but not resolute themselves. Indeed, this simplification prevents students from understanding the complexity of the functioning of a gender order (Connell, 2011) and its equally complex educational implications. On the contrary, it offers the possibility for many gender stereotypes to survive⁷. The nature itself of the National Plan for Scientific Degrees leads investment in promoting the presence of women in STEM. Instead, there are no incentives for men in care / education – related courses («it's less cool») (Holtermann, 2019).

3.2 On the redesign of intervention, methodological issue

Literature regarding the COVID-19 emergency addresses methodological challenges in the redesign of interventions mainly due to difficulties in recruiting participants, avoiding distorted samples, building and maintaining research relationships. For example, from the point of view of researchers, it is difficult to create trust with participants without in-person contact, getting/updating ethics approval in a stressful time for

⁷ <http://www.expecteverything.eu/hypatia/>

participants (and also for researchers themselves) due to the great uncertainty at collective level, and data analysis when the pandemic has 'modified both research fields and methodological strategies' (De Barros et al., 2020, 243).

In our research during the pandemic, we intercepted some problems mainly connected to the student double interviews online. Concerning the interviewees, the possibility of contact only by telephone, by email, or, worse, through a mediator who probably contacted them in the same way made them lose a possibility of empathy and motivation to carry out the interview, which made the process of interviewing more complex recruitment.

We also matched technical difficulties such as the audio, the video quality, the network connection, the metallic voice: these are all aspects that made more complicated realising empathy (Sullivan, 2012; Lupton 2020; Howlett 2020; Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman 2020).

Despite the difficulties described above, there are also elements of positivity in online interviews. One of these is represented by the possibility of «entering» the rooms of the students interviewed with the consequent possibility of carrying out a small ethnography concerning the most intimate environments of the lives of boys and girls (Sangaramoorthy, Kroeger, 2020).

3.3 On the ethical issues and cultural issues

For some study courses (in particular for Materials Sciences), the recruitment of interviewees was challenging. As researchers, we wonder if this issue is linked to the lack of awareness on the issue of gender but do not have enough to prove it. As a research group, we had fewer difficulties in recruiting students from the humanistic course degree and more on the scientific courses where the intervention of the mediator with higher hierarchical level resulted as necessary in order to obtain the students' participation (Vicente et al., 2020). This last issue led emerge an ethical problem concerning the involvement of students that probably were obliged by their teachers to participate.

Interviewing in a period of social isolation means considering the very reason that drives the researcher to carry out online interviews, which is the existence of the pandemic, among the ethical aspects of research (Miller, 2020). The main restitution that the interviewer can give to his interlocutors is the willingness to listen and the interest in what students want to tell, but what if the students are not really interested in participating? What is their advantage? How can the interviewer repay his interlocutors in such cases (Geertz, 2000)? Those are issues that inevitably arose where the short interviews involved people who had never thought about the subject in question.

Furthermore, the pandemic has given rise to the phenomenon of the «pandemic fatigue» also given by the considerable time spent in front of the screens (Labrague, Ballard, 2020; Hawley et al., 2021). Recruiting

research participants in times of hardship, anxiety, and social distance is another ethical issue that interviewers have to deal with.

Conclusion

This article has sought to identify the most salient issues faced by the project group during the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing this, we obtained some expected results and some unexpected results on the project's overall objective and on how we implemented it.

Concerning the expected results, we found that the online interviews resulted particularly complex compared to face to face interviews, due to both technical problems and increased difficulties in realising empathy between the interviewer and the interviewee (Will et al., 2020). Moreover, approaching the gender dimension of one's personal and educational biography for the first time requires time and the presence of an interlocutor who supports the attention and reflection of those involved in the interview.

A second unexpected result concerns the project's aim related to the sensitivity to the gender dimension: reflection on the gender issue is particularly weak on students coming from degree and master degree courses where the gender topic is not addressed. In fact, according to the theory of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) an adult could learn to change their meaning schemes if, in their life, they come across a disorienting dilemma (something that do not have a clear solution) and they have a time and a good enough space (Winnicott, 1971; Merrill, West, 2009) to interrogate it for becoming more reflexive and capable of acting people (Formenti, West, 2018; Vindrola et al., 2020; Teti et al., 2020). In this sense, the intervention promoted and the reflections conducted invite to plan a (continuous) exchange between middle and university students on gender issues related to orientation so that these stimuli can become opportunities for all participants for reflection, training, awareness of one's education (formal and informal) (Tramma, 2009; 2019), between constraints, desires and opportunities.

It is hoped that this article can be of use to further develop cross-cultural qualitative methodology and expand upon the emerging field of literature surrounding video conferencing qualitative research.

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