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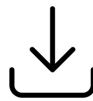
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A Picture, a Lighthouse, a Kite: Metaphors of Emergency Teaching

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ABSTRACT: *This study presents the metaphors that emerged from a group of 22 teachers interviewed about their switch to remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main theoretical framework adopted to study the emergency teaching situation (Hodges et al., 2020) was that of smart learning, defined as 'context-aware ubiquitous learning' (Hwang, 2014) and as centred on content, rather than on devices (Gwak, 2010). Primary school teachers from Italy were interviewed about online and smart learning. Following the idea that proficiency can not exist without the ability to reflect on and about actions (Nuzzaci 201), participants were asked to describe their experiences by choosing images or ideas that would represent them. The use of metaphors allowed us to better understand their feelings related to the condition of emergency teaching. Data from the interviews was classified in four emerging themes used by participants: a. distance – picturing themselves as TV characters only available to students through a screen, or as pictures hanging from a wall, teachers felt the weight of barriers over their relationships with classes; b. responsibility and co-responsibility – reflection became an opportunity to question responsibility, as teachers felt like a lighthouse for their pupils, trying to help in overcoming their difficulties; other sea-related metaphors, like that of a lone sailor and a huge storm, or a deep abyss, tell the story of a very difficult situation in which references were lost; on a more positive note, some teachers saw this situation as a possibility for the blooming of new competencies and new co-responsibility links with families – a kite built with pupils but led by a teacher; c. the wasteland – this group of metaphors mostly involved Special Education teachers, who felt disconnected from pupils 'like a rock at the bottom of a river', or screaming in a nightmare depicted as a variant of Munch's Scream; the difficulty or impossibility to have meaningful relationships with children with special needs affected the teachers' morale and sense of fear; d. travelling between two worlds – seeing the remote teaching experience as a journey, teachers felt like abandoning a well-known habitat to explore distant and unexplored worlds, mostly based on an 'analogic vs digital' discourse; many participants felt that this change was non-reversible, as the future scenarios will always have to come to terms with what happened during the pandemic period.*

KEYWORDS: *Smart learning, Narrative thought, Remote teaching, Primary schools*

Introduction

In the period between March and June 2020, Italy found itself, like the rest of Europe and the world, in an unimaginable situation of forced closure due to the COVID-19 emergency. The entire student population «stopped going to school and started receiving telematic communications from teachers or educators» (Pastori *et al.,* 2021). Therefore, for the teaching staff, it was also a sudden change, because they found themselves dealing with a total immersion in digital teaching, driven by the emergency and not by a carefully planned intervention. This study is based on the direct observation of the emergency teaching phenomenon and tries to take a snapshot of it at the moment in which it occurred. This paper aims to be a contribution to an in-depth understanding of the perceptions and experiences of primary school teachers, through the elicitation and discussion of metaphors that have the power to describe the perceptions of these teachers at the time of the health emergency, using semi-structured interviews.

1. State of the Art

As it can be observed in the literature, after the COVID-19 pandemic emergency researchers all over the world have been active in exploring brand new scenarios, based on novel research questions. In particular, about smart and online learning, Todd (2020) observes that «online learning becomes the new norm, the fact that the shift was power-coercitive and unplanned is worrying, even if it was the only option available for continuing education provision». The main theoretical framework referred to in this article is that of Hwang (2014): 'smart learning' is defined as learning that can take place anywhere, anytime thanks to smart devices. They are «the building blocks of the Internet of Things» (Kopetz, 2011), linked together they create a solid structure over imperceptible data and information.

Hwang (2014) also introduces the idea of 'context-aware ubiquitous learning', or 'u-learning', that takes into account the interaction between learners and environments, resulting in a learning environment that makes 'adaptations and provides appropriate support'.

On the other hand, concerning narratives and metaphors in the humanities, Garramone, Lipari and Genzano (2017) define them as a constitutive tool of the «first form of mediation between different realities, being closer to the sensible and the real». Narration is «the first expression of deep learning to shape one's questions and formulate adequate representations of them» (Farahi, 2020) and allows us to understand others, but also, and above all, to understand ourselves (Bruner, 2002). On this basis, it can be assumed that narratives, as well as metaphors, are the only means that «give continuity to our experience of us» and allow «an act of creation of our Self» (Poggio, 2004). As

Eriksson and Pinnegar (2017) argue «metaphors capture the individual identity and specify the plotlines of teaching and the obligations, duties, and responsibilities of the teacher as well as the role of the teacher and others in the teacher's practice».

2. The research project

The fieldwork took place from the second half of May 2020 until the end of July 2020. The research sample consisted of twenty-two primary school teachers: nineteen women and three men, five of them were special education teachers and seventeen curricular teachers. Most of them lived and worked in the North of Italy.

The choice of participants was mainly based on acquaintances of the researchers, but also included four people who were contacted via online communities and social networking websites. It is important to consider that in the initial research design the sample was intended to be made up of twelve to fifteen people, but near the end of the data collection phase, one of the participants spontaneously addressed an unexpected and interesting topic: lifelong learning in the era of webinars. It seemed appropriate to add some other participants so that this new topic could emerge in a relevant and consistent way.

Interviews were conducted on the phone: this choice was dictated by the impossibility of moving due to the national health emergency, and it was hence not possible to take note of the non-verbal and para-verbal elements that give hints about the processes being carried out by participants. This technique allows, in some ways, to replace the face-to-face interview, but some reticence, perhaps determined by the context the interviewed person was in, was quite evident, easily observable. A further obstacle detected by researchers was the use of specific jargon, typical of educators and teachers, which sometimes needed to be clarified to make the answer congruent with the question asked. In this sense, Mantovani (1998) recalls how «the language used by the interviewer must be suitable for the interviewee», because «the meaning that [the researcher] attributes to the terms must be exactly the one that the participant attributes to it».

However, on two occasions videoconferencing could be used, but on one of them it was realised that non-verbal communication could heavily influence the answers received from the participants. For this reason, the remainder of the interviews were conducted on the phone, asking for consent to record the call in advance and guaranteeing anonymity in the transcription phase.

At some point before one of the interviews, it was necessary to create a comfortable and trustful scenario for one of the participants who had some feelings of unease. The subject contacted the interviewer a few days before the interview for fear of not being adequately prepared on the topics of the interview, not so much for the interview itself. In fact,

among the suggestions most often given to those who conduct surveys of this kind is that of saying «a few more words (to clarify a misunderstanding, to show curiosity and respect towards the opinions of the interviewee, etc.) rather than one word less» (Fazzi, Martire, 2010).

2.1. Methods

To conduct this study, we followed a qualitative research approach. As Cecconi (2002) notes, this research paradigm allows us to understand the object of a study «from the perspective of the participants in the phenomenon itself and not from that of the researcher». To explore the teachers' experiences we chose the tool of the semi-structured interview with a series of questions that aimed to explore what was happening to them in that specific period, and particularly: the start of distance learning, the difficulties, the problems, the evaluation tools adopted, the collective reflection, the socialisation, the educational relationship and finally the creation of a metaphor or the proposal of an image that could help the researcher to understand the positioning of the participant with respect to the experience they were living. Next, content analysis was performed on the interview transcripts, which as Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017) note is a «continuous process of coding and categorising then returning to the raw data to reflect on your initial analysis». To code and categorise the contents of the interviews, we chose to make use of the NVivo 2012 software, a tool that belongs to the category of Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS)[1].

Coppola (2011) points out that this tool «is designed to assist the work of those conducting research from the beginning to the end of the research process». This is a delicate operation, as it is possible to find a topic within the same textual string initially marked with another code. In this phase, the researcher has a great responsibility because thanks to a careful reading of the transcripts and the re-listening of the interviews, it is possible to catch also the unsaid, opening up new possible interpretations.

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the interview transcripts, and especially of the answers given to the last question in the interview script, allowed to define four main emerging themes, appearing with different degrees of concentration. The most present was 'distance', together with 'responsibility and co-responsibility'. A few interviews proposed the topic we labelled as 'the wasteland' or explored the 'travelling between two worlds' theme. What follows is a discussion of the metaphors used by

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[1] NVivo, https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/home.

participants to describe their feelings, with an attempt at interpreting and classifying them.

3.1. Distance

Among the most common concepts and images summoned by participants in their responses, 'distance' is the most prominent, as well as the presence of an obstacle separating them from their worlds. One of them imagined herself as a character inside a drawing: she felt as she was in a closed place, with an open window; her pupils were in front of her, but she could not make contact with them. This metaphor introduces the idea that emergency teaching caused a huge relational gap, in which the teacher is far away and experiences difficulties in maintaining an effective connection with the class. Moreover, the idea that the educator is inside a drawing could be interpreted as a 'reality surrogate' in which the teacher feels to be trapped.

The concept of 'obstacle' was introduced by another participant: she described a barrier preventing an authentic relationship with her pupils, while another teacher used a stronger image – that of an elderly person in a nursing house, in front of plexiglass protection. These statements brought in the topic of the impossibility to have direct contact and the sense of frustration that derives from it.

Another participant described herself as a TV character, like the ones seen in popular afternoon shows[2]. In particular, she felt compelled to think about all the possible methodologies, ideas and ways to engage children, leveraging their creativity and imagination. The character was described as separated from its public by a screen, with children that could not be questioned.

The last image that falls into this theme was proposed by a teacher who used the evocative metaphor of many hands stretching out to touch each other but never actually being able to make contact. She felt she could not have a 'real' connection with the classroom, she just had a hint of being in contact but ultimately felt the impossibility of authentic interaction.

3.2. Responsibility and co-responsibility

The second main theme that was identifiable in the interviews was that of 'responsibility'. Among the metaphors that fall into this category, the most emblematic is probably that of a lighthouse, used by a participant to highlight the important role she felt she had during the emergency period as a reference for her class and the families of her pupils. Moreover, she recounted moments in which she helped them in overcoming their difficulties, mostly connected to the loss of friends and relatives. The lighthouse is a representation of the teacher herself, entering the households and helping families not getting lost in the storm represented by the COVID-19 emergency.

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[2] The reference here was to Melevisione, a popular Italian TV show for younger children.

With a very similar image, another participant told he felt as a boatman engaged in a journey, a sort of odyssey: in this trip, the educator saw himself in the middle of a storm, together with his pupils, in a sort of Noah's ark. The idea of a storm, or an abyss, appeared frequently in the interviews: another teacher described all the pandemic crisis as 'a very unstable condition'. She used the metaphor of a tightrope walker, saying she was constantly investing in research about teaching and learning, with no assurances or certainties.

Referring to this theme another participant used the metaphor of a tree, or a group of trees, like wood or a forest, bringing in the idea of complexity and reciprocal support: trees in a forest are not alone but surrounded by other trees, hence the teacher in the emergency scenario stood together with colleagues and students. This positive metaphor introduces a variant of this second theme, which was labelled co-'responsibility'. Another participant proposed the idea of a circle of children: she was at the centre of it, with all the pupils around her. In this metaphor children, parents and teachers are mutually supportive, just like the trees in the previous one.

One last metaphor that was classified under this theme was that of a rose. This flower has two different meanings for the participant who proposed it. The first one was connected to the thorns, which represented the difficulties and issues that she encountered, as well as her doubts regarding the new methods imposed by emergency teaching. The second one referred to a personal 'blooming' in terms of abilities and competencies, especially those related to digital teaching. The participant's system of beliefs was overturned: something that she was suspicious of became interesting and useful for her practice, empowering her and changing her perception of responsibility towards students.

3.3. The Wasteland

Only a few respondents described their experience using images that could be classified as pertaining to the theme of a 'wasteland', expressing a sense of disorientation in their role as special education teachers. One of them told about how he felt 'like a rock in a river', unable to reach out to pupils with disabilities. The river in this metaphor represented knowledge, and the stone referred to stillness and to the impossibility to act, generating frustration. Similarly, another participant felt as if she was inside *The Scream*, a famous painting by Edvard Munch, living a nightmare experience. A picture book titled *Il buco*[3] inspired another metaphor, as the main character of that story has a very huge hole in her stomach, from which monsters exit.

These metaphors were interpreted as the representation of participants' fears during the emergency teaching experience, mostly

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[3] *Il buco* is a picture book by Anna Llenas, distributed in Italy by Gribaudo. Original edition: A. Llenas (2015). *Vacío*. Granada: Barbara Fiore Editora.

generated by the uncertain future and by the lack of proper training, tools and infrastructure surrounding them.

3.4. Travellers between two worlds

Part of the sample used metaphors referring to a 'journey' between a real world and a virtual one. The clearest image in this sense is that of a bridge, linking remote places and habits. One of the participants imagined crossing it, while thinking about the sea underneath, with all the risks and the mysteries hidden in it. One of the interviewed teachers described this bridge as a connection between two worlds: in one world there are remote places and distant habits, while in the other one everything is known, and teachers had to cross the seas and overcome all the difficulties and risks. The only certain thing was her change at the end of the journey: this was described as inevitable by another participant, and only coming after a mutual, shared change.

Similarly, the metaphor proposed by another participant was that of diving in the sea, explained as a way to find and try out new teaching methods, with the help of a lot of webinars and online resources. Besides connections between land and water, there were also metaphors connected to the idea of a double nature of teaching: analogue and digital. One metaphor proposed by a participant involved a picture representing a man, walking down a road that gradually turns into a photograph. She connected this to the idea of being in a liminal territory, the digital one, that helped her in connecting with her pupils.

Conclusions

The metaphors presented in this paper only offer a glimpse of the experience lived during the first season of distance teaching in 2020 and reflect only a part of what was the effect of a sudden and radical change in the practices of teachers. They were used to working in the presence of others and to carrying out work that thrives on constant and multi-level human relationships.

The themes that emerged from this study offer a faceted view of the complex array of experiences that characterized the professional life of teachers during the pandemic crisis in 2020. They felt distant yet did not forget their responsibility, often acting as a reference for their pupils and their families. They travelled through wastelands and between worlds, learning things that would have required far more time.

It would be interesting, as a follow-up study, to interview the same people a few years from now, to see to what degree their perceptions and representations will change or remain the same, considering the unpredictable nature of the scenario they lived in.

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