

Promoting digital awareness among pupils with special educational needs to combat their exclusion

Promoción de la conciencia digital entre el alumnado con necesidades educativas especiales para combatir su exclusión

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PALABRAS CLAVE:

Digital competence
Digital awareness
Inclusion.

RESUMEN:

The aim of this paper is a critical reflection on digital education and on the development of essential skills useful to empower onlife citizenship. According with European Recommendations, the student needs to achieve a digital awareness that allows him or her to critically understand the so large amount of information of digitised society. In order for every student to achieve the same results, it is essential to pay particular attention to the needs of each student, especially those with special educational needs. To keep up with digital transformation, the actions that society has taken to tackle the digital issue also extend to school context. From the educational point of view, the key to ensuring the success of each student lies in the educational co-responsibility and active collaboration of the entire educational community. Therefore, creating a common educational program can contribute to the success of digital and media education.

KEYWORDS:

Competencia digital
Conciencia digital
Inclusión.

RESUMO:

El objetivo de este artículo es una reflexión crítica sobre la educación digital y el desarrollo de habilidades esenciales útiles para fortalecer la ciudadanía en línea. De acuerdo con las Recomendaciones Europeas, el estudiante necesita alcanzar una conciencia digital que le permita comprender críticamente la gran cantidad de información de la sociedad digitalizada. Para que cada estudiante logre los mismos resultados, es fundamental prestar especial atención a las necesidades de cada uno, especialmente aquellos con necesidades educativas especiales. Para mantenerse al día con la transformación digital, las acciones que la sociedad ha tomado para abordar el tema digital también se extienden al contexto escolar. Desde el punto de vista educativo, la clave para garantizar el éxito de cada estudiante radica en la corresponsabilidad educativa y la colaboración activa de toda la comunidad educativa. Por lo tanto, la creación de un programa educativo común puede contribuir al éxito de la educación digital y mediática.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

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ABSTRACT:

O objetivo deste artigo é uma reflexão crítica sobre a educação digital e o desenvolvimento de habilidades essenciais úteis para fortalecer a cidadania onlife. De acordo com as Recomendações Europeias, o aluno precisa alcançar uma consciência digital que lhe permita compreender criticamente a grande quantidade de informações da sociedade digitalizada. Para que cada aluno obtenha os mesmos resultados, é fundamental prestar atenção especial às necessidades de cada um, especialmente daqueles com necessidades educativas especiais. Para acompanhar a transformação digital, as ações que a sociedade tomou para abordar a questão digital também se estendem ao contexto escolar. Do ponto de vista educacional, a chave para garantir o sucesso de cada aluno está na co-responsabilidade educacional e na colaboração ativa de toda a comunidade escolar. Portanto, a criação de um programa educacional comum pode contribuir para o sucesso da educação digital e de mídia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The exponential development of digital generated new social and cultural dynamics. The related academic interest can be seen in the community transformation of recent years, and in the new exploited adaptation methodologies.

Through the union between online and offline life, the onlife society becomes an augmented reality (Buonauro & Domenici, 2020), from which it is not possible to escape. The human being is experiencing a completely new way of dealing with hyper connected everyday life. These new ways of life inevitably generate differences in the access and in the use of digital, influenced by personal and social characteristics. Person with disability, or with temporary disorders, may find himself lacking the resources, material and otherwise, necessary to keep up with change and to contain exclusion.

The digital transition represents a difficult challenge that is still bringing problems. The need to prepare a social structure through inclusive paths has produced many difficulties, which are still prevailing. One of these is the Digital Divide, a heterogeneous and multi-faceted construct. This phenomenon is not identifiable in a single reality, but must be broken down and analysed according to the different peculiarities. In this regard, Marangi et al. (2022) introduce the distinction between Digital Divide and digital educational poverty: in the first one is assumed the lack of access or the lack of digital technologies use by everyone, while the second one is aimed at achieving the necessary skills to take advantage of the new corporate structure, exercising its digital citizenship.

Inclusive information and communication technologies (ICTs) are often associated with assistive technologies. However, you must also take into account the daily use of such technologies, such as smartphones. Nevertheless, to let these tools usable and accessible with efficacy, they must be accessible and usable (Gaggioli, 2018). In the post-mediality era, we are living a change in the way of accessing information. If in the past newspapers, radio and television were the main sources of information, nowadays digital technology has seen an exponential increase in information and through different channels. Nowadays young generation, to access information, prefers social networks and other online channels. The growing use of smartphones has made daily life hyper-connected and saturated with information, which are too often coming from sources less transparent and reliable (Falzone, 2023).

The complexity of the current society, characterized by a multiplicity of facets such as migratory flows, globalization, digitalization, inevitably drive to a rethinking of the educational system (Buonauro & Domenici, 2020) The European Commission launched a new initiative to develop the European Union's Youth Employment Programme. The legislator to act for social development and to ensure equity in digital access, and it is also the task of school, which has to ensure its proper use through training actions strictly personalized on each student's needs. "Access to technology is a central theme and is now fully considered as an integral part of the right to education" (Unesco, 2024). This right "must respond to all people's need to access, master and use technology as a tool that can provide the ability to become active members of society" (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2022).

With the introduction of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), Italy is working to improve the individual's quality of life, especially in terms of health and education, strengthening the country's inclusiveness. Recent years have been marked by a succession of national and European laws and actions, with the aim of meeting the continuous needs arising from the socio-digital transformation. One of the main actions is the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027, in which the European Union lays the foundations for a common definition of accessible and inclusive digital education. The motivation lies in the desire to create a common impetus between Member States in addressing the challenge of the digital transition (European Commission, <https://education.ec.europa.eu/it/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan>). The Plan aims to develop a high-performance digital education ecosystem, supporting each individual through high quality tools and methodologies. "By helping citizens to acquire basic digital skills from an early age (digital literacy [...]) combating misinformation, computer education and good knowledge and understanding of data-intensive technologies such as artificial intelligence." (Marangi et al., 2022). Digital literacy and skill development in students with special educational needs becomes a priority objective (Dettori, 2021) to enable everyone to exercise their right to be an active citizen, in consideration of their own needs and peculiarities.

2. DIGITAL COMPETENCE AS A TOOL FOR EMANCIPATION

According to a survey conducted by the European Union (European Commission, 2022) in June 2021 the 99.8% of Italian households were covered by at least one fixed broadband network, with 8.6 percentage points difference between urban and rural areas (respectively 97.0% and 88.4%). In the same year, ISTAT (2023) conducts a research on basic digital skills of Italians. The study shows that the age group between 16 and 74 years old, the percentage of "digitally competent" citizens amounts to 45.7%, with a difference in height between the Middle and South of Italy. Narrowing the target to the 20-24 age group, the percentage increases to 61.7%. The influence of educational attainment is also a relevant aspect; in fact, people aged 25-54 with tertiary education have a basic knowledge of digital instruments.

The decreasing age of first access to internet by younger people brings with it the need to foster greater awareness about everything that is digitally accessible. Through digital awareness education, students student have the chance to reach a level of competence indispensable to become a digital citizen. The concept of digital competence, complex and multiform, is closely aligned to an active and conscious use of whatever you find online. To understand the meaning of this construct, in 2013 the European Commission introduced DigComp. This framework, currently version 2.2, identifies the five areas of digital competence: Information & data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety and problem solving and at least basic digital skills.

By analysing the ISTAT survey (2023) described above, it is possible to identify the level of competence in each of DigComp 2.2 five areas. In the area "Communication and Collaboration", the gap between Italian citizens and the EU27 average is minimal, standing at 75.8% compared to 77.5% in EU27. In the "digital content creation" section, the Italian percentage is 41% against

45.2% in EU27, while in the area of “problem solving” it is 47% against 52.7% in EU27. There is also a clear difference of -9.8 percentage points compared to the EU27 average in the area “Information & data literacy”, followed by -7.6 percentage points compared to the EU27 average in the area “safety”. The research shows a serious lack of information and data literacy, which may raise concerns about the low awareness of Italian people regarding the potential of digital technology and the risks that result from it.

School must know benefits and risks of digital tools and one of its goal and duty should be to pursue and promote the personal and social empowerment of each student, especially for those who need support activities. Living in the “dating” society means that you can often encounter a large number of conflicting and misleading information. It is fundamental, in fact, to analyse them by recognizing their reliability through critical thinking (Falzone, 2023). What the Italian “Buona Scuola” Law (L. 107 of 13 July 2015) already identified in the past is still an urgency and we need to promote in students the development of digital skills, not simply identifiable in technical skills but also in the ability to use critical thinking (Scarinci et al., 2022) reaching a deep understanding.

It is therefore urgent to provide tools that are essential for adapting to digital transformation, which are proactive and not reparative. Through Media Literacy it is possible to understand and use ICT independently, with the aim of overcoming the Digital Divide and preventing exclusion (Buonauro & Domenici, 2020).

Focusing educational action on the development of digital skills and knowledge is essential to analyse and understand the reliability of online content (Fabiano, 2023). Too often, we are mere users of information; especially the youngest that tend to inform themselves exclusively through social networks, remaining simple spectators without the ability to recognize information authenticity. This is supported by a recent study conducted by Cortoni (2022) on digital awareness of students, in which he highlighted the passivity of adolescents in interacting with online information. Indeed, social media are the main platforms for young people to stay up-to-date on events, but the online participation of respondents is absent: 63% of them never participate in online consultations on social and political issues, and 50% never express public opinions on the matter. This supports the view that schools need to strengthen their educational action through inclusive teaching which recognizes and addresses the needs of others. The aim is to be able to select and read information critically online, use technology to solve problems and be aware of their rights and duties, while respecting themselves and others.

3. DIGITAL EDUCATIONAL CO-RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

With the introduction of the PNRR's School Plan 4.0, adopted by the Ministry of Education decree no. 161 of 14 June 2022 (MIM, 2022), the foundations for the creation of hybrid learning environments are laid through the union between digital technology and school. To face the risks arising from hyper connection, the Declaration of Rights in the Internet (Chamber of Deputies, 2015) is issued, endorsed by the EU through the General Data Protection Regulation (2016/679) This is a document that highlights the need to protect citizens' data when browsing online. The aim of the institutions is to strengthen Digital Safety, through the development of digital soft skills (Cortoni, 2022). As the process of meaning attribution, compared to online information, is subjective and not only determined by context, it is essential that school provides students with the opportunity to independently and consciously identify their meaning (Buonauro & Domenici, 2020). The educational action responds to support the student in understanding the idea of the surrounding world. School and family, as primary educational agencies, are called to strengthen their alliance to meet the needs arising from digital. This cooperation focuses on promoting the inclusion of all students, with a view to achieving their own empowerment. The attention paid to those with special educational needs has meant that school action is centred on the needs of the individual, paying attention to every need. Although it is not an easy task, those responsible for educational action are working to make learning more accessible to all and tailored to each.

The need to create a common educational action is crucial to counter the improper use of computer tools by students. The bad influence that digital can have is manifested in various psychophysical problems: to sleep, sight, hearing and metabolic level, as well as relational and emotional level (Pisano et al., 2022). In this scenario, school is the privileged place for the construction of the person, therefore, has the duty to offer everyone the opportunity to develop digital skills, paying attention to situations of fragility. As is well-known, digital technology plays a key role in the inclusion of students with special educational needs (Fabiano, 2020) by removing barriers and promoting accessibility. Another school's task is to involve the most vulnerable students and create targeted actions not only on digital literacy, but also social and emotional (Gaggioli, 2018).

In this regard, Gui et al (2018) have led the Digital Wellness Project with the aim of raising awareness among students about online consciousness. This is the first randomized trial in Italy on the effectiveness of media education. The research shows a worrying percentage of widespread use of smartphones, even at less appropriate times (50% of respondents use their smartphone during homework). With the aim of validating data acquired in previous research, Gui et al. (2021) repeated the survey confirming the lack in the area information & data literacy.

According to Buonauro and Domenici (2020) School and teachers have the task to understand the change in the modes of expression, communication and transmission of knowledge, adapting the teaching method to the evolution of society.

“A truly effective Media Literacy should include both technical aspects related to specific digital skills - and cultural aspects, and consider the digital media no longer only as tools, but rather as contexts within which one lives, communicates, experience of social and cultural alterity [...] in the first case, Media Literacy continues to use Media mainly as support (for example to teaching), in the second case the media are instead assumed as language and culture, for which a new operation of education and literacy is planned” (Buonauro & Domenici, 2020).

In a teaching design strictly focused on digital skills, the active involvement of the student (Fabiano, 2020) is essential for a deep understanding and empowerment. This is possible by strengthening the collaboration between school and family, extending cooperation to all entities that have the power to bring benefits to the digital inclusive process. The figure of the doctor is also central, through the Digital Health Budget (Pisano et al., 2022) in collaboration with the family. In this case, it is possible to evaluate the exposure to digital and create a basis on which to base one's educational action (Pisano et al., 2022). There is also a need to increase teacher's training which is still insufficient. According to the survey conducted by Dettori (2021), teachers have a low level of digital skills, presenting deficiencies in knowledge of ICT and their inclusive potential.

In this context the Community Pacts for digital education arised to strengthen the educational co-responsibility between school and family, and to broaden the educational horizon (Garassini et al., 2024). Through the Digital Pacts it is possible to collaborate with the active actors of the educational process, creating a solid project and focused on the needs of the student, with the aim of promoting personal and digital well-being. The union of family, school and territory is therefore indispensable to promote the development of digital awareness in students. This Pact covers five key points: establishing the right time for digital access, laying the foundations for digital autonomy, creating shared rules, empowering adults through information, and building a cohesive community. The project is therefore in development, and to date it has been adopted in 12 Italian regions with over 4,000 parents involved (Garassini et al., 2024).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Being a digital citizen means to be able to use technologies effectively and, at the same time, have developed a high level of "online civic engagement", which is manifested through interest in cultural, social, political and economic issues (Gülbay et al., 2023). In the information and data society, concern for the most disadvantaged groups must be a priority. Increasing co-responsible educational collaboration becomes the key to fostering the inclusion of students with special educational needs, who have the right to develop skills and awareness through personalized modalities. Beyond the strategies that can be adopted, this article focuses on the inclusiveness of educational cooperation.

The critical and deficiencies still present today in the society, particularly in schools, are a starting point on which to work towards common welfare. National and international laws and actions on digitization can only be effectively implemented if there is a continuous dialogue between the actors of educational action. Educating digital awareness is a fundamental prerogative to train students as future active and responsible citizens.

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