

Crises time: an opportunity to rise up against injustice and structural inequalities. Fighting alongside parents for a better world through new forms of school-family co-participation

Paola Dusi*[ⓑ] ^aAudrey Addi-Racah[ⓑ] ^bMaria Mendel[ⓑ] ^c^a Università degli Studi di Verona (Italy)^b Tel-Aviv University (Israel)^c University of Gdańsk (Poland)

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The changes that have shaped the contemporary world are many and varied. We live in a time of crises, in our economic systems, in the health of our democracies, in our very societies. Each of these aspects is inextricably linked with a crisis of equality that has seen changes sweep through many areas of our working, economic, educational, social and political lives. In such conditions, exacerbated by climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, awakening the spirit of equality should start with strengthening a vision of a better future.

Education systems are not impervious to the spirit of the time. The contemporary school is disoriented, lost in the transit from one sociocultural and economic system to another, from a school conceived as a vehicle for conveying the cultural heritage of a people (Dewey, 1990) to the “neoliberal” school at the service of its customers (families and students) and — even more so — of the “globalised” labour market. This is a school driven by a standardized (fixed and uniform) assessment system to envision its function in terms of individual performance, rather than what it could be: a place of holistic education in which a person can learn to “*ser mais*” (Freire, 1972), together with other people; a vital space in which “selection” becomes a positive force based on recognition and the appreciation of each person’s capacities, not least insofar as they serve the common good.

Across the world, the pandemic has shone a light on the challenges that the school faces in ensuring the right to a good education for all, underlining the socio-political and economic inequities which already affect us as groups and individuals and which are exacerbated by the intersection of multiple factors (from poverty, gender and disability to the experiences of people from migrant backgrounds).

As we have all witnessed, the COVID-19 crisis has worsened the conditions in which millions of families and children live, heightening their vulnerabilities (Save the Children, 2021), deepening divides in access to education and increasing both learning poverty (SOF, 2020) and the risk of social inequality and exclusion.

In this context, how can teachers and parents — through education both at school and at home, and acting both individually and collaboratively — productively animate thinking about, and the practice

* ✉ paola.dusi@univr.it

of, equality on a daily basis? How can educators fulfill their role in a new world in which meeting the challenges of injustice and working for a better world for all our children, starting with the little things that depend on oneself (Saint Teresa d'Avila, 1985)?

In this special issue, the authors lead us on a journey around the world, taking as a starting point the experiences of parents, teachers and students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the analysis of studies and research papers looking at the impact of school closures and emergency remote teaching and learning in different countries (Spain and Germany) and in a more general, global context, they emphasize the way that the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing disparities. As we see from the case of a grassroots parents' movement in Chicago, the challenge of ensuring the right to a good education for all is one that we have already been facing for many years.

Paola Dusi and Audrey Addi-Racah's article *Time to rethink the teacher-family alliance? Central issues in the "pandemic" literature on home-school cooperation*, provides a visual bibliometric analysis that maps the central themes examined in academic research on school-family relations during a "time of crisis", with a focus on COVID-19. This study covers 286 articles published up to the end of 2021, as retrieved from three data sources (Scopus, Web of Sciences, ERIC). The analysis of the papers reveals that, in the research on the parent-school relationship, the terms *distance learning*, *electronic technology* and *online learning* were prominent, reflecting the fact that, with the interruption to school-based education in this period, there has been a focus on remote emergency teaching and learning. Four clusters emerged in the analysis, each corresponding to one of the dominant themes in the literature: 1) The first is labelled "educational players", referring primarily to the *school*, *teachers* and *parental involvement*. The linkage between these terms is relatively weak, indicating that researchers looked at these players in separate instances. Amidst the upheaval of the pandemic, we witnessed a shift in the respective roles of parents and teachers, along with a variety of technological and pedagogic challenges that altered how teachers went about their work, at all levels of education, and impacted everyday family tasks; 2) The second cluster is "distance learning". It reveals that, with the digital sphere becoming central to school-family interactions, there was an interest in the use of technology-based practices to ensure the delivery of education through "*electronic learning*" or "*on-line courses*". Research looking at the experiences of parents found a broad spectrum of situations and experiences on both sides of the teacher-family relationship; 3) The third cluster, "partnership" is largely concerned with policy making during the COVID-19 crisis and reflects the challenges of communication between diverse stakeholders. The papers in this cluster focus on the flaws in social and educational systems that are still rooted in a deficit approach, whereby blame is assigned to the most vulnerable families and their children in terms of their response to distance learning; 4) The last cluster, "social context", builds on this perspective, revealing how emergency remote education has laid bare socio-economical and capital inequalities that were already present within societies. The analysis makes it possible to highlight specific issues, from the need to rethink parent and teacher roles in a way that promotes an alliance founded on the sharing of educational responsibilities, to the lack of adequate structures, and the persistence of inequities that — in too many cases — have affected both parents' experiences and their children's educational opportunities.

Addressing a number of these themes, Angelika Paseka (*Home-School Partnership in Germany: Expectations, Experiences and Current Challenges*) leads us through an overview of the role of parents in the German school system before, during and immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, the school-family relationship is understood in terms of a continuum, with different approaches exhibiting varying levels of familialism (where responsibility for care and/or education lies with the family) and de-familialism (in which responsibility is shifted on to the state). The question is, in which of these directions are laws, policies and school practices moving?

According to the author, at a European level, policy programmes are generally oriented towards improving parent engagement, the better to support and improve children's school outcomes (familialism). However, policy in Germany, specifically, has seen movement in both directions, towards greater familialism in some respects, and towards de-familialism in others.

Paseka begins her account underlining the multiplicity of attitudes towards the role of parents that existed before the pandemic, with parents viewed variously as opponents, partners, suppliers/providers and experts (in regard to their own children). She then analyses representative surveys administered

during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the challenges faced by all the actors involved and emphasizing the “expert” role imposed on parents, which indicates a push in the direction of familialism. With financial support from central government, Germany’s federal *Länder* implemented programmes designed to counteract the negative effect of the pandemic. The paper presents two of these (LIFE and BiFoKi); these offer an illustration of how schools have reassumed their role and duties in the education of Germany’s children, but also of how, at the same time, parents — and the expertise they acquired over the course of the pandemic — have apparently been forgotten about. Parents seem to have been restored to a primary function as supporters of the school, with the school-family relationship shifting back towards a state of de-familialism. The outcomes of this are not yet clear, and as so often happens, the demands made of parents are often contradictory. The struggle between familialism and de-familialism continues, crying out for effective practices of mediation.

In Spain, as in countries all over the world, the COVID-19 outbreak demanded urgent measures from the government and educational policy makers. Inmaculada González Falcón’s article “*Spanish education policy in times of pandemic. Decisions and consequences for families from an inclusive perspective*” sets out the measures formulated during the first wave of the pandemic, from March to September 2020, and the early stages of the return to school, and examines their implications for different social groups. Based on an inclusive approach that calls for the provision of education for all, González Falcón analyses a selection of Spanish and international studies linked to children, families and education, together with Spanish government regulations and reports on the measures and consequences of COVID-19, and press releases and other publications on the impact of the coronavirus on the educational community and day-to-day school life. Her article discusses three aspects: 1) access to education and the curriculum, in regard to which we learn that wholesale school-closure and distance-learning measures, which were the same for all children, made it more difficult for students with special educational needs and/or families with fewer digital resources to keep up their studies. 2) The participation of students and their families in the teaching/learning process, which in many cases — especially among students from vulnerable social backgrounds — was limited and/or generated stress, due to a range of factors including the demands made by the school and the pressure placed on families to support their children’s learning (e.g., limited communication with teachers; increases homework, which intensified tensions between families and the school) together with conditions in the home (e.g., parents’ workload, economic pressure and lack of competences, reduced extra-curriculum activities). And 3) the acquisition of learning and skills, which is seen to be reduced among the most vulnerable students, such as those from immigrant and single-parent families, or who are living in poverty. In conclusion, the paper underlines several key issues that educational policy needs to address to overcome the social gaps exacerbated during the COVID-19 crisis and outlines appropriate approaches to resolving them.

Maria Mendel’s paper (*Parents, crises and beyond: Towards school as a shared place and a more-than-human world*) leads us towards new perspectives on school-family relationships in times of crisis, proposing a pedagogy of vital places, where place is “a field of constant confrontation”, an arena and an expression of the educational relationship between those who live, those who have died, material things, and everything that is left by these people and things, as a kind of active, spatial heritage. To support her theory of a more-than-human world, the author presents the experience of a sustainable community school in the USA, a country in which neoliberalism is scattering communities, and which serves — in the author’s view — as a sort of foretaste of what is to come in Poland. In exploring this example, she sets the idea of place centre stage, both “haunted places” and other loci, where subjectivity is not only a human domain, and proposes a radical pedagogy of the common place, a place “which is vital, constituting a space of tenderness, sensitive to vividness, and activity of matter”. Against the background of multiple global crises, which are reinforcing inequality and injustice, and faced with the spread of charter schools (public schools run by non-public bodies – Lipman, 2011) as one outcome of neoliberal policies, grassroots parents’ movements are advocating for place-conscious education and sustainable community schooling. The actions of these parents take place in specific contexts and constitute a form of political expression, one that gives them a new role in their relations with the school. The Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS) movement underlines the role of local places and communities in educational processes; it proposes a model of the “sustainable community school” (vs. the corporate model), a school that is rooted in ethics, equity and social justice. One example of this is the Little Village Lawn-

dale High School in Chicago, through which the community seeks to survive, to persist as a territory with a history, spectral leftovers and its own subjectivity. Seeking to “recompose pedagogy” in a time of crisis, Mendel (drawing on Derrida and Ruitenberg) proposes a pedagogy of place, of haunted places, that moves beyond an antinomic reading of culture-nature relations (Braidotti, 2006) in search of justice and hope. It is a political pedagogy in which parents seem to play a significant role, thanks to their resistance to injustice and inequality and their fight for a better future for their children, for future generations, for the places where, and through which, they live, and all the more-than-just-human world.

Using a generative structuralist approach that understands structures in relation to people’s agency, Carmel Borg’s contribution, *Parents as “Subjects”. Revisiting Parent-Adult Educators Relations in Viral Times*, takes the analysis of social inequalities further, setting us in the middle of the “care crisis” that has affected most parts of the world over the last two years. The power of parents “to act in the world” lies on a continuum, each point of which combines varying levels of agency and structural oppressions, in economic, social, cultural and symbolic terms.

Drawing on existing research on the matter, the author makes the case that the primary cause of the care crisis was not the virus but the structural distributive injustice promoted by neoliberal states.

His analysis highlights the central role played by the asymmetry of power in parental participation, access and hope, questioning — in a context steeped in inequality — the measures adopted by the authorities (at international, national and local levels) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Considering the situation of parents from an intersectional perspective that takes into account questions of gender, habitus and capital, Borg outlines how lockdown policies actually “grounded” the most vulnerable parents — i.e., those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who work in the grey economy, who cannot work from home but have, instead, to engage in out-of-home labour — thus disproportionately affecting young, low-skilled, single mothers with a migrant background and their children.

These families’ vulnerabilities are actually the product of social inequalities that the public discourse assumes as “normal”, legitimizing a charitable approach towards them while refusing to acknowledge the structural injustice created by the economic and political system, a system that offers an ideal image of the perfect parent against which the parenting abilities of those who do not fit the approved model are measured, and in doing so legitimizing their social condemnation. Against this background, the author proposes an approach to promoting authentic parental activism through adult education, which he denominates Liberatory Parent-Centred Education (LPCE). Borg describes LPCE as being rooted in reflection, action and collective-driven answers and welcoming of other epistemologies. He acknowledges that, for the teacher or educator, the challenge is great: to work with marginalized parents, who face a day-by-day struggle to survive in a world characterized by uncertainty and competition, who hold other narratives, and who have been induced to perceive themselves as inferior. The first step in this task — he reminds us — it is to gain awareness of the oppression and “multidimensional” inequality (UNESCO, 2022) to which these parents (and their children) are exposed.

Returning to the primary question guiding this special issue, regarding the roles of parents and educators following the pandemic crisis, if we are to view education as a form of political action, only a true educational alliance between parents and school professionals can lead to social transformation, and only if these adults (if we) choose to give space to new questions and perspectives, to step off the customary path and embrace counter-hegemonic practices (Mayo, 2016).

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Paola Dusi – Università degli Studi di Verona (Italy)

📧 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0796-5986>

✉ paola.dusi@univr.it

Paola Dusi (PhD) is associate professor of social education at the University of Verona. Director of “Inclusion & diversity Center”. Her research interests focus on families and school education in a complex society, particularly among adolescents and families with a migrant background, through decolonial and intersectional approaches; teacher training; school-families relationships.

Audrey Addi-Racah – Tel-Aviv University (Israel)

📧 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2427-8782>

Audrey Addi-Racah (PhD) is associate professor at the School of Education at Tel-Aviv University. Currently she is the Vice Dean for Academic Affairs at the Faculty of Humanities. Her research is related to sociology of education with a focus on educational inequality, school effects, educators' work and parental-involvement in education.

Maria Mendel – University of Gdańsk (Poland)

📧 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4022-5402>

Maria Mendel is professor at the Institute of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Gdańsk, where she chairs the Department of Social Pedagogy. She also teaches in a doctoral program at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk. Her work focuses on public pedagogy and pedagogy of place.